

MEAT

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*This book is for Foxy,
my mainstay and the love of my life.*

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*Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed which
is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree,
in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed;
to you it shall be for meat.*

Genesis 1:29

One

Under skies of tarnished silver, towards the granite clouds, Richard Shanti runs home.

Step after crushing step, his breath falling in and out of strange rhythms with the pounding of his feet. Mucus building at the back of his throat – the only moisture left in his body. His legs alternately telling him that they're burning beyond endurance, that they're too weak to go on. He wants to listen.

Instead, he spits out his precious phlegm.

He's out of sweat. The last of it has dried at his temples and his bearded face is aflame. His eyes sting with salt but there are no tears left to clear them. He's desiccating on the run.

He smiles.

His thighs and calves are blowtorched. Blazing, blazing, blazing with every step. His muscles are lava and jelly. There's no strength left in them; not an ounce of goodness or grace.

Not yet.

His shins bend with each burdened contact. He can feel them giving under the load. He imagines hairline cracks appearing in the immaculate bones and a snap – the sound of a wooden ruler breaking under water. It extends his pain. The sound of that damp splintering lingers in his aura; echoes eternal in his ears.

How much will it take to clear the backlog? I'll do anything. I want my purity back.

He runs.

There's a limitless tempo to it. Pain is the punctuation. The percussion of his soles on the stony road is a beat of torment.

Thack-thack-thack-thack-thack-thack-thack.

He runs.

It is his only salvation. He runs. He pays.

This life is not long enough to clear him of the ill he has begotten. By his own hand he is condemned. Every part of him must atone. The agony in the soles of his feet lances up into the marrow of his ankles. He visualises stress fractures creeping through his tarsals.

He runs; willing the pain into his body. The pack hammers his back as though it is alive. Every step forces it up and then slams it down against his spine. There is no harmonious pace. The straps chafe his shoulders and the weight threatens to pull him over backwards. Every movement pounds him, grinds him down.

His lungs are dry with the frenetic passing of air. Smoke from the meat trucks clings in his throat until it is distilled to a tainted scum that sickens him.

He runs. He pays. He prays.

The pain is with him all the time now. The damage in his joints and bones scrapes along his nerves each moment of the day. His existence is a whiteness of suffering.

Perhaps I am getting clear.

'Hey, Ice Pick!' Bob Torrance shouted from the elevated observation box at the top of the steel stairs, 'What's the chain speed today?'

Shanti checked the stun-counter beside the access panel against the main clock.

'Running at a hundred and thirty an hour, sir.'

Torrance smiled in admiration and delight. High chain speeds meant bonuses for everyone. They made him look

good with the men and with Rory Magnus.

‘You wipe out cattle like a disease, Rick. Keep it up.’

Shanti was the calmest employee in Magnus Meat Processing and Bob Torrance, the chain manager, loved him. He’d never seen another man like him. They called him the Ice Pick or Ice Pick Rick because of the total cool with which he manned the stun gun. Psychologically, it was one of the toughest jobs on the chain; the most damaging to the mind. For this reason the position was rotated between four trained stunners on the work force, each taking a week of stunning followed by three weeks on other areas of the chain or elsewhere in the factory. No one could kill hour after hour, day after day, month after month without something coming permanently adrift in their head. A break was mandatory for the sake of sanity and, more crucially, to maintain high productivity.

But if anyone could lay a captive bolt gun to the brow of a living creature from this day to retirement without a single day off, it was the Ice Pick, Richard Shanti. If anyone could look into the eyes of the soon-to-be-bled-gutted-quartered-and-packed for the rest of his life without a hint of damage to the psyche, it was he.

And look into their eyes he did. Everyone had seen him do it.

For most stunners, it was the eyes that were the problem. Torrance understood why – he’d been a stunner himself in his youth. He knew it was the toughest job in the slaughterhouse. How could you watch the light go out of thousands of pairs of eyes and not be affected by it? How could you not wonder where that light went? How could you not wonder if there was something wrong in what you were doing?

These questions layered up in a person’s head. Each passing pair of eyes had their own character and texture. Each pair of eyes was unique.

