The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp

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Extract

I never thought I would save the world—or die saving it. I never believed in angels or miracles either, and I sure didn't think of myself as a hero. Nobody would have, including you, if you had known me before I took the world's most powerful weapon and let it fall into the hands of a lunatic. Maybe after you hear my story you won't think I'm much of a hero anyway, since most of my heroics (if you want to call them that) resulted from my being a screwup. A lot of people died because of *me*—including *me*—but I guess I'm getting ahead of myself and I'd better start from the beginning.

It began with my uncle Farrell wanting to be rich. He never had much money growing up and, by the time Mr. Arthur Myers came along with his once-in-a-lifetime deal, my uncle was forty years old and sick of being poor. Being poor isn't one of those things you get used to, even if being poor is all you've ever been. So when Mr. Myers flashed the cash, all other considerations—like if any of it was legal, for instance—were forgotten. Of course, Uncle Farrell had no way of knowing who Mr. Arthur Myers actually was, or that his name wasn't even Arthur Myers.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again. Maybe I should just start with me.

I was born in Salina, Ohio, the first and last child of Annabelle Kropp. I never knew my dad. He took off before I was born.

Mom's pregnancy was difficult and very long. She was almost ten and a half months along when the doctor decided to get me the heck out of there before I exploded from her stomach like some kind of alien hatchling.

I was born big and just kept getting bigger. At birth, I weighed over twelve pounds and my head was about the size of a watermelon. Okay, maybe not the size of a watermelon, but definitely as big as a cantaloupe—one of those South American cantaloupes, which is a lot bigger than your California variety.

By the time I was five, I weighed over ninety pounds and stood four feet tall. At ten, I hit six feet and two hundred pounds. I was off the pediatrician's growth chart. Mom was

pretty worried by that point. She put me on special diets and started me on an exercise program.

Because of my large head, big hands and feet, and my general shyness, a lot of people assumed I was mentally handicapped. Mom must have been worried about that too, because she had my IQ tested. She never told me the results. When I asked her, she said I most definitely was not. "You're just a big boy meant for big things," she said.

I believed her. Not the part about being meant for big things, but the part about me not being retarded, since I never saw my scores and it was one of those things where you have to believe that your parent isn't lying.

We lived in a little apartment near the supermarket where she worked as an assistant manager. Mom never got married, though occasionally a boyfriend came around. She took a second job keeping the books for a couple of mom-and-pop stores. I remember going to bed most nights with the sounds of her calculator snapping in the kitchen.

Then, when I was twelve, she died of cancer.

One morning she had found a tender spot on her left temple. Four months later, she was dead and I was alone.

I spent a couple of years shuttling between foster homes, until Mom's brother, my uncle Farrell, volunteered to take me in, to his place in Knoxville, Tennessee. I had just turned fifteen.

I didn't see much of Uncle Farrell: He worked as a night watchman at an office building in downtown Knoxville and slept most of the day. He wore a black uniform with an

embroidered gold shield on the shoulder. He didn't carry a gun, but he did have a nightstick, and he thought he was very important.

I spent a lot of time in my bedroom, listening to music or reading. This bothered Uncle Farrell because he considered himself a man of action, despite the fact that he sat on his butt for eight hours every night doing nothing but staring at surveillance monitors. Finally, he asked me if I wanted to talk about my mom's death. I told him I didn't. I just wanted to be left alone.

"Alfred," he said. "Look around you. Look at the movers and shakers of this world. Do you think they got to be where they are by lying around all day reading books and listening to rap music?"

"I don't know how they got to be where they are," I said. "So I guess they could have."

He didn't like my answer, so he sent me to see the school psychologist, Dr. Francine Peddicott. She was very old and had a very long, sharp nose, and her office smelled like vanilla. Dr. Peddicott liked to ask questions. In fact, I can't remember anything she said that *wasn't* a question besides "Hello, Alfred," and "Good-bye, Alfred."

"Do you miss your mother?" she asked on my first visit, after asking me if I wanted to sit or lie on the sofa. I chose to sit.

"Sure. She was my mom."

