

**MEAT**

**A LOVE STORY**

**SUSAN BOURETTE**



**BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK**





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## PRAISE FOR

### *Meat: A Love Story*

“Takes [us] from an old-fashioned Greenwich Village meat-shop butchering tutorial to the Inupiat whale-blubber harvest. In Alaska, Bourette fathoms the relationship between meat and its provenance, and teases that out in subsequent chapters describing such topics as the workings of a Texas cattle ranch and moose-hunting season in Newfoundland. Throughout, she covers the broader subject of meat, including the history of American beef and its subcultures and controversies such as the impact of agribusiness and climate change on ranchers. The narrative moves swiftly and broadly.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Both a personal story and a study of human behavior, Bourette’s book is something like a cross between Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*. Love of meat is not required to enjoy this; it will be satisfying for members of most food cultures.” —*Library Journal*

“As wittily written as it is insightful, and essential as an antidote to all the misinformation about the raising, cooking, and eating of meat, *Meat: A Love Story* is not a polemic but a well-reasoned, well-researched addition to the literature of food culture.”

—John F. Mariani, author of *The Encyclopedia of American Food & Drink* and food columnist for *Esquire* magazine

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*For my mother.  
Thank you for all of those wonderful Sunday dinners.*

## PROLOGUE

VIOLENT WINTER WINDS lash against the streetcar as it rattles down Toronto's Queen Street West. Past the Gap and Starbucks. It rumbles by a vegetarian café where diners can be seen sucking hemp through straws and chopsticking at their tempeh salads, their sallow faces obscured by white clouds of steam that rise halfway up the window. Once the domain of hippie bicycle couriers, the café tonight caters to people who have their BMWs parked outside. The students and artists long ago priced out, the counterculture has given way to the country club. The restaurant's clients tonight are soccer moms who shop at Roots a few storefronts away, and the executives and bean counters who toil in the nearby corridors of commerce.

The streetcar clatters to the next stop. The doors open and riders are assaulted not only by a chilly blast but by the overpowering and unmistakable whiff of hot dogs on the grill. Dressed in a toque and fingerless gloves, the cart vendor works frantically folding dog to bun, his workspace clearly segregated. On the west side, the hot dog peddler has his Polish sausages and frankfurters cooking. On the east, that's where the veggie dogs go. Just as the bacon bits and HP Sauce are relegated to one side, condiments like corn relish and sauerkraut to the other.

The streetcar lurches again, crossing an invisible dividing line. A place that not so long ago looked like it was cut out of a vintage postcard, circa 1956. A neighborhood where Euro-style delis are filled with sausage links that hang like stalactites from the ceiling, buttressed up against old-world butcher shops and grubby bars. Slavic-looking men with noses shaped like the kielbasa that decorate their stores, their moustaches about as long and coarse as the brooms they push. Shops like the Prague Deli, where you can order from the same bill of fare served up here for decades: classics like Gypsy goulash, tripe soup, and pierogies slathered in sour cream and bacon.

But recently there's been an invasion. A different one from the one that had marked the arrival of immigrants here, starting in the '20s. The delis and butcher shops are still here, but the street is now being crowded by upscale shops like Art Metropole, the Downward Dog Yoga Centre, and Clafouti Patisserie et Café. A haute onslaught; pouty models sharing the sidewalks with guys in bloody aprons. These days, it's a haven of carnivore chic. A place now considered hallowed grounds by the hipster cognoscenti, most of whom would see the old street as kitsch rather than tradition. Those like the twenty- and thirtysomethings standing here beside me tonight for an introductory course in butchering.

We're shivering in a cold, cramped room at the Healthy Butcher, a place where the new and old commingle. The smell is as old as time—harking back to the days when the caveman clubbed his first woolly mammoth. The aesthetic is as new and shiny as the latest Marc Jacobs. We are culinary tourists here, the new face of Queen Street West.