So what, if Shanti didn’t mix with the other workers? So

what, if he ran himself to the edge of collapse every night and morning? As long as he turned up on time and did the kind of quality work he always had, Torrance had no complaints.

Every stunner needed a way of counteracting the job. If running helped Shanti cope, that suited Bob Torrance. He smiled to himself as he imagined Shanti sweating his way home of an evening.

It couldn't have suited him better.

Management had learned over the decades that stunners needed time out from the job they were trained for otherwise they didn't last. Torrance had seen it a few times in his long career at MMP. He remembered one young employee in particular:

Stunner Wheelie Patterson had been a jovial, fresh-faced boy when he started out. Pulled the front wheel of his push-bike high in the air on his way out of the yards every evening, thinking it was impressive and making everyone laugh. He was keen, sincere and committed to his work. He told the chain manager at the time – a fool with no instincts called Eddie Valentine – that he could handle two weeks at a time on the stun. It was a mistake for Valentine to let him do it, but back then there had only been religious guidelines for workers to follow – nothing secular or practical.

The kid had worked at the head of the chain like he was one of the machines. The conveyor would roll, the aluminium panel would open bringing a restrained head into view. Wheelie would voice the blessing, 'God is supreme. The flesh is sacred,' then whack the head with a sharp hiss and metallic clunk from the captive bolt gun. The panel would slide closed. He'd hit the proceed button and the conveyor would roll again.

The panel would open.

Head.

Eyes.

'God is supreme. The flesh is sacred.'

Hiss-Clunk.

The panel would close.

The stun counter spun higher.

Wheelie worked that way – two weeks on, two weeks off – for six months. Each night he rode home on the bike everyone had come to know as the unicycle owing to his customary flourish in the forecourt. The other two weeks saw him ‘on the bleed’ or herding the cattle into the crowd pens and single file chute with an electric prod.

After a while, workers began to notice that Wheelie Patterson’s smile had changed. He wore it like a mask that was too small and hurt his face. They noticed he wasn’t as professional and committed as he had been when he first arrived. He deliberately aimed his prod or ‘hotshot’ at the genitals of the cattle in the holding pens, sought to shock the sagging udders of the spent dairy cows. Torrance saw him corner a bull from time to time and torment it with repeated electrocutions. Bulls were the ones that fought back hardest.

Wheelie lost his position as stun man the day they found him using the captive bolt gun on every part of a bull he could reach through the access panel except the designated stun point. Torrance had been the one to pull the pneumatic weapon from his hands and end the bull’s life with a single, correctly positioned shot. By that time the bull’s slaughter had already begun. The bolt gun had split its jaw and broken both cheekbones. Blood drained from the fat round holes the bolt gun created. Wheelie had also managed to shoot through the bull’s windpipe and down into the lungs through the tops of both shoulders. The bull could barely sigh its pleas for release by the time Torrance got to it.

But stockmen and slaughtermen were a valuable commodity and Wheelie’s behaviour, from the management’s point of view, had done nothing worse than retard the factory’s chain speed and cost them money. His mismanagement of cattle

during the time they spent in the crowd pens and runs had caused some of the meat produced to be affected by PSE. This described a condition in meat cuts that were ‘pale, soft and exudative’. The sort of meat people didn’t want to buy because it tasted bad and the texture was all wrong. PSE was known beyond any doubt to be caused by increased stress in cattle during the hours and minutes prior to slaughter. Wheelie’s games with the hotshot hadn’t done anything for the quality of Magnus Meat products.

He’d been fined, sent for guidance and put back on a distant chain position where it was too late to torment the animals or spoil the meat – removing limb ends with bone shears.

Even after the ‘one week on, three weeks off’ statute had been brought into effect by Rory Magnus, the job still got to a few of them. Torrance remembered one stunner opening the access panel, locking eyes with the cow in the restraining box and then shooting himself in the head with the bolt gun. Other stunners over the years had been affected in different ways. Some hurt themselves off duty and bore the scars to work. Others merely went a little nutty and that was fine – plenty of the men in Magnus’s employ were a rib shy of a rack.

