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First published in Asimov's, September 2001

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I came to praise Caesar, not to bury him.

Hell, we all did.

The farm spread out before us, green and rolling, dotted with paddocks and water troughs. It looked like the kind of place you wish your parents had taken you when you were a kid and the world was still full of wonders.

Well, the world may not have been full of wonders any longer, but the farm was. Problem was, they weren't exactly the kind you used to dream of—unless you were coming down from a *really* bad acid trip.

The farm was the brainchild of Caesar Claudius MacDonald. He'd finally knuckled under to public pressure and agreed to show the place off to the press. That's where I came in.

My name's McNair. I used to have a first name, but I dumped it when I decided a one-word byline was more memorable. I work for the *SunTrib*, the biggest newstape in the Chicago area. I'd just broken the story that put Billy Cheever away after the cops had been after him for years. What I wanted for my efforts was my own syndicated column; what I got was a trip to the farm.

For a guy no one knew much about, one who almost never appeared in public, MacDonald had managed to make his name a household word in something less than two years. Even though one of his corporations owned our publishing company, we didn't have much on him in our files, just what all the other news bureaus had: he'd earned a couple of Ph.D.'s, he was a widower who by all accounts had been faithful to his wife, he'd inherited a bundle and then made a lot more on his own.

MacDonald was a Colorado native who emigrated to New Zealand's South Island, bought a 40,000-hectare farm, and hired a lot of technicians over the years. If anyone wondered why a huge South Island farm didn't have any sheep, they probably just figured he had worked out some kind of tax dodge.

Hell, that's what I thought too. I mean, why else would someone with his money bury himself on the underside of the globe for half a lifetime?

Then, a week after his 66th birthday, MacDonald made The Announcement. That's the year they had food riots in Calcutta and Rio and Manila, when the world was finding out that it was easier to produce eleven billion living human beings than to feed them.

Some people say he created a new life form. Some say he produced a hybrid (though not a single geneticist agrees with that.) Some—I used to snicker at them—say that he had delved into mysteries that Man Was Not Meant To Know.

According to the glowing little computer cube they handed out, MacDonald and his crew spent close to three decades manipulating DNA molecules in ways no one had ever thought of before. He did a lot of trial and error work with embryos, until he finally came up with the prototype he sought. Then he spent a few more years making certain that it would breed true. And finally he announced his triumph to the world.

Caesar MacDonald's masterpiece was the Butterball, a meat animal that matured at six months of age and could reproduce at eight months, with a four-week gestation period. It weighed 400 pounds at maturity, and every portion of its body could be consumed by Earth's starving masses, even the bones.

That in itself was a work of scientific brilliance—but to me the true stroke of genius was the astonishing efficiency of the Butterballs' digestive systems. An elephant, back when elephants still existed, would eat about 600 pounds of vegetation per day, but could only use about forty percent of it, and passed the rest as dung. Cattle and pigs, the most common meat animals prior to the Butterballs, were somewhat more efficient, but they, too, wasted a lot of expensive feed.

The Butterballs, on the other hand, utilized one hundred percent of what they were fed. Every pellet of food they ingested went right into building meat that was meticulously bioengineered to please almost every palate. Anyway, that's what the endless series of P.R. releases said.

MacDonald had finally consented to allow a handful of pool reporters to come see for themselves.

We were hoping for a look at MacDonald too, maybe even an interview with the Great Man. But when we got there, we learned that he had been in seclusion for months. Turned out he was suffering from depression, which I would have thought would be the last thing to affect humanity's latest savior, but who knows what depresses a genius? Maybe, like Alexander, he wanted more worlds to conquer, or maybe he was sorry that Butterballs didn't weigh 800 pounds. Hell, maybe he had just worked too hard for too long, or maybe he realized that he was a lot closer to the end of life than the beginning and didn't like it much. Most likely, he just didn't consider us important enough to bother with.

Whatever the reason, we were greeted not by MacDonald himself, but by a flack named Judson Cotter. I figured he had to work in P.R.; his hair was a little too perfect, his suit too up-to-the-minute, his hands too soft for him to have been anything else but a pitchman.

After he apologized for MacDonald's absence, he launched into a worshipful biography of his boss, not deviating one iota from the holobio they'd shown us on the plane trip.

"But I suspect you're here to see the farm," he concluded after paraphrasing the bio for five minutes.

"No," muttered Julie Balch from *NyVid*, "we came all this way to stand in this cold wet breeze and admire your clothes."

