

Slaughterhouse 98271

By John Whiteclay

Blue sky, green grass. A meadow, perhaps. The river, red with blood, sluices through. On its banks, the slaughterhouse trainees are clustered in a half-circle around the supervisor.

“As you can see, the river is at its bloodiest at the mouth of the facility’s waste conduit,” said the slaughterhouse supervisor. “Look! That’s what you’re going to prevent, right there.”

A black and red cow head floated by, bumping lazily against the muddy bank. Dutifully, the slaughterhouse trainees spied it.

It’s illegal to dump dead animals in the Red River, of course. But the owner of Tulalip Slaughterhouse learned long ago that in on this reservation, nothing has ever been done to a corporate criminal unless they were caught in the act, very red-handed.

Thus, the bloodless chute. The gory waste seems to appear by magic in the river everyday. Health inspectors appear, in any of a dozen records dating back to 1996, never to have questioned its presence in the iconically, or ironically, named Red River. Besides, the river has been cherry colored for over sixty years: one wonders if the members of the Tulalip Indian Reservation would be nostalgically saddened or, perhaps alarmed, if it were to ever unexpectedly flow blue?

Chugging along under the bright sky, the river reeked of offal. As it jagged through the slaughterhouse property, it grew bloodier. It gained carcasses as it passed by the killing building, located just beyond the animal holding pens.

“The slaughterhouse specializes in feed-grade beef and horsemeat. We supply raw product to a variety of agricultural feed distributors. As members of our waste division, you’ll be operating the chute mechanism in the center of the main killing floor that allows for the disposal of unsuitable or overstock carcasses. You’ll be sweeping the carcasses onto the hydraulic trapdoors with forklifts—don’t worry, you’ll get trained and certified after lunch,” the supervisor explained, his words recited by rote.

Fertilized by cow and horse blood, the grass at the water’s edge was as green as at a country club golf course. Yellowjackets and blowflies chased chunks of animal flesh downstream. The trainees nodded at the supervisor, though their eyes were captivated by the unnaturally rosy river.

“The unusable carcasses drop into an industrial grinder. The tissue is disposed of via a conduit that leads into the river. Blood and excrement are hosed down the conduit every four hours as well. The slaughterhouse saves a great deal of money by disposing of its organic waste in this way. It’s very green.”

The supervisor laughed at his pun, which was lost on the men—and they were all men—who spoke only rudimentary English.

The slaughterhouse has a high turnover rate, necessitating a bi-weekly training of uncontaminated employees in the basics of bovine and equine elimination. On that pleasant, sunny Thursday, the supervisor was wrapping up a standard three-day orientation with a fresh peck of employees. On Monday, the newbees sat in a clean conference room, reading aloud from the training manual and drinking coffee to loosen their bladders for the mandatory drug test. On Tuesday, they were herded onto the killing floor, wended first through the filthy holding pens where animals either stood on rotten hooves or lay in mushy lakes of urine, moldy hay and

blood.

They were hustled, with much technical narration, past the killing stalls where crimson drenched men jammed animals in line with sharp hooks. The slaughterhouse workers' mouths moved constantly as they sang or cursed. Infected mares and crippled stallions, aged cows and bulls reared and shrieked in time with the bang of the bolt guns against decaying skulls.

The shrill neighs, the moaning lowing, the Ukrainian and Oaxacan folksongs, the grinding of the industrial bone crushers and the buzz of the saws beat up the trainees' ear drums. After an hour, the supervisor waved them off the killing floor and back to the conference room with the brisk mannerisms of a teacher hurrying third graders past nude statues during a museum field trip.

That was the sieve: if the trainees could bear the plunge to the earsplitting, vomit-inducing killing floor with equanimity, they'd last at least six months.

Over half didn't make it. Another quarter vanished during the midday smoke break.

On Thursday, the remaining twenty or so were finalizing their training with a stroll along the river. Yellow sun and unprocessed limbs addle their eyes.

"Your job will be to prevent these larger disposals. All tissue evacuated into the river must be under an ounce in weight. Like my thumb, see? Now, can anyone spot a piece of horse anatomy?" The supervisor beams and rocks on his heels, his clipboard pressed to his chest.

A middle-aged Hispanic man gamely pointed.

"Is pig!"

"No, Mr...Garcia, is it?" The supervisor scanned his clipboard. "Mr. Garcia, I'm afraid you weren't paying attention during Monday's orientation. We don't deal in pigs. Cattle, horses, the occasional donkey, or *burro* as you might say, ha-ha! But no swine."

"Is pig," insisted Mr. Garcia, stubbornly. "See?"

He pointed again.

Near the conduit, all saw it. A smooth hunk of pink, almost human, flesh bobbed along, gleaming in the sun.

"Well! Say, Johnny? Can you hook that out for us?"

The supervisor waved a senior worker over to a small crane bolted into the ground near the conduit.

"Occasionally we get an old horse with bald patches brought on by mistreatment, or a severely diseased cow. Got it, Johnny?"

The grappling hook snagged the pink skin. Johnny flashed the supervisor a thumbs-up. "Reel her in! I'm betting on a horse. Our cattle are generally from the most reputable, if not the most...oh ...my God!"

Welcome to Slaughterhouse 98271.