THOMAS FRANK ON TV'S D.C. FANTASIES

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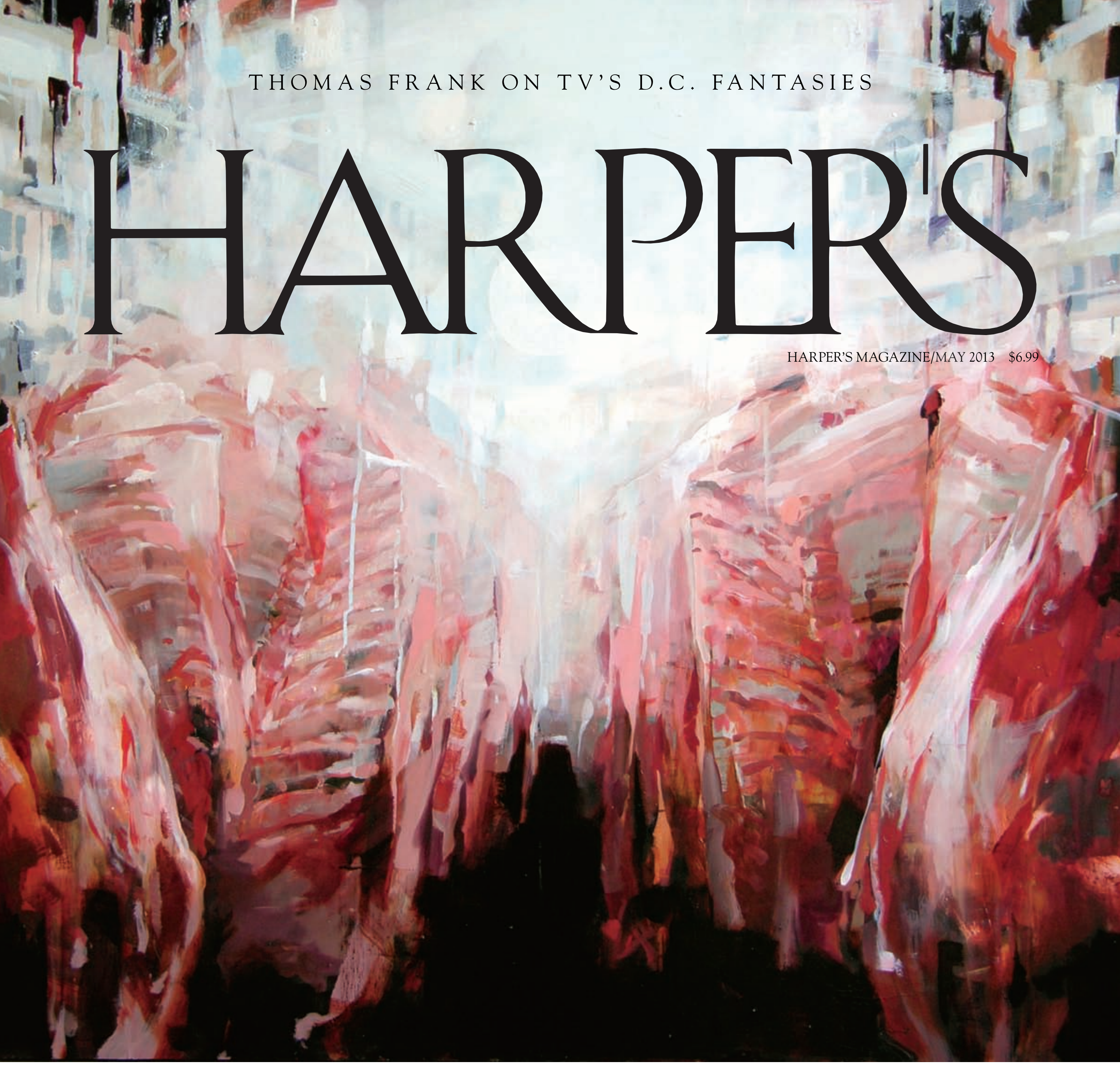

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THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

Undercover in an Industrial Slaughterhouse

By Ted Conover

AN UNCOMMON PAIN

Living with the Mystery of Headache

By Sallie Tisdale

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REPORT

THE WAY OF ALL FLESH

Undercover in an industrial slaughterhouse

By Ted Conover

The cattle arrive in perforated silver trailers called cattle pots that let in wind and weather and vent out their hot breath and flatus. It's hard to see inside a cattle pot. The drivers are in a hurry to unload and leave, and are always speeding by. (When I ask Lefty how meat gets bruised, he says, "You ever see how those guys drive?") The trucks have come from feedlots, some nearby, some in western Nebraska, a few in Iowa. The plant slaughters about 5,100 cattle each day, and a standard double-decker cattle pot holds only about forty, so there's a constant stream of trucks pulling in to disgorge, even before the line starts up a little after six A.M.

First the cattle are weighed. Then they are guided into narrow outdoor pens angled diagonally toward the entrance to the kill floor. A veterinarian arrives before our shift and begins to inspect them; she looks for open wounds, problems walking, signs of disease. When their time comes, the cattle will be urged by workers toward the curving ramp that leads up into the building. The ramp has a roof and no sharp turns. It was designed by the livestock expert Temple Grandin, and the curves and penumbral light are believed to soothe the animals in their final moments. But the soothing goes only so far.

"Huele mal, no?" says one of the Mexican wranglers: "It stinks, doesn't it?" He holds his nose against the ammoniac smell of urine as I visit the pens with Carolina.[1] We are new U.S. Department of Agriculture meat inspectors, getting the kitchen tour. The wrangler and his crew are moving cattle up the ramp. To do this, they wave sticks with white plastic bags tied to the ends over the animals' heads; the bags frighten the cattle and move them along. For cows that don't spook, the workers also have electric prods—in defiance, I was told, of company regulations—that crackle when applied to the nether parts. The ramp really does stink. "Yeah," I say in Spanish. "Why does it smell so bad?"

"They're scared. They don't want to die," the worker replies. But that's what they're here to do, and once on the ramp, they're just a few moments away from it.

On the opposite side of the plant is the end of the story. There, scores of refrigerated trailers wait their turn at the loading docks. They'll be filled with boxes of meat and cattle byproducts, which will make their way in one form or another to a store or restaurant near you.

In the middle, facing U.S. Highway 30 to the north, is the door through which humans enter the

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[1] *To protect the privacy of people I encountered in and around the slaughterhouse, many names have been changed.*

Photographs from Schuyler, Nebraska © Jared Moossy

plant. We enter willingly, from all appearances, and under careful scrutiny: cameras monitor the main entrance (as they do almost the entire plant), and workers must pass through a security shack en route and show their company I.D.'s.

Though I tend to dislike scrutiny, I actually don't mind the shack, because it makes me feel important: instead of a Cargill I.D., I get to flash my police-style USDA badge. And when I leave, at shift's end, the guards can't ask to see what's in my bag, as they can the regular workers. Even my walk to and from the car is shorter, because a couple dozen parking places near the entrance are reserved for the USDA.

While the inspectors work at Cargill Meat Solutions, we are not employed by them. Rather, you could say, we are embedded. The company accommodates us along the chain, at four special places on the kill floor. (In another part of the plant, farther downstream, a different, smaller group of USDA employees grades the meat.) Cargill also provides us with our own locker rooms, a couple of offices for the veterinarians in charge, and a break room where we eat meals and hold meetings.

Carolina and I are not like most of the other inspectors. This becomes obvious as Herb, our immediate supervisor, sits us down to fill out paperwork. The regulars are putting on their white hard hats, grabbing the wide aluminum scabbards that hold their knives, and heading out onto the floor to begin the day. They are mostly white and mostly from the area around Schuyler, Nebraska, the town we sit at the edge of. I grew up in Colorado but arrived in Nebraska from my home in New York City, which strikes many here as odd. Carolina was born in Mexico, spent her childhood in California, came to Nebraska a few years ago, and became a U.S. citizen in the past year. Still, in certain ways she has more in common with our coworkers than I do, because she has worked in meat plants before—the JBS packinghouse in Grand Island, Nebraska, where she was a quality-assurance technician, and before that a kosher slaughterhouse in Hastings, Nebraska, where she worked on the line—which means she has experience with a knife. Which I do not. That experience, I will soon learn, counts for a lot.

Herb is the tallest inspector, probably by a couple of inches. He reminds me of Garrison Keillor. He is soft-spoken and respectful and regrets that we had to buy our own waterproof boots—he doesn't think that's fair. But he supplies us with the other things we'll need, starting with a dozen uniforms, which consist of navy-blue cotton pants and white short-sleeve shirts with our first names sewn over the breast pockets. (He had ordered these a couple of weeks earlier, asking my size over the phone and suggesting I order a bit large: "You can always grow into 'em—all the rest of us have!") We get digital stopwatches to hang around our necks, so that we can time our breaks and know when to change posts. The aluminum scabbard is flat and about a foot long; it holds our knives, a meat hook, and a sharpening steel. Some inspectors wear the scabbard around their waists, securing it with a white plastic chain. But most just hang it near them at their post. Hairnets are required for everybody, and men with beards must also wear a beard net. Herb hands us each a hard hat and points out the supply of earplugs (also required) sitting on a nearby desk: "Get yourself a pair of those and I'll show you around."

