

Trotter

It takes skill to grade a carcass. Not everyone can look at meat hung in the chiller and decide what's prime for the butchers and what's dog food. You've got to gather together everything you know about where the animal's come from, then look for the clues: a grey-pinky colour, the right amount of marbling, plenty of lean, and that nice firm texture. Those are the basics but knowing how to spot them is harder than it sounds. I've been in the trade since I was a lad of sixteen, so I ought to know a thing or two.

Same applies to folk when you first meet them. Before I started here, that battleaxe at the Job Centre was barking on about how interviewers grade you when you go for a job, saying it takes them exactly seven seconds to suss a person out. After that it's crunch time and they've pretty much decided whether you scored yourself the gig or not. Same as a carcass, it boils down to looks: the way you talk, what clothes you're wearing, how you stand, too fat, too skinny. Reckon I'm a better judge of who's fit for a job here than that old bint. How'd she know if she's never done a real day's work in her life?

Sussing people out is basically the same as grading a prime cut. One sniff and you've got either figured. The bad stuff smells of shit. The good meat is kind of sweet and gets your mouth juices going. I like to keep my tools sharp, so I give myself little tests. At work, I'm busy grading meat all day, but with people I get my practice in too. I'll make a knee-jerk judgment when a new fellow starts at the plant, and then sit back and see how good my prediction was.

But once in a while, one turns up who surprises me.

Trotter. The name alone was an invitation to bullying. Years of tormenting right there. A tall bloke with fine white hair, youngish – early forties, at a guess - he sloped forward, like he was made of rubber, his forehead pointed at the concrete floor. Never knew his first name. If you asked anyone at the factory, he was Trotter. With a name like that, his fate working as Line Op at Quality Pork Meat Processing & Co. was pretty much a given.

I first laid eyes on him on his induction day. The Boss, or Supervisor Dave, as he told us to call him, brought him over during a line stop. Tea-break forgotten, Dave yelled over the roar of the machines to assemble us. The newcomer stood to one side in his ordinary clothes, beige and browns from top to toe, looking even less remarkable than the rest of us in our hairnets, dirty overalls and rubber gloves.

I leant against the stainless steel surface of the cutter and got started with sizing him up, just like I do with a prime cut when it's ready for sawing and deboning; I had him down for dog meat in an instant.

"Losers, this is the newbie." The Boss thumped Trotter on the shoulder. "What d'you say your name was?"

"Folks tend to call me Trotter," the man muttered at the blood-stained tiles.

"Trotter it is then!" The Boss said in his best buddy voice which he only used for introducing new starters.

He turned to me and gave me a weasley grin, "He'll need bringing up to date with 'em new procedures. You take care of that, eh Bob."

I nodded and gritted my teeth. The Boss had a thing about calling people the wrong name: Rob became Bob, Clive became Clive-O, Kev became Kevvie. It was like he set out on purpose to get right under people's skin.

"I'll make sure he knows about the weaknesses further up the chain too. There's been a few glitches here and there. Management issues. Nothing serious, but best he's in the know." The other workers would pick up on my dig. The Boss wouldn't; the guy was as thick as pig-shit.

The Boss had turned his attention back on the newcomer, oblivious to the smirks coming from the semi-circle. "See Trotter, they've introduced new efficiencies," he broke the word into bits: *eff-ish-shun-sees*.

"Weeding out the time-wasters. Pigs-per-minute versus safety protocols, that's the key here. He'll make sure you're up to speed with the changes. Calls himself a certificated slaughterer, so I'm guessing he's got some idea." He gave me a slap on the back, turned to Trotter with a last wink, then sauntered back to his glass-fronted office, lowered his fat arse into his office chair, leant back, arms behind head, and got on with his

supervising. We got back to our stations and productivity quotas: slicing off ears; carving out cheek meat, tongues and palate; gouging out eyes; removing brains and spinal cords.

Safety protocols. How the Boss loved these two words: shorthand for punishment. Foul up and you knew about it quicker than you could gut a pig.

Trotter came up to me later wearing his new overall. “Where can I get the safety documents Supervisor Dave talked about?” he said, his voice the same monotonous rumble as the packing conveyor.

