The Butcher

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"A shadow slid across the woman's face on the late September day. A cold wind whipped the clouds, their formations slicing the sun into lop-sided, jagged pieces. Even with the cool air coming through the open kitchen window, drops of sweat bubbled up on Joyce's lip and brow."

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A shadow slid across the woman’s face on the late September day. A cold wind whipped the clouds, their formations slicing the sun into lop-sided, jagged pieces. Even with the cool air coming through the open kitchen window, drops of sweat bubbled up on Joyce’s lip and brow.

“Damn hot flashes,” she cursed, as she wiped her damp forehead with the back of her sleeve.

Through the window above the sink she could see her father hunched in his wheelchair, his beloved dachshund cradled in one arm. His green plaid stadium blanket lay slipping over his shoulders, exposing the navy blue cardigan he refused to let Joyce wash for him. The sweater smelled like perspiration, which was no better and no worse than the rest of him. Joyce thought of her father’s odor as ‘the old man smell’, part body odor, part mildew, part urine. Forty-five years after a childhood spent avoiding this man, Joyce was trapped into becoming the caretaker. If it weren’t for the money coming from his pension, Joyce would have put him away years ago.

Where were the clouds, that in her childhood, transformed into dragons, elephants and fancy-coifed poodles? Today, she saw slate-colored knives and purple-tipped swords thrusting across the sky. “I should fix his blanket, that’s what a good daughter would do,” she told herself.

“The hell with it,” she said to the empty kitchen. If he had been a half-way decent father, she would sit with him right now, and listen to the stories she had heard a hundred times before. He remembered the cockfights of 1922, but damned if he knew whether or not he took his heart pills that morning. “Maybe things would be different,” she told herself, “if he hadn’t earned his living as a butcher.” Or, seem to enjoy it as much as he obviously
She remembered that as a young girl her new friends insisted on observing how a cow became a hamburger. Joyce would lead them from her family's living room to the store in the front of their house. With fingernails cutting into her clenched palms, Joyce would shrink into the door as her father sharpened his knives, putting on a show while pretending not to see his audience. With a flourish, he would cut the flesh that oozed blood as if he were one of the Arabian thieves she'd seen in Saturday afternoon black-and-white movies. Those men with their dark skin, dusty clothes and cavalier attitude toward killing repulsed her. No one ever wanted a second show, but Joyce was exposed to the carnage with every new friend.

As a teenager, Joyce felt doubly outraged when she learned that she had to live with the monthly flow of her own blood. When her father found out, he seemed to taunt her.

"Now you can bear your own young'uns and suckle them, too, just like this here mama pig did with her brood. I bet they're squealing right now, lookin' for her." He swung the terrified pig up onto the butcher block and before Joyce could move, slit the pig's neck. Blood gushed from the gurgling mouth, streamed down its chin, belly and hooves, trickling onto the tile floor. Joyce ran to her room and threw her shoes away when she discovered she had tracked the pig's blood onto her carpet.

His heartlessness went beyond a detachment to his livelihood. Stray animals were neutered without benefit of anesthesia. Her father placed the unsuspecting critter in a burlap bag, swung it around into dizzying disorientation, then made his cut with a pocket knife before the animal could escape. Each was left to lick its wounds and some of them died from the ordeal.

With time, her sisters and brothers learned not to become attached to the animals living with them, especially after one memorable Sunday afternoon. Their mother, who lived to serve her husband, called out to them in the yard.

"Time to eat kids, everyone inside."
There was no ignoring that order, as everyone was expected at Sunday dinner, the only day of the week their father didn’t work. He was already seated in his chair as the youngsters washed their hands and fell one by one into their seats. His normally dour face held a crooked grin with little bits of pasty saliva clogging the corners of his lips.

“Does anyone recognize our guest?” her father asked innocently.

There was no one at the table besides the family. The children didn’t know how to react to their father, who rarely talked to them, let alone joked with them.

“George, does dinner look familiar?” he asked Joyce’s youngest brother.

George scanned the table, seeing the usual fresh vegetables from the garden, home-baked bread, mashed potatoes and meat sliced and laid out on a platter. As he was about to answer his father, he saw the metal-studded collar lying near his plate. He picked it up and the tiny bell attached to it tinkled. It belonged to his pet lamb, Chico.

“You’ll have to find something else to pull your wagon, son. You can’t go gettin’ sentimental about these animals, kids. I raise them to put food on the table for you and all my customer’s kids. Now eat up, everyone, and stop your cryin’!”

George sat at the table the rest of the afternoon and evening, refusing to eat his beloved lamb. He would not be excused from the table until he did. When his father finally went to bed, George’s mother held her sobbing son to her breast, repeating quietly in his ear, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry for everything.”

Joyce’s hands began to sting and she let go of the wash cloth wrung tightly in her hands. Cuts as small as razor nicks pulsed raw and red on her fingers. Old men’s diapers were as irritating to skin as those of a baby’s. The blanket had slipped entirely from her father’s shoulders now.

“Joyce, come here, girl, Gretel’s not movin’. She ain’t
breathin, neither!" Her father's screechy voice pierced the rushing of the wind.

Joyce had been waiting for this day. She grabbed the limp sausage dog by the skin of its neck, and without checking for signs of life, she tossed the little body down the steep ravine on the edge of her yard. Ignoring her father's choking cry, she turned her back to him and started for the house. Her foot dislodged the brake on his left wheel, sending it forward in a lurch. The other brake locked on, causing the chair to spin in Joyce's direction.

Her father's eyes held the terror of a trapped animal. Joyce smiled at her father and said, "One's enough for today, Dad, don't you think?"

--Anne Steger