

James Patrick Kelly: Fruitcake Theory

dumb
without
followers.
the
enough
upset
his
a
Stupidity.
it
comb,
"The
me.

Bjorn is trying to tell me that the rooster isn't as a spoon. Obtuse, maybe. Naïve, yes. Tedious, a doubt.
The rooster is sitting across the aisle and up two seats, paying no attention to us. We're just
He's staring out the window of the van at the snow. "He's Kuvat, Maggie," says Bjorn. "Aliens think differently than we do."
"Cranial capacity." I tap the side of my head. "Check that skull. He's got room up there for half a cup of brains, tops."
"Maybe he's got some kind of distributed nervous system," Bjorn says. "How else could they have built
starship?"
"The scarecrows built the starship," I say. "The roosters came along for the ride. You follow long
and it's obvious."
"Intellectual bifurcation is just a theory."
Nevertheless, Bjorn slides down in his seat, defeated once again. "All we know is that they're Kuvat, both roosters and scarecrows." He takes out his appetite pacifier and starts sucking at it. I don't mean to
him.
The rooster starts eeking to himself.
"Eek eek eeeek, eek eek eeeek! "
He looks like a cauliflower the size of a washing machine -- with legs. They are bird legs, to be sure, with scaly shanks and clawed, three-toed feet. But
body is an enormous scoop of convoluted flesh. All he wears is the translator, a golden disk that hangs on
cord around his neck like the Noble Prize for
His skin is as translucent as spilled milk. Beneath
are coils of muscle marbled with gray fat. He has spindly arms and his little head is mostly mouth. We can't see the upright ruddy flap, like a rooster's
just behind his button eyes, because tonight he's wearing a Santa's cap of red felt.
Bjorn pops the appetite pacifier out of his mouth. "I think that's 'Jingle Bells,' " he says excitedly.
eeeking." He makes a note of this. Bjorn is new to the following team. He's twenty-four and takes everything too seriously, except himself. He's fat and blond and sweet as a jelly donut. I really do like him; he just hasn't realized it yet. He brings out the mother in

van
bad
an
shopping.
in
fusion,
always
see
be
four
other
for
ask
Dopey,
found
observe,
roosters.
in
through

I yawn. I'm not a night person and I'm riding in a
at two in the morning. It's the rooster's fault, of
course. It's December 22 and the rooster has got a
case of holiday spirit, even though he doesn't know
elf from an elephant. He wants to do a little
It's a security nightmare, but we accommodate him. We
always do because we're asking for the Kuvat
encyclopedia for Christmas. Not that we know what's
it exactly, but these creatures come from a planet a
hundred and thirty light years away. They're bound to
have a grand unified theory, the secret of cool
and a cure for cellulite.
=Persons?= The rooster turns toward us. =This one has
hunger.=
"Me too. I haven't eaten since dinner." Bjorn is
happy to interact with our charge. "Wait until you
the food court at this mall. It's totally grade. Must
thirty different kinds of ethnic." He's starting to
bubble with enthusiasm; I give him a needle stare.
"Well, maybe only twenty," he mutters.
=This one has also thirst, persons.=
"This one is called Maggie." I touch my chest.
"Mag-gie." The rooster can't tell humans apart. This
continues to annoy me; I've been following him for
months and he still doesn't know who I am.
=Laughing all the way, person, ha, ha, ha.=
There is some debate as to the accuracy of Kuvat
translations.
I'm sick of this rooster. I've asked to follow any
Kuvat, preferably a scarecrow, but I'd even settle
another rooster. As far as we know, there are four
besides this one. Roosters don't have names, don't
me why. At first we gave them nicknames -- Dodo,
Dumbo, Ding-dong, and Dufus -- only when Balfour
out, she pitched a fit. Our job was to follow,
and protect the Kuvat, she said, not to make snide
remarks. She doesn't even like us calling them
When she overheard Jasper laughing about "Dopey" back
August, she pulled him from the following team and
banished him to Waste Assessment, where he sifts
Kuvat garbage and samples their sewage.