I'm fighting to keep my balance on this slippery concrete floor and out of harm's way. A good distance from the four-hundred-pound slab of flesh dangling on a meat hook, or "on the rail," as they say in the vernacular of the trade. On one side of me is a

thirty-year-old Johnny Depp look-alike, who looks like he wandered straight off the set of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. He's wearing a striped shirt, a dozen small silver hoops, a tuft of hair on his chin, and a self-satisfied smirk. There's a married couple at the back, who whisper conspiratorially, subscribers to magazines like *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit*; an art director and Bobby Flay-wannabe; and a doctor-cum-gourmet with a special interest in nutrition. There's also Ryan Donovan, the clean-cut head butcher and onetime chef who grew weary of the terrible pay and even worse hours before trading in his chef's hat for a butcher's apron. And finally, observing from the sidelines is Mario Fiorucci, a former lawyer and vegetarian turned organic-meat mogul, and the brains behind the operation.

We've been granted a backstage pass to a show typically reserved these days for an industrial underclass employed on the meat-factory floors and a handful of butchers across North America intent on resurrecting a once-proud tradition. At the show here tonight, the central cast members are a \$1,600 heap of beef and the store's head butcher. "There's no definitive way to get from A to B—to take apart Humpty-Dumpty," Donovan says, waving a knife in his hand as if to underscore the point. "There are lots and lots of ways you can take down an animal."

*Take down an animal?* Sounds like a pep talk at a hunting lodge. I had expected that this would be a purely clinical exercise—with diagrams, skeletal cutaways—like the kind of illustrations you might see on the walls at the doctor's office. Maybe they do have something like that in the advanced classes. But one quick look at our how-to guide, *Breaking Down the Beef*, and I can't help thinking that this is *Butchering for Dummies*. Our handout looks like it's been printed for third-graders.

There's a cartoon cow painted in hues of hospital green and Pepto-Bismol pink. She looks almost gleeful, if not a little frisky—like she's trying to get away. Who can blame her? To this artist, she's clearly not a member of the sacred Bovidae clan, but food with a face. Meat wrapped in a leather case and divided into primal cuts: the chuck, rib, loin, hip, sirloin, shank, flank, plate, and brisket. But this simple approach does make some sense. After all, I doubt there are many among us who have ever laid eyes on meat that hasn't already been cleaved into individual and family-size portions and shrink-wrapped. For some it may even come as a shock: Meat comes from animals!

Fiorucci begins to deconstruct the handout for us, piece by piece. "Let's digest this information carefully," he intones before launching into an explanation of the differences between tough and tender cuts of meat. How the "locomotive" muscles at the front of the cow propel her around the pasture. And how the rib, loin, and sirloin muscles are used to support her frame—muscles that typically will be less exercised and more tender between the molars.

Meanwhile, Donovan is hard at work with a knife called a scimitar—using a grip I've never seen illustrated in Miss Manners's guide to etiquette. He makes a few cuts before disposing of the knife, ripping into the flesh with his bare hands. The fat between muscles gives way with a pop, pop, pop—like bubble wrap in the hands of a kid. Soon the cow's kneecap is exposed, glistening under the lights like fine porcelain. Donovan hacks away until four hundred pounds of Toronto's finest organic beef is dangling by a single tendon. It's hard to think of suspense in butchering, but the buildup truly is something out of a Ruth Rendell novel.

“We could call it *Death in the Queen Street Crypt*. It was the butcher that did it,” Johnny Depp cackles in my ear.

Meanwhile, the punk band The Viletones are playing at the Bovine Sex Club down the street and a Michael Toke installation is going up at the Fly Gallery nearby. But here, it’s butchering as performance art. The butcher as star in the eyes of this audience, the reception no different here from a crowd putting their hands together for the band or patrons lingering appreciatively in front of the art installation. Those old Slavic butchers never realizing that what they were doing was anything other than a job. Never mind that it was art. And up until recently, no one else seemed to, either. Not so long ago, this same crowd would have been lined up for veggie cooking classes featuring dishes like Virginia Sham and Beetroot Carpaccio. Up until now, the idea of anyone other than Jeffrey Dahmer forking over \$80 for an introductory course in butchering—unthinkable !

The carnivores are back. It’s like a bitch-slap to all those reedy, high-minded herbivores who have demanded nothing short of a bloodless revolution, dictating the parameters of the discussion, decreeing the rules for years. Now it’s the meat-eaters who have wrested control of the food debate.

