

Bodies In Motion and At Rest

Dawn at the Tasti-Linx sausage plant, there are football field sized lockers full of hanging meat. Headless, skinless, gutless steers, heifers and hogs hang from dull gore-crusted hooks in vast crowds. They wait to be separated from their bones and ground into a bloodless paste. They wait to be blended with a secret mixture of herbs, spices, nitrates and other preservatives.

Thirty-five year old Donna Consiglio adjusts her hair net. She's got on her blood stained white smock coat and her full-length black rubber apron. She's ready but first shift won't begin for another eight minutes. She walks through three long corridors to the door onto loading dock number twenty-nine. She smokes. This is where in seven hours Wayne Stokes, her fiancé, will back in a refrigerated tractor-trailer, help load it with fresh boxed sausage, then drive it to a distribution facility in Fort Worth. She finishes her cigarette and returns to her station where she stuffs two-pound hunks of meat and gristle into the funnel of a grinder bigger than her doublewide.

At about nine, three hours before the trucks come, Donna looks up at a clock for just a moment as her hand performs a rote motion for the um-teenth time—pushing meat into the grinder with a special length of two by four. Occasionally the wood catches on the whirling blades and the trick is to let go of it quickly before the hand is wrenched and the wrist broken. The wood will tumble about in the hopper for a beat or two, then pop out. She'll catch it and work some more.

But this time Donna doesn't wait for the wood to pop out, and she doesn't catch it because she is thinking about something that is not her job: sweet, quiet Wayne. She

grabs for the wood, throwing her left hand into the hungry opening. The rotating blades grind four fingers within millimeters of the palm, plus the tip of the thumb down to the knuckle.

She's not in the habit of removing her engagement ring. It's company policy to wear no hand or wrist jewelry but Donna reasons, justly, that she is a careful and skilled worker. This is, as industrial accidents typically are, unexpected.

By the time the severed fingers make their way to the machine that stuffs spiced and treated meat into an endless sheath of casing to be twisted into contiguous, coherent segments, the digits are indistinguishable from the beef and pork that are the main ingredients here. The ring has been battered and disfigured but is more recognizable for what it is: a cheap bauble of low karat gold, which accounts for its semi-retained structural integrity as it travels through the blades and rifled tubes of sausage packing machinery. The tiny chip of cubic zirconium is still firmly nestled in its mashed setting. It rests just under the skin of an otherwise perfect link, visible to Spot Inspector Juan Lopes. He plucks the ring-bearing sausage off the conveyor belt, slices it open with a box-cutter clipped to his apron, extracts the scrap of metal and deposits it in a back pocket of his jeans. He throws the ruined sausage into a hundred-gallon bin that fills throughout the day. The contents of this bin will be shipped to Mexico to be processed and added to feed for hogs and cattle.

Juan takes his lunch at noon, same as everybody on first shift. He has nothing to eat but pays twenty-five cents for a cup of coffee and begs a cigarette from a coworker. He drinks the coffee. To light the cigarette he uses a brass lighter left him by his late

father, Big Juan. As he smokes he remembers the ring, fishes it from his pocket and fingers it between drags until he decides it's worthless and flicks it into the dust in front of dock number twenty-nine.

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Wayne Stokes drives short-haul. It's refrigerated food, safer than the oil and CNG he hauled when he was twenty, but three-plus tons is a big load, long and wide as big rigs always are, so it isn't easy. The money's okay, not as good as long haul but he's glad he can stay put, settle in. He wants a family. His girl, Donna isn't too pretty. She's seven years older than him and at thirty-five she's only got a few, now risky childbearing years left. But she's solid in her mind, practical. And she took his ring. She accepts him.

He's looking forward to seeing her on her lunch break. He doesn't drive faster; he's on schedule. He'll back into bay twenty-nine at about five to noon. He'll hop down from the cab and have a smoke. She'll come out the same door she did when they first met. He'll walk up and hand her a sandwich in a brown paper sack. He brings her a sandwich every day. Ham and Swiss on white, roast beef, lettuce, and horseradish on toasted rye, these are her favorites. He likes to watch her eat. She's so hungry from working seven hours straight, and she loves the sandwiches so much, but she's real careful when she eats around him. It makes him feel special that she minds the way she eats just for him. He's pretty sure he loves her while he thinks about this.