This rooster has been the most rambunctious tourist of the five. Since the Kuvat landed in May, he's been to the pyramids and the Taj Mahal and the Eiffel Tower. He's crazy about zoos and disneys. He saw the third game of the i08 World Series and was a Special Guest at the Sixty-Sixth World Science Fiction Convention. He seems to be partnered with Kasaan, the scarecrow who is the leader of the Kuvat expedition. Bjorn has signed on to the theory that the roosters are scouting us and make detailed reports back to the scarecrows, who rarely leave the compound we've built around their starship. This theory is conveniently unverifiable, since we're not allowed to follow roosters onto the starship.

Mall, When we pull up to the entrance of the Live Night two Balfour herself gets onto the van. She nods at the we of us and then approaches the rooster. one "You will have an hour. I'm afraid that's as much as you. can do, one hour. These two will accompany you for hour. Anything you want, these two will obtain for "Even Do you understand everything? These two? One hour? that though she won't admit it, it's obvious that Balfour, everything." too, thinks that the rooster hasn't got the brains the God gave to spinach. have =Kuvat pay? That is the habit.= "No," said Balfour. "These two will pay for information of fruitcake.= "Fruitcake?" Balfour glances back at us, as if we some idea what the rooster is talking about. Bjorn shrugs. "I'm sure there's fruitcake somewhere at the mall," Balfour says. =The fruitcake solves much hunger.= As we get off the van, Balfour touches my arm. I let Bjorn go on ahead with the rooster. "Any trouble?" she says. "Not so far." "Well, there is now. Kasaan is on her way here from the U.N." "Here as in here? Why?" She gives me an exasperated glare. "Maybe she realized there are only two more shopping days until

Christmas."

of

answers.

already

We're

heads

at

shoulder.

strategically

trips,

If

by

before

arrive.

hour,

mundanes,

hang

warm

arms

Balfour is as mystified by Kuvat behavior as the rest

of us, but she's Undersecretary for Alien Affairs. When people have questions, she's expected to give

answers.

Sometimes that vein in her left temple pulses like a blue worm.

"You want to pull our guest out?" This would be the first time a rooster and a scarecrow have met outside the starship compound. It's a chance to observe new behaviors -- but the mall is so public.

"I don't think so. No."

"Tell him about Kasaan?"

She rubs her eyes and I realize that she probably dragged herself out of bed for this. "Maybe he

knows. Look, I've seeded the mall with our people.

going to let this happen, okay? It's the good old observe and protect. I just wanted to give you a

heads up." She turns away but catches herself. "How's Bjorn working out?"

"He should do more sit ups."

She sighs, but the vein subsides. "It's two-thirty in the morning, Maggie. Not even Hack Bumbledom is funny

at two-thirty in the morning."

"Want me to pick you up some fruitcake? It's full of information."

"This could be big." She brushes snow off my

shoulder.

"I'll be in the security office."

Followers and their families are scattered

strategically around the room. When we take roosters on field

trips, we try to minimize their access to the mundane world.

If we can, we clear a site completely; otherwise we drop

by unannounced and late at night. We're in and out

before the media and the Kuvat chasers and the oddjobs

arrive. There are a few civilians shopping at this ungodly

hour, and of course the staff of all the stores are

mundanes, but we've got good coverage.