What’s changed?

It’s hard to know with certainty how it all started, although the cultural signposts these days are everywhere. Maybe the tipping point came with the makeover of New York’s meatpacking district into one of Manhattan’s more fashionable addresses. Today, there are new meat temples cropping up everywhere—from high-end butcher shops like this to Madison Avenue’s Nello, where a fourteen-ounce Wagyu sirloin sells at a heart-stopping \$750 a steak.

And what are we to make of fashionistas like Sienna Miller posed provocatively on the cover of *Esquire* in little more than a T-shirt featuring a moose head? And the antlered taxidermy, the rustic realism of bars and restaurants cropping up in glossier neighborhoods around Los Angeles and Brooklyn? For me, though, nothing pointed to a shift in the cultural zeitgeist more clearly than the purse I coveted in the window of a Yonge Street store in Toronto. Stitched together from recycled materials, it was emblazoned with big gold letters that screamed: I LOVE BACON. A rallying cry not just to porcine lovers everywhere but also to all of us lapsed vegetarians, who—according to a very informal and unscientific survey—eventually were lured back to meat-eating by the overwhelming savory and glorious aroma of bacon.

Like so many others in my urban, middle-class circle, I’ve dabbled in vegetarianism throughout most of my adult life. In fact, it was my first act of self-determination when I moved away from home. My first cookbook? *Diet for a Small Planet*, of course. Still, I can’t claim any real stick-to-it-ness. Not like my partner, Gare, who is a sportswriter, celebrating thirty years of meat-free living. And while I must confess I have never really been more than a vegetarian dilettante, I’ve been stunned to watch my longtime vegetarian friends and acquaintances fall like dominos. Tamsen eating a hamburger. Lisa chewing on chicken wings. Carolyn mowing through a steak. And Khalil, the nineteen-year-old soft-spoken and thoughtful artist, reared almost exclusively on peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches, now living on raw meat.

Pound for pound, as North Americans, we’re eating more meat than ever. On average, we consume 260 pounds of meat a year. But, up until recently, when many of

us did consume meat, it was with a supersized side order of guilt. We know all too well the arguments against meat-eating: It clogs our arteries, destroys the ecosystem. It's a cruel massacre of innocent victims. A slaughterhouse horror show I witnessed firsthand, believing—at least for a time—my days as a carnivore were over forever. The sin, the immorality of meat-eating has been the overriding leitmotif of the past few decades, ever since those first pot-smoking, bead-loving longhairs hijacked the debate and determined what the nation *should* have for dinner. Still, it gnawed. Deep in our guts, we knew Homer Simpson was right when he told his meat-eschewing daughter on the way to a neighborhood barbecue, “Lisa, you don’t win friends with salad.”

So, we began to rally. To reclaim our rights as meat-eaters. After all, where would the world be without the contributions of carnivores like Beethoven, Faulkner, Lincoln, and Trudeau? It's true that the vegetarians once held the countercultural high ground. Now, it's the carnivores who rule cool. Meat is the new black.

Maybe it's our last hurrah. One last shot at getting our fill before what some are gloomily predicting will be an all-out meat apocalypse. A world, according to those like Harvard anthropologist James L. Watson, in which meat-eating will be a historical footnote, something future generations will only read about in books of antiquity. Why? Mad cow disease, Professor Watson postulates, is just the first in a host of new and deadly diseases that eventually will infect our animals, wiping out whole species, one sacrificial lamb, cow, pig, and chicken felled after another. The upshot of factory farming, he argues, which has all but wiped out biodiversity.

Meanwhile, the evening is drawing to a close here at the Healthy Butcher. Our cow carved and sizzling on the grill, we gather at the front of the shop to swap notes, to chew the fat. Students are clamoring for a few last morsels of wisdom from Fiorucci. Growing up, I didn't know anyone who wanted to become a butcher. The butcher's life seemed to hold little in the way of adventure, of romance. But watching Fiorucci hold court, his students laughing, hanging on his every word, I can't help wondering: Is the butcher the new celebrity chef? And more important, why are we so obsessed with meat in North America? These are the questions I will grapple with on a protein pilgrimage of sorts—my year in meat. But not before I wrestle my classmates out of the way, wielding my toothpick like a dagger, to get at the New York sirloin now being sliced into shards and served on a platter in front of us.