A few of us laughed, and Cotter looked just a bit annoyed. I made a mental note to buy her a drink when the tour was done.

"Now let me see a show of hands," said Cotter. "Has anyone here ever seen a live Butterball?"

*Where did they find you? I thought. If we'd seen one, do you really think we'd have flown all the way to hell and gone just to see another?*

I looked around. No one had raised a hand. Which figured. To the best of my knowledge, nobody who didn't work for MacDonald had ever seen a Butterball in the flesh, and only a handful of photos and holos had made it out to the general public. There was even a rumor that all of MacDonald's employees had to sign a secrecy oath.

"There's a reason, of course," continued Cotter smoothly. "Until the international courts verified Mr. MacDonald's patent, there was always a chance that some unscrupulous individual or even a rogue nation would try to duplicate the Butterball. For that reason, while we have shipped and sold its meat all over the world, always with the inspection and approval of the local food and health authorities, we have not allowed anyone to see or examine the animals themselves. But now that the courts have ruled in our favor, we have opened our doors to the press." *Screaming bloody murder every step of the way*, I thought.

"You represent the first group of journalists to tour the farm, but there will be many more, and we will even allow Sir Richard Perigrine to make one of his holographic documentaries here at the farm." He paused. "We plan to open it to public tours in the next two or three years."

Suddenly a bunch of bullshit alarms began going off inside my head.

"Why not sooner, now that you've won your case?" asked Julie, who looked like she was hearing the same alarms.

"We'd rather that *you* bring the initial stories and holos of the Butterballs to the public," answered Cotter.

"That's very generous of you," she persisted. "But you still haven't told us why."

"We have our reasons," he said. "They will be made apparent to you before the tour is over."

My old friend Jake Monfried of the *SeattleDisk* sidled over to me. "I hope I can stay awake that long,"

he said sardonically. “It's all rubbish anyway.”

“I know,” I said. “Their rivals don't even need the damned holos. Any high school kid could take a hunk of Butterball steak and come up with a clone.”

“So why haven't they?” asked Julie.

“Because MacDonald's got fifty lawyers on his payroll for every scientist,” answered Jake. He paused, his expression troubled. “Still, this guy's lying to us—and it's a stupid lie, and he doesn't look *that* stupid. I wonder what the hell he's hiding?”

We were going to have to wait to find out, because Cotter began leading us across a rolling green plain toward a barn. We circled a couple of ponds, where a few dozen birds were wading and drinking. The whole setting looked like something out of a Norman Rockwell or a Grandma Moses painting, it was so wholesome and innocent—and yet every instinct I had screamed at me that something was wrong here, that nothing could be as peaceful and tranquil as it appeared.

“To appreciate what Mr. MacDonald has done here,” said Cotter as we walked toward a large barn on a hillside, “you have to understand the challenge he faced. More than five billion men, women and children have serious protein deficiencies. Three billion of them are quite literally starving to death. And of course the price of meat—*anymeat*—had skyrocketed to the point where only the very wealthy can afford it. So what he had to do was not only create an animal as totally, completely nutritious as the Butterball, he had to also create one that could mature and breed fast enough to meet mankind's needs now and in the future.”

He stopped until a couple of laggards caught up with the group. “His initial work took the form of computer simulations. Then he hired a bevy of scientists and technicians who, guided by his genius, actually manipulated DNA to the point where the Butterballs existed not just on the screen and in Mr. MacDonald's mind, but in the flesh.

“It took a few generations for them to breed true, but fortunately a Butterball generation is considerably less than a year. Mr. MacDonald then had his staff spend some years mass-producing Butterballs. They were designed to have multiple births, not single offspring, and average ten to twelve per litter—and all of our specimens were bred and bred again so that when we finally introduced the Butterball to the world two years ago, we felt confident that we could keep up with the demand without running out of Butterballs.”

“How many Butterballs have you got here?” asked the guy from *Eurocom International*, looking out across the rolling pastures and empty fields.

“We have more than two million at this facility,” came the answer. “Mr. MacDonald owns some twenty-seven farms here and in Australia, each as large or larger than this one, and each devoted to the breeding of Butterballs. Every farm has its own processing plant. We're proud to note that while we have supplied food for billions, we've also created jobs for more than 80,000 men and women.” He paused to make sure we had recorded that number or were jotting it down.

“That many?” mused Julie.

“I know it seems like we sneaked up on the world,” said Cotter with a smile. “But for legal reasons we were compelled to keep the very existence of the Butterballs secret until we were ready to market them—and once we *did* go public, we were processing, shipping and selling hundreds of tons from each

farm every month right from the start. We had to have all our people in place to do that.”