"What do you miss most about her?"

"She was a great cook."

"Really? You miss her cooking the most?"

"Well, I don't know. You asked what I missed most and that's the first thing that popped into my head. Maybe because it's almost dinnertime. Also, Uncle Farrell can't cook. I mean, he cooks, but what he cooks I wouldn't feed to a starving dog. Mostly we have frozen dinners and stuff out of a can."

She scribbled for a minute in her little notebook.

"But your mother—she was a good cook?"

"She was a great cook."

She sighed heavily. Maybe I wasn't giving the kind of answers she was looking for. "Do you hate her sometimes?"

"Hate her for what?"

"Do you hate your mother for dying?"

"Oh, jeez, that wasn't her fault."

"But you get mad at her sometimes, right? For leaving you?"

"I get mad at the cancer for killing her. I get mad at the doctors and . . . you know, how it's been around for centuries and we still can't get rid of it. Cancer, I mean. And I think, what if we put all the money we spend on these wasteful government projects toward cancer research. You know, stuff like that."

"What about your father?"

"What about him?"

"Do you hate him?"

"I don't even know him."

"Do you hate him for leaving you and your mom?"

She was making me feel freaky, like she was trying to get me to hate my father, a guy I didn't even know, and even like she was trying to get me to hate my dead mother.

"I guess so, but I don't know all the facts," I said.

"Your mother didn't tell you?"

"She just said he couldn't commit."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"Like he didn't want a kid."

"Like he didn't want—who?"

"Me. Me, I guess. Of course me."

I wondered what the next thing I was supposed to hate was.

"How do you like school?"

"I hate it."

"Why?"

"I don't know anyone."

"You don't have any friends?"

"They call me Frankenstein."

"Who does?"

"Kids at school. You know, because of my size. My big head."

"What about girls?" she asked.

"Girls calling me Frankenstein?"

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

Well, there *was* this one girl—her name was Amy Pouchard, and she sat two seats over from me in math. She had long blond hair and very dark eyes. One day during my first week, I thought she might have smiled at me. She could

have been smiling at the guy on my left, or even not smiling at all, and I just projected a smile onto a nonsmiling face.

"No. No girlfriends," I said.

Uncle Farrell talked to Dr. Peddicott for a long time afterwards. He told me she was referring me to a psychiatrist who could prescribe some antidepressants because Dr. Peddicott believed I was severely depressed and recommended I get involved with something other than TV and music, in addition to seeing a shrink and taking anti-crazy drugs. Uncle Farrell's idea was football, which wasn't too surprising given my size, but football was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Uncle Farrell," I told him, "I don't want to play football."

"You're high-risk, Al," Uncle Farrell answered. "You're running around with all the risk factors for a major psychotic episode. One, you got no dad. Two, you got no mom. Three, you're living with an absentee caretaker—me—and four, you're in a strange town with no friends.

"There was another one too . . . Oh, yeah. And five, you're fifteen."

"I want to get my license," I told him.

"Your license for what?"

"For driving. I want my learner's permit."

"I'm telling you that you're about to go off the deep end and you want to talk about getting your learner's permit?"

"That reminded me, the fact that I'm fifteen."

"Dr. Peddicott thought it was a great idea," Uncle Farrell said.

"A learner's permit?"

"No! Going out for the football team. One, you need some kind of activity. Two, it's a great way to build confidence and make friends. And three, look at you! For the love of the Blessed Virgin, you're some kinda force of nature! Any coach would love to have you on his team."

"I don't like football," I said.

"You don't like football? How can you not like football? What kind of kid are you? What kind of American kid doesn't like football? I suppose next you're going to say you want to take dancing lessons!"

"I don't want to take dancing lessons."

"That's good, Al. That's real good. Because if you said you wanted to take dancing lessons, I don't know what I'd do. Throw myself over a cliff or something."

"I don't like pain."

"Ah, come on. They'll bounce off you like—like—pygmies! Gnats! Little pygmy gnats!"

"Uncle Farrell, I cry if I get a splinter. I faint at the sight of blood. And I bruise very easily. I'm a very easy bruiser."