# 1

## BUTCHERED

WE'RE DEEP IN THE SHADOWS, in the bowels of a building with walls that sweat gristle and blood. A modern-day chop house that serves up pork bellies and picnic roasts, loins and shoulders, and the odd human finger. A sprawling leviathan of steel and pipe, hidden in a wheat field, in the heart of the Canadian prairies.

We're standing in a semicircle on the kill floor at Maple Leaf Pork in Brandon, Manitoba. Two dozen fresh recruits, our mouths agape. Mike, a short, squat factory-floor veteran, stuffed into a bloody lab coat, is leading our tour. Hundreds of hogs swing by on a conveyor line; flayed and shackled up by their hind legs, their heads dangling by a flap of skin, they smack together like bowling pins.

Shivering against the cold, dressed in flimsy cotton jackets, we take in the floor show through a haze of steam that rises from the cement like vapor off a swamp. We stare at the blank faces of men dressed in the uniform of the meat trade: steel toes, mesh gloves, safety glasses to shield against the blood spray, and ear protection to ward off the shrieking white noise. They plunge in and out of the hogs' bellies with knives, yanking out glistening tubes of red and gray entrails, bowels, hearts, and livers that eventually will be chopped up, packaged, and shipped off for the dinner table.

No one strays too far from the pack. Undoubtedly worried they'll be swept onto a conveyor belt, hung on a hook, and eventually shrink-wrapped.

"We'd harvest the farts if we could," Mike offers with a certain morbid glee. "Yup. We use just about everything. Only three percent of the pig goes to waste around here."

I squeeze my eyes tight, trying for a moment to block it all out. Trying to envision my mother's roast pork fresh from the oven, studded with cloves and smothered in maple glaze. But I can't get past the reek of guts and scared animals. My head begins to swing like a seesaw. "Don't you dare puke," Mike snorts, grabbing at my helmet to take note of my name, displayed there in bold lettering. "Suck it up, Princess."

I'm praying for a miracle. That I won't toss my cookies. Or worse, be tossed out ass over teakettle my first day on the job. "It's the smell," I respond weakly. And then with all the bravado I can muster: "I'll get used to it."

With that, Mike cocks his head and inhales deeply before he begins a spiel he's surely mouthed dozens of times before. "You know what that smell is?" he growls rhetorically. "That," he says, leaning in for emphasis, "that's the smell of money."

It was all about the money. That's why I was here. I wasn't looking to do a story about meat but rather the meat business. I came to work undercover for a Canadian

business magazine, to give the white-collar class a glimpse into a world inhabited by workers whose blue collars are splattered with blood. I came to try to explain the rationale behind a business that grinds up and spits out its workers with the same breakneck speed that it uses to turn pig into pork.

I had the suspicion that Maple Leaf wasn't so concerned about feeding a pork-hungry public but more about boosting the bottom line. A corporate strategy built on cheap labor and high volume to compete in a low-margin business. Maple Leaf's strategy here in Brandon essentially was the formula of Big Meat that had been perfected by companies like Tyson Foods and replicated cookie-cutter-style by every major pork, beef, and chicken processor in North America.

I had come here to tell the story of an industrial underclass, an army of more than 200,000 workers in North America's slaughterhouses. It was for good reason that a meatpacker had never made it on *Fortune's* list of the "100 Best Companies to Work For." Yes, it was awful, filthy, and dangerous work. But was it necessarily so? You might imagine that these weren't the kinds of questions you'd broach with your boss on the first day at work. Not if you wanted to keep your job. Or your sanity. Besides, I knew that I'd never find all of the answers here even if I stayed until retirement. The truth was, I couldn't think any further ahead than punching the clock at the end of my shift.

I had no way of knowing that my time here in Brandon would be so utterly transforming. That I would leave the factory floor and swear off meat forever before being lured back—inexplicably—by a short-order cook waving a strip of bacon. Brandon simply would be the starting point in a much longer journey that would take me whale-hunting with the Inupiat in Alaska and sausage-making in small-town Acadian Louisiana; to working on an organic farm in New York state and dining with a bunch of hippy-dippy New Agers at a raw-meat potluck in Colorado. My year in meat would be spent exploring the philosophical, social, and historical underpinnings of our obsession with meat in North America.