We leave the break room, walk down a short corridor, up some stairs, and through a pair of swinging metal doors to a singular circle of hell. The kill floor is a hubbub of human and mechanical activity, something horrific designed by ingenious and no doubt well-meaning engineers. Herb shouts a few things, but the kill floor is so loud that I have no idea what he's saying—and little understanding, at first, of what I'm seeing. Though it's called a floor, it's actually a room, about the size of a football field. It's filled with workers on their feet, facing some fraction of a cow as it passes slowly in front of them, suspended from the chain. Three workers are perched on hydraulic platforms fitted with electric saws, which they use to split hanging carcasses in half, right down the middle of the spinal column.

Bootleggers
BAR & GRILL
LA GLORIA

The key to comprehension is the chain, which moves the carcasses around the enormous room. It begins on the eastern wall, just beyond the area where the cows come in from the outside. This is the only section of the room hidden from view, behind a partition. But Herb takes us up onto a metal catwalk and through a heavy door. From there, grasping a railing, we can look down on the killing.

Passing one by one through a small opening in the wall, each animal enters a narrow, slightly elevated chute. On a platform just above the chute is a guy called the knocker. Suspended on cables in front of him is something that looks like a fat toaster oven with handles on either side: a captive-bolt gun. The knocker's job is to place the gun against the animal's forehead and pull the trigger. Most of the time, the cow immediately slumps forward, blood oozing from the circle where the thick steel bolt went in and came out. If one shot doesn't do the trick, the knocker does it again.

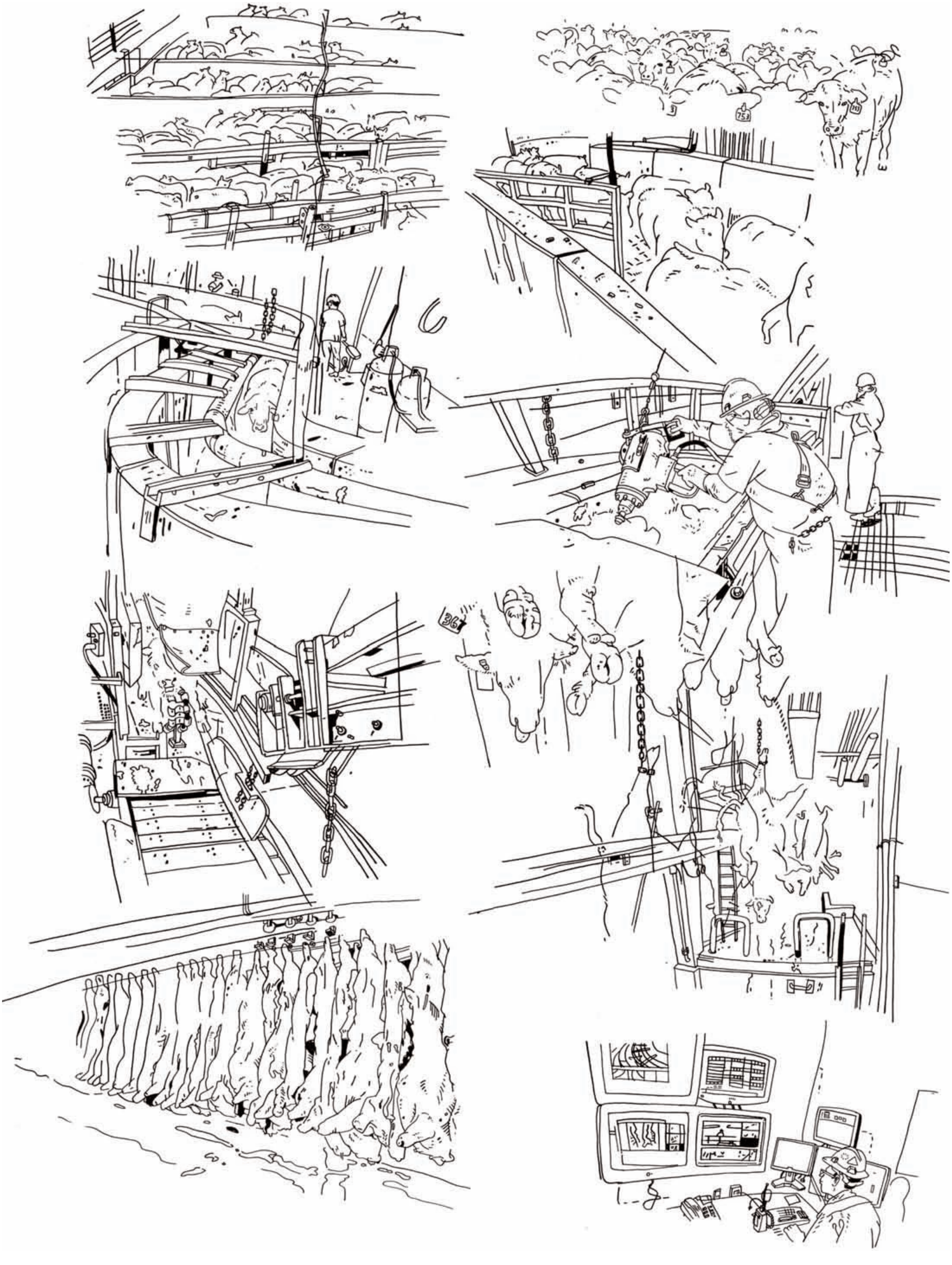
Meanwhile, down on floor level, a second worker wearing a helmet with a face mask and protective padding has reached into the chute from below and attached a cuff around the animal's left rear leg. Once the cow has been knocked, the chain hoists that leg and then the rest of the animal up into the air, and the body begins its journey around the room.

Carolina and I watch this for some time without talking. The knocker moves slowly, patiently waiting for his gun to achieve good contact with the animal's forehead. It usually takes more than one try, as the animals duck down or try to peer over the side of the chute, whose width the knocker can actually control with a foot pedal. One cow, unlike the others, lifts her head up high in order to sniff the knocking gun. *What could this thing be?* It's her last thought. The knocker waits until her wet nose goes down, then lowers the gun and *thunk*. She slumps, then gets hoisted aloft with the others. The knocked animals hang next to one another for a while, waiting for the chain to start moving—like gondolas at the base of a ski lift. From time to time an animal kicks violently, sporadically. "They're not really dead yet," says Carolina, which I can hear because she's close to my ear and it's slightly less loud in here. In most cases, apparently, what she says is true and intentional: the pumping of their hearts will help drain the blood from their bodies once their necks are sliced open, which will happen in the ensuing minutes. By the time the chain has made a turn or two, the kicking will stop.

Dismemberment proceeds by degrees. At different posts, workers make cuts in the hide, clip off the hooves, and clip off the horns, if any. The hide is gradually peeled from the body, until finally a big flap of loose skin is grasped by the "downpuller" machine, which yanks the whole thing off like a sweater and drops it through a hole in the floor. Here, for the first time, the cow no longer looks like a cow. Now it's a 1,200-pound piece of proto-meat making its circuit of the room.

Soon after, the heads, now dangling only by the windpipe, are detached from the body and go off on their own side chain. The huge tongues are cut out and hung on hooks adjacent to the heads: head, tongue, head, tongue. They turn a corner, pass through a steam cabinet that cleans them, make another quick turn, and meet their first inspectors.

Food inspection in the United States is a patchwork affair. By most accounts, we have Upton Sinclair to thank for the federal effort: *The Jungle* frightened the nation so thoroughly in 1906 that Congress passed legislation mandating inspection the same year. Today, the USDA is responsible for overseeing slaughter operations, employing 7,500 inspectors throughout the country. The Food and Drug Administration is responsible for most other areas: fresh produce (the source of recent outbreaks of such pathogens as *Listeria,* on cantaloupes, and *Salmonella,* on spinach), seafood, dairy, and processed foods like peanut butter. USDA inspection has the bigger budget, reflecting a belief from bygone days that meat carries the greater risk of contamination: without a USDA stamp, meat cannot leave a slaughterhouse. Over the past generation, however, produce and seafood have come to eclipse meat as sources of outbreaks of food-borne illness. Among the reasons are thought to be increasing consumption of fresh food, and food-distribution systems that can quickly



Drawings by Olivier Kugler, based on a video, produced by the American Meat Institute and narrated by Temple Grandin, of a tour around a Cargill beef-processing facility spread contamination across state and international borders.

