

# US

## HOWARD WALDROP

*Here's an ironic, wise, funny, and (as is usual for this author) meticulously researched look at three different lives that might have arisen from one particular fork in the Road of Time, if things had worked out just a bit differently. . .and the impact that each of those lives might have had on the world around it.*

*Howard Waldrop is widely considered to be one of the best short-story writers in the business, and his famous story "The Ugly Chickens" won both the Nebula and the World Fantasy Awards in 1981. His work has been gathered in the collections Howard Who?, All About Strange Mon-sters of the Recent Past, and Night of the Cooters, with more collections in the works. Waldrop is also the author of the novel The Texas-Israeli War: 1999 in collaboration with Jake Saunders, and of two solo novels, Them Bones and A Dozen Tough Jobs. He is at work on a new novel, tentatively entitled The Moon World. His most recent book is a new col-lection, Going Home Again. His stories have appeared in our First, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Twelfth, and Fifteenth Annual Collections. While he has neither telephone nor computer, he has a Web site at <http://www.sff.net/people/waldrop>. A longtime Texan, Waldrop now lives in the tiny town of Arlington, Washington, outside Seattle, as close to a trout stream as he can possibly get without actually living in it.*

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## PROLOGUE

The ladder, though ingeniously made, was flimsy and the rungs were too far apart. He had pushed the dowels into the holes in each of the three sections. It had been made to fit inside the car, parked a mile away off the road to Hopewell. The night was cold and it had not been easy to put the sections of the ladder together with the leather gloves he wore.

Construction stuff lay all around. The house wasn't landscaped yet, borders and walks were laid out but not yet rocked in. The house was big, two stories and a gable-windowed third narrow one set in the steeply pitched roof. The outside stucco.

He put the ladder against the upstairs window, the one with the shutter that, though new, was already warped and wouldn't close completely

He picked up the gunnysack, cheeked in his pocket for the envelope, and started up. There were two lights on downstairs, the sitting room and the kitchen.

The ladder swayed and groaned. He had to lift one leg at a time, more crawl up than climb, then pull the other one after it up to the same rung. When both feet were on one, he could feel the vibration of the strain.

He reached the next from the top, pulled the shutter the rest of the way open without a sound. He raised the window, the sack flopping over his face as he used

one hand to steady himself and the other to lift.

His eyes adjusted to the dim light inside. There was a stack of trunks and suitcases under the window, the sill of which was concrete rather than wood. A crib across the way. Beside the window a fireplace and mantel, some bird toys along the top. A scooter on the floor. Just past the fireplace a big parabolic electric heater and a chair. The room was almost hot.

He smelled Mentholatum or Vicks salve. He eased himself over the sill, swung the sack and his feet to the floor. He went to the crib, where the medicine smell was strongest.

The kid was safety-pinned under the blankets, its breathing a little rough and croupy. He undid one of the pins, eased the toddler out of the crib. It began to move.

“Sh-sh-sh,” he said, holding it close and swinging it slightly back and forth. He noticed the kid was in some kind of cut-down larger garment rather than Dr. Denton’s or a nightshirt. The child subsided.

He pulled a blanket out of the sack, wrapped the kid in it, put both back in the bag, lifted it gently by the center top. He went to the windowsill, laid the bag down, eased himself over. He had to search around for the first rung, turned, put one leg down, then the other. He reached back inside, lifted the child by the sack onto the concrete sill. He felt inside his pocket, took out the envelope, put it on the inside of the sill.

Then with both hands, he lifted the sack.

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## **ONE: “THE LITTLE EAGLET”**

He had been born just after Clyde Tombaugh discovered the planet Pluto. He was the most famous child in the world for a year or two, until Shirley Temple came along. He was the son of a famous man and a celebrated mother. Somebody’d tried to kidnap him when he was twenty months old, but they’d caught the guy on the way to his car, and Charles Jr. was back in his crib by 10:00 p.m. and didn’t remember a thing about it.