The Live Night Mall is "Y" shaped. Ribbons of light

hang from its vaulted glass ceiling; they shiver in the

warm breeze that blows from the ventilators. Each of the

arms is lined with the usual assortment of shops selling

games, infodumps, shoes, T-shirts, ties, hats,

kitchenware, software, artware, candy, toys, candles,

hair
its
Chief,
are
the
I'm
I
pass
off?"
it
Security
the
a
I

perfumes and pheromones. You can get a skin tint, a style, or walk-in liposuction. At the end of each of arms is an anchor store, a Sears & Penny, a Food and a Home Depot. The three arms come together in a vast, garish, and noisy cluster of fast food storefronts. Bjorn might be right about the number of ethnics; I don't think I've ever seen Icelandic in a mall before. At the hub of the mall there must be a couple of hundred round tables. The surfaces of each screens tuned to themed cable stations. Even though place is pretty much deserted, it's still filled with the ghostly mutter of news and sitcoms and cartoons. expecting to spot the rooster here somewhere but all can see is a handful of followers and a Santa nodding over a latte. Kevin Darcy pushes his sleeping four-year-old by me in a stroller and murmurs, "Sears and Penny." So I pick my way through the maze of tables. As I Santa, he shoots out of his chair. "Where did you come from?" "Home," I say and try to get by. "No, you didn't." He pushes in front of me. "You're a stranger. Who are all these people?" "This the mall, friend. We're all strangers here." "Not at my mall, you're not," he said. "Listen, why don't you take the rest of the night I flip open my wallet and give him a good look at the ID. "I'll bet you're tired. I'll clear it with your boss." He glances at it, but I don't think he sees anything. "It's not him," he says uncertainly. "It's all the presents. I have to finish my list." Now I'm just guessing at his story, but I'm pretty sure I've got right. He's old and broke and stuck in Social shock -- just trying to earn a few extra bucks over holidays. Only he hasn't actually moved to a night schedule, so he's trying to tough this shift out with chemicals. That's why he's just south of coherent and has cephadrine eyes. "If I go, they'll replace me with Santabot." He lowers his voice. "They don't take bathroom breaks." "Excuse me." I sidestep him. "I have to see a rooster about a fruitcake." "Wait! I'll put you on my list." He clutches at me. "What do you want for Christmas?" "How about someone else's life?" He considers this and

slip by.
"You can have mine!" he calls after me. "Hey!"
As I enter the Sears & Penny, I notice an odd,
stinging,
only
section,
where it is so strong my eyes water. A mundane sales
clerk is tapping, "Silent Night," on the keypad of his
cashcard reader,
Bjorn and the rooster are sitting on the floor on a
red
picnic.
The rooster's Santa cap is cocked at a rakish angle.
He
has opened a plastic bag containing three white Fruit
of
the Loom undershirts.
He is eating them.
Somehow he has also obtained a four pack of Murray's
Chocolate Mint Wine, two of which are now empties.
=Hungry?= He holds a wine-stained rag out to me.
"No," I say, "thank you." I try to catch Bjorn's eye
but
he is staring between his legs as if counting the red
checks on the tablecloth.
=One hundred percent cotton.= The rooster pulls a new
undershirt from the bag and turns it this way and
that,
another
like
Bjorn,
could I speak to you?"
He finally looks up, his eyes red and watery from
rooster smell. "You think I'm fat." He shivers like a
barrel of Jell-O, then laughs out loud.
"What?"
"Everybody thinks I'm fat. I am fat!" He spreads his
fingers across his waist. Sure, Bjorn could do a
creditable Santa without padding but what's that got
to
in
my throat like balloons. I cough and manage to choke
out, "What's going on here?"
=He knows you bad or good,= The rooster says around a
mouthful of undershirt. =so good good goodness sake.=
"He's not stupid, Maggie." Bjorn giggles and reaches
for
the last can of wine. "He just doesn't know what he
knows." He pops it open and drinks.
"Bjorn!" I want to stop him but the rooster smell is