But these were exceptions to the generally smooth running of the MMP chain. Torrance didn’t dwell on the exceptions because he liked things smooth. Smooth and cool like Richard Shanti.

Like an ice pick.

Maya Shanti had the evening meal prepared by the time he arrived home.

She worked in the well-windowed kitchen and glanced up often from her cooking in case he came early. He never did. When they were first married, he had often taken the MMP bus home, only running to work with his work clothes and

lunch in a small pack a few times a week. Over the years, his running had become an obsession. She was certain it would kill him.

She brought three pans of water to the boil ready to cook the green beans, broccoli and spinach as soon as she saw his gaunt, hunched silhouette plodding up the lane. The rice was already done and warm in the oven. She made a lot of rice and forced both Harsha and Hema to eat at least three full bowls before leaving the table.

Still, the twins looked thin to her.

He would wash with cold water from the steel tub outside using soap as old and hard as a stone, then he would put on a brown body-length tunic of rough material, something he had demanded she make for him, and sit without speaking for five minutes in the bedroom while his breathing returned to normal. He came quietly to the table, not joking or laughing like he used to, and he would make them all sit in silence before eating. When he reached for his cutlery the girls would begin to chatter and giggle and only then did things in the Shanti household appear normal.

MMP workers were privileged and protected. They could have picked a larger house nearer the town or the whole floor of a tower block if he'd wanted. There was plenty of space and choice. But they had both agreed they wanted to see a little greenery each day and Richard had always wanted to grow his own fruit and vegetables – another pastime that had become a fixation. It would have been dangerous to live in such isolation but MMP employees were safe almost anywhere they went and Richard Shanti's family, because of the important job he did, were untouchables, protected forever in the shadow of Rory Magnus, the Meat Baron.

Maya wanted to smile at their good fortune and shower her husband with love. She wanted to enjoy their status in the town and be carefree like the other MMP wives. But when she served the meal each evening and looked at the

tiny streams of sweat that still slipped from Richard's temples, she felt a weight across her shoulders like the one he carried on his back twice a day.

Dessert was fresh fruit from the trees, canes or vines at the rear of the house. Richard would eat his fruit, chewing each bite so long that the twins would laugh as they counted each movement of his jaw. He would reach a bony hand out to each of them and touch their faces and their hair. Then he would retire to the bedroom and prepare to sleep. Recently, he had been having problems keeping his eyes open for the whole meal and Maya knew that he was using himself up, burning himself to a useless stump of a man with all his cruel self-punishment.

Something had to be done.

Richard Shanti ran every day.

On the Sunday run, his corporal mortification was so severe and sustained he could almost believe he might one day be free of his deeds. On Sundays, he ran only once but he ran further and harder. The route was different to his workday route. It started out the same but once he was on the main road out of the town, he veered onto a path that was kept open only by the passage of his own heavy footsteps once a week.

The path he took led through overgrown hedges, no longer cared for or trimmed. The entrance was marked by a few broken bricks that had once been the wall on one side of a bridge. The only vehicles that came out this way or this far from the town were the MMP buses taking employees to and from work, and trucks transporting meat. No one ever came this way on foot except for him. It was too far from the town to be safe. The bridge was still there, but the walls separating it from the drop on either side were long gone. It spanned a cut that stretched towards town. In the opposite direction, it ran towards the wasteland.

It was five miles to the bricks. That was the first landmark he ran to every Sunday. When he reached them, he turned off the main road and the path took him through brambles, nettles and spiky hawthorn down below the road level. He welcomed the scratches on the skin of his legs. So overgrown was the sunken path that it was like running through a jungle at the bottom of a giant gutter. The growth of plant life was dense on all sides. He had to duck and dodge low strands of needle-lined creepers and the outreaching branches of small trees that had been growing ever since the mysterious byway was abandoned.

He turned left from the bridge taking him away from civilisation. Had he turned right, the disused tracks would have taken him to the very centre of Abyrne, a place he had no desire to visit. Twigs whipped at his face and arms. Fallen branches and roots threatened to trip him. The constant minor damage and the threat of worse if he fell made the Sunday run the hardest and most rewarding of all.

His only rule: once he was running he would not stop for any reason other than being physically unable to continue. That had never happened.