But it convinced his father (a very private man) and his mother (from a distinguished family) that they would be hounded all their lives by newspapermen, gossip columnists, and radio reporters if they stayed where they were.

They moved out of the house in New Jersey and moved out to Roswell, New Mexico, so his father could be near his friend Dr. Robert H. Goddard, who fooled around with rockets.

“The Little Eaglet,” as the press had dubbed him, grew up watching six-foot-long pieces of metal rise, wobble, and explode themselves all over the remote scrub country of the Eden Valley that “Uncle” Robert used as a range.

It was a great place to be a kid. His mother and father were often away on flights, surveying airline routes, or his father was off consulting with Boeing or Curtiss, or there’d be pictures of him in a zeppelin somewhere. His mother, when she was around, wrote books and was always off in her study, or having another of

his brothers and sisters.

He had the run of the place. The first time he'd walked over on his own to the worksheds, Uncle Robert had stooped down to his level and said, "Do anything you want here, kid, but don't *ever* play with matches."

They let him have pieces of metal, old tubing, burnt-out frozen-up fuel pumps, and that neat stuff that looks like tortoiseshell. They had to run him out of the place when they closed up at night.

He went unwillingly to school in 1936, each day an agony of letters and numbers. Of course he had to poke a few three-foot jerks in the snoot because they made fun of his curly golden hair.

He learned a phrase early and used it often: "So's your old man."

His own old man, after some vacillation, jumped on the Preparedness band-wagon and was out with Hap Arnold, beefing up the army air corps.

You wouldn't have known there'd just been a Depression.

Uncle Robert finally got something right. When he was eight, Charles Jr. watched a rocket go up and actually get out of sight before it exploded. He, Uncle Robert, and everybody else ran back inside the small blockhouse while it rained metal for a couple of minutes.

Of course his father taught him how to fly, but since he'd been driving the converted mail van and rocket trailer from the shed three miles out to the range since he was six (he'd put blocks on the brakes and accelerator and stood on a box to see out the windshield), he thought flying was a lot like driving a car, only the road was bigger.

One time he and his father talked about it. "I like flying too, I guess," said Charles Jr. "But the air's so *thick*. That's for sissies."

"You'll think sissy when you pull three Gs on an inside turn sometime," said the Lone Eagle.

He spent most of his time with his aunt and uncle, and by the time he was ten he was working for Uncle Robert after school and full time in the summers, at whatever needed to be done.

Uncle Robert was getting older—he'd always looked old with his bald head and mustache, but now his head was wrinkled and the mustache was gray and white like a dollop of cream cheese across his lip.

The war had already started in Europe. One day a shady character in a cheap suit it brought in some plans and left.

The whole crew gathered around. Uncle Robert tapped the blueprints. "*That's* what the Germans are working on," he said. "They're not very serious yet, but they will be. They're on the right track, but they're spending most of their time trying to get a good centrifugal pump, and haven't thought about regenerative cooling yet. On the other hand, look at this. Graphite vanes in the exhaust, and I assume if it's ballistic they'll be set beforehand; if it's guidable, they'll have to make room for steering mechanisms and radio controls."

He looked at all of them. "The army and air corps have their thumbs up their wazoos right now, so we'll have to do it ourselves on the Smithsonian and Gug-genheim money. I figure the Nazis are six months behind us in some things, a couple of years ahead in others."

They went to work and they worked hard, especially after the U.S. got in the war when the Japanese bombed the Phillipines.

It wasn't easy, but they did it by the middle of 1942. They fired it off. It went 143 miles and punched a thirty-foot hole in the desert even without a warhead.

They showed it to the air corps.

World War II was over late in 1944, just after Charles Jr. turned 14.

It was a bright and sunny day in the winter of 1945. He and Uncle Robert were looking at one of the German A-4s that had been lying around everywhere in Europe when the war ended and then shipped to America, along with their sci-entists. The army had given Goddard five or six to play with.