All that was to come, but in Brandon I was focused on my assignment, the one story that would set all the other stories in motion. After my orientation tour, I headed straight for Maple Leaf's HR department. That put me across the desk from a sober, stern-faced twentysomething. She scanned my résumé. One I'd admittedly doctored. Unlike all those crafty business types I'd read about getting creative with their résumés—adding degrees, pumping up job titles and work responsibilities—I had taken the opposite tack. Erasing any hint of the time I'd spent at university, my years toiling as a reporter at Canada's most prestigious media address. Just as I sat there in the chair in front of the HR person, completely unadorned; no makeup or jewelry, no lavishly overpriced shoes. No big-city attitude. Did I mind working overtime? she asked finally, glancing up from my résumé, a glint of pity discernible in her narrow-set eyes as I chirped merrily about working long hours in my previous jobs. Did I have transportation to work? Did I have any sexually transmitted diseases? And so on, until all the boxes had been checked off and my interviewer whisked me to the door and smiled weakly. "We'll call you," she said.

I waited and waited. So when the call finally came in two weeks later, I found myself squealing into the phone. Truthfully, I didn't know whether to be overjoyed or mortified. Happy I could complete my assignment or petrified that I had just landed

one of the most dangerous and gruesome jobs on the planet. For \$9.45 an hour, I would join the ranks of some 1,300 other workers in Canada's largest meatpacking plant. A slaughterhouse team with titles I'd never seen in any employment directory: knockers and stunners, pig chasers, jawbreakers, and kidney poppers. I was assigned a job in the rookie part of the plant, working in "by-products," slicing the cheeks out of hogs' heads.

How bad could it possibly be?

Monday. My first day on the job. I had thought the orientation tour a couple of weeks earlier had steeled me for anything, but this morning I have the jitters. Other first days had been filled with expectation and hope, but now I'm filled with dread. It's just past 6:30 a.m., and the sun hovers low on the horizon, casting a faded wash over this pretty patch of prairie also known as Wheat City, about 115 miles west of Winnipeg. A steady stream of pickups and rusted-out station wagons is already on the road. Their headlights bounce along a dead-end stretch of highway, toward a low-slung building situated in a field of hay bales, a fifteen-minute drive from Brandon. The parking lot is already teeming, filled with dozens of young men in muscle shirts and women pinched into low-riding jeans. They walk two by two, the sound of gravel skidding beneath their feet. In the distance, a truck is busy unloading a shipment of today's hog kill. The constant drone of the engine muffles the sound of their collective squeal.

Inside, workers are lining up at the punch clock—looking for all the world like the pigs being herded in through another door on the opposite side of the building. We're not the first workers on the kill floor. The first stage of the assembly line has been in full swing for nearly an hour. Some workers are busy working in tag teams struggling to load these obese porkers onto the gam table. Others are already covered in blood. Hacking into the hogs' cavities to extract the bung—the pig's intestines and anus—a task these men will perform 21 times a minute, 2,500 times before the morning bathroom break, and 10,000 times before the day is out.

Meanwhile, upstairs, high above the kill floor, twenty-five of us are gathered in a large room. The floor beneath our feet is rumbling, set into motion by the thrum of the butchery below. The walls are festooned with posters trumpeting Maple Leaf products: chops, hams, ribs, and roasts. The artwork, the meat, primed by stylists like Hollywood stars in a *Vanity Fair* spread, bears no resemblance to the stuff we saw on the floor. I can't even imagine that the workers below would recognize it as the fruit of their labor.

I had expected that our job training would be two to three weeks, working alongside a factory-floor veteran. I thought that we would work our way up to a shift on the factory floor after spending days learning how to sharpen a knife and the rules of health and safety. But this process apparently has been sped up, just like the pace of disassembly. In its wisdom, gleaned over years of recruiting, Maple Leaf apparently has come to the conclusion that everyone is far better off if new employees aren't left to meditate too long on the job they've been hired to do. That must explain why we are about to roll out onto the floor and into our workstations after lunch following a morning that is not so much practical training as it is a case of being sold and hectored, charmed and threatened by the man now standing at the front of the room. The face of management: Robert Panontin, a thirtysomething labor-relations specialist.