In 2011, President Obama signed the Food Safety Modernization Act, which strengthens and refocuses the FDA. Meanwhile, a consensus has grown that the USDA's regimen of visual, carcass-by-carcass inspection—enshrined by the 1906 laws—places too much manpower on the kill floor and not enough in labs and meat-grinding plants to test beef for *E. coli,* poultry for *Campylobacter,* and pork for *Toxoplasma.* Already, a cooperative effort between the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the poultry industry has set the stage for vast reductions in the number of on-site inspectors. ("Splash enough chemicals on and you can call anything safe," a Schuyler inspector told me.) In beef plants, though, the inspectors remain in full force. By law, in fact, the chain cannot move without them.[2]

THE AUTHOR'S KNIVES AND MEAT HOOK. PHOTOGRAPH BY TED CONOVER

Herb leaves us at Heads, the most demanding of the several posts we rotate through during the shift. Five inspectors on the day shift and four at night tend to the fifty feet of chain—and each examines a new head and tongue every minute or so. Carolina and I both have trainers: she's with Lefty and I'm with Stan. We watch what they do and then, over the roar of the machinery, try to digest their explanations and do the same.

Before taking our knives to the hanging heads, we're told to look at them closely. They are a gruesome sight, dripping with blood, eyeballs protruding the way eyeballs do from a skinned skull, small muscles exposed and twitching as though the animal were still alive. The heads face away from us, toward the tiled wall, for which I'm grateful. First we look into their mouths from behind, through a daffodil-shaped opening that I believe is the epiglottis. We're checking for tonsils, making sure they've been removed. These are considered "specified risk materials" (SRM) and get disposed of along with a portion of the small intestine called the distal ileum.

Next we peek around the side of the head at the teeth in the lower jaw. If three pairs are visible, the animal is thirty months of age or older and at greater risk of carrying bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or mad-cow disease). The brain and the spinal cord of these older cattle are also considered SRM. A worker is supposed to have plugged the knocker's hole in the forehead of such animals with a cork—to prevent the escape of brain matter—and marked the top of the head with blue ink. These heads will be disposed of in a landfill.

The nontactile inspection is over within three seconds. Now comes the hard part. With a knife in one hand and a meat hook in the other, we slice the flesh from the cheeks on either side of the head—the goal is to let the flaps dangle down, not to sever them. As I soon discover, making these cuts neatly takes skill. Done well, they expose a thin layer of meat against the bone, as well as the insides of the lymph nodes next to the ears.

If anything looks amiss, we "mark it out" by stamping the top and sides of the head with blue ink. These heads get thrown down the "condemned chute" to the basement, where they are rendered. If it looks extra bad—say, if a lymph node is full of pus or shows other irregularities—we push a button that sounds a horn and summons a Cargill foreman, who affixes a red tag to the head. That takes about five seconds more.

In the worse cases—heads that show signs of a serious infection, such as tuberculosis—we attach a blue tag, so that Doc Barbera, the veterinarian who heads our FSIS detail, will know to take a look. (Marking out meat later confirmed to have tuberculosis bacilli earned one Schuyler inspector a $3,000 bonus.)

Last, we use the hook and knife to hold and slice open six more lymph nodes hanging from the back of the tongue. Somebody skilled, like Stan, can do this in two or three seconds. For Carolina, it's closer to five. For me, at the start, it's more like ten—they're slippery. After cutting open the nodes, we turn to the pedal-operated sink behind us to rinse our knife and hook and rubber-gloved hands of the blood and flesh that now cover them. If we cut into anything vile, knife and hook must also be dipped into the sanitizer, a cylinder of near-boiling water next to the sink.

Then we wait for the next head to move into range.

During our breaks, we can visit the Cargill canteen upstairs, where food is served hot and pretty cheap, and some do. But it's more popular to bring your own food and hang out in the break room, which has the slightly threadbare air of privilege you find in the business lounge of a small airport.

I find the break room fascinating; its bulletin boards, cabinet fronts, and miscellaneous surfaces are all plastered with things to read. There are ponderous directives from the USDA, boring notices about union elections, fuzzy printouts of cattle teeth to aid in the identification of overage animals. A dry-erase board announces shift swaps for the coming week; a photocopied seniority ranking shows Lefty on top. There are a couple of schematics of the plant indicating where to seek cover in case of a tornado.

The refrigerator is adorned with funny pictures and cartoons. *You're not fat,* says one sled dog to another, *you're just a little husky.* On its side are cardboard wheels, one pair for each shift, that indicate where everybody starts on a given day: Heads, Livers, Pluck (the heart and lungs), and Rail (where each carcass gets a final inspection before leaving the kill floor).

All in all, there are about thirty slaughter inspectors assigned to Cargill Meat Solutions in Schuyler, split between the day shift (6:08 A.M. to 2:38 P.M.) and the night shift (3:16 P.M. to 11:46 P.M.). Most have not been to

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[2] *In February, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack warned that the federal budget sequester would soon lead to a partial furlough of USDA meat inspectors. This measure, which would have curtailed or even halted production, was narrowly avoided when Congress allowed the agency to divert $55 million from elsewhere in its budget to pay inspectors.*

college, but worked elsewhere in the meat industry, often on the line, before becoming inspectors. This is a definite step up: line jobs top out at about fifteen dollars an hour, while federal inspector jobs begin at that level and reach close to thirty dollars an hour plus overtime.

Most inspectors are men, but there are a few women. Even so, Carolina stands out from the group, which tends to be conservative in appearance and conduct. She wears a lot of mascara and eyeliner, a diamond stud below the left corner of her mouth; her long nails are fuchsia. Across the back of her jean jacket is her last name spelled out in shiny silver studs. She does not act demure or submissive in the least, and she mixes Spanish in with her English whenever possible—which I don't think everyone here likes. Men whistle at her in the plant, but not in the break room.

On our first day, we sit at the big table in the middle of the room, which is covered with sections of the *Omaha World-Herald* and bowls of microwave popcorn. Stan takes a Mountain Dew from the refrigerator and grabs a seat. He's in his forties, with a scraggly blond beard and a rangy build. He has a quick wit and likes to tease and provoke.

His buddy Hank sits across from him, doing the crossword puzzle from the paper. Tina, a bit younger and with young kids, tells me that her father was an inspector, too—she uses his old sharpening steel. She takes the job seriously, augmenting or correcting the answers she hears the others give to my questions, and is the first to tell me about Red Meat School, a training camp for veteran inspectors.

Hard hats and scabbards are left in the locker rooms or around the edges of the break room—usually there's blood on them, so they don't often find their way to the table. Many people have decorated their hard hats with stickers. Tina's says, on one side, I'M NOT SURE I'M ENJOYING THIS.

While others read the paper, Carolina answers texts and talks on the phone. Often she speaks rather loudly, which annoys some of the inspectors. But she defuses this annoyance with her good-natured chatter and flirting. *"Taylor, qué pasó?" "Perry, cómo estás?"* The question of nicknames comes up—someone observes that though Carolina and I are both left-handed, Lefty has already claimed the moniker. Someone mentions that Perry's nickname is Spike and asks Carolina how you say that word (which she mishears as "Spark") in Spanish.

"Chispa," she answers.

"Cheese puff?" comes the reply. There is laughter. "Cheese puff—that fits you, Perry!"

"Or *chispita,*" she offers.

"Cheese pizza? Cheese pizza, Perry!"

People start checking their stopwatches. Breaks last fifteen minutes and are staggered, and if you return late to the floor, you will force other inspectors to cover for you. Ours is over, and I follow Stan to the viscera table.

This inspection post, which comprises both Livers and Pluck, is the most disturbing, and the most interesting, on the kill floor. Just upstream, the skinned carcasses have had their tails cut off. Now the chain carries them over a wide, flat, stainless-steel conveyor belt—the table—moving at exactly the same speed they do. On this belt stand workers in white rubber boots, who use their knives to slice open the body cavity and "drop" the organs at their feet.

There's a lot of steam (those innards are still hot) and splashing as the viscera hit the table with a plop. Using their gloved hands and booted feet, the workers nudge the big livers to one side of the table, and the pluck—the hearts, still connected to the lungs—to the other. A different worker, standing on the floor like us, flips and slides the massive livers so that they're right side up and properly presented to us for inspection.

It's a lot to take in, the river of organs flowing slowly by. The most dramatic parts, the large, bulbous stomachs in the middle, we're suppose to look at and touch but not dissect: most are full of the animal's last meal, generally corn but sometimes also hay—we see it on those occasions when the stomach gets nicked. We do gently prod

BOTAS EXOTICAS
ROPA VAQUERA
SOMBREROS
TEXANAS
HEBILLAS
CINTOS
OPEN

a spot called the ruminoreticular junction, where the cow's large first stomach meets the reticulum, a kind of filtering compartment. I'm not told what to look for, but I find something soon enough: a two-inch metal screw. Herb has explained that this part of the stomach "is like the bottom of a garbage pail"—the heavy, bad stuff settles here and sometimes gets stuck.