blooming in my head. "What have you told him?" I'm
not
sure whether my feet are touching the floor.
=Kuvat not stupid.= The rooster chews with a sideways
motion, like a horse. =This one sees. This one
remembers. But only Kasaan knows.=
"Kasaan? What about Kasaan?"
"It's the truth," Bjorn says. "Want some?" He offers
me
the Murray's chocolate wine and I snatch it away from
him.
=Cotton?= The rooster offers the bag of undershirts.
"No." I wave him off absently. "Maybe later."
"He's emitting some kind of euphoriant," says Bjorn.
"Can you smell it, Maggie?"
=Tidal of comfort and joy, comfort and joy.=
"Yes." I sit down next to him. If I don't, somebody
will
have to pull me off the ceiling. "How did it start?"
"He was talking about Kasaan. He says she's going to
empty him, or something. I'm pretty sure he's getting
ready to turn in his report." He beams, pleased that
he's finally won our argument. "I have a theory. He
has
to tell the truth, right? The smell makes him do it,
feel great about it. And it's working on us too. Tell
me
a lie, Maggie."
=Lies stink.= The rooster spits out the undershirt's
polyester size tag.
"Oh god," I say. "Oh my god." I take a swig of
Murray's
and pass it back to Bjorn. "Kasaan is on her way over
here." The chocolate weight in my gut helps me forget
that I'm breaking every rule of following there is.
By
this time tomorrow, I'll be helping Jasper centrifuge
Kuvat sewage.
=Person,= says the rooster. =You smell unhappy
always.=
"I am unhappy," I say. "I've got a right to be
unhappy."
"Why is that?" Bjorn asks.
"Because we have to follow this stupid rooster
around,
Bjorn! I don't know about you, but that makes me feel
stupid. It should make everybody in the whole damn
world
feel stupid."
"Well, at least you're not fat." Bjorn laughs and
hands
me the Murray's. Just to be sociable, I take a drink.
=Person is fat,= says the rooster. =Person feels
stupid.=
I hear running footsteps. Our backup is coming fast.
When I think of how this is going to look to the rest
of
the following team, I start to giggle. "We're
screwed,"
I say.

"Very." Bjorn thinks it's funny too.
Balfour herself is leading the charge. "Maggie!" When she spots us she pulls up. She stares as if she has just caught Santa shoplifting.

I struggle to my knees and hold both hands out to warn them. "Get out of here, now! It's an airborne intoxicant." I realize I'm waving a can of Murray's Chocolate Mint Wine at the Undersecretary for Alien Affairs. I set it discreetly on the plastic tablecloth.

"Gas masks in the van," Balfour says to the team as she covers her mouth and nose with her hand. "Clear the store. No, clear the mall. Seal everything." A handful of them peel off, running. The other followers goggle at us, then back away uncertainly. "Kasaan is looking for him," she says. "Are you okay?" "Sure," says Bjorn. "Tidal of comfort and joy." "I think we're all right," I say. "But we're not moving, observing anymore. We're part of it, Balfour. Now after before it's too late." They leave, dragging the giggling menswear clerk threads them. The rooster stands and brushes a few white off. =Person, is there fruitcake?= We find fruitcake at the North Pole, a seasonal kiosk North halfway down the Home Depot arm of the mall. The Pole also sells ten different flavors of candy canes, and boxes of assorted chocolates and Christmas cookies in his full complement of reindeer cavort around the circular base of the kiosk. I know it's the rooster smell which continues to float up my nose, but I find myself humming along with Gene. The fruitcake is stacked five high in round red tins decorated with scenes of cherry-faced kids building snowmen and wrapped in cellophane. Bjorn takes one off the top and gives it to the rooster. "This is fruitcake," he says. holds The rooster takes it, turns it over several times, it up to the light and then taps a finger against the lid of the tin. =Is hard.= to "It's inside." I shake my head, laughing. "You have open it first." The rooster glances up and down the deserted mall. =There is no pay person.=

Bjorn is unwrapping a white chocolate snowman. "Don't worry. We'll take care of it."
=This one pays. That is the habit.= He sets the fruitcake, unopened, back on the counter. =Christmas

is.

The Kuvat pay.=
"No, really....," says Bjorn, but I nudge him in the

back

just as the rooster begins to eek.
"Eeeeeek, eek, eek, eek. Eeeek! " Beneath his translucent skin, the flesh appears to seethe. We can hear a sloshing, like a mop in a bucket of water. The rooster claps a hand to his chest and I see a viscous ooze between stubby fingers. He brings the hand to

his

mouth and blows on it, once, twice, then opens it and shows us.
=Pay.= he says. Bjorn drops his chocolate snowman. Clicking softly on his smooth palm are four green pearls.
"What are they?" says Bjorn.
=The end of fat,= says the rooster. He offers them to Bjorn. =Person eats?=
Of course, I am immediately suspicious of the green pearls. What is the end of fat anyway? What will

these

things do to the human digestive system?
"How many?" Bjorn's face is as soft as cookie dough.
"Wait a minute!" I'm stunned, but I can't bring

myself

to stop it.
=The one.=
"What was it you said, Maggie?" He smiles at me.

