

Special Meats

The grey-haired pastor and his Wesleyan flock were blocking the road to Special Meats so I called my boss to let him know I would be late.

Glen cursed my ear off when I told him about the roadblock. He'd only just called the cops, so I was stuck until the pastor was coaxed back into his rabbit hole of a church. I turned off my car and reclined the seat. Outside they were chanting "The only genes God wants tampered with are blue jeans!" I mouthed along out of boredom and watched the protesters shuffle arthritically up and down the road. Most were holding a sign in one hand and a cane in the other. To my surprise I saw a few people with Downs syndrome marching along. They were young too, that was uncommon. Most people were pruning genetic warts like Downs syndrome out of their children. The adults with Down syndrome were all wearing shirts that said *I'm Worthwhile Too!* I felt bad for them. With all the control people had over the minds of their babies the mentally handicapped were dying out just like the programs established to help them. They were stupid to fight progress, but what else could they do? Hell, sometimes the options for genetic modification spooked me too. My wife Alyssa told me about parents arguing over the hair and eye color of their kids. I had even heard about skin color being changeable through modifying melanin production. What once was normal was the ancient past and nothing could bring it back.

Finally, the cops showed up to clear the road. As I drove past, some grandmother spits at my window and flipped me off, her bird crooked with arthritis. I thought about how I would phrase the encounter for Alyssa, play it up for laughs. We needed to laugh more.

When I got to work, the queue was already pretty backed up and a few guys from the early morning shift were standing outside impatiently waiting for us to come and relieve them. I

parked and popped my wedding ring in the never used ashtray of my 2025 Honda Gemini. I always took it off to keep blood from rusting the metal band.

“Fucking finally, don’t worry Joel, just take your time. It’s just more overtime I earn,” Tom said between puffs on his cigarette.

“I just want to walk slow so I can take my time and admire you,” I said sauntering up to Tom. “You’re so sexy. Let me just get a good look at you,” I reached around for his ass.

“Cut it out you friggen homo,” he said jumping back like I’d made a pass at him in the boys’ locker room. Tom was too easy to fuck with. He played tough, but the moment you acted gay the bluster collapsed.

I didn’t want to torment him too badly though. He’d agreed to take one of my shifts so Alyssa and I could go camping by Lake Champlain. Our hours were terribly mismatched. Whenever she had a day off from the hospital the smells that came with me from work made her nauseous. I never complained when she came from Burlington with the undeniable smell of antiseptic and blood on her clothes.

Glen was in the locker room taking a coffee break when I finally punched in.

“Wesleyans again?” he asked.

“Isn’t it always that pissy old man and his people?” I responded.

“Nah, a couple years ago it was PETA. They were worse, threw the cube steak all over my truck. Some even got in the cab and it stank for days.”

“Beautiful, you would think people would get over it, everything that comes out of here is marked. You don’t have to eat it.”

“Let them bitch and fight it. At the end of the shift our checks still clear and the cube steak rolls out the door.”

“I guess,” I responded.

“Don’t guess too much, it hurts your brain,” Glen said, tabling our talk.

I followed him out, putting on my bloody apron. We parted ways at the door which led to the stinking rendering floor of the Special Meats Slaughterhouse. We were one of only two places in Vermont licensed to process genetically modified cattle. Glen went deeper into the facility while I headed to the loading docks.

We had a few tractor trailers already lined up and marked with the farms they’d come from. Inside I could hear the quiet lowing of the gemod cows. The first trucker was pacing by his rig and packing a lip of Skoal. When the driver saw me he practically ran over eager to get his load processed. He was probably getting paid per delivery.

“Sorry, traffic issues. How many you got?”

“It’s a full truck, twelve heifers, about 36,000 pounds of meat that needs killin. I have another couple runs to make today so let’s hurry up man.”

“Christ, your boss raise enough gemods?”

“He’s getting government dinero; some place in Africa is having a famine so we’re shipping the cube steak over there as part of a relief effort.”

I nodded, “You guys sure make a killing with government cube don’t you?”