Another day, I notice a four-inch wire sticking out of the stomach near the junction. I assume that the wire, like the drops of oil and the odd bit of latex glove we occasionally find on the viscera table, came from upstream on the kill floor—a piece of some machine that got lodged in the cow. But Herb tells me it's much more likely that the animal ate the wire at some point in its life and lived with it jutting out of its stomach for some time. "Cows eat anything, and what they can't digest stays there," he explains. Also, he says, "they're tough." They can live with pain.

The inspection post on the livers side of the table is, in my opinion, the best, because livers are easy to cut. Using the smaller of our two knives—the "lamb skinner" or "liver knife"—we slice off a small lymph node with a soft filleting motion that, if done well, exposes a thin white bile duct. You know it's the bile duct because it's filled with a liquid as bright yellow as Stan's Mountain Dew. The second cut, with the sharp tip of the knife, is away from you and into the bile duct, which you open to check for liver flukes. Tina shows me my first of these, a flat, slow-moving green thing about three quarters of an inch long with cilia all around the edge, like a huge paramecium, that got into the cow through its drinking water. She grabs the U.S. INSPECTED & CONDEMNED stamp, which sits in a well of blue ink attached to the side of the table, and stamps the liver once. That signifies to the workers downstream that the liver is not suitable for human consumption but is still okay for things like cat food.

A bigger problem you identify by moving your gloved hand over the liver's smooth surface, and by simply looking at it. With disturbing regularity, this inspection turns up evidence of an abscess, usually a big white bump visible or palpable just under the surface, as though there were an egg embedded there. If we detect an abscess, we stamp the liver twice, indicating that it should be disposed of.

Fifteen minutes on Livers 1, fifteen minutes on Livers 2, then it's time to move to Pluck 1 on the other side. We palpate the lungs and slice away the esophagus, exposing and cutting into two sets of lymph nodes. Next, and truly difficult for me, is slicing open the heart.

The hearts are wildly various, soft or firm, small as a cantaloupe or bigger than a honeydew. We are supposed to slice them open, then flip them over and leave them flat. Practiced hands can do this with a single, graceful motion. Not mine. Unless you slice just the right way, the cardiac muscle fights back, requiring several strokes before it yields. And unless you cut in just the right place, the opened heart will not lie flat but instead stand up awkwardly. A proper first cut, which exposes all the heart's chambers, will often release a warm pond of blood. Practiced inspectors get none of this on them; a newbie, I'm sad to say, gets splashed all the time.

The hand you use makes a huge difference, and Stan, right-handed, had a hard time modeling lefty technique. Finally he placed his knife in his left hand. His graceful moves disappeared as he tried to figure it out; eventually, as though forgetting I was there, he got immersed in the point-of-view exercise. I imitated his motions as the other inspectors around the table watched. There was some shaking of heads.

"He still hasn't got it right."

Lefty and Stan agreed to swap trainees so that I might see it done more organically. Lefty was in his forties and had worked as an inspector since shortly after high school. He opened hearts one after another, making them look as sliceable as butter. Again and again I tried to imitate him. Slowly I improved. Just before it was time to swap positions, without knowing how or why it worked, I sliced a heart and it opened up as though I'd said a magic word. Blood spilled across the stainless steel in front of me. “Yes,” I said, “yes.” I looked at Lefty. He smiled.

“One down,” he said, “a million to go.”

I had never heard of Schuyler, Nebraska, when I applied for an inspector job. I wanted to learn not only how meat is inspected, but how slaughter works. The demographic side of things also intrigued me. A century ago, packinghouses were located in big cities like Chicago, where the livestock arrived by rail. An elderly New York neighbor of mine once told me of seeing sheep driven through streets on the East Side of Manhattan, near the current site of the United Nations.

But by the 1950s, the packinghouses began moving to small-town America, where the livestock could arrive by truck. Schuyler got its beef plant in 1968, joining an eventual cohort of similar towns across cattle country: Grand Island, Lexington, and West Point, Nebraska; Dodge City, Garden City, Holcomb, and Liberal, Kansas; Fort Morgan and Greeley, Colorado. An American rural proletariat was born. Plants unionized and the workers made a good living: a typical wage in the 1970s was between seven and nine dollars per hour, well above the federal minimum.

But then salaries took a drop, and Latino workers started coming in. Schuyler had fewer than 200 Hispanic residents in 1990. Today there are more than 4,000, about two thirds of the town’s population. The demographic mix in most other beef-packing towns has also tilted Hispanic.

Once the FSIS approved my employment application, I was offered a post in Schuyler and accepted. Herb called me up a couple of weeks before I was due to report. We discussed what I’d need to bring and where I’d want to live. I’d probably find Columbus, where he and many other inspectors lived, most congenial, Herb thought. It was only about twenty minutes away and had plenty of stores and restaurants: “There in Schuyler, it’s mostly burritos and taco stands.”

But I wanted to live in Schuyler. It was surprisingly hard to find a place. Johnnie’s Motel (run by an enterprising man named Javier) offered temporary lodging and a good location, right next to the town supermarket and Chona’s, a family Mexican restaurant that occupies a former Hardee’s. But I wanted a longer-term arrangement, and began to scan newspaper ads and bulletin boards. I was a day too late for a small house that the landlord had recently renovated: “I ended up renting it to some Mexicans. Wish you’d called earlier.” When I started asking around the USDA break room, however, the inspectors who lived in town—Stan, Lefty, a supervisor named Peter—started throwing out the names of Schuyler landlords.

One of these was named Sammy. “I think he might have something,” offered Lefty. “My uncle rents two units in his complex, and I think only one other is occupied. There’s eight units in all.”

By that evening, one of them was mine. Rent was $300 a month. Sammy had once loved to ski, and the place, which he’d designed himself, had a rustic Seventies-era look. Roger, another of my co-workers, had lived there as a younger man. “It still got the wood paneling and shag rugs?” he asked. I nodded.

The building was located across town from the “pack,” as Sammy and everyone else called the plant. Its main disadvantage, which Sammy freely confessed, was that it was only two blocks from the railroad tracks that bisected Schuyler, and trains blew through, whistles screaming, at all hours of the day and night. (I told him that I actually liked the sound of trains.) The only tenant besides Lefty’s uncle was a freelance roofer in his seventies, whom I liked a lot.

“Why do you think Sammy leaves all these apartments vacant?” I asked a neighbor one evening.

“I think he doesn’t want to rent to Mexicans,” the man answered.

Carolina and I were approaching the end of our weeklong training period (my training would be extended because of my slower pace), and Herb had promised to show us the rest of the plant before we began working regular shifts. Hard hats donned and earplugs in, we walked to Fabrication.

“Fab” is the largest room in the plant, the place where the hanging carcasses, having spent two or three days cooling down in the tomblike “hot box” (which is as cold as a refrigerator), are gradually disarticulated. The sides of beef—literally one side of a carcass—are first halved into forequarter and hindquarter. Then there is a further subdivision into salable cuts of meat.

The workers in Fab are mainly arrayed in long rows along parallel moving belts, and although the process is impressively automated, with all kinds of machinery cunningly crafted to present meat to the workers and then move it on its way, the main tool of production is the knife wielded by a human hand. From a catwalk, we observed the activity below: unlike the workers on the kill floor, the ones here were packed closely together, practically elbow to elbow, as they engaged in their repetitive motions. Most were Latino, with a smattering of very dark-skinned people, likely Somalis, and a few white people as well. (Cargill employs more than 2,000 workers at its Schuyler plant, and says they represent more than twenty nationalities.)

It was cold in here. Carolina shivered and crossed her arms. “I hated working in Fab,” she said, referring to her job at the kosher beef plant in Hastings. Indeed, most workers regard the kill floor, with its violence and rivers of blood, as preferable to Fab, purely on the basis of temperature.

Next we visited some specialty areas. In one room, large stainless-steel machines attended by technicians whirred and churned out masses of pink pellets; they looked like Tater Tots made out of meat. “Know what this is?” Herb asked us. “You heard of pink slime?”

This controversial beef filler had been in the news since the *New York Times* wrote about it in 2009. The meat industry calls it lean finely textured beef (LFTB) and boneless lean beef trimmings (BLBT), but its famous nickname comes from an FSIS microbiologist who dissented from his agency’s approval of it. Gerald Zirnstein wrote that the product was not beef but “salvage.” In an email to colleagues released to the *Times* as part of a Freedom of Information Act request, he added: “I do not consider the stuff to be ground beef, and I consider allowing it in ground beef to be a form of fraudulent labeling.” Meat companies are not required to disclose the use of ammonia gas to kill bacteria in pink slime. But publicity over how it was made turned consumers away from ground-beef products and drastically hurt sales.