It's three of. The end of the trailer kisses the rubber bumpers on the loading dock. It's hot and dry out, sunny. Wayne's boots kick up a tiny cloud of dust when he hits the ground. He's holding the bag with the sandwich in it. He was out of rye bread this

morning, out of ham too, so the sandwich is roast beef with lettuce and horseradish on white toast. That's okay.

The quiet boy, Juan stands smoking up on the dock. He's looking into his hand, fidgeting with something. He squints and cocks his head a little bit. His bottom lip juts out for a beat and he tosses whatever it is away without looking. It lands in the dust on the far side of the rig. Pausing, resting the paper sack on a running board, Wayne lights a smoke of his own. He walks around to the five steps up to the dock. The thing Juan threw is near the trailer's left wheel. It's shiny. He squats, his cigarette an upward, diagonal slash jutting from pursed lips. He picks it up. It's dirty. He rubs it, spits on it a little and rubs it again. He knows what it is and to whom it belongs. He drops it in his shirt pocket.

Inside the office, a tiny cube with imitation wood paneling and no windows, the plant manager makes a joke about gays, scribbles numbers on Wayne's clipboard, then initials the appropriate forms and bills of lading. He says his joke about gays is just a joke and Wayne doesn't hear and he doesn't notice the manager's obvious desire to chat, the fantastic gossip dangling from the tip of his tongue and shining in his puppy-sad eyes. The manager hands over the papers, and Wayne goes out to help load the truck. He's not leaving yet. He wants to get in the cab and gun it the hell out of there without pulling the freight door down. He wants to shove it into fourteenth gear, strip the clutch, and find a stretch of steep, downhill road with hairpin turns. But he won't do that because he believes that moving food from where it's made to where it can be sold, bought, and eaten is important. It's his patriotic duty, he thinks. And, he thinks it's all he's got left. He thinks he's alone now.

He's throwing the boxes very hard.

He yells, "Keep 'em coming!" and mutters, "Mother humpers."

When the sausages are loaded and locked in under the humming refrigeration units he gets behind the wheel. He doesn't say anything to anyone, just starts the engine, slips her into fourth, and hits the road.

The day is clear and bright, not a cloud in the sky, royal blue. The road is dry. Why isn't the ring on Donna's hand? Why would she throw it out like that? Why is it so beat up, he wonders. They don't fight. There's no time for fighting. Five days a week he drives all morning and afternoon and when he gets done he's beat to hell, maybe has himself a beer in front of the TV before turning in. She works those twelve-hour shifts, gets home soaked in gore, spends forty-five minutes in a scalding shower, and collapses into bed. He's speeding, doing eighty-four. He thinks maybe he should have tried talking to her but he was thinking such nice things about her when he pulled into the loading bay. Then the ring, right there in the dirt. That boy Juan just tossed it there, like a bad link lifted off the belt and tossed into a refuse bin.

Wayne's knuckles whiten on the wheel. A brown-spotted rabbit hops once in the middle of the road. It's the biggest he's ever seen, four feet from nose to nubby tail. It makes just the one hop then turns its head and looks Wayne flat in the eye. He turns the wheel a tiny bit, not a genuine evasive effort, just unchecked reflex. He's still going to hit the rabbit, he knows. And he knows he shouldn't have jerked the wheel. The comprehension about the ring, the eye-contact with the rabbit, the steering-wheel flinch and the flashed picture of what is surely about to happen come simultaneously. In this instant he knows so much it should be pleasurable—so much knowing washing over and

through him like a low wave falling across a clean, sandy, stupid shore. He'll never again have this much certainty at once and he knows this, too.

The rig jackknifes. He's thrown clear of the cab through the windshield, which smashes, filling his face and scalp with glass. Tractor and trailer snap apart and collide and the freight explodes over the blacktop. Sausages litter a fifty-foot swathe of roadbed. They rain down like meat blackjacks and, before he loses consciousness, one hits Wayne on his caved-in cheek.