But Uncle Farrell wouldn't take no for an answer. He ended up bribing me. He wouldn't take me to get my learner's permit unless I tried out for the football team. And if I didn't try out for the team, he promised he would put me on so much antidepressant dope, I wouldn't remember to sit when I crapped. Uncle Farrell could be gross like that.

I really wanted my permit—I also didn't want to be so doped up, I couldn't remember how to crap—so I went out for the team.

I made the team as a second-string right guard, which basically meant I was a practice dummy for the first-string defense.

Coach Harvey was a short round guy with a gut that hung over his pants, and calves about the size of my head, which, as I mentioned, was large. Like a lot of coaches, Coach Harvey liked to scream. He especially liked to scream at me.

One afternoon, about a month before Uncle Farrell struck his deal with the chief Agent of Darkness, I saw how much screaming he could do. I had just let a linebacker blow by me and cream the starting quarterback, the most popular

kid in school, Barry Lancaster. I didn't mean for this to happen, but I was having trouble memorizing the playbook. It seemed very complicated, especially seeing it was a document intended for big jocks, most of whom could barely read. Anyway, I thought Barry had called a Dog Right, but actually he had said "Hog Right." That one letter makes a huge difference and left Barry on the turf, writhing in agony.

Coach Harvey charged from the sidelines, silver whistle clamped between his fat lips, screaming around the hysterical screeches of the whistle as he ran.

"Kropp!" *Tweet!* "Kropp!" *Tweet!* "KROPP!"

"Sorry, Coach," I told him. "I heard 'dog,' not 'hog.' "

"Dog, not hog?" He turned his head toward Barry, still twisting on the ground. He kept his body turned toward me. "Lancaster! Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay, Coach," Barry gasped. But he didn't look okay to me. His face was as white as the hash marks on the field.

"What play was that, Kropp?" Coach Harvey snapped at me.

"Um, Dog Right?" I said.

"Dog! Dog! You thought hog was dog? How is dog like hog, Kropp? Huh? Tell me!"

The whole team had gathered around us by this point, like gawkers at the scene of a terrible accident.

Coach Harvey reached up and slapped my helmet with the palm of his hand.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" He slapped me

again. He proceeded to punctuate his questions with a hard slap against the side of my head.

"Are you stupid?" Slap.

"Are you stupid, Kropp?" Slap.

"Are you thick, is that it, Kropp?" Slap-slap.

"No, sir, I'm not."

"No, sir, I'm not *what?*"

"Stupid, sir."

"Are you sure you're not stupid, Kropp? Because you act stupid. You play stupid. You even talk stupid. So are you absolutely sure, Kropp, that you are not stupid?" *Slap-slap-slap.*

"No, sir, I know I'm not!"

He slapped me again. I yelled, "My mother had my IQ tested and I'm not stupid! Sir!"

That cracked everybody up, and they kept laughing for the next three weeks. I heard it everywhere—"My mommy had my IQ tested and I'm not stupid!"—and not just in the locker room (where I heard it plenty). It spread over the whole school. Strangers would pass me in the hallway and squeal, "My mommy had my IQ tested!" It was horrible.

That night after the practice, Uncle Farrell asked how it was going.

"I don't want to play football anymore," I said.

"You're playing football, Alfred."

"It's not just about me, Uncle Farrell. Other people can get hurt too."

"You're playing football," he said. "Or you're not getting your license."

"I don't see the point of this," I said. "What's wrong with not playing football? I think it's pretty narrow-minded to assume just because I'm big, I should be playing football."

"Okay, Alfred," he said. "Then you tell me. What do you want to do? You want to go out for the marching band?"

"I don't play an instrument."

"It's a high school band, Alfred, not the New York Philharmonic."

"Still, you probably need to have some kind of basic understanding of music, reading notes, that kind of thing."

"Well, you're not going to lie around in your room all day listening to music and daydreaming. I'm tired of coming up with suggestions, so you tell me: What are your skills? What do you like to do?"

"Lie in my room and listen to music."