Next we descended to the basement and visited the rendering room, a smelly, dark space where the hides are processed in vats of liquid and begin their transformation into leather. On our way back, we stopped at Offal (divided into red and white), ducked under the heads chain, and passed through the double doors that lead to the small white-collar sector of the plant, walking through a little pool of soapy bubbles intended to cut the amount of grease people track out. Across the hall from the USDA break room, we made one final stop: Cargill's video-surveillance headquarters.

It was like stepping into another universe. The room was clean, quiet, and spotless, with a single technician sitting in an armchair before an array of monitors. On the screens were feeds from the cameras set up around the plant—the kill floor, Fab, the parking lots and loading docks, everything. At Herb's request, the technician showed how she could aim and zoom the cameras. She was not, she said, there to monitor the inspectors. Still, it was clear that she could watch us if she wanted to: she zoomed in on an inspector named Terry as he finished palpating a tongue and turned to rinse his knife in the sink.

"All of this goes to headquarters in Wichita, right?" asked Herb. Yes, she said, everything she saw was accessible at Cargill headquarters, and she was in regular touch with them, although about what, exactly, she declined to say.

Back in the break room, Doc Barbera asked whether we had any questions. Veterinarians run the inspection details at every plant (in fact, the FSIS is the country's largest single employer of veterinarians). Doc, as everyone called him, was a mild, grandfatherly man of measured responses. But when he asked what we had seen and I said the words "pink slime," it pushed a button.

"The publicity around that is just outrageous," he said. "The product is proven safe—it might be the safest thing *in* ground beef, because it's so thoroughly disinfected. All they do is clean it up with ammonia. It's been in hamburger for years. But now with all the commentary, and the USDA taking it out of some school lunches, it's like a witch hunt. Plants have closed, hundreds of people have lost their jobs, and all because of politics and ignorance."

I was surprised that Doc was so unquestioning about the safety of industrial processes like treating meat with ammonia—Canada, for one, disallows meat that has been so treated. But his frustration with how seemingly irrational thinking in big cities can affect life in the country was something that came up again and again in Schuyler.

The next time was a couple of days later, during lunch break. Tina looked up from her magazine with a sigh of disgust. "Humanely treated, organic beef," she groaned, reading from the page. "What's that? And why would you think they go together? They're not the same."

Everyone nodded and chuckled. Later, I tried to tease out her objection. "Well, 'organic' is only about what they're fed," she explained. "It has nothing to do with the conditions of their lives. So what does 'humanely treated' even mean? Do you take them into a barn every night? Do you brush them and sing them a song? No cattle are raised that way! It's some city person's fantasy!" What seemed to get her goat, as it did Doc's, was that urban consumers with little knowledge of animal husbandry or the food industry could influence the whole rural economy simply by hopping on some politically correct bandwagon.

This is not to suggest, however, that the inspectors didn't care about animals. The next week, Lefty, sitting at the table, read aloud from the *World-Herald* about an undercover video of workers at a dairy farm in Idaho abusing animals. Peter, a supervisor sitting nearby at his computer, soon had the video on his screen, and ten or twelve inspectors gathered around to watch.

It was one of the more horrific videos produced by the advocacy group Mercy For Animals, showing workers twisting cows' tails, dragging them behind a tractor with a chain, hitting them on the head with a plastic cane, and trying to force one with a broken leg to walk. There were disapproving gasps and groans all around, and no minimizing it at all. "That makes me sick," said Tina.

I was feeling proud of the cohort when someone read aloud from the text on the webpage, which described how the workers would be prosecuted for their cruelty. An inspector named Jason piped up. "They're probably back in Mexico by now," he said derisively.

"What did you say?" asked Carolina, looking up from her mortadella sandwich. She had been pouring picante sauce directly into her mouth from the bottle after each bite.

"Oh, I'm just joking," he said.

Very slowly, I improved. My eye for meat got better—I began to understand what I was seeing. And, probably more important, I got better with a knife, and had a series of small breakthroughs. "You're pushing too much. Try slicing more," said Nick, watching me struggle on heads. "Stand closer to the tongue before you hook it. And hook straight down. Otherwise it'll start swinging." Right on target.

Keeping the knife-edge sharp was another key skill. I started to use my sharpening steel after every series of cuts, just like everybody else, and noticed that many inspectors kept a second steel or a sharpening stone at hand for those times when you needed more than a touch-up.

When was that? When your knife nicked your hook, for example, as mine did several times a day at first, mostly on heads. Or when your knife went all the way through the heart and struck the metal table. Even hitting bone seemed to dull the blade a little bit.

So I struggled, and experimented, and was helped by kind inspectors when things got overwhelming. They handed me their knives and worked on mine in the spare seconds between pieces of meat. They demonstrated how much better the steels worked if you used soap and an abrasive pad to keep them clean, or gave me lessons on the long sharpening stone in the break room, which sat in its own reservoir of oil.

I knew I was getting better because I dulled my knife less often. And because I didn't have to replace my gloves as often. All of us wore latex gloves; on the hand that held the hook, we also wore a thin fabric no-cut glove underneath, which saved me from countless self-inflicted injuries. The slightest nick, however, would cut the latex and let in water and blood. The first week, I replaced my gloves two or three times a day. By week three, some days I didn't have to replace them at all.

There was, however, another lesson I had yet to learn. I had quickly grown used to "stamping out" meat with ink or tagging it for disposal by Cargill management. But the real power for an inspector is the ability to stop the line. Every single inspection post has a big red button that lets you do just that.

Carolina and I received no special instruction on when to push the button, but obviously it is not a thing you do lightly. Stopping the line halts production, idling scores of workers and costing the company money. Nothing can proceed until the problem is resolved.

The first time I saw it done was Friday of my first week. Jason, working Pluck 3 across the table from me, pushed the button. I saw him gesture at the workers downstream from him, but he wouldn't talk to them—we'd received specific instructions about that. If something goes wrong, address the supervisor, not the worker who might be responsible.

The supervisor, a heavyset, sometimes surly man named Bano, approached Jason at a surprisingly leisurely pace. Jason described what he had seen out of the corner of his eye: a worker had dropped a liver to the floor. It should have been disposed of because of that. Instead, according to Jason, the man had rinsed it in the sink and returned it to the table, and because his gloved hands were not rinsed first, the liver stood a good chance of being contaminated. The worker denied the story. Jason stood firm. Bano, angry, found the liver, disposed of it, and cleaned the table around it. The line started back up. Elapsed time: a little under ten minutes.

Another time, Nick stopped the line while working on heads. He had noticed the third pair of lower teeth that indicate risk of BSE. Yet this head was not marked with blue ink, and the knocker's hole in its forehead had not been filled with a cork to stop the potential leakage of SRM: somebody—more than one person—had messed up. This stoppage lasted much longer, as various supervisors were called in. Doc later revealed in a staff meeting that the incident had led him to "write up" the company with a document called a noncompliance report. This meant Cargill was required to investigate the incident and respond to the government, in writing, with an explanation and a plan to prevent similar lapses going forward. Doc told us not to be shy about stopping the line: "Make them get the supervisors out there. That's what'll really get their attention."

"Yeah," Russell chimed in. "Hit them in the wallet." (One inspector later told me that the cost to the company of stopping the line is about $10,000 per minute.)

I was pleased to hear this little pep talk, evidence of the inspectors' integrity. Working inside Cargill, embedded in the plant (as well as in the community of the company town), one could imagine relations getting a bit too cozy for the public good. Doc would have none of it.

My own initiation into line stopping came two days later. I was nearing the end of my extended training period, in week two, working the post called the Rail. On each of this station's two platforms, an inspector stands beside a trimmer—a Cargill worker adept at trimming anything off a carcass that shouldn't be there before it makes its way to the hot box, including bruised tissue, fecal matter, little pieces of hide, and so forth.[3] The job involves visual inspection and, on the Lower Rail, running one hand along a strip of peritoneum in search of abscesses. I was training with Taylor, an amiable guy who, like most inspectors, had gotten his start as a regular line worker at a beef plant—in his case, Omaha Steaks. Taylor had taped an MP3 player into his hard hat and was listening to music, but he immediately looked up when I pointed to a couple of rivulets of thin black liquid running down the hock.

"Stop the line!" he said, and I did.

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[3] *Trimmers on the Rail, and in some other locations, wear chain mail over their torsos. As I would learn, this practice stemmed from an accident in 2000, when a worker in Fab named Jesus Soto Carbajal was "dropping rounds"—cutting heavy round steaks out of hanging carcasses. His knife apparently slipped out of his hand just as the round steak dropped, and the weight of the steak drove the blade into his chest, killing him. This was, as far as I heard, the only work-related death to take place inside the Schuyler facility.*

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Foremen jogged up the stairs to our level of the platform. Their best guess was that oil had dripped down from a newly lubricated chain. In any case, the trimmer reached up and cut off the contaminated parts, while other workers were dispatched to wipe off the rail upstream, using long poles with rags attached to them.