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Carl Tubbs pushes a pen across his blotter. He's early. There's nothing to do. There never is because it is his foremen who run the plant, not him. He signs papers and takes orders over the phone. He tries hard to avoid his nagging awareness that he is not really manager of the entire Tasti-Linx packing facility, but its overpaid shipping clerk. Days like today it's hard. He's early because he rushed to beat traffic. In his car he makes a blustery effort to be on time every day because while he's changing lanes without signaling, spilling coffee on his tie, and laying rubber at four way stop signs, he can convince himself he has purpose. But today he arrives a few minutes before nine and knows the plant has been churning for four solid hours with no help from him.

He picks up the pen, pulls a steno pad from under a stack of papers and writes his name several times in varied script. The intercom from production ops buzzes. He jumps, catches his breath and presses the 'talk' button.

"Yeah?" he says.

“Mr. Tubbs,” says the man on the other end, one of the foremen—Glen Stillman. “Lady lost some fingers in the grinder. I put a tourniquet on her and called an ambulance.”

“I’ll be down.”

He gathers paperwork for an injury. These things must be carefully recorded. Liabilities must be assessed. He strides down the corridor and takes the last three steps down to the plant floor in a bound. He has his clipboard, steno pad, and forms he will pass on to his bosses in triplicate.

The injured woman is sitting on a stackable plastic chair. Stillman must’ve cut away the left sleeve of her white work coat to make room for the tourniquet. She’s still got on her bloody rubber boots and big black apron. Her legs are splayed, toes pointing up to the ceiling. She’s looking at nothing, eyes out of focus. Carl wonders whether she’s in shock. Her mouth is moving and her right hand twitches on her thigh. He has to walk past her to get the papers to Stillman. He needs to get them signed by her foreman, someone who in the event of a lawsuit can be reminded of their name on this form and relied upon to testify to the truth of what they’ve already signed. He comes within a few feet of her. He’ll pass her in seconds and be on the floor, get the papers signed.

“Can you please give me a ride to the fucking hospital?” she says as he steps over her feet.

“Pardon?” he says.

She lifts her fingerless left hand, wadded in paper towels already soaked through with blood. The veins in her forearm are swollen because a fat orange rubber band is cutting off circulation at the crook of her elbow.

“Hospital, motherfucker!”

They’re right by the door to loading dock number twenty-nine. It opens. Three EMTs come in. Carl exhales. They bustle him out of their way. They need to get at Donna, who relaxes, tells them her name. She lets them shine a light into her pupils. They hold up fingers and ask her what day it is.

Stillman signs the papers. One EMT asks him what happened to Donna’s hand. They need to know whether they can find the fingers somewhere and bring them to the emergency room for reattaching. Carl stiffens. He waits for Stillman to make eye contact but he won’t. Instead the foreman looks at the EMT in charge, oscillating his head slowly. This gesture says, *There is no way, and you have no more questions.* Tasti-Linx employs, counting both full and part timers, 127 Texans—a real economic boon and necessity. Everybody around here knows it. The other two EMTs get a stretcher and hustle Donna out to the ambulance. There is an understanding reached here but Carl doesn’t play a part in it. He watches it, bears mute witness.

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Juan Lopes gets off work at five. In twelve hours he’ll stand again at the end of the assembly line and watch tens of thousands of pink-gray phalluses emerge onto a conveyor belt. Some of these he’ll remove and discard on the basis of flaws: discolored meat showing through the casing, deformities, bulges, or ruptures. He’s been on his feet since five a.m. He doesn’t count hours or look at clocks. That’s a trick he knows. The shift is either happening or not. Now it’s over and he waits with other men who ride with him in the back of a flatbed pickup. They ride to the same barrio coffee shop where Juan sometimes buys a pork sandwich to bring for lunch at the plant. Tomorrow, Wednesday,

payday he'll have lunch. Having eaten, he won't be so tired at the end of the day. Before he sleeps he'll stay in the kitchen for a while and read.