Panontin scans the room, sizing up this unlikely group of greenhorns warily. I'm sure that there are common threads that run through the two dozen among us, the most obvious one being economic necessity bordering on desperation. Yet our backgrounds are varied. It was almost like we had been plucked at random—or that we had all fallen on hard times, had taken different roads to reach this dead end, this last stop.

There's Tina, a velvety-eyed thirty-year-old mother of four, with hair sculpted like a porcupine. Her background is in retail. She stares at her hands, folded in her lap. At the next table, there's Jenn, a mid-twenties, golden-haired anthropology graduate in wide-leg pants, who smiles shyly. She looks least likely to fit in. But, in fact, she may be most suited to the job, having worked gutting bears at her grandparents' hunting lodge in Northern Ontario. At the back of the room, Joe, a transplanted Newfoundlander with big teeth and a know-it-all sneer, is fresh from working the oil rigs in Alberta. And there's Andrew, built like a boulder at six-feet-two and 270 pounds. Four years as a short-order cook have given him what the company values most: knife skills. The group also includes two Chads, Enoch, Phoebe, and Tim, who's back after quitting eight months ago. He's been assigned to the overnight sanitation shift, cleaning up guts and gore.

The indoctrination begins. Panontin sidesteps the reality of our poverty and pitches our employment here as an opportunity. "You have been chosen to be part of the Maple Leaf team," he explains, his baritone voice filling the room. "This is a big investment for us. To train you. To give you the kind of skills that you can take with you wherever you go. We are investing big in each and every one of you."

We listen quietly as Panontin expounds on Maple Leaf's commitment to the community and its employees. Just as I had listened to the company president elucidate corporate strategy for shareholders who nibbled on finger sandwiches at the company's annual meeting in Toronto. Maybe it was the cynical reporter in me—or the dearth of party food here—but I'm not buying it. It's only now that I realize that there's no chance I'll ever be coopted by management. If I'm going to sympathize with anybody, it's going to be my coworkers and the pigs.

And maybe that's why Panontin suddenly shifts gears. He senses he's losing us. Talk now turns to a language every low-wage worker can understand. How working at Maple Leaf can make us richer in ways we'd never expect. Perfect attendance over a month? An extra dollar an hour paid retroactively for the month and a shot at a company draw for \$1,500. Extra time on the company clock will also translate into "pork bucks"—a kind of funny money printed here at the plant that allows us to buy our ribs and back bacon at factory-floor prices. Yes, even the perks are pork.

Panontin finishes his sales pitch, gathers his materials, and takes his leave before stopping short of the door: "I just want you to know we're watching you like a hawk," he snarls, looking around the room one last time to make certain his tone has elicited the intended effect. "You have signed an employee-employer contract with us. We've agreed to pay you a wage and you agree to come to work. I have a really good friend in security at the mall. If I'm doing an investigation on you, I'll go down there to watch his security videos. God help you if I catch you goofing off at the mall on video."

We sit in silence, beholding him with a collective wince. But Panontin knows the statistics aren't pretty. He knows most of us—yes, "the Maple Leaf team"—will flee

long before we reach our three-month probation, like thousands of other workers since Maple Leaf opened the doors of its megaplant here in 1999.

Just like the worker who was waiting to board the bus I arrived on in Brandon before my first week of work. A young man with a world-weary look, whose hands were crippled by too many long hours spent working with a knife, whose blue eyes were ringed by dark circles. I imagined his nights were haunted by the same dark and surreal images that filled his days on the factory floor. Passing him in the terminal, I couldn't help staring, thinking about Jurgis Rudkus, the central character in Upton Sinclair's muckraking exposé of the meat industry, penned over a century ago. Did Sinclair's work still have relevance?

