

Butchering Day

Jeffrey Wald

It was butchering day. One hundred rabbits sat in two long rows of cages in the pole barn out back, their hides like a North Dakota whiteout.

Johnson always got up early. But on butchering day, he was up before 4. He was fast, very fast, and if he timed it right, he could have the whole lot butchered before his kid woke up.

He put on his Levi's, the ones with the tear in the right knee (there were still a few drops of dried blood from last butchering day), and his red plaid shirt, and his sweat-stained Minnesota Twins baseball cap. He walked into the kitchen and pressed start on the coffee maker and then walked to the front door, grabbed his boots, and laced them at the kitchen table. He walked back to where the coffee was now dripping and stood against the counter, waiting. He was lean, but strong. His muscles toned and useful. His was a handsome and rugged visage. His whole bearing had a lived-in feel to it.

When the coffee maker began sputtering, he poured himself a cup of black, very hot coffee (no creamer, never any cream). He emptied the cup quickly in three or four gulps, set the cup in the sink, and walked outside, through a storm door missing a windowpane.

He walked to the shed where he stored his equipment. Two thin nylon ropes. A carpet cutter with a fresh blade. And a pair of sharpened tin snips. But where was the Kent Hrbek mini Louisville Slugger baseball bat?

Then he remembered. He shook his head as if shaking off a fly. He walked to the middle of the yard, by the back deck, and picked up the bat in the grass. He brought the bat and the ropes and the carpet cutter and the tin snips over to the pole barn. He walked in.

The pungent smell of ammonia did not bother him. He knew well the various odors of farm life; knew them not as something foreign or gross, but as something that just is, like grass or gravel roads.

He placed the equipment on the ground near a two by four nailed at eye level between two posts. Then he tied the two ropes onto the two by four, so that the bottom of the rope hung to his naval. He walked back to the shed and brought out five large Styrofoam coolers and put them by the two by four. He turned to walk back to the rabbit barn. It was still black out, even in the east.

He picked up a transport cage from the ground. He walked over to the first row of cages and grabbed out a rabbit. It was heavy. He used to weigh each rabbit before butchering, but that was now unnecessary. He knew within an ounce how much each rabbit weighed, and thus within a cent or two how much it would net him when the truck came by later that day to take the meat to California. He placed nine more rabbits in the cage, then he grabbed the cage and carried it to the two by four with the rope.

He knelt by the cage and lifted out the first rabbit. His movement was seamless, the process apparently effortless. From the single whack to the back of the head with the bat; to the tying of the rabbit's hind legs to the dangling rope; to the slitting of the rabbit's neck with the carpet cutter; to the lifting of the neck with the left thumb to let the bright blood drain; to the cutting of the hide around each hind foot; to the

pulling down of the hide to the rump; to the cutting off of the rump with the tin snips; to the pulling down of the hide over the rabbit's head; to the cutting off of the rabbit's head and front legs with the tin snips; to the slitting of the rabbit's stomach with the carpet cutter; to the effortless removal of the innards; to the quick retrieval of the heart and liver; and finally to the snipping of the hind feet and untying of them as they dangled from the two ropes.

He wasn't exactly unthinking during this process, but measured. Precise. No movement wasted. His body, and that of the rabbit, utterly controlled. He was simply the best. He'd learned from his dad, who'd learned from his dad, and so forth. And one day, he'd teach his son. He'd guide his son's left hand to the rabbit's rich fur. Show him how to hold it, firm yet gentle. You didn't want to startle the rabbit. Make it squirm or jump right before you raised the bat and popped it in the back of the head. Because then you might shatter your own damn hand.

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He held the rabbit with his left hand by its scruff. Then he picked up the mini Louisville Slugger. He raised the bat, poised to strike the rabbit once in the back of its skull, stunning and paralyzing it. He hesitated. The bat dropped an inch or two. He stared into the rabbit's red right eye; its red, alien eye stared back.

He remembered.

He remembered the sound of the breaking glass. He remembered walking towards the back deck, where the sound had come from. He remembered seeing Douglas, his six-year-old, standing on the deck, glass at his feet, a miniature Kent Hrbek Louisville Slugger baseball bat in his hand. He remembered climbing the three

deck stairs in two strides and grabbing the bat. He remembered grabbing Douglas by the scruff of his neck. He remembered raising the bat over Douglas's body. He remembered Douglas flinching, turning one blue eye away but keeping the other trained on the raised bat. He remembered the rush of blood to his head, the whiskey shot of adrenaline that swamped and consumed him with murderous rage. He remembered breathing in once and exhaling once. He remembered bringing the bat back down to his side. He remembered releasing his grip on Douglas. He remembered telling Douglas to *go to your damn room*. He remembered Douglas turning and opening the storm door with the broken glass. He remembered hearing Douglas running up the wooden interior stairs to his bedroom, muffling cries. He remembered chucking the bat over the deck railing into the grass. He remembered grabbing a garbage bin, broom, and dustpan and cleaning up the broken glass. He remembered feeling the tension in his shoulders relaxing, the pulsing blood in his brain slowly receding, the roar of high tide quieting. He remembered the lingering concentrated headache, the pain in his teeth from clenching, and the knotted muscle between his shoulder blades. He remembered massaging the knot like sourdough, wondering why the hell have a kid if this is what it did to you? If all they ever did was bring out the worst in you? Turned you into an asshole?

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Johnson looked again at the rabbit with the red eyes. He set down the bat. He placed the rabbit back in the transport cage. He walked out of the barn and across the yard. He opened the storm door with the missing glass and then the main door. He went inside and walked up the dark stairway.

He entered Douglas's room at the top of the stairs. He saw Douglas's collection of deer antlers and pheasant feathers and cool rocks. He knelt on one knee next to Douglas's bed. He looked at Douglas, his face lit by his mallard lamp. He figured if ever there was a preserved image of Eden, it was contained in the face of a sleeping child. Only problem was that child would wake up, and you'd be there, and the Fall would be all too real again.

Johnson exhaled. He patted Douglas's brown hair. Then he stood up and turned to walk out of the room.

The old oak floor creaked. Douglas turned, still half asleep, and saw his father.

"Daddy," he said.

"Yes, Douglas," he replied, turning to face him.

"Is it butchering day?"

"Yes, Douglas."

"Are they all done, daddy?"

"No Douglas, not yet."

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Douglas."

"Can I help this time, or would I still just get in the way?"

Johnson considered. He realized that perhaps the miracle of a child was its ability to forget. To forgive entirely.

"Sure, Douglas. You can help me after breakfast. But get some sleep now."

"Ok, daddy. Good night."

Douglas laid his head back down and closed his eyes. Johnson turned and went downstairs to wait for morning. In the meantime, he walked back outside, past the waiting rabbits, and grabbed his toolbox from the shed. He walked back to the porch to begin the process of replacing the glass that had been broken.