Uncle Robert had been sick the year before, recurrence of the TB of his youth, but had gotten better. Now he seemed to have some of the old spark back. He looked at the pumps, the servo-mechanisms. He looked in the empty warhead section, then he looked at Charles Jr.

"How'd you like to take a little ride?" he asked.

"Yippee yahoo!"

"As many times as you've seen things I built turn into firecrackers?"

"You didn't build this one. The Germans did."

"At White Sands, they're maybe kinda going to send up mice and monkeys."

"Phooey!" said Charles Jr.

"Double phooey," said Uncle Robert.

On March 13, 1946, Charles Jr. went for a little ride. They hadn't told his mother or father, and no one else either, until after the fact.

The front section separated and fired some JATO units as retro rockets, and the surplus cargo parachute opened, and the thing came down sixty-eight miles away, within two miles of where Goddard and the crew were waiting.

The trucks drove up. Charles Jr. was sitting in the shade of the parachute can-opy.

Uncle Robert jumped out of the truck and ran up to him.

There was a small cut above his eye.

"She rides a little rough," he said, and smiled.

On July 4th, 1963, *The Great Speckled Bird* came down on the surface of the Moon, backwards, rockets firing, and settled to the lunar dust.

The commander was Col. Chuck Yeager. The pilot was Lt. Col. David Simons, M.D., the navigator was Maj. Joe Kittinger, and the civilian mission specialist was Charles Lindbergh, Jr.

After a few hours of yammer and instrument readings that were hunky-dory, Charles Jr. suited up in one of the big bulky space suits the navy had built for them.

Yeager checked him over, then said, "You're on, kid."

It was being carried live by all the radios in the world; they'd have to wait till

they got back to see it, as both Early Bird and Echo III satellites weren't cooperating.

The big ladder came out from the ship and Charles Jr. backed down it, unable to see well behind him because of the size of the oxygen equipment on the suit.

He paused just as he got to the bottom, looked up at Kittinger who was filming him with an Eymo camera (besides the official one on the side of the airlock), and stretched his foot out, inches above the dust.

He swung one foot out in a small circle, almost touching, then the other.

He said, "Here's one for Mom, and one for Pop, and one for Uncle Robert and" —he jumped onto the ground with both feet—"one for the good old USA."

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## TWO: "CALL ME CHUCKY"

He could say he'd been around since Pluto was a pup. Disney made the first cartoon with Mickey's mutt a few months after he was born.

When he was twenty months old he was kidnapped. It was the most sensational story of the decade. After much police activity and several copycat ransom notes, his father, the most famous man in the world, and, after Babe Ruth, in America, paid the right people and went in a coast guard plane to find his son in the boat—as the kidnapper's message said, "*boad*"—*Nelly* between Horseneck Beach and Gay Head near Elizabeth Island.

Charles Jr. was sleeping like a log in a built-in bureau drawer belowdecks on the stolen and deserted boat. The kidnapers were never found and the ransom money, much of it in marked gold certificates, which became illegal tender a couple of years later, never showed up.

Colonel H. N. Schwarzkopf of the New Jersey State Police had put a twenty-four-hour guard around the Lindbergh house in Hopewell and up at the Morrow house just after the kidnapping. His father hired his own bodyguards and dismissed the state troopers once Charles Jr. was recovered. But they moved from New Jersey soon anyway.

Famous father, famous mother, most famous child in America.

Of course he ended up in Hollywood.

Later in interviews, Charles Jr.—"Call me Chucky"—said, "Yeah, yeah, child of the Depression. We had to cut down to *two* cooks. And don't ask *me* how somebody with such a publicity-shy father and mother ended up doing one, count 'em, one *Our Gang* short. I think they felt sorry for me—guys with big guns walking around wherever we were; people watching me like a hawk day and night.

"Warhol used to run that damn clip at the Factory all the time. There I am, three years old, sitting in a bear-barrel airplane, replica of the *Spirit*, with an aviator's cap. There I am, me and the new kid Spanky whatever happened to him, huh?—racing all these other kids down that damn long hill in L.A.; soap-box racers, fire engines, tanks, and me and Spanky McFarland win 'cause all the other kids have

a wooden demo-derby.