This was deeply satisfying—but not as good as the stoppage about a month later. That one, which lasted so long that they sent everybody to lunch, workers and inspectors alike, was initiated by Peter, a supervising inspector. He had noticed that the floor drain in the transfer hall leading from the kill floor to the hot box had backed up, creating a pool of dirty water. The carcasses on the chain passed right over the pool, and anything that dripped down could splash back up and contaminate the meat. I asked Peter whether it was hard to shut down the plant that way. Not at all, he said. Doc would always back him up, or any of us.

Still, I knew there would always be human error. One day I confessed to Herb that I had gotten so jammed up at Pluck 3 that I failed to cut open a heart as it passed by. Hadn't I just endangered the food supply?

Herb told me not to do that again—but also not to worry. "If there's a problem, somebody will catch it," he assured me, by which he meant either a regular line worker or a "QA": a Cargill quality-assurance employee. Cargill, after all, was also concerned with the wholesomeness of its product. One day I heard a fellow inspector opine that, in some ways, we were just another layer of QA. Herb seemed to be saying the same thing—that there was some redundancy built into the system, more than one chance to catch a problem.

On the other hand, inspectors are savvy enough to know that even when they do good work, their presence is less central to food safety than it once was. Visual and tactile inspection is important, but, as one inspector put it to me, "You don't need shit to have bacteria." To a large degree, the detection of invisible pathogens has now become the primary task.

Eric Schlosser, the author of *Fast Food Nation*, told me that all the major fast-food chains now have strict standards for the levels of pathogens they'll accept from their suppliers. The meatpacking companies conform to them or lose the ability to sell meat to these major customers. To date, however, companies have successfully blocked proposals to let the USDA set similar standards.

Why, asks Schlosser, are meatpackers "willing to do for their big fast-food customers what they won't do for the USDA and the average American consumer? If we ever get food-safety reform at the USDA, the agency will be able to set standards for various pathogens in meat, test widely for them, and order mandatory recalls or impose tough punishments when the rules are broken."[4]

Shift's end, and a fast walk to the USDA men's locker room. The narrow space quickly filled with exhausted bodies not too tired to crack jokes: about men bending over, about that one Latina trimmer, about the lameness of the Kansas State football team. (The night-shift veterinarian was a K-State diehard transplanted to Husker country.) Locker doors swung open and we had company while undressing: glossies of buxom, naked women. Or, on one door, Hillary Clinton's head photoshopped onto the body of a strapping female wrestler barely contained by her red-white-and-blue singlet. My locker was near the hamper for dirty uniforms, and I watched and ducked as, bloodied and balled up, the clothing flew in from up to twenty feet away. Each flight marked the revelation of another inspector's body. It was a cross section of body types you could have found almost anywhere—a few guys physically fit, but most far from it. Why, I wondered, were these so surprising to behold? Why did the images of wide hairy backs or fat white stomachs stick in my brain as I walked through the parking lot to my car and sometimes for hours afterward?

I think it was because undressed and goofing around, we no longer looked like government employees: GS-5s, GS-7s, and GS-9s. Dressed in hats and uniforms, we were the trained overseers of a specialized industrial process. But naked, we resembled something else: a group of predators (a pack, you might say) presiding over the slaughter of vast herds far too numerous for us to eat ourselves. The genius and horror of humanity was our ability to send the spoils to anonymous others of our kind located states and continents away. In the locker room you could see us as naked apes, as hominids killing cows; industrial slaughter is predation writ large.

"How are you doing?" Carolina asked me at the end of the first week. "The first time I worked with a knife, my hands hurt so much at night they kept me awake. I couldn't put them under a pillow, only on top."

I must be made of tougher stuff, I thought. My forearms were sore, but nothing worse than after a day of, say, tennis and yard work.

My self-congratulation was premature. During my second week, I was awoken by pain in my right forearm—my hook arm. I must have been sleeping on it, I thought, adjusting it and trying to drift off again. I couldn't. The pain was sharp, throbbing. I took Advil, which helped a little.

The next night it happened again, but this time to my left arm as well. Over the next few days and nights, I found myself unable to remove socks with my right hand—the pain in the thumb was excruciating. That entire hand, especially between the thumb and index finger, was now perpetually swollen. My fingertips tingled constantly unless they were completely numb, which they now were every morning when I woke up.

I started asking about pain at work and found that people had a lot to say—in a terse kind of way. Taylor, with more than fifteen years on the job, told me he took three Advils before every shift. Stan said, "It's worst at the beginning." Lefty said, "Everybody's got it." I overheard Janet discussing her recent cortisone shot, which had been helpful but failed to alleviate the pain in her little finger. Herb, I noticed, had a lot of surgical scars on his right arm, and his wrist didn't look quite right. "Yeah, had surgery to remove bone that had built up in there," he said. "Try ice."

Hearing me quiz the others, Janet realized I was serious about the question. "Have you tried wearing a wrist brace at night?" she asked. I hadn't and told her I didn't see how that would help, since my arms weren't moving much then, but she urged me to try one anyway. So that day after work, I set off to find a brace for my right wrist, the one that hurt the most.

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[4] *The USDA's recall orders are technically voluntary. In practice, however, the government's ability to persuade is powerful, and companies almost never decline.*

I went to Columbus, everyone's destination when it came to consumer choice. The Walgreens there sold five kinds of braces, but two were out of stock. I bought one that looked sturdy and proceeded to Walmart. The selection there was even larger, and included a more lightweight variety with pink lining, just for women. Clearly the demand for wrist braces was substantial around here. I bought a second one and put it on the minute I got home.

The relief was almost immediate. I tried to understand why and concluded that the brace must ease pressure on the carpal tunnel, even while I was sleeping. But other problems remained. Gripping anything with my right hand was painful, probably because I used that hand for flipping livers: they were slippery and weighed upward of twenty pounds, so I had to grab each one hard. Other movements caused particularly sharp pain in my left elbow, which I guessed was the result of wielding the knife on heads. Everything was worse in the morning, which made it hard to twist the shower faucet or hold a cereal spoon.

And yet I felt guilty complaining about it, and even about acknowledging it at first. Most workers had it much, much worse. Whatever motions were causing my pain at the plant, I never had to perform them for more than seventy-five minutes straight—that's how long inspectors spent at a stint on Heads. By contrast, most regular Cargill workers, on the kill floor and in Fab, had to repeat a single motion for an entire shift: eight hours, with only two breaks. Turnover in the meat industry is said to be extremely high. Pain and these kinds of deep, bloodless injuries have to be a main reason why.

Stan picked me up in his truck after dinner to give me a ride to the pool league at Bootleggers Bar & Grill. At Walgreens that day I'd bought a tube of heat rub and worked it into both hands. Stan sniffed the air. "What's that?"

"Bengay."

"Bengay?" He took his eyes off the road and looked at me sideways. "Pussy!"

This was my second appearance in the pool league. The first had gone unexpectedly well, mostly because two of my four opponents in the round-robin had the decency to self-destruct when shooting for the eight ball. So Stan had called me back and even lent me his extra cue.

The team was mainly inspectors: Stan, Hank, and Rick, a supervisory inspector at the Cargill grinding plant—a hamburger factory—in Columbus. There was also a toothless old farmer, Eric, who lived a few miles out of town. He wore a dirty cap and Larry King glasses, and his jeans, barely hanging on to his ass, hadn't been washed in ages. Many of his comments seemed to be about "bitches," but his lack of teeth made them hard to understand.

The bar was busy—but lest I get the wrong impression, my companions informed me that it was one of only five left out of thirty-one that had graced the town in the 1970s and 1980s. The clientele was non-Hispanic, with two exceptions. Our opponents' team included a Ford mechanic born in Guatemala—he was new in town and filling in for a regular—and the bartender himself was Hispanic. (Schuyler has one Hispanic bar, the Latino Club, active mostly on weekends.)

Between turns at the pool table, I chatted with the Guatemalan mechanic, and then got caught up in a conversation with a middle-aged guy sitting at the bar. When I mentioned that I worked as a USDA inspector at the pack, he asked, "Seven or nine?"

For a moment I was puzzled. Then I realized that he was asking my federal GS number—in other words, how much money I made. The fact was that I was neither a GS-9 nor a GS-7 but a GS-5—a truly humble status for a fifty-four-year-old. As a newcomer with no previous meatpacking experience, I did have the perfect excuse, but I felt oddly reluctant to share that with him. Instead I said, "Seven," which is what I would be if I stuck it out for two years. He still looked sorry for me.