"I'm talking about skills, Mr. Wisenheimer, gifts, special attributes—you know, the thing that separates you from the average Joe."

I tried to think of a skill I had. I couldn't.

"Jeez, Al, everybody has something they're good at," Uncle Farrell said.

"What's so wrong about being average? Aren't most people?"

"Is that it? Is that all you expect from yourself, Alfred?" he asked, growing red in the face. I expected him to launch into one of his lectures about the movers and shakers or how anybody could be a success with a little luck and the right mindset.

But he didn't do that. Instead he ordered me into the car and we drove downtown.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I'm taking you on a magical journey, Alfred."

"A magical journey? Where to?"

"The future."

We crossed a bridge and I could see a huge glass building towering over everything around it. The glass was dark tinted, and against the night sky it looked like a fat, glittering black thumb pointing up.

"Do you know what that is?" Uncle Farrell asked. "That's where I work, Alfred, Samson Towers. Thirty-three stories high and three city blocks wide. Take a good look at it, Alfred."

"Uncle Farrell, I've seen big buildings before."

He didn't say anything. There was an angry expression on his thin face. Uncle Farrell was forty and as small and scrawny as I was big and meaty, though he had a large head like me. When he put on his security guard uniform, he reminded me of Barney Fife from that old *Andy Griffith Show,* or rather of a Pez dispenser of Barney Fife, because of the oversized head and skinny body. It made me feel guilty thinking of him as a goofy screwup like Barney Fife, but I couldn't help it. He even had those wet, flappy lips like Barney.

He pulled into the entrance of the underground parking lot and slid a plastic card into a machine. The gate opened and he drove slowly into the nearly empty lot.

"Who owns Samson Towers, Alfred?" he asked.

"A guy named Samson?" I guessed.

"A guy named Bernard Samson," he said. "You don't know anything about him, but let me tell you. Bernard Samson is a self-made millionaire many times over, Alfred. Came to Knoxville at the age of sixteen with nothing in his pockets and now he's one of the richest men in America. You want to know how he got there?"

"He invented the iPod?"

"He worked hard, Alfred. Hard work and something you are sorely lacking in: fortitude, guts, vision, passion. Because let me tell you something, the world doesn't belong to the smartest or the most talented. There are plenty of smart, talented losers in this world. You wanna know who the world belongs to, Alfred?"

"Microsoft?"

"That's it, smarty-pants, make jokes. No. The world belongs to people who don't give up. Who get knocked down and keep coming back for more."

"Okay, Uncle Farrell," I said. "I get your point. But what about the future?"

"That's right," he said. "The future! Come on, Alfred. You won't find the future in this garage."

We took the elevator to the lobby. Uncle Farrell led me to his horseshoe-shaped desk that faced the two-story atrium. About halfway between the security desk and the front doors was a waterfall that fell over these huge rocks that Uncle Farrell told me had been hauled down at great expense from the Pigeon River in the Smokies.

"Funny thing about life is you never know where it's going to take you," Uncle Farrell told me. "I'm working at the auto body shop when in strolls Bernard Samson. He strikes up a conversation, and next thing I know here I am making double what I pulled in at the shop. And for sitting—for nothing! *Double* for *nothing*, just because the richest man in Knoxville decides to give *me* a job!"

Mounted on the desktop were dozens of closed-circuit monitors set up to survey every nook and cranny of Samson Towers.

"This system is state-of-the-art, Alfred. I mean, this place is tighter than Fort Knox. Laser sensors, sound detectors, you name it."

"That's pretty cool, Uncle Farrell."

"Pretty cool," he echoed. "You betcha. And this is where I sit, eight hours a day, six nights a week, in front of these monitors, staring. Watching. What do you think I'm watching, Alfred?"

"Didn't you just say you were watching the monitors?"

"I am watching nothing, Alfred. Eight hours a day, six nights a week, I sit in this little chair right here, watching nothing."

He leaned very close to me, so close, I could smell his breath, which did not smell very good.

"This is the future, Alfred. *Your* future, or something like it, if you don't find your passion. If you don't figure out what you're here for. A lifetime of watching nothing."