"We're

not observing anymore. We're part of things now." He accepts a pearl from the rooster. "Thank you. Do I chew?"
=Swallow hurry.=
"Bjorn!"
He pops it into his mouth and it's over. I wait for

him

to keel over and writhe or throw up or maybe even explode, but he just watches me with that goofy

smile,

which I absolutely understand. Whatever happens is

all

right, is true, is good. We'll both accept it because the world smells so sweet tonight.
Bjorn raises his hands over his head like a Sugar

Plum

Fairy and does a pirouette.
When the rooster offers me the green pearls, I'm not

at

all tempted. "Thanks." I sweep them onto my hand and pocket them. "But I think I'll save these for breakfast."
The rooster's eyes glitter for a moment and go dim.
=One,= he says. =Share.= He turns to the North Pole

and

retrieves his fruitcake.

The rooster wants to eat the cellophane wrapping but we talk him out of it. When we pry the top off the tin, he eeks and drops it. =Not Christmas!= The cake is still in the bottom half of the tin; it rolls toward the Playbot store.

=Fruitcake stinks!= He starts hopping up and down on one foot. =Stinks like a lie.=

"I'm sorry," says Bjorn. "Maybe that one was bad. I can get you another."

=Take it away!= the rooster says. =Bury it!=

"His hour is almost up." I say, "Let's get him out of here."

us But we don't get the chance because striding toward from the food court is Kasaan. A dozen gas-masked followers trot behind.

so The Kuvat scarecrows have no more in common with our scarecrows than the roosters have with gallus domesticus. We call them scarecrows because they're gangly and because they wear loud, loose clothes that cover most of their bodies. But nobody who meets a scarecrow ever remembers her wardrobe. What you remember prize as mouth pointed.

-- is the impossible head. It looks something like a pumpkin, only pumpkins aren't rust red or as wrinkled as walnuts. The eyes are like bloodshot eggs and the mouth is full of nightmare teeth, long and curved and pointed.

If the scarecrows weren't so shy, so polite, so intelligent -- everything that the roosters are not -- they would've frightened the bejesus out of us.

Instinctively At the sight of Kasaan, the rooster forgets all about the fruitcake and begins to eek furiously.

on Bjorn and I step back. The scarecrow is swooping down the rooster; I've never seen one move so fast. The followers are left scrambling behind. The rooster tenses. He looks as if he wants to run in five directions at once, but can't decide which one.

This "Eek, eek, eeeek, eeeeeek, eeeeeek! "

has Just before it happens, I realize what I'm seeing. isn't any meeting. It's an attack: a lion charging a wildebeest, a wolf taking a hare.

"Uh-oh," I say, but it's good. It's true. The smell has changed everything.

Kasaan slams into the rooster, knocking him down. The

back. rooster bounces, rolls and lies, shivering, on his
His legs pump weakly as Kasaan looms over him. The
scarecrow bends to nuzzle the rooster's shoulder. He
closes his eyes. His eeking is low and wet. The
breathless followers catch up.
"What is this?" I recognize Balfour. "Oh my god,
she doing?"
Kasaan's nubbly pink tongue licks between bared teeth
at the rooster's shoulder. It makes a sound like someone
washing hands.
"Observe," I say. "But don't protect. Not this time."
The licking goes on for several moments. Suddenly the
teeth pierce the skin and sink deep. The rooster
stiffens, but makes no sound. With a quick jerk to
one side, Kasaan tears an apple-sized chunk of the
rooster's flesh away. Her jaws close on the meat -- once,
twice,
three times -- and then she tilts her head back and
swallows. The wound brims with purple blood; Kasaan
licks it clean. When the bleeding stops, the
scarecrow steps away and stretches luxuriantly.
"What tasty information!" She offers a hand to the
rooster, who struggles to his feet. "You have seen
most deliciously."
"I have a theory," whispers Bjorn, "about how these
reports are made..." But he doesn't get to elaborate
because Kasaan comes up to him.
"What that one gave you," the scarecrow says, "is the
egg of a vuot, a worm that will grow over the years
in your intestines."
Bjorn turns the color of eggnog.
"How do you know about that?" I say.
"I ate those memories," says Kasaan. "Now the vuot is
a beneficial parasite that all Kuvat share. It will
filter toxins and regulate your metabolism and prolong your
life. You need not worry about side effects. Indeed,
I believe you will be most happy with your relationship
with the vuot over the coming centuries."
I pat my pocket to make sure the pearls -- vuot eggs
-- are still there. Kasaan notices this and bows
apologetically. "What has happened, is and is for the
good. But there is something that has not yet
happened,
which I must unfortunately prevent from happening."
I can guess what's coming. "We bought them from him,"
I say. "We paid."
"Maggie, a fruitcake is not the price of