The truck comes. The men pile into the back. There are benches facing each other along the sides, wooden slat railings that come just above the backs of their heads as they sit and ride.

It's very hot. The sun is bright going down, and slanting light pierces their eyes. Inside the factory it is dim so this sharp contrast is uncomfortable. It affects everybody's mood. Juan doesn't know their names, the two arguing.

"¡Asno! ¡*You stepped on my toe!*" one hollers.

The other snarls back, "*You're sprawling all over like a fat rich pig.*"

The men are up, glaring into each other's eyes just like that. Juan stands too. He holds his hands out with one palm extended toward each, trying to placate them before something bad happens.

"Hombres," he says. "*Amigos, sit down. The truck—we're in motion.*"

They don't bother looking at him. He is quiet all the time, only a boy to them, he knows. He is taller than most of them, and skinny not muscular as they are. They carry meat from the big refrigerated rooms to thick tables where it is cut. They butcher it into two-pound hunks with single strokes of their cleavers. He isn't like them but he is of them, more than the whites. They must know this at least.

The angry men pause then square off. They will punch each other anywhere they can. Juan understands these men are angry out of all proportion because they hate their jobs and can get nothing better and they hope their children will get educations and desk

jobs but this is also unlikely. The truck rolls over a small hole. It bounces twice, front wheels then rear.

The bigger fighter loses his footing and stumbles, grabbing the other's forearm for balance. Their eyes widen. Maybe they see the significance of their quarrel is minute compared to what will happen in the time it takes for their hearts to beat twice more. These fighters are in the middle of the truck bed. Juan is at the rear by the tailgate. He watches them fall at him, holding each other's arms, knocking him off with them so that all three tumble onto the rushing dirt together. It hurts more than Juan expects. After all, the truck rarely moves more quickly than thirty-five miles per hour. The pitted road scrapes his skin off in sheets.

They cannot afford treatment at this emergency room, none of them. The fighters are sitting by one another talking, friends now. Juan is in a seat by himself. He watches the elevators, the check-in desk, and the entrance to where doctors and nurses help the hurt and sick people. The big doors open and a gurney comes out into the hall. A fat orderly pushes it up against a wall and walks away. There is a man on the gurney. He has bandages on his head and face, casts on his arms and legs. Juan recognizes him by his voice. He is Mr. Stokes, the man who drives an empty truck to the dock five days a week, helps load it with sausage, and drives away. He always has a cigarette to spare. He is also the man who will marry a woman who works at the other end of the assembly line from Juan.

Mr. Stokes is moaning very loud but his words sound crushed as if they were coming through the grinder. "Donna," he says, again and again.

The elevator doors slide open and a woman in a wheelchair with bandages on her hand gets off, pushing with her good hand on the right wheel, pulling herself with her feet on the floor in front of her. A nurse follows her. He tells her she needs to go back to her room and lay down.

“I been here all day,” says the woman. “I’m going outside and have a cigarette.”

“You lost a lot of blood. You’re on a lot of morphine.”

The woman stops jerking herself forward in the wheelchair and sits very still and straight. She turns her head and lifts her left hand from her lap.

“Fuck you,” she says.

“Donna?” says the man on the gurney.

Juan can hear the two fighting friends chattering. He watches the lady, Donna, yanking her wheelchair toward the gurney bearing the man she will marry. The taller of the fighters says, “*We are resting here so long I can’t feel my injuries anymore.*”

This is a boast and a lie. Juan feels his injuries. He wishes the fighters would shut up so he can hear the lady in the wheelchair. But he hears her fine because when she gets to the gurney she is crying loudly and this makes her voice rise as she speaks to the broken truck driver. Juan sees her trying to get closer to her man, held at bay by the railings on the sides of his wheeled bed. She leans, resting her head on the brushed metal, and holds a dangling end of the thin bedclothes as if they were an ailing child’s fingers.

“I lost my ring,” she says, choking on her own thick sobs.

Through miles of gauze and cloth tape Mr. Stokes breathes, “Found it.”