“If they give him the Nobel, he can afford to turn the money down,” Jake said wryly.

“I believe Mr. MacDonald is prepared to donate the money to charity should that happy event come to pass,” responded Cotter. He turned and began walking toward the barn, then stopped about eighty feet from of it.

“I must prepare you for what you're going to—”

“We've already seen the holos,” interrupted the French reporter.

Cotter stared at him for a moment, then began again. “As I was saying, I must prepare you for what you're going to *hear* .”

“Hear?” I repeated, puzzled.

“It was a fluke,” he explained, trying to look unconcerned and not quite pulling it off. “An accident. An anomaly. But the fact of the matter is that the Butterballs can articulate a few words, just as a parrot can. We could have eliminated that ability, of course, but that would have taken more experimentation and more time, and the world's hungry masses couldn't wait.”

“So what do they say?” asked Melissa.

Cotter smiled what I'm sure he thought was a comforting smile. “They simply repeat what they hear. There's no intelligence behind it. None of them has a vocabulary of more than a dozen words. Mostly they articulate their most basic needs.”

He turned to the barn and nodded to a man who stood by the door. The man pushed a button, and the door slid back.

The first big surprise was the total silence that greeted us from within the barn. Then, as they heard us approaching—we weren't speaking, but coins jingle and feet scuff the ground—a voice, then a hundred, then a thousand, began calling out:

*"Feed me!"*

It was a cacophony of sound, not quite human, the words repeated again and again and again: *"Feed me!"*

We entered the barn, and finally got our first glimpse of the Butterballs. Just as in their holos, they were huge and roly-poly, almost laughably cute, looking more like oversized bright pink balloons than anything else. They had four tiny feet, good for balance but barely capable of locomotion. There were no necks to speak of, just a small pink balloon that swiveled atop the larger one. They had large round eyes with wide pupils, ears the size of small coins, two slits for nostrils, and generous mouths without any visible teeth.

“The eyes are the only part of the Butterball that aren't marketable,” said Cotter, “and that is really for aesthetic reasons. I'm told they are quite edible.”

The nearest one walked to the edge of its stall.

"Pet me!" it squeaked.

Cotter reached in and rubbed its forehead, and it squealed in delight.

"I'll give you a few minutes to wander around the barn, and then I'll meet you outside, where I'll answer your questions."

He had a point. With a couple of thousand Butterballs screaming "*Feed me!*" more and more frantically, it was almost impossible to think in there. We went up and down the rows of small stalls, captured the place on film and tape and disk and cube, then went back outside.

"That was impressive," I admitted when we'd all gathered around Cotter again. "But I didn't see any two million Butterballs in there. Where are the rest of them?"

"There are more than three hundred barns and other enclosures on the farm," answered Cotter. "Furthermore, close to half a million are outside in pastures."

"I don't see anything but empty fields," remarked Jake, waving a hand toward the pristine enclosures.

"We're a huge farm, and we prefer to keep the Butterballs away from prying eyes. In fact, this barn was built only a month ago, when we finally decided to allow visitors on the premises. It is the only building that's as close as a mile to any of our boundary lines."

"You said that some of them were in pastures," said Julie. "What do they eat?"

"Not grass," answered Cotter. "They're only outside because they're multiplying so fast that we're actually short of barns at the moment." He paused. "If you looked carefully at them, you noticed that grazing is quite beyond their capabilities." He held up a small golden pellet for us to see. "This is what they eat. It is totally artificial, created entirely from chemicals. Mr. MacDonald was adamant that no Butterball should ever eat any product that might nourish a human being. Their digestive systems were engineered to utilize this particular feed, which can provide nourishment to no other species on Earth."

"As long as you tinkered with their digestive systems, why didn't you make them shit-eaters?" asked Jake, only half-jokingly. "They could have served two purposes at once."

"I assume that was meant in jest," said Cotter, "but in point of fact, Mr. MacDonald considered it at one time. After all, some nourishment *does* remain in excrement—but alas, not enough. He wanted an animal that could utilize one hundred percent of what we fed it."

"How smart are they?" asked one of the Brits. "When I was a child, I had a dog that always wanted me to feed it or pet it, but it never told me so."

"Yes it did," said Cotter. "It just didn't use words."

"Point taken," said the Brit. "But I'd still like to know..."

"These are dumb farm animals," said Cotter. "They do not think, they do not dream, they have no hopes or aspirations, they do not wish to become Archbishop. They just happen to be able to articulate a few words, not unlike many birds. Surely you don't think Mr. MacDonald would create a sentient meat animal."

