

The Hog Yards

Suzanne Fisher

April's early morning sun lightened the damp air, loaded heavily with squeals and dew. The rains had stopped in Pepperhill, but they kept coming in the highlands up North. With fields too wet to work, straight trucks and semis rolled into Melture Pack unloading pot loads of heavy barrows and gilts for the afternoon kill.

Rebecca Goldman slipped her muddy car through waiting trucks and visiting farmers to the upper deck of the slaughter plant's hog yards. Rebecca's tall, lean frame, blonde curls and clean complexion would be layered in shit and tattoo ink by noon.

"Nice to see you made it, Little Becky," hollered her pot-bellied supervisor from across the weighted-down floor scales. "Only twenty-three minutes late for your last day on the job."

"Just be happy I'm here, Porker," she called back while buttoning an oversized, white Melture Pack shirt.

Rebecca beat an old, frayed hog slapper against the side of her boot and waved a black flag over pigs' backs, which scared the crowd of ninety squealing swine off the scales and up the alley. Porker slammed the gate shut behind the commotion.

"Yeah, the boys were afraid the Skunk River had come outta its banks and swallowed you up," Porker blurted proudly. Pieces of juicy chaw spat with his words.

"No fear of that. My death will be by floods of pigs not floods of rivers," she replied, unamused, and continued after the hogs in a waving, noisy mess.

She pushed the crowd to the tattoo station where they shimmied through a narrow opening to be pierced and numbered by the tattoo man's hammer. Dirty gray pigs, black belted pigs, red spotted pigs - they would soon all be clean, white pork with shoulders tattooed black and necks squirting red. All ninety were marked and gone.

Rebecca stopped chasing and stood still, laughing with the two small Mexican men who had helped send the hogs to kill. Marco was the tattooer and Jose another flagger.

Nearly singing, with his head bouncing up and down and forever smiling, Marco said, "Mamacita, you join us late in this morning. Must have drank all the bottle and the worm too."

Jose agreed. She shook her head, laughing with Jose at the

wild little man.

Fearing the cheerful early morning attitudes of his employees would spread throughout the workplace and the rest of the day, Porker yelled over the loud speaker. "Got fourteen downers in the runway for you three to take care of," he commanded.

Having succumbed to exhaustion and stress, these pigs were speed bumps in the way of healthy loads racing by. Assuming their routine positions, Jose sat ready in the loader tractor. Porker held the air gun as though ready to duel. Rebecca and Marco slapped one hog between its shoulder blades urging it to live. Grunting between gasps, it resisted. Its purple flesh, hot and quivering, was now blood-splashed within. Ruined from a quality standpoint, this pork was no longer a commodity. It was a burden.

Porker handed Rebecca the gun. "You've been here six months now. When those college professors call up to see how you done, I'll either tell 'em you completed the job or ya didn't."

"I'm not shooting these pigs," Rebecca insisted.

Marco intervened, "I'll do it Mamacita. This...this you shouldn't do."

"Fine," Porker said, adjusting a wad of tobacco with his tongue. "Get one of these Mexicans for your reference, don't come crawling to your good old supervisor."

Porker turned to go back to his throne in the glassed-in office. His fat legs rubbed, fighting each stride.

"Oh, what a powerful man," Marco teased behind his back, laughing with Rebecca at the threat.

Marco shot air into the heads of the hogs that had already given up. Rebecca thanked him. He smiled as they rolled the deads into the bucket of Jose's tractor. The remains would be rendered and forgotten.

Through with her last Melture Pack morning, Rebecca walked out into the parking lot for a quick lunch break. Families of several yardsmen were waiting on pickup truck tailgates for lunch with their husbands and fathers. Children, too young yet for school, chased each other and soccer balls around the lot. Hispanic music fought the pig odor for air space. As the men broke for lunch, the women greeted their husbands in Spanish, then called, in English, for their children to come eat.

Standing among the families, Rebecca thought back to how she had attempted at the beginning of her internship to describe this scene to her own family over lunch back home. "They all eat

lunch together, everyday," she started. "Their kids are so cute, and the women bring huge meals with burritos and salsa and tortillas filled with hot peppers and beans and beef and...."

But Rebecca's story was cut short. "It's bad enough you work with these people. We don't want to have to hear about them while we're trying to eat. Those Mexicans never worked a day in their lives. They're lazy, shifty people. You can't trust them. Do you hear me? Don't trust them," her father warned over a forkful of mashed potatoes and gravy.

Her father's warning was far away now, though, as a little boy with tiny fingers and shiny eyes ran to Rebecca holding out a tortilla with its contents dripping out. "Oh, thank you, Joey. That looks yummy," she said to Marco's youngest son. While he shook his head yes, his smile contained dimples and tiny teeth biting his lower lip.