Although it was a work of fiction, *The Jungle* had the feel of journalism. And more than the feel—it reeked of the real-world stink of the Chicago stockyards in which Sinclair vividly depicted the horrifying living and working conditions of a family of Lithuanian immigrants toiling in turn-of-the-century meatpacking. An instant bestseller. Readers were horrified by Sinclair's portrayal of a meat supply infected with vermin, animal feces, human blood, and body parts. How bribed inspectors looked the other way when diseased cows were slaughtered for beef; how filth and guts were swept off the floor and packaged as potted ham. The book elicited outrage, prompting Congress to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act, both signed into law by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. Sinclair, however, reportedly was disappointed. He had written his book with the hope of improving conditions for the working man. "I aimed at the public's heart," Sinclair lamented, "and by accident I hit it in the stomach."<sup>1</sup>

For a time, it may have seemed like Sinclair's appraisal was unnecessarily gloomy. As it turned out, successive cycles of industry-labor rancor over the next few decades would improve the working man's lot. By the 1950s, more than 80,000 workers in North America's slaughterhouses were covered by national agreements that standardized wages and working conditions. By the 1970s, wages in meatpacking were 18 percent higher than in the rest of the manufacturing sector.<sup>2</sup> Workers could participate in the luxuries of the middle class: buy homes and new cars and take vacations.<sup>3</sup> Conditions that would have been unimaginable to those who worked in the slaughterhouses of *The Jungle*.

Maybe it was inevitable, but the gains weren't permanent. Beginning that same decade, industry upstart Iowa Beef Packers began to rewrite the rules for killing, chilling, and shipping beef. Other meatpackers jumped on the bandwagon to compete in an increasingly competitive industry. One by one, they shuttered the doors of plants with entrenched unions. They pulled up stakes in big cities, reopened sprawling new plants in rural areas, and began to recruit immigrant and migrant workers from Mexico and Asia who were willing to do the job for half the wages.<sup>4</sup>

By the late '80s, the U.S. meatpacking industry had restructured. Big Meat had seized the same opportunities as other major corporations, riding a wave of anti-union sympathy in both the public and political arenas. That trend was best illustrated by Ronald Reagan's successful showdown against air-traffic controllers. His breaking of their union was portrayed as a profile in courage.

Competitive pressures in the marketplace finally began to push across the border.

By the early '90s, weakened by the recession of the previous decade and feeling squeezed by more efficient producers in the United States, Canadian packers began to look to the American behemoths for lessons in how to reposition themselves in a newly competitive landscape. "What are we waiting for?" the executive in charge of Maple Leaf's meat division asked provocatively at a conference of industry colleagues. "Wal-Mart to come to town and put us out of business?" Maple Leaf began to gobble up competitors, close inefficient plants, and squeeze concessions from its workers much as the industry had done in the United States a decade earlier. It also began to recruit cheap labor from beyond its borders. With 35 percent of its workforce comprised of workers drawn from countries like Mexico and El Salvador in 2006—up from 8 percent in 2003—the Brandon plant is quickly moving to a U.S. model. A prototype in which its workforce is made up of recent immigrants and—in the United States at least—undocumented workers.

In recent years, meatpackers have come under increasing scrutiny. Smithfield Foods, for example, was found to have created "an atmosphere of intimidation and coercion" by spying on workers, harassing them, and even firing them for backing the union trying to organize them. Large U.S. plants have also been the target of recent crackdowns on illegal immigrants. Some critics question what they see as the moral myopia of the industry. While meatpackers publicly denounce illegal aliens, critics charge that in reality they privately turn a blind eye to having them on the company payroll because undocumented workers are unlikely to complain about working conditions or push for union representation. In 2005, a scathing 175-page report issued by Human Rights Watch, titled *Blood, Sweat, and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants*, denounced the U.S. meatpacking industry for "systematic human rights violations." "What's happening here," said the report's author, Cornell University professor Lance Compa, "is a modern-day version of *The Jungle*."

Maybe that's why so many of the workers here look so glum, so desperate. As they stream into the company cafeteria, they pass by a sign that reads HAMLET'S. There's not even a flicker of recognition for what might pass as abattoir humor. Inside, the din of coffee cups is muted by the singsong of chain-link belly belts that chime as workers file in line for today's grub. Today's special? Pork chops, mashed potatoes, and gravy.