immortality,"

says Kasaan gently.

=Fruitcake stinks.= says the rooster. =Person lies.=

His

wound has already healed.

on

"I'm afraid I must insist." The scarecrow lays a hand

my shoulder.

=Better not cry. Tell me why.=

Bjorn,

I know she means me no harm. So does the rooster,

Balfour, and all the followers. I'm going to give her the eggs. Maybe later we'll find out what the right price for them is. As far as I'm concerned, the situation is under control. But it's not my mall. "Get your hands off her!"

It happens so fast. Santa comes from somewhere behind the followers. No one sees him until he goes

airborne.

He's spry for an old man, clipping Kasaan at the

waist

and spinning him around. The eggs go flying out of my hand and splatter on the floor. Santa and the

scarecrow

fall in a heap.

"Monster!" screams Santa. "Get out of my mall!" He's

got

his hands around the scarecrow's neck. We swarm over

to

pull them apart but we're a millisecond too late.

Kasaan bites down hard on Santa's bicep. She tears off

a

mouthful of muscle and some red felt rags. Perhaps

it's

instinct that makes her swallow.

"Ahhh!" Blood spurts. Santa faints.

The scarecrow picks herself up slowly, licking the

blood

off her lips.

"Kasaan, I am so sorry," says Balfour, her voice

muffled

by the gas mask. "I thought we had secured the area."

Kasaan stares thoughtfully at her. "He is a senior."

"Old, yes," she says. "Poor thing probably doesn't

know

what he's doing."

"This is how you treat your elders?"

"What do you mean?"

"We have made a terrible mistake," says Kasaan. "I

wish

to return to the ship immediately."

=And a happy New Year,= says the rooster, as he

follows

the scarecrow out.

Three days later, the Kuvat starship takes off. They have yet to return.

Barbara Balfour, Undersecretary of Alien Affairs, resigns in February, after taking a merciless

pounding

in the media and both houses of Congress. In March

she

signs a contract to write *Who Lost the Kuvat?*, which presents her side of what happened. Although sales

are

disappointing, the vein in her temple stops throbbing. Bjorn Lipponen loses one hundred and fifty pounds in

six

months. Two years after *The Incident*, as it comes to

be

called, he is named one of the twenty-first century's Hundred Most Sexy Men. Later, he becomes a noted futurist. His book, *The Road to Eternity*, is in its eighteenth printing.

Nobody knows quite what to do with Lester Rand, the demented Santa. There is considerable sentiment for charging him in the World Court with crimes against humanity. But who can say what will happen if the

Kuvat

come back and find out that we punished the messenger instead of accepting the message? In his later years,

he

writes a children's book, *Reindeer in the Mall*, which

is

optioned by Fox and made into a full length computer animated cartoon.

I am never going to write a book. I'm not going to

live

forever

There are a lot of theories about what caused *The Incident*. Some want to blame me for insulting the rooster, even though what I said was only the truth. Others say that it is humanity's fault for

mistreating

the Lester Rands of the world. Many former Kuvat

chasers

maintain that when Kasaan digested the information he bit off Rand, he saw into the dark soul of *Homo*

sapiens

sapiens and was repelled. I guess everyone has a

theory.

Here's mine.

It was the fruitcake.