

The Killer

Sue Hazel

She crouched, huddled by the galvo wall, cramming grubby fists over her ears and stubbing her nose down on a knee, hating Monday afternoon.

Early on would be the long harsh scrapes of blade on steel, clangs as the knives went into the heavy steel bucket and ‘Remember yours’ as she grabbed three pans and two small buckets — aluminium with straight sides and curved metal handles so thin they left hurting purple marks on her hands when carried full.

‘C’mon Snook,’ and she’d follow Dad striding away from their safe warm kitchen, fast running down the back yard then careful tiptoeing — the kids didn’t wear shoes much, just for Sunday best — picking her way through treacherous sharp shards of stone that covered the hill, up past the cow yard and stable to the wool shed yard to fetch the killer.

‘Which one this week?’ he’d tease, already knowing the scrawniest, with tattered woolly dags dangling and long ragged hooves deep split with age — too many days and years on hard red earth and those sharp stones bruising, tearing into its hooves. Once she’d argued ‘No Dad, this one here, look at its eyes, all soft and brown...’ and watched as he ran the flock down the race, whipping the gate shut to send one off. Always the tired one, slope-shouldered, hobbling, defeated. The one just waiting, ready to be next.

With Scot and Rusty chained at their kennels she’d be controlling one side of the killer’s run, eagle-eyed and pacing like a dog guarding, watching for its last brief — hopeless — bid for freedom. Down to the galvo shed. Really a tank stand, four thick pine posts, iron sheets nailed on for walls and a smooth concrete floor with a long black rubber hose feeding down from the tank overhead for running water. There was a shelf made of old boxes, thick dark timbers nailed, stencilled Grazcos Sheep Dips. Handy size, just the right height.

Oh she hated the next bit – hated knowing it. A tattoo of panicked skittering hooves, fast bleating mews of fear, sometimes a thick drowning scream, her Dad grunting ‘there that’s it... ahhh curse your kicking...’ as he waited for the quiet still, and life gone. He pushed hooks through fetlocks and ‘up you go...’ as he heaved the rattling chain and there was the killer, hoisted, waiting. Then liquid flowing fast splatting into the bucket, gobbing heavy thick plops on the floor and that smell in her nose, her mouth, all through the air around. Blood. Still — so many years later — she knows the smell and taste of red. No-one knows that about colour, but

she does. She knows that red is thick and edgy; metallic like the steel smell on a knife blade and the hammer and the saw; like the chewing taste of dull silver roofing nails; smooth like the bucket she carried cold to the killing place every Monday then warm, slopping full of flabby purple flesh for the walk home.

The killer's life dripped away, left its body. She tensed, waiting for the ten crunches. Always ten, he had done this job so many times that's all it took. Heavy scissor-like cutters — she could hardly lift them — hacked up through glistening white bone then that squelching tear of sinew and muscle and the beast hung exposed, guts hanging, already cooling and ready for butchering.

'Hurry up now' the words from Dad she dreaded. Now she had to look, to see. Have to be there, in that tiny space with a still, hanging carcass and her Dad intent and her waving the tea towel, frantically moving flies frenzied with the stench of blood and meat and death.

Out came the stomach distended, green with grass and bile, yards of pink-grey slimy slipping intestine, foamy pink lung bags, the weighty heart still and dark and with that same red smell. Then it was her time. She stepped forward with the little buckets, every week flinching as the liver thumped into one, a lump of quivering purple brown; and into the other flipped two kidneys still dripping blood from thick tubes sticking out of their innards. The buckets always went behind the post near the doorway, another tea towel spread over their bounty and she was back to endlessly waving, hopelessly moving the dark myriad buzzing loud and intent on feast.

Then would be the punching, fisting hard between the sheen of wool-knobbed skin and the muscle lined body; her Dad grunting and thrusting deep to separate them and leave nothing but a hunk of meat split and hanging from the two hooked legs, the other two sticking out, useless. She had to watch the fabric waving – not too close to swipe her Dad but close enough and fast enough to keep those ('bloody' he'd called them once) flies off the carcass — white, red-streaked, uninvolved, unmoving, central to this ritual. And the head still woolly; eyes staring dull, pained into infinity; ears limp soft; mouth gaping a last silent cry and its few stumpy green teeth leering.

She sensed the end coming, his gradual removal from making this slaughter. His body eased, stood relaxed. He pulled a bag — an old bed sheet doubled with sides sewn — to cover the sorry nudity he'd created, pulled and tied tight the drawstring. The beast hung there all night alone.

‘That’s done, thanks Snook, off you go now,’ and she’d heft her two buckets and tiptoe, careful again, to the house. The buckets went into the fridge and with them a small sigh... lamb’s fry for breakfast tomorrow. She hated lamb’s fry.

Butchering followed in the next morning’s cool, before the flies came. Dad lifted the carcass off its hooks and shouldered it down to the block beside the underground tank near the house. The block, a huge lump of tree trunk weathered a dirty, bleached grey. Sheets of newspaper spread, the pans ready, tomahawk sharp and hack hack hack through bone and muscle and meat. Cracking and crunching came next, she could hardly bear seeing, hearing as a wrench over Mum’s knee snapped broken its leg joints, and fast clean cuts sawed through, separated the loin and leg roasts.

The week’s meat speckled with torn strips of bloody newsprint piled on trays and fast into the fridge. Away from the heat and flies gathering above and around, coming again, relentless. Strips of fat and sinew, shoulder blade bones, hacked shanks, ribs, tongue and eyeballs, sometimes the heart, brains and tripe — all chucked in buckets to overflowing. She carted them down to the dog fridge in the shearers’ cottage. Fresh scraps. The dogs bounded about yelping, flinging sticky strands of slobber.

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