“No, of course not,” interjected Julie. “But hearing them speak is still a bit of a shock.”

“I know,” said Cotter. “And that’s the *real* reason we’ve invited you here, why we’re inviting so many other press pools—to prepare the public.”

“That’s going to take a lot of preparation,” I said dubiously.

“We have to start somewhere,” said Cotter. “We have to let the people know about this particular anomaly. Men love to anthropomorphize, and a talking animal makes doing so that much easier. The consumers must be made to understand, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that these are unintelligent meat animals, that they do not know what their words mean, that they have no names and aren’t pets, that they do not mourn the loss of their neighbors any more than a cow or a goat does. They are humanity’s last chance—note that I did not even say humanity’s last *best* chance—and we cannot let the protestors and picketers we know will demonstrate against us go unanswered. No one will believe *our* answers, but they should believe the answers of the unbiased world press.”

“Yeah,” I said under my breath to Jake. “And if kids didn’t want to eat Bambi, or Henry the Turkey, or Penelope Pig, how is anyone going to make them dig into Talky the Butterball, who actually exists?”

“I heard that,” said Cotter sharply, “and I must point out that the children who will survive because of the Butterballs will almost certainly never have been exposed to Bambi or Henry or any of the others.”

“Maybe not for a year or two,” I replied, unimpressed. “But before long you’ll be selling Butterburgers on every street corner in the States.”

“Not until we’ve fulfilled our mission among the less fortunate peoples of the world—and by that time the people you refer to should be prepared to accept the Butterballs.”

“Well, you can hope,” I said.

“If it never comes to that, it doesn’t really matter,” said Cotter with an elaborate shrug. “Our mission is to feed Earth’s undernourished billions.”

We both knew it would come to that, and sooner than anyone planned, but if he didn’t want to argue it, that was fine with me. I was just here to collect a story.

“Before I show you the processing plant, are there any further questions?” asked Cotter.

“You mean the slaughterhouse, right?” said Jake.

“I mean the processing plant,” said Cotter severely. “Certain words are not in our lexicon.”

“You’re actually going to show us Butterballs being ... *processed*?” asked Julie distastefully.

“Certainly not,” answered Cotter. “I’m just going to show you the plant. The process is painless and efficient, but I see no value in your being able to report that you watched our animals being prepared for market.”

“Good!” said Julie with obvious relief.

Cotter gestured to an open bus that was parked a few hundred meters away, and it soon pulled up. After everybody was seated, he climbed on and stood next to the driver, facing us.

“The plant is about five miles away, at almost the exact center of the farm, insulated from curious eyes and ears.”

*"Ears?"* Melissa jumped on the word. “Do they scream?”

Cotter smiled. “No, that was just an expression. We are quite humane, far moreso than any meat packing plant that existed before us.”

The bus hit a couple of bumps that almost sent him flying, but he hung on like a trooper and continued bombarding us with information, about three-quarters of it too technical or too self-serving to be of any use.

“Here we are,” he announced as the bus came to a stop in front of the processing plant, which dwarfed the barn we had just left. “Everyone out, please.”

We got off the bus. I sniffed the air for the odor of fresh blood, not that I knew what it smelled like, but of course I couldn't detect any. No blood, no rotting flesh, nothing but clean, fresh air. I was almost disappointed.

There were a number of small pens nearby, each holding perhaps a dozen Butterballs.

“You have perhaps noticed that we have no vehicles capable of moving the hundreds and thousands of units we have to process each day?” asked Cotter, though it came out more as a statement than a question.

“I assume they are elsewhere,” said the lady from India.

“They were inefficient,” replied Cotter. “We got rid of them.”

“Then how do you move the Butterballs?”

Cotter smiled. “Why clutter all our roads with vehicles when they aren't necessary?” he said, tapping out a design on his pocket computer. The main door to the processing plant slid open, and I noticed that the Butterballs were literally jumping up and down with excitement.

Cotter walked over to the nearest pen. “Who wants to go to heaven?” he asked.

*"Go to heaven!"* squeaked a Butterball.

*"Go to heaven!"* rasped another.

Soon all twelve were repeating it almost as if it were a chant, and I suddenly felt like I was trapped inside some strange surrealistic play.

Finally Cotter unlocked their pen and they hopped—I hadn't seen any locomote at the other barn—up to the door and into the plant.