I shrugged. “Dunno, but I doubt they contain anything I can’t tell you. If I were you, I’d focus on the basics. See if you can get through day one without puking and you’re onto a winner. You get used to the smell of blood and rotting flesh soon enough. Besides, you’ll need a strong stomach when you get macerator duty.”

“Macerator?”

“Category one waste disposal. Worst task of ‘em all.”

The Boss’s prize piece, the Industrial Meat Macerator, had its own separate annexe set apart from the other machinery but still in full view of the supervisor’s office. “State-of-the-art,” the Boss would croon. He’d been made to attend a full-day training after the expensive new equipment was installed. “Read the whole frickin’ manual from top to bottom. I know this beauty better than any of them onsite technicians do.”

The poor sucker tasked for a day with this beast of a machine was rarely able to cope. It was a hard grind, no doubt about that. A pulley system operated the heavy paddles attached to a giant axel of stainless steel. Once the frozen chunks of offal and meat waste were inside, he also needed a strong stomach; the pus of pig-brain soup that came spurting out of the nozzle at the other end made your guts crawl.

The work was repetitive: load the machine, collect the soup, load the machine, collect the soup. Like that all day in a mind-numbing, never-ending cycle. Did your head in, made your back ache, made your insides churn. And if that wasn’t bad enough, the Boss watched the poor sod on duty like a hawk.

The Boss’s way with newcomers was to bring them down a notch or two so as to establish his authority.

“Trotter, you dimwit!” he bellowed as our newbie sloped along, bucket in hand, blank look on his face. “Get your arse over to station seven and get mopping. There’s blood and shit everywhere. Come on, this ain’t rocket science. If you can’t manage this, how are you going to get on when you get sawing machine duty, eh?”

The rest of us kept our heads down and breathed a sigh of relief. If the Boss had taken up against Trotter, that suited us. This muttonhead who skulked around in the corner during tea-break and couldn’t muster hardly two words chit-chat was, in his limp-limbed, slack-jawed glory, an insult to our trade. He deserved whatever he had coming.

No one was more offended by Trotter than the Boss. Besides giving him the worst jobs he could, the list of nicknames he invented was longer than a sheep’s entrails: Miss Piggy, Babe, Porker, Hamlet, Squealer, Hogzilla, Kevin Bacon, or just Pig, plain and simple.

Despite the tide of put-downs and insults, Trotter put his backbone into the work. Geeks like that thrive on red tape and procedures. Besides, he was hardly wasting time talking, was he? Credit where it’s due and all that, he was pretty good at meeting productivity quotas and sometimes exceeding them. All this was fine in principle, trouble was, if he went on like this for much longer management’d up our delivery metrics.

The Boss treated Trotter’s speedy turn-around times like a personal attack. Here was this novice showing up the fact that his line had been under-delivering for a good long while.

The Boss piled on the challenges, waiting for the moment when Trotter would cave in, trip up or better still give up.

“You’re on deboning today, Pigswill. Chop chop. Twenty pigs by lunchtime should keep you busy.”

Trotter didn’t bat a single white-lashed eyelid as he made his way to the station and set about the task. Time lunch came around, he’d already exceeded quota by ten percent. Some fat guy from management dropped by, sniffing around, trying to root out the reason for this sudden increase in turnover.

“Clear expectations, discipline and emotional intelligence,” I could hear the Boss boasting to the guy in the suit. He spoke in a loud voice as he tapped his temple. “All down to good judgement and sound management.”

“He’ll want to watch out, or that brown-noser’ll be after his job,” I muttered to Kev when the suit’d cleared off.

The Boss set about restoring his credibility by giving Trotter the lowest jobs. Unlike other workers who put up a fight, Trotter got on with each new task, his stiff neck straining as he spent the rest of the day heaving stinking carcasses into the boiling water.

“Got the tanks again, did yer?” I overheard Maxi saying to Trotter as she slid over to the corner where he was standing during tea-break. She snuck a glance back at Mike who watched from across the room with a smirk that said this was a dare.