My luck didn't hold that night: despite two brilliant, erratic beginnings, I botched several easy shots and lost all four of my games. Stan's team would now fall in the league standings. Embarrassed, I apologized and decided to walk home.

It was 11:00 P.M. on a cold, clear night. Bootleggers was the only place open downtown, with all the parked cars clustered in front of it. Though I had to get up early, I felt in no particular hurry to get home, so I walked around.

Like so many Nebraska small towns, Schuyler had been very different when young: a place with aspirations to grow bigger, but in the meantime to do small right. The seat of Colfax County, Schuyler has a handsome four-story courthouse built in 1921 with terracotta and stone trim and a monument to World War I soldiers on its lawn. The post office, two blocks away and almost twenty years younger, is less prepossessing, but has high ceilings and a WPA mural of wild horses in the moonlight on one wall.

The Schuyler of old has been memorialized by the town's historical society in a museum, located in an old commercial building between the courthouse and the post office. The museum is a large place, chilly in early winter, packed with memorabilia of generations of German, Bohemian, and other immigrants. When I was there, three elderly volunteers were keeping it alive; the name of a fourth had recently been whited out from a sign in the window.

The museum was seldom open, but I'd gone three times, often to look through a collection of scrapbooks in three-ring binders. One was titled "Blizzards and Floods: Traumas That Folks Want to Remember." As I learned from Nadine Beran, the curator, the Platte River, more than a mile away, had repeatedly flooded the very street we were on. There were photos and newspaper articles showing submerged fields, houses, and railroad tracks.

I asked Beran what sorts of materials she had on the meatpacking plant, Schuyler's largest employer for more than forty years. I was particularly interested in the labor unrest that had convulsed the town in the 1970s. After poking around, Beran was able to produce only a photo of the pack's groundbreaking ceremony in 1967 and a company brochure from the 1980s. She had no explanation for the paucity of slaughterhouse stuff in the otherwise overflowing museum. This made me conclude that labor unrest is a trauma that folks want to forget.

The meat workers had voted to strike in 1971 over wages and in sympathy with strikers at other plants in the area. The owners vowed to keep the pack going with replacement workers. Scabs and union members battled it out, shots were fired, and the National Guard closed Highway 30. There was friction in town as well, particularly along B Street, home to Bootleggers and several other bars. "Families were against families," I was told by Thom Greenwood, who later worked in the pack and is now a vice president of Local 293 of the United Food and Commercial Workers. "If you were management and your brother wasn't, you couldn't talk to him."

"There was some people downtown who got thrown through some windows," said Bob Blum. He was twenty-six at the time of the strike, and had his leg broken near B Street when he was struck by a car driven by non-union workers. "They just swerved over and hit me. There was four in the car, I knew two of them." Blum spent a month in the hospital in traction, a month at home in a body cast, and "basically had to get a new knee put in." Had he pressed charges, sought redress? "I didn't want to stir up nothing," he told me. "I get along with a couple of them now."

The next labor trauma, though much less violent, had a more profound effect. Land O'Lakes, which owned the plant in 1984, told workers that their wages would be cut from $10.69, then the standard rate across much of the industry, to a dollar less. Schuyler wasn't the only place this was happening; IBP, a major beef producer, went first, and its competitors all followed suit. But when workers in Schuyler refused to accept this cut, the plant was closed. And when it reopened eighteen months later, it was with a new owner and no union, and the wage had been reduced not just by one dollar an hour but by $2.50.

Some workers went back, tails between their legs. Others left town. Meanwhile, Schuyler changed. Clarkson TV & Appliance, the store next to Bootleggers, became Tienda Chichihualco, a Latin grocery store named after the little town in southern Mexico from which many early immigrants had come. The old Ben Franklin across the street became Variedades La Chiquita, filled with goods from Guatemala. The former location of Didier's, still the largest supermarket in town, was around the corner and now hosted the Latino Club.

At times, new arrivals got the cold shoulder, or worse. On March 4, 1995, nearly 600 workers who had reported to the pack for a special extra night shift discovered they'd been set up: the shift was a pretext for a raid by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Exits were closed, guarded by armed men, and 133 workers were arrested and soon deported, the majority to Mexico. Word of the raid spread quickly, and managers soon found themselves about seventy-five additional workers short. (The feds later revealed that they had struck a deal with plant management: they would stage their raid outside of regular hours and avoid disrupting production if management would help lure workers to the fake shift.)

Local 293, meanwhile, has not staged a major labor action in years. Some 1,300 people at the Schuyler plant are still unionized. And Greenwood says the union sticks up for its members: "Somebody gets screwed, we'll take them all the way to court." But strikes, as he explains, are another thing: why walk off the job to ensure some old-timer's vacation pay if you may lose your job the next week in a Homeland Security raid? Still, says Greenwood, the passage of time has strengthened the union's hand, as the first wave of Latino immigrants becomes more established in Schuyler: "A lot of them are staying put. They've become citizens, they're second-generation, and so tomorrow means something for them now."

As I entered my second month at Cargill Meat Solutions, I finally was able to keep my knife sharp (most of the time, anyway). And aided by painkillers, I tended not to feel the hurt in my arms after midmorning. Yet it scared me to push through it every day. Carolina showed me a painful lump that had developed on her forearm, some kind of knot. "I live with it," she said, sounding only slightly less macho than Stan. Pain was part of the deal. As I became more familiar with managing it and gained a small degree of mastery over the rest of the job, I began to relax a bit.

Some days I even got bored. I certainly wasn't the only one: looking across the viscera table, more than once I saw Lefty essentially fall asleep on his feet. He was so acclimated to the routine that, between cutting up every third pluck as it passed in front of him, he appeared to be taking a nap in six-second increments. His eyelids would close, his mouth would sag open, and then he'd snap to attention and reach for the next pluck.

I never could have managed that. But I must have fallen into some sort of semicomatose state the day the dead dog appeared on the viscera table, or I would never have registered such profound shock.

"What the fuck!" I blurted as the damp gray thing, a whippet or small greyhound, presented itself in front of me. It looked like my dog back in New York, if he were gray and had just taken a bath and, well, drowned. Then I noticed the animal's feet: there were no toes, no claws, only little hooves. I pointed at it with my knife.

"Fetus," said Taylor, my trainer that day. "Or embryo. Whatever."

"How often do you see those?"

"Oh, every once in a while. Usually they're still inside the uterus." That was when I realized that the sacs of varying size that periodically passed before us, usually with something lumpy within, were the wombs of pregnant cows. Supposedly the plant butchered only steers (castrated bulls) and heifers (female cows that have not borne a calf). But clearly the screening system was less than perfect. The sight of the fetus reminded me of the pro-life billboards I'd seen along the highway, equating abortion to murder.

When I asked Doc Barbera about the fetus, he told me they were extremely valuable. "They send them to a special room and then take out their blood," he said. Fetal bovine serum, I later learned, is prized by biotechnology labs, which use it for in vitro cell culture, and can sell for $500 per liter.

I wasn't bored for the rest of the day.

Lefty had looked vaguely amused at my shock—he appreciated anything that helped the time go by. Whereas Stan favored the off-color joke, Lefty concocted more dramatic high jinks to keep his brain alive. On Heads, for instance, he sometimes cut an eyeball from its socket and tried bouncing it off the floor, the wall, and back into his hand. At the viscera table, he'd sometimes spy a swollen ovary—they could present as a pellucid blue, the size of a softball—and launch it into the air toward somebody he knew.

His most notorious prank, though, I'd already been warned about. More than once, in his trusted role as a senior inspector, Lefty had suggested that a trainee slice into a severely swollen abscess—the kind that would burst open when nicked, covering the trainee with pus. But as it happened, I accomplished this on my own. I was on Heads, slicing without thinking, when I set off a small explosion. Suddenly I was covered with slime the color of key-lime-pie filling, aghast at the putrescence of it. The four inspectors upstream paused to take it in. Two were mirthful, two disgusted.

"Oh my God," I said. I wiped my face on my sleeve, then grabbed a handful of paper towels and started trying to clean myself off.

"You know what?" said Peter, the supervisor who happened to be working next to me. "Don't even bother." He stifled a grin. "Go to the locker room and change. We'll cover for you." I thanked him and apologized.

"Don't feel bad," he replied, finally allowing himself a chortle. "It happens to everybody at least once. You're a real inspector now."

Other aspects of the pack gradually became less mysterious to me. I saw how the guy with the giant metal box was actually swapping out dull knives for sharp ones. How the different sirens that sounded throughout the day had different meanings, summoning different supervisors. How those colored lightbulbs high on the ceiling reflected the status of the line, and how the different colors of hard hats among Cargill workers denoted rank.

One day I became aware of a tall woman in a white lab coat who sometimes stood off to the side at Livers. In

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one hand she held a clipboard and in the other a pen. I knew she wasn't an inspector, and since we weren't subject to review or supervision by anyone at Cargill, I wasn't concerned. Still, she *was* looking at us. Then Tina, working next to me one day, asked if we could swap positions "so that I can talk to Mary Ann."