“It's as simple as that,” said Cotter. “The money we save on vehicles, fuel and maintenance allows us



to—”

“There's nothing simple about it!” snapped Julie. “This is somewhere between blasphemy and obscenity! And while we're at it,” she added suspiciously, “how can a dumb animal possibly know what heaven is?”

“I repeat, they are not sentient,” said Cotter. “Just as you have code words for your pet dog or cat, we have them for the Butterballs. Ask your dog if he wants a treat, and he'll bark or sit up or do whatever you have conditioned him to do. We have conditioned the Butterballs in precisely the same way. They don't know the meaning of the word ‘heaven’ any more than your pet knows the meaning of the word ‘treat’, but we've conditioned them to associate the word with good feelings and with entry into the processing plant. They will happily march miles through a driving rain to ‘go to heaven’.”

“But heaven is such a ... a *philosophical* concept,” persisted the Indian woman. “Even to use it seems—”

“Your dog knows when he's been good,” interrupted Cotter, “because you tell him so, and he believes you implicitly. And he knows when he's been bad, because you show him what he's done to displease you and you call him a bad dog. But do you think he understands the abstract philosophical concepts of good and bad?”

“All right,” said Julie. “You've made your point. But if you don't mind, I'd rather not see the inside of the slaughterhouse.”

“The processing plant,” he corrected her. “And of course you don't have to enter it if it will make you uncomfortable.”

“I'll stay out here too,” I said. “I've seen enough killing down in Paraguay and Uruguay.”

“We're not killing anything,” explained Cotter irritably. “I am simply showing you—”

“I'll stay here anyway,” I cut him off.

He shrugged. “As you wish.”

“If you have no vehicles to bring them to the plant,” asked the Brit, approaching the entrance, “how do you move the ... uh, the finished product out?”

“Through a very efficient system of underground conveyers,” said Cotter. “The meat is stored in subterranean freezers near the perimeter of the property until it is shipped. And now...” He opened a second pen, offered them heaven, and got pretty much the same response.

*Poor bastards, I thought as I watched them hop and waddle to the door of the plant. In times gone by, sheep would be enticed into the slaughterhouse by a trained ram that they blindly followed. But leave it to us to come up with an even better reward for happily walking up to the butcher block: heaven itself.*

The Butterballs followed the first dozen into the belly of the building, and the rest of the pool followed Cotter in much the same way. There was a parallel to be drawn there, but I wasn't interested enough to draw it.

I saw Julie walking toward one of the pens. She looked like she didn't want any company, so I headed

off for a pen in the opposite direction. When I got there, four or five of the Butterballs pressed up against the fence next to me.

*"Feed me!"*

*"Feed me!"*

*"Pet me!"*

*"Feed me!"*

Since I didn't have any food, I settled for petting the one who was more interested in being petted than being fed.

"Feel good?" I asked idly.

*"Feel good!"* it said.

I almost did a double-take at that.

"You're a hell of a mimic, you know that?" I said.

No reply.

"Can you say what I say?" I asked.

Silence.

"Then how the hell did you learn to say it feels good, if you didn't learn it just now from me?"

*"Pet me!"*

"Okay, okay," I said, scratching it behind a tiny ear.

*"Very good!"*

I pulled my hand back as if I'd had an electric shock. "I never said the word 'very'. Where did you learn it?" *And more to the point, how did you learn to partner it with 'good'?*

Silence.

For the next ten minutes I tried to get it to say something different. I wasn't sure what I was reaching for, but the best I got was a *"Pet me!"* and a pair of *"Good's"*.

"All right," I said at last. "I give up. Go play with your friends, and don't go to heaven too soon."

*"Go to heaven!"* it said, hopping up and down. *"Go to heaven!"*

"Don't get so excited," I said. "It's not what it's cracked up to be."

*"See Mama!"* it squealed.

“What?”

*"See God! See Mama!"*

Suddenly I knew why MacDonald was being treated for depression. I didn't blame him at all.

I hurried back to the slaughterhouse, and when Cotter emerged alone a moment later I walked up to him.

“We have to talk,” I said, grabbing him by the arm.

“Your colleagues are all inside inspecting the premises,” he said, trying to pull himself loose from my grip. “Are you sure you wouldn't care to join them?”

“Shut up and listen to me!” I said. “I just had a talk with one of your Butterballs.”

“He told you to feed him?”

“He told me that he would see God when he went to heaven.”

Cotter swallowed hard. “Oh, shit—another one!”

“Another one of *what* ?” I demanded. “Another sentient one?”