"You could get Rebecca a plate," his mother, Maria, said following after Joey. Maria held the plate under Rebecca's dripping tortilla, then filled it with more food. "We will miss you. You must come back to visit," Maria said as she offered Rebecca a lawn chair and a place in the back of the family truck.

Rebecca thanked Maria for the meal and said goodbye as she walked back into the hog yards. She took in every scene to ensure it's place in her memory. She passed the junk pen, full of rejected hogs. These pigs were sorted off for abscesses, ruptures, stiffness, rhienitis, testicles, and for just not making grade. They were collected for the Spam truck and a ride to Austin, Minnesota. She looked across the full distance of the pens filled with over 14,000 head. Sprinkler systems rotated on and off throughout the building. Thick dust rose over the few pens that held hogs raised outside and not in confinement. Up toward the kill floor, men stood on alley dividers, hollering and beating hog slappers against cement walls. They chased hogs into a carrousel that spit the hogs into a line and onto a conveyor, then up on a chain.

After taking in the extent of the yards, Rebecca continued to her post where Marco and Jose were already at work. Rebecca said, "God guys, this is such a crap job. Why don't you get out of this hole too?"

Marco's smile faded slightly. "Awe, its not that bad here, Mamacita. This place feeds our families now."

Before she could apologize, Marco smiled again and suggested she run the tattoo hammer one last time.

Reluctantly Rebecca took the wooden ink brush and the iron tattoo hammer from Marco. The men danced down the empty alleyway to bring another ninety head. She hated tattooing. The hammer was heavy, every pig had to be hit quickly in the same place, and after each hit, the hammer had to be re-brushed with ink to ensure a good print. Along with this, the needle numbers absolutely had to match the pigs with their farmer to track the pork through the system.

Rebecca carefully set new needles in the hammerhead, upside down and backward so as to be read correctly on the carcasses. She combed the needles with the wet brush, allowing black ink to freckle her face and blonde curls. Pigs 7013 were ready to tattoo.

All the hogs charged the chute and one went through tattooed and crying. The rest turned back in confused circles until Marco and Jose convinced them to go. Now they came fast and the hammer came down hard and faster. She no longer worried about the cries she caused. She just kept the hammer rolling.

Ink was everywhere. It painted the gates, the pigs, Rebecca's white Melcher Pack shirt, and the slippery grip in which she held the hammer for nearly two hundred hogs. Only a few pigs remained when a cautious one stopped before the iron hammer coming down. On a roll, she did not react to his decision, and dug the needles deep into herself.

Rebecca fell to the shitty floor. The anonymous few barreled over top her. She lay on the slated concrete with a black and bloody "13" below her right knee.

Marco scooped her off the messy floor, running with her through the yards. He carried her up the scale office steps to the hog buyers' break room.

Phil, an old buyer, grandfathered in from Melture Pack's beginning, got off his seat to see the commotion.

"Did Little Becky get her numbers?" Phil asked. "Damn that hurts." Phil lifted his pant leg over a faded tan boot, revealing a perfect black "11" under his right knee. "She'll be fine. Get back to work now, Marco," ordered Phil.

The rest of the afternoon, she laid passed out on the break room couch only to be stirred now and then when Porker would remove the ice from the swollen knee to show truckers the "13." When she awoke, she was alone. All the squealing had stopped. The leg still throbbed unbearably. No one came to her yells for

help. The clock said only 3:30, but the offices were dead.

Furious for being left alone and passed out, Rebecca hobbled to the door of the yards. In the window she saw a mad sight. Jose and dozens of men were standing on alley dividers clinging to two hundred pound pigs. Rebecca opened the door to find only one step. The rest were sunk beneath rushing water. Men were hip deep in dark, murky water, hopelessly pulling pig snouts to air.

The Skunk River was inside the hog yards. Three foot high and rising. She placed one boot into the murk.

"No! No, Mamacita, no, your leg will burn green from this poison," Marco yelled from the water.

Rebecca stood on the step. Dead hogs came to the top. Dirty red, black, and white pigs floated by her with 70135 tattooed black in their shoulders.

Marco waded to save Rebecca from her perch. She climbed securely on his shoulders, and they took off through the river to higher ground. Marco set the injured girl at her car door. She removed her stained work gloves to shake his hand goodbye. His little hands were rough and callused. "Good luck with everything, Marco." She told him to keep the gloves.

"Oh, Mamacita, you are such a kind lady," he said.

"And you're a good man, Marco. A good, hard working man." She hugged him.

As she started to drive away a tear rolled down her cheek. Marco smiled to her, waved the dirty leather gloves, and walked back into the river.