“They tell me Roach creamed his shorts; wanted to sign me, team with Spanky; already had a name picked out, Sankandank, you know, Spank and Sankandank, anyway, lifetime contract; Louis B. Mayer would honor it once I got too old for the *Gang* stuff

“Yeah, I coulda had it all. Been as big as Buckwheat or Alfalfa. Coulda stayed on, beat up on Butch and Woim.

“What happened. Dad said no way, José.”

His father had visited Italy and Germany several times, and they had lived in England for a while, only to find British newspapermen just like the ones in America, so they moved back. His father was convinced that since it wasn't ready and couldn't afford it, the U.S. should stay neutral in any coming conflict in Europe or Asia. He'd become a major spokesman for America First.

One day at school, Chucky came out to find one of his best friends beating the snot out of another. He pulled them apart while they were swinging in blind rage at each other, noses bloodied, eyes shut.

“Geez, guys!” he said.

One pointed to the other. “He said your father was a Jew-hater. That made *me* mad. I said no, he wasn't, he was just dumb as a post. That made *him* mad.”

Chucky, age eleven, went home. His father was packing for a trip to Des Moines where he was going to make a terrifically ill-timed speech about staying out of the European war which had been going on for a year and a half already.

“Dad,” said Chucky to his father, who looked just like him only bigger, and was putting shirts in a leather bag. “Dad, *somebody* has to kick some Hitler butt.”

He was sent to his room without his supper.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Chucky in another interview in 1989, “that was the first time any kid of his expressed an opinion that wasn't his. It started me on that downward spiral that led me to where I am today. For which, thanks. . .”

After the war was over and things got back to normal, Chucky went off to college in 1948.

And fell in with evil companions. Some guys who endlessly drove back and forth across the country because they couldn't stand wherever they were. Poets, artists, weirdos, and Old Lefties, white folksingers who spent all their money on bus trips to Alabama to learn exactly what it was Cornbread Joe hollered on that record across the fields when he wanted someone to bring the water jug or oats for the mule. There were a zillion guys loose in New York City on the GI bill, finding out what life was all about. Chucky: “Say what you will. The guys who shot heroin are all still alive; the boozers have been dead these thirty years.”

Then he started to make things. Birdhouses made out of old airplane parts. Small ones at first, made from old propeller hubs and radio aerials, exhaust stacks, parts of instrument panels. Then they got larger and more complicated. He had a few small gallery shows, then a couple at museums. He dropped out of college his

sophomore year, rented a studio and went to work.

One day Calder came by, took a look around, and whistled. Rauschenberg and all those guys dropped in; Mailer, smarting from *Barbary Shore*, came in and smoked some tea and talked about Chucky's pop, whom he'd met in the Pacific, and said he was going to start a Village newspaper sometime.

His first real show was called "Birdhouses for the Stratosphere" and it all went fine from then on. He went on to use parts from jets. His *Birdhouse for the Rukh* used most of a Super Constellation he'd gotten cheap from the NATSB. They had to build an extra plaza in front of the rededicated O'Hare before he could install it.

Even with that going on, he continued to make the smaller houses all through the fifties and sixties and have shows in little galleries; people actually bought them and used them for birdhouses. His wren series—made from an old Curtiss Wren—was the best and most popular.

At one of these small-show openings in the early sixties, Chucky was a little high from reefer and a little tight from wine and a little up from some innocuous-looking red tablets someone had given him. He was 32 and good at what he did, and knew he'd be doing it the rest of his life.

An old man was looking at some of the things ("Houses for the Bluebird of Sadness," the show was) and waited until the people who'd been around Chucky went over for the free cheese and beer.

The old man caught his eye. "You did these?"

"Yep."

"I have something to tell you," said the old man. "But I can't tell you until you promise it goes no further."

"Oh, this is serious? Wait a sec." Chucky quit smiling and set his face in a calm mask with a wipe of his hand.