The Sunday run was the only time he was ever tempted to stop and it had nothing to do with avoiding the agonies he caused himself. A few miles along the hidden path, the slopes on each side fell away gradually and the trail became an embankment rather than a cut. The growth of dense brush still surrounded him but now and again he would catch glimpses of the wasteland beyond the town. The wasteland formed a natural, roughly circular border that no one crossed into. His own house was nearer to the perimeter than most people cared to be but there was a broad swathe of fields and woods between. Here, though, as the embankment approached the stagnant waters of the old canal, he could see out into the barren, eroded landscape where nothing grew.

There was no soil with an ounce of nourishment in it.

Instead, a heavy black dust was swept across the dark, carved expanse. It was like looking at a black sea of sculpted waves that never moved, or a black desert of tiny dunes. Occasionally, a glint of white would sparkle from below the dust when funnels of windblown dirt exposed the glassy rock below. There was nothing in the wasteland. Nothing but thirst, hunger and solitude until death. He was tempted by its void. The wasteland was a place where he could run to his conclusion. Death would be slow but certain. It seemed the perfect end to the life of an executioner.

For just a few moments, the dense shrub, usually twice his head height, would thin out and he would be running along an exposed ridge.

Where the ridge met the old waterway, there was a route back towards his house along the outskirts of the town if he turned left again. If he continued straight on, the path, and the embankment it ran upon, ended; swallowed by the wasteland. The canal, at right angles to it, also stretched a little further before narrowing, blunting and ending in the sterile wilderness that held the town in its black fist.

Richard lay on his back, eyes closed, already asleep. Maya had banished the girls to their bedroom upstairs. She shut the door behind her as she entered and stood watching the long, shallow breaths coming and going from her husband's diaphragm. He was so thin it hurt to look at him. He seemed not to have smiled at her in a decade. *He could be on his deathbed*, she thought, looking at his pale skin and the lines stitched deep into his face.

She undressed quietly, not wanting him to wake yet. When she was naked, she looked in the mirror, turning one way and then the other in order to catch the curves of her buttocks, stomach and breasts. *Dear Father, I'll be as thin as the rest of them soon*. She put her palm to her mouth to stop the sob that wanted to come out. Recovering herself, she cupped her

hands under her breasts and felt the weight of them. They should have been fuller and heavier like they used to be, but now they were slim and less shapely. *Narrow*. She hated to see it.

Richard had only been in bed for ten minutes. She slipped in beside him and slid down below the covers. He wore a night shirt but he was naked from the waist down. She kissed his soft, lifeless penis and took it between her lips. As gently as she could, so as not to wake him too quickly, she worked it around inside her mouth with her tongue until it began to swell. Soon it was throbbing the way it had every night in their early years of marriage. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she too felt the warm rush of erotic interest and tension fill her belly and seep from inside her.

He stirred. A moan came from him that sounded like pain or torment. She didn't stop. He gasped and she knew that he was awake now. Awake and not stopping her. She made her attentions lighter to prolong it. In the old days he had never wanted it to end and she would tease him until he almost cried for release.

He spoke:

'I don't have the energy to reciprocate.'

She paused:

'This is just for you.'

For the next fifteen minutes she worked on him until the skin of it was so tight it seemed it might burst. She knew the final pulses were not far away.

She stopped again.

'Please, Maya. Don't stop now.'

'I want you to do something for us. For me.'

'No, Maya. Don't. You know I can't do it. I won't do it.'

She took him back into her mouth, brought him back to the edge and took her mouth away.

'Can't you see how thin they are? They depend on you. We all do. I'm begging you, Richard, just this once. Don't

let us starve like this.'

Her head moved over him again. The muscles in his stomach and thighs tightened.

'No,' he said.

She sucked him harder, stopped again.

'Please, Richard, we need it. Just a few kilos. You can bring it in your backpack. Fill it up.'

'Do it to me, Maya. Let me come.'

'Meat. Say you'll bring us meat.'

He was crying, shaking his head but agreeing. Shaking his head and saying, 'I will. I promise.'

He put his hand on her head and urged her downwards.

She took him in deep.