Trotter mumbled something into his cup of tea and made a move to his station while Maxi sauntered back to join Mike and a few others who’d gathered to watch the show.

The next day, Trotter got scalding duty again. Say what you like about the geezer, he sure knew how to get on with it. He had this ability to check-out of the situation, to disconnect. Same with the bad-mouthing; he was sealed tight behind his plastic covers; they protected him from the taunts just like they protected the rest of us from the blood and grime. During a stint of trimming fat for spam, he was a machine working on autopilot. Kev said it was the same with the skinning.

“He’s sat there workin’ the flesh, up to his armpits in shit, rough edge of the scraper goin’ ten to the dozen, but from the look on his face, he might as well of been at Butlins.”

A few weeks in, while Trotter was on slicing, a cut of bacon came out of the slicer a little thicker than usual. Protocol said that if the cut was very thick, it might breach regulations and the polystyrene cover of the vacuum pack wouldn’t reach round.

The Boss was poised and ready to pounce. At last, here was his chance to dig under Trotter's rubbery exterior and graft away at his flesh.

"D'you know what mightier happened had this cut here made it past measurement to the vacuum packing and then into the shops in this state, its wrapping hanging off all incorrect?"

The Boss had called an unscheduled line stop. Standing in one of our semi-circles, we shuffled and twitched, impatient to get back to work. Too much stopping and we could put paid to any hopes of a tea-break. Lips curled at the edges, the Boss dangled the offending slice between thumb and forefinger, flapping it inches from Trotter's nose. This was his trophy for days of patient waiting.

Trotter gawped at the botched slither with a dead expression. His silence spoke louder than the racket of the machines that surrounded us and, as the Boss's face got redder, Trotter's message became clearer. He may as well have shouted it at full voice: The Boss was nit-picking. The slice was well within guidelines. But the Boss's quibble was like a packing line set in motion; he had no choice but to see it through.

"Tell him, Max. Tell him what mightier happened here. Tell him about how we'll have Food Standards noses up our arses if this slice had gone out like this."

Maxi gritted her teeth. The Boss's question didn't bother her; grillings like this were regular enough, but she loathed being called Max.

Maxi's muttered response was barely audible in the clang, wallop and hiss of machines, and water from the production lines elsewhere in the plant, so the Boss took over.

"Quite right, Max! Then where would we be, eh? The inspection folk down our throats, a ton of paperwork for me, and you lot all getting off scot free. Protocol. That's why we have it. Just bloody follow it!" He slapped down the slither onto the metallic surface with a thwack. "Back to work, the lot of you. And Pigswill," he gave Trotter a wink that was the opposite of friendly, "More care next time or there'll be consequences. You get my drift."

Next it was Susan's turn to mess up. She'd been shortcutting the packing process. We all try to cut corners from time to time. I suppose it's our way of taking pride in what we do. Some of the shortcuts we come up with aren't half bad, either; when Fali used scissors instead of a knife, the Boss gave him a good ticking off and zero credit for using his loaf, but the next day, a bunch of blister-wrapped scissors turned up at the station for the packing team to use.

Like Trotter, Susan's foul-up was so slight it didn't merit a mention. She'd used the wrong end of the hammer to tug a piece of flesh away from the gristle. Bored with scrutinising Trotter's every move, the Boss assembled us together during tea-break to recite the hygiene protocols. Hammer in hand, he addressed his opening gambit at Trotter. "Piggy here is going to tell us why I've got an issue with Susan's work, aren't you Piggy?"

Susan stood to one side, head bowed, cheeks flushed.

What happened next surprised us all. Instead of waiting for Susan to bleat her defence, Trotter spoke up. His voice was a guttural mumble at first, but it rose, sailing over the clang of the machines and gathering ground, like a conveyor belt switched on at the mains.

"I'm not sure I agree with your priorities. The way I see it, the hygiene protocols you refer to don't even come near to addressing the very real problems we're facing. There's mess everywhere: the surfaces, the floors, our clothing. We're dealing with carcasses that are covered in intestinal and faecal matter. The people who are handling pig brains are probably inhaling porcine brain tissue which may account for the recent outbreak of e coli that you're all trying to cover up. So yes, I agree that there's an issue with hygiene, but I would suggest that Susan's initiative with the meat tenderiser is the least of our worries, Dave."