Jenn sits across the table from me. Her face full of dread. Like me, she's not hungry. She leans forward, head bowed, one hand on the table, another holding a cigarette. She doesn't usually smoke, but the anxiety has been building all morning. In a few minutes, she'll be on the factory floor, hacking away at a pig's head. She thought she was ready. "I had a nightmare last night," she sighs softly and pauses. "I was being chased by hogs' heads. It's still freaking me out." She draws long on her cigarette, then snuffs it out abruptly like she's exorcising a demon.

Soon, our posse is herded back to the training room, where we'll be fitted in the costume of the factory floor. Rubber boots with steel toes; whites still stained with the memory of yesterday's slaughter; a belly belt to protect the organs; earplugs, a hair net, and helmet; and a mesh glove that extends to the elbow. I'm now dressed to kill, or at least butcher.

Jesus Zavala stands ramrod-straight, hands clasped in front of him, looking like a no-guff factory-floor statesman. Jessie, as he is affectionately called, a Mexican-trained butcher, has worked his way up to trainer in less than two years on the job at

Maple Leaf. He is to be our mentor.

Zavala leads us deep into the basement of the building. A crypt, really, where there are no windows, no vestiges of the outside world.

It's now 1:30 and workers are busy on the dressing floor, pulling on hearts and livers they'll place on the spikes behind them. Further down the line, men and women are carving into slabs of pork to make picnic roasts and loin chops. Their arms move in a mad flurry of butchery, making it difficult to distinguish one human body from another. One or two slipups and there's a bottleneck. The quotas must be met or it will mean overtime—part of our collective agreement with the company. One hour. Two hours. Whatever it takes to get the job done.

Our first day on the line, and we learn we're in for an hour's overtime. No choice but to accept. There's a problem at the gam table, first stop for the freshly killed hogs as they topple from a tumbler to have their tendons slit and be skewered up by their hind legs. Several workers are off sick. Sherri, our floor supervisor, a pretty woman of grandmotherly vintage, arrives, clipboard in hand. Her heavily caked eyelashes flutter as she peers out from behind gold-rimmed glasses. "Four," she finally bellows in a husky voice. "I need four real strong guys on the gam table."

A half-dozen hands shoot up. Andrew, the guy who's built like an offensive tackle, is waving his arm anxiously. Sherri picks off the men individually: "You, you, you, and you." Andrew smirks, and falls into the parade of burly men who trail Sherri down the hallway. "I have no idea what the hell a gam table is. But it's gotta be better than the gore in there," he avers as he rumbles out.

It's showtime for the rest of us. Zavala clamps on his protective hearing gear, slips on a pair of goggles, and motions us through. We enter a room reverberating in a chorus of hum and hiss, clang and thud. I step over strings of slippery yellow gristle and pools of blood, past plumes of steam that rise from the floor to my workstation.

On the right, workers are hunched over a conveyor line of disembodied heads. Some are sawing off ears with pneumatic knives. Others are skewering heads onto spikes. The thrum of the line triggers the beasts' mouths in motion, as though they're in conversation. They round the corner, tumbling onto another conveyor belt. Piled three by three, they're headed straight at me.

Zavala is already in a dance of kinetic perfection. With all of the skill and artistry of a sculptor, he reaches forward, picking a head up by the esophagus, and begins chiseling. First slicing the cheeks from the outside of the head, then the inside. He plops the flesh onto a smaller conveyor belt below, and thrusts the hog's head down a chute, on its way to rendering. "Now you try," he says, handing me a razor-sharp knife and smiling with encouragement.

I grasp at a snout, and haul twenty pounds of head toward me. It's heavier than I imagined, and I stumble. The head rolls from my carving station, falling faceup on my boot. Mouth ajar, eyes still open, cheeks twitching, it stares up at me as if stuck in some sort of somnolent scream. I do better next time. Soon, dozens of hogs' heads later, I can feel the blood trickling down my cheek and seeping into my bra. But what makes me really woozy is the sensation of warm, sticky flesh on the other side of my plastic glove each time I lay hold of an esophagus.

By quitting time, my carving hand is starting to give out. My back aches. But it's my cheeks that hurt the most from sucking my lips in all day, hoping to keep the blood