“No, of course not,” said Cotter. “But as often as we impress the need for absolute silence among our staff, they continue to speak to each other in front of the Butterballs, or even to the Butterballs themselves. Obviously this one heard someone saying that God lives in heaven. It has no concept of God, of course; it probably thinks God is something good to eat.”

“He thinks he's going to see his mother, too,” I said.

“He's a *mimic!*” said Cotter severely. “Surely you don't think he can have any memory of his mother? For Christ's sake, he was weaned at five weeks!”

“I'm just telling you what he said,” I replied. “Like it or not, you've got a hell of a P.R. problem: Just how many people do you want him saying it to?”

“Point him out to me,” said Cotter, looking panicky. “We'll process him at once.”

“You think he's the only one with a vocabulary?” I asked.

“One of the very few, I'm sure,” said Cotter.

“Don't be *that* sure,” said Julie, who had joined us while I was talking to Cotter. She had an odd expression on her face, like someone who's just undergone a religious experience and wishes she hadn't. “Mine looked at me with those soft brown eyes and asked me, very gently and very shyly, not to eat it.”

I thought Cotter's would shit in his expensive suit. “That's impossible!”

“The hell it is,” she shot back.

“They are *not* sentient,” he said stubbornly. “They are *mimics*. They do not think. They do not know what they are saying.” He stared at her. “Are you sure he didn't say *'feed'*? It sounds a lot like *'eat'*. You've got to be mistaken.”

It made sense. I hoped he was right.

“Don't feed me?” repeated Julie. “The only un-hungry Butterball on the farm?”

“Some of them speak better than others. He could have been clearing his throat, or trying to say something that came out wrong. I've even come across one that stutters.” It occurred to me that Cotter was trying as hard to convince himself as he was to convince her. “We've tested them a hundred different ways. They're not sentient. They're *not!*”

“But—”

“Consider the facts,” said Cotter. “I've explained that the words sounds alike. I've explained that the Butterballs are not all equally skilled at articulation. I've explained that after endless lab experiments the top animal behavioral scientists in the world have concluded that they are not sentient. All that is on one side. On the other is that you *think* you may have heard something that is so impossible that any other explanation makes more sense.”

“I don't know,” she hedged. “It sounded exactly like...”

“I'm sure it did,” said Cotter soothingly. “You were simply mistaken.”

“No one else has ever heard anything like that?” she asked.

“No one. But if you'd like to point out which of them said it...”

She turned toward the pen. “They all look alike.”

I tagged along as the two of them walked over to the Butterballs. We spent about five minutes there, but none of them said anything but “*Feed me!*” and “*Pet me!*”, and finally Julie sighed in resignation.

“All right,” she said wearily. “Maybe I was wrong.”

“What do you think, Mr. McNair?” asked Cotter.

My first thought was: what the hell are you asking *me* for? Then I looked into his eyes, which were almost laying out the terms of our agreement, and I knew.

“Now that I've had a few minutes to think about it, I guess we were mistaken,” I said. “Your scientists know a lot more about it than we do.”

I turned to see Julie's reaction.

“Yeah,” she said at last. “I suppose so.” She looked at the Butterballs. “Besides, MacDonald may be a zillionaire and a recluse, but I don't think he's a monster, and only a monster could do something like ... well ... yes, I must have been mistaken.”

And that's the story. We were not only the first pool of journalists to visit the farm. We were also the last.

The others didn't know what had happened, and of course Cotter wasn't about to tell them. They reported what they saw, told the world that its prayers were answered, and only three of them even mentioned the Butterballs' special talent.

I thought about the Butterballs all during the long flight home. Every expert said they weren't sentient, that they were just mimics. And I suppose my Butterball could very well have heard someone say that God lived in heaven, just as he could have heard someone use the word "very". It was a stretch, but I could buy it if I had to.

But where did Julie Balch's Butterball ever hear a man begging not to be eaten? I've been trying to come up with an answer to that since I left the farm. I haven't got one yet—but I *do* have a syndicated column, courtesy of the conglomerate that owns the publishing company.

So am I going use it to tell the world?

That's my other problem: Tell it *what*? That three billion kids can go back to starving to death? Because whether Cotter was telling the truth or lying through his teeth, if it comes down to a choice between Butterballs and humans, I know which side I have to come down on.

There are things I can control and things I can't, things I know and things I am trying my damndest not to know. I'm just one man, and I'm not responsible for saving the world.

But I *am* responsible for me—and from the day I left the farm, I've been a vegetarian. It's a small step, but you've got to start somewhere.

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