"There," he said. "Try me."

"Between you and me?"

"My word as a Video Ranger," said Chucky.

The old man eyed him, then sagged his shoulders.

"I kidnapped you once."

"Sonofabitch!" said Chucky. "Not you. The situation. Why'd you ever do that?"

"I went *messhuganeh*," said the old man. "It was the Depression. I was desperate. I borrowed a stranger's boat. I kipped you from the crib, sent the notes."

"Well, they never caught you."

"It was very fucked over, from beginning to end. I couldn't believe it, that I was getting away with it, I was so excited. And I lost it, all \$50,000 of it, between the time I put you in the boat and the time they came to get you. I took it from the satchel your father brought it to the graveyard in and put it in a big tin box. I had it with me when I put you on the boat. I was so excited, I dropped it. I watched my life getting smaller and smaller and further away. If only I'd put it in a *wooden* box . . ."

"Could I give you a few bucks?" asked Chucky.

"I didn't come here, Mr Lindbergh, Jr., to ask for money. I came here to ask forgiveness."

Chucky laughed and readied out and grabbed him by the shoulders, causing him to wince.

“Forgive? Mister, that was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Thank you!”

“You mean that? All these years, nobody knew but me, and I was so sorry that I’d done it. I’ve lived a clean life since. . . .”

“Gaffer,” said Chucky. “Go with my blessing. I mean that. Thanks for telling me.”

“Good-bye, then.”

“Good-bye.” He watched the old man leave.

“Whowazzat?” asked a friend. “It looked intense.”

“A stranger,” said Chucky, smiling. “He wanted to put the touch on my old man.”

When his father died in the 1970s, Chucky called up a bunch of old engineers and mechanics and tool-and-die men. He had them make an exact replica of the Ryan *Spirit of St. Louis*.

Then he took it apart, piece by piece, and built the *Birdhouse for Pop*. It’s outside the Air and Space Museum.

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### **THREE: “CRAZY CHARLIE”**

After seventeen years in the Plutonian depths of being a famous man’s son, he took off.

In 1953, just at the end of the Korean War, a guy showed up in Concrete, Washington. He walked with a slight gimp. He drove a secondhand two-door purple Kaiser. He rented a place on the edge of town for \$8.40 a month. Once a week or so he’d drive out of town; one of the locals saw him over at the Veterans’ Hospital in Mt. Vernon. Otherwise he walked everywhere in the town of Concrete, shopped at the local grocery store. Slowly it got out that his name was Charles.

Mostly what he did was fish the Skagit River, 365 days a year if he could, less if it was muddied up, though the flow was now controlled through Diablo and Gorge Dams. Sometimes the Sauk and Cascade were muddied up and put the lower river out for fishing for four or five days at a time.

He used a Gladding Ike Walton model 8 fiberglass fly rod and a Pflueger 1498 reel, and he caught more fly-fishing than all the other people around there caught with bait or casting reels or the new spinning reels. People over on the Skykomish and Stillaguamish fly-fished, but not many yet on the Skagit.

One day right downtown, in a pouring rain, fifteen or twenty people stood on the bridge to watch him. There was already both ends of about an eight-pounder sticking out of the back pouch of his homemade fishing jacket, and they watched for twenty-two minutes by the watch, as he played and landed what was by the best estimate a steelhead that would go twenty-five pounds.

He reached down with a pair of pliers and jerked the Brad's Brat out of the fish's lip and watched it swim back out to the deeper water against the far bank. "What the hell?" yelled someone from the bridge. "They won't be around forever, yon know?" said Charles "Then why the hell did yon catch it if you were going to let it go?" "Because I can't help myself," said Charles, and began casting again. From then on he was Crazy Charlie.

In 1957, over in Sedro-Wooley, he met a girl at the Dairy Delight. She moved in with him in a slightly larger shack on the edge of Concrete that cost \$12.00 a month.

They ate trout and salmon; she canned salmonberries and blackberries; they smoked steelhead and came out of the woods with mushrooms and roots and nuts and skunk cabbage; they drove in the purple Kaiser.