"Sure. Who's Mary Ann?" Tina pointed to the woman in the lab coat.

While Tina chatted with Mary Ann, I thought about another pattern I had noticed: the way animals passed through the factory in groups. Midmorning, for example, you might notice that the severed heads had become extra large, their flesh hard to cut, and somebody would say, "Yeah, they switched from Black Angus to Holsteins." But even within a specific breed, you would see patterns of difference, especially on the viscera table.

For me, it was most noticeable in the livers. Typically I'd find an abscess in, say, one out of every eight livers. But then there would come a streak of them just riddled with abscesses—sometimes you had to mark out almost every one. Not only that, but in the middle of these streaks you might see grotesque and creepy things: deformed livers hardly looking like livers at all, or tumors jutting out of other kinds of viscera. This diseased tissue sometimes made you feel as if you should stop breathing and take a step back, or sterilize not only your knife but also your hook and your hard hat, and maybe get a new pair of latex gloves and take a shower as well.

When it was time for us to rotate posts, I asked Tina about Mary Ann. "What's she doing there?" I yelled, so she could hear me.

"Oh, she works for the feedlots. She keeps track of how many livers we mark out. It's correlated to the antibiotics or something."

I asked Mary Ann about it during a line stoppage the following week. "I work for Eli Lilly," she told me.

"The drug maker?"

"Right. I keep track of how many livers inspectors mark out with abscesses, and they use it to monitor the use of antibiotics in the feed."

"How do you mean? The more antibiotics, the more abscesses?"

"That's right."

I paused and thought. "But wouldn't antibiotics make the abscesses go away?"

Mary Ann smiled. "I guess not!"

Somehow this was worse than seeing shit on the meat or ingesta leaking out of a ruptured stomach. It wasn't contamination from an isolated slaughtering mishap: it was deliberate, systemic contamination of the food chain. As much as 70 percent of all antibiotics sold in the United States are administered to livestock—they are a powerful way to ensure animal growth. I knew this had to be a dangerous practice, because overuse of antibiotics leads to resistance on the part of bacteria. It ultimately robs these medicines of their power.

What I hadn't known was that consumption of these drugs makes so many cattle sick. That was morally unsettling, of course. But it was equally unsettling in terms of what we eat. Can the chemicals that overwhelm a cow's liver also be present in an otherwise healthy-looking cut of beef, in a steak we might eat? If they can, USDA inspectors won't be the ones to detect such contamination: they're not trained to look for it.

Stan didn't seem too surprised when I told him I was quitting. I'd been an oddball candidate from the beginning: a New Yorker who had showed up in Nebraska for a job as an intermittent inspector—fifteen dollars an hour and no benefits. It was also unusual to qualify for the FSIS with a four-year college degree—most people came in with two years of experience in food handling—and Stan knew my educational background.

Working on Heads one day, I almost choked when he suddenly asked me where I had gone to college. Not wanting to lie to him, I said I would fill him in later. He never did press me for details, but on our break that afternoon, he said, "You're the first guy I ever met who finished college and doesn't brag about it. Most of the people here who had some college"—and he named a couple of names—"they really want you to know."

I told him I missed my family, which was true; that the work was tougher than I'd thought, which was true; and that there were prospects for a job teaching, which was true. I didn't tell him that I no longer had any feeling in my fingertips each morning, or that I wore a brace at night to alleviate carpal-tunnel pain. I knew how he felt about complainers. I also didn't tell him about my plan to write an article—but I will have before this comes out, and I hope and suspect that he will forgive me and let me buy him a meal next time we meet, because I owe him one.

Here is why: for weeks, Stan had been wanting to take me to his favorite place for a steak, and suddenly it was now or never. Slaughterhouse work didn't seem to turn any inspectors away from eating meat (one man I met who had worked in a hot-dog factory still ate hot dogs). And if freshness is a virtue in beef, you couldn't get any fresher than "hanging tenders": slender strips of meat cut from a carcass on the Rail, placed in a ziplock bag with spices, cooked in a sanitizer, and discreetly shared with all and sundry during breaks.

I figured Stan would know a good steak when he saw one, and part of me really wanted to go. We scheduled it for the night before I was to leave Schuyler. Stan and his wife, Josephine, picked me up at dusk in their SUV and pointed me to a seat in back with a little cooler next to it. "Have yourself a beer," said Stan, who already did.

"Thanks," I said. I was grateful for the beer because I was nervous. Although Stan didn't know it, I hadn't eaten any beef at all since the day I started at the pack. Seeing the knocker at work was part of the problem. So was standing near the cattle as they were herded up Temple Grandin's doomsday ramp. And then there were the heads, eyeballs intact, and the highly rationalized industrial setting, the idea of a powerful enterprise devoted to wholesale killing. And if you believe that animals might have souls—sometimes I do—then you might relate to my mental picture of a spiritual highway spiraling upward from the knocking room, through the ceiling of Cargill Meat Solutions, and into bovine heaven, with a constant stream of cattle arriving every day.

That was the spiritual side of the equation. There was also, on a more practical level, the question of wholesomeness. What I'd seen on the viscera table made me suspect that consumers could be getting quite a dose of pharmaceuticals with their beef.

You were never really in the clear unless you went completely organic. Beyond that, it seems smart to avoid ground beef. Most *E. coli* contamination comes out of grinding plants, where the provenance of the meat can be practically anywhere in the hemisphere and the standards are often lower. Grinding conceals almost all the sins.

But our dinner wasn't going to be about hamburger. Stan said the restaurant was out of town, and I found no trace of it on Google or Yelp or anywhere else: in rural Nebraska, thank God, it's still possible to get off the e-grid.

Because I'd like to keep it that way, I will not name the restaurant or its location here. I will say that it was in one of those little Nebraska towns that time forgot. The roads were unpaved, the brick schoolhouse was abandoned; apparently there had been a flood. Main Street had no streetlights, and the only business showing any sign of life was our steak house. But it was roomy, with a long bar, two TVs going, a pool table, and an area for dining.

I'd finished two beers before we walked in. Stan and Josephine knew several people (and I actually knew a guy from my first pool night), so it took a little while before we sat down and considered the menu.

"Rib eyes, right?" Stan asked Josephine, and she nodded. As he had promised, the rib eye dinner was $14.95 and came with Texas toast, potato, and salad. Stan ordered his medium, Josephine medium rare, and he asked for the Dorothy Lynch—a local brand of French dressing—on his salad.

I looked down the menu. My stomach turned slightly. "I'll have exactly what he ordered," I told the waitress. We asked for beers all around, too.

My phone was sitting on the table and Josephine asked if I had any pictures of my kids. I showed them. I'd seen a photo of a Hispanic girl on Stan's locker door at work, and now I asked about her.

"That's my granddaughter," said Stan proudly. "My little beaner baby."

"Say what?"

Josephine smiled. "My daughter from my first marriage married a Mexican."

"Oh, like Mickey," I said.

Mickey was a trimmer who often worked on the Rail. He was very talkative. His daughter had married a Mexican, he once told me, and they'd ended up moving in with him and his wife. It had been hard, he said—he was one of the workers locked out in 1984 who had come back to a lower wage. Mexicans, to him, were the embodiment of all that had gone wrong: the decline in his salary, and the transformation for the worse of his beloved Schuyler.

For a long time, he had been very angry. If he saw a Mexican walking into town from the plant, he would refuse to pick him up: "I'd say, 'Go ahead, get frostbite, die!'" But that was then. "Now, if I know them, I'd help," he said. "And they'd help me." A key moment in the transformation had been the arrival of his granddaughter.

Stan said it was the same for him. "Sure, we were a little racist before. But Mickey and me don't let nobody say the B-word. We say 'beaner baby' among ourselves, but that's because people know how we really feel."

And so the heartland changes.

The meals arrived. I've never been a particular fan of rib eye, but from the moment I saw the steak and caught its aroma, my stomach felt fine. I watched Stan and Josephine lift bites to their mouths and chew. I salivated. I lifted my knife and pushed in my fork.

The next ten or fifteen minutes were an intense pleasure. It is hard to describe how good that steak was. I finished mine first. "You must have liked that," said Stan.

"Wow. It was delicious."

But meanwhile, I was thinking: What did this mean? What kind of witness was I, what kind of predator? I know that going vegan is perhaps the proper ending to my story, and truly, it's the one I foresaw. But appetite is a hard thing to control; a lifetime habit doesn't just go away. I do know that I eat much less beef than I did before, and I pay more for better stuff. I have subtracted 90 percent of the hamburger from my diet, and I now seek meat that requires a knife to eat. It will be better meat—and using the knife will mean I have to think about it, every single bite. ■

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