Supervisor Dave, aka the Boss, now demoted to Dave, turned on Trotter. "What's that Trotsky? Did I ask you for your opinion?"

"Yes, actually, you did."

Someone tittered, the sound was swallowed by the din of the factory floor. Another chuckle gurgled forth, and another, then another in domino effect. The whole packing line was bent double, reeling with laughter.

Dave joined in with a forced laugh, more like a bark. His face looked as if it'd been slapped with a chop loin. "Good one Pigsty. You did a good one."

From that day onwards, Dave ramped up his efforts to bring Trotter down. Any normal guy would've cut their losses, found a different job, moved on. But not Trotter. His head sank deeper and he grafted harder.

Fuelling Dave's hatred was the fact that, since his coup against Dave's authority, Trotter's kudos among us Line Ops had soared. Not that it changed anything. True to his name, Trotter seemed to enjoy wallowing in shit and, after a few failed attempts to invite him to join in the tea-break gossip, we just left him to skulk in his usual spot in the corner.

As for Dave, a nice firm juicy hunk of revenge was on the cards. The dreaded meat macerator duty was a tidy solution. It became a daily sport for Dave to send Trotter to the annexe each morning when he reported in for rota. Soon Trotter didn't bother checking in. His job was the meat macerator, end of story.

One morning, Trotter was nowhere to be seen. He'd overslept, got stuck in traffic, or was sick and hadn't called in. Maybe he decided that another day at the meat macerator was more than he could stomach. As the minutes ticked by, ten, twenty, thirty, Dave fidgeted like a rabid animal. Lateness was a number-one offence. The promise of a tasty, well-meted telling off had the boss salivating.

Then the meat macerator packed in. At what point in the morning it had gone bust, no one knew, but Mike told us that when he'd gone to relieve Trotter's duty in his absence, he'd found it as dead as mutton.

You could practically see the cogs in Dave's brain as he digested the significance of the machine's breakdown. Here was his chance to claim back a slice of his damaged prestige while he waited for his showdown with the tardy Trotter.

He gathered us round the busted machine, all excited about showing off his skills. "Must be some kind of blockage. Ain't no one in this entire plant that knows the workings of that machine better than I do." He

proceeded to bark out instructions for the jobs we were to undertake while he climbed inside to see if he could fix the thing.

We returned to our various tasks with a communal sigh at the prospect of a few minutes breather while Dave was taken up with fixing the equipment. Meanwhile, our hero scaled the machine and yanked himself inside, dropping his body into the huge funnel.

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It was later when the ruckus broke out. Word was passed from one Line Op to the next in a Mexican wave. The machine had been down since the factory doors had opened that morning. Trotter, who had in fact been here all along, had discovered the malfunction and, as per updated safety protocols, had bypassed the line manager and gone direct to request the assistance of the onsite technician. *Where efficiency is at stake, it is vital to deal with the problem promptly*, the guidelines stated.

As it transpired, the stun pen had been on the blink too; an overnight power-failure meant a few of the machines weren't working. Protocol was clear enough. It was the Line Op's job, in this case Trotter, to call and wait for the technician to arrive. Trotter had obeyed the instructions to the letter.

Once the technician was on the case, it took moments for the machine to get the all clear. Plug in the power source and she was good to go.

Rumour had it that it was Trotter who pressed the red button, and as the heavy burnished steel cranked into motion, with a little more effort than usual, the whirr of the machine hummed along to the factory noises.

Even now, I can picture Trotter's face as he emerged from the annexe; his lips drawn into a soft smile. It was the first time I'd seen any flicker of emotion on that flat face since the day he'd started with us at the plant.

Only later, when Clive came to collect the pink slime for disposal, did someone ask where Dave had got to.

Clive shrugged, “Beats me. Not seen him for a few hours now.” With a groan, he heaved the bucket of grey soup off the ground. “Best dispose of this quick. Don’t know why, but this batch reeks of shit worse than usual.”