In 1958 they had twin boys, whom people learned to call Key and Matt. They assumed they were family names for something like Keyes or Keynard and Mat-thew or even Mattias. If you go to the Skagit County Courthouse and look up their birth certificates, you'll find their names are Quemoy and Matsu. It was 1958 after all.

The one peculiarity other fishermen and the people in town noticed was that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, even playing a fish, if a plane flew over he would watch it until it disappeared. They assumed it had something to do with the Korean War.

One day one of the town blowhards came into the cafe shaking his head. Every-body was ready for a story.

"Goddamnedest thing. Give me that Seattle paper," he said. He looked through it quickly. "Here, damn, Ed, you look."

"What'm I lookin' for?"

"Well look with your eyes and just lissen. I was up in Marblemount at the Rocky Ford Cafe. Over in the corner was Crazy Charlie and that girl of his—the two boys being most likely in school this time of day. And you know who was in the booth with them, talkin' to them? Huh?"

"Dwight David Eisenhower," said someone. They all laughed.

"Charles Lindbergh. The Lone Eagle."

"Shit," said someone. "What would he be doin' talkin to Crazy Charlie?"

"You got me. He's older now, Lindbergh, but I knew it was him from when he used to come to the plant during the war. As big as life. Sure as shootin'." They all knew the blowhard had retired from Boeing with a disability a few years before.

"He used to be a practical joker, give old man Boeing a hotfoot soon as look at him," he continued. "Always cutting up."

"Well, what was they doin'?"

"Eating hamburgers, shakes, and fries."

"I didn't think Charlie and his girl ate that kind of stuff. The kids neither."

"I said the kids wasn't there. And they was sure as hell eatin' that way today."

"Did they see you?"

"Hell, no. I was so astounded it was Lindbergh I just sat down in that far

booth, the one halfway in the kitchen. Couldn't hear 'em neither, place was crowded. Had a roast beef sandwich."

"We don't care what you had for lunch. What'd Lindbergh do?"

"Talked. Ate. Went outside. By the time I was through they was gone."

"Nothing about Lindbergh in the papers," said Ed.

"Can you beat that? Guy like that in town, nobody thinks it's a big deal."

"Well, it was more than thirty years ago," said the blowhard. "Still, you'd think somebody would mention it."

"Maybe it was personal," said someone.

"Yeah, right. The Lone Eagle and Crazy Charlie and his girl."

They all laughed.

Charlie died in 1985. His common-law wife Estelle died in 1989. Quemoy and Matsu own motion picture production in Seattle like the Krays owned London in the sixties. Neither fishes.

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### **EPILOGUE:**

He reached in his pocket, took out the envelope, put it on the inside of the sill.

Then, with both hands he lifted the sack.

The rung broke with a sharp snap and his foot hit the next one.

There was a sudden instant of chill blind panic. The sack had thudded onto the concrete sill. He eased his other foot down the outside of the ladder to the rung he'd fallen to. He made it the rest of the way down, filled with adrenaline, cradled the bundle in his arms, and made off for the woods and his car.

Halfway through the trees, he realized the kid hadn't moved.

When he got within sight of the car, he put the sack down, lifted the blanket and child out. The kid was limp as a bunch of leather. One side of the head was misshapen. He felt around for a heartbeat.

He went further back into the woods from the road, laid the kid down, kicked some leaves over him, and took the blanket and sack to his car and sped away toward Manhattan.

The biggest manhunt in history was on. There were shady intermediaries, ransom was paid. There was no Boad Nelly, no child.

Two truck drivers, one black, one white, on their way into Hopewell two months later, stopped their truck and went into the woods to take a pee.

They saw what was left of the kid on the ground. He had been gnawed by animals.

They ran for the cops.

Three years later, Bruno Richard Hauptmann, on trial for his life for essentially passing hot gold certificates, was shown the ladder used in the kidnapping. "I did

not make *that*,” he said. “I am a *carpenter*.”