“I don’t but the boss gets one greedy fucking look in his eye whenever the check comes from Washington.” Pretty sure he rubs his dick on it before taking it to the bank,” laughed the trucker as he unbolted the trailer and swung open the doors.

Immediately the earthy stink of gemods waiting to be processed into cube steak struck my nostrils. Even though the animals came to us in square iron crates which looked like huge toy blocks their smell permeated the trailer. The cows had been inside the crates for most of their lives. The genetic modification led to them producing more muscle mass. All the weight made the creatures too heavy for their legs. They couldn’t walk at all. Their stubby legs were covered under a ton of prime cut meat. The shit and piss was cleaned to keep sores from developing all over their backsides, but still you couldn’t wash the stink out of a gemod and it was ten times the smell of a cow.

Covering my mouth I grabbed the first cage. The cages were laid two across and went to the back of the rig. Ball bearings lined the bottom of each one allowing them to be pushed. I grabbed the handles and pulled while the trucker yanked the ramps out of his truck bed. Inside there was a moo and I patted the metal box.

“Easy there girl. Not much longer,” I huffed as I pushed the gemod inside the slaughterhouse. I put a finger through the hole used for air flow and scratched the gemod’s head. My touch elicited another quiet moo from the creature which twisted towards me.

“Take it easy,” I said as I grabbed the cattle gun, pressed it to the hole and shot a steel rod through the gemod’s brain. As my right arm jolted back from the recoil I jabbed a pithing rod into the hole, swishing it through the brains to make sure the gemod had died. Finished, I sent the

crate down the line to be processed watching it disappear behind the cloudy plastic flaps which separated the killing room from the rendering floor.

I killed the cows for hours. One at a time I brought them from the truck, killed them, and sent the bodies on to be gutted, butchered, and processed into cube steak. When the cows died they made an oof sound as the air left their lungs. It sounded like someone getting punched in the gut. I had been at Special Meats for two years and it was eerier to kill the gemods than other modified animals. Other things twitched, you could feel the life leaving them. Watching made you feel bad, but at least you knew. Gemods didn't have room to twitch. You had to listen because you never saw the end, just the crate with its vacant black hole. Sometimes the bones of their legs snapped as they slumped but that was all. Oof then maybe a wet crunch. Those were the only signs. It seemed so pathetic. Such gigantic animals and all they could muster were those tiny sounds to let you know the job had been done right.

Still, this was my favorite job inside Special Meats. It was clean. The days when I was tasked with rendering beef were awful. Gemods had a ton of blood in them; cutting into them was like breaking a dam. I always left the floor looking like I'd come up from a pit or razor wire. Blood caked beneath my fingernails, inside my ears, up my nose, between the toes and anywhere else it could dry. The butchers apron could only keep so much out. I kept a bunch of plastic bags in my car for rendering days. Two bags were for my shirt, pants, and socks. I'd sit on another couple bags and drive home in my soaked underwear as blood pooled beneath my nuts. On those days my evenings were spent showering for an hour while the clothes took two tumbles in the washer.

After I said my goodbyes and harassed a few more people in the parking lot I started the short drive back home to Shelburne. The angry sons and daughters of god weren't there to harass me which I appreciated. I was hungry and didn't much desire a half hour delay being preached the sinfulness of my job or how I was going to Hell. If the infinitely wise God didn't want us tampering with our genetics then he should've made us too dumb to figure out what we were made of. Alyssa always laughed at the old zealots. These were the same people who were eager to have all sorts of invasive surgeries to kill their cancers. They'd deny food to the starving, but used their Medicare to ensure their lives continued uninterrupted. The hypocrisy was sickening.

I got home around six-thirty and put three chicken breasts in the oven. They weren't gemod poultry. I made sure of that. Cows were just bred bigger but chickens were pumped full of hormones so they'd mature from chicks to adults in a week. Someone had also found a way to change chicken genetics so they were born featherless to cut out plucking. The cows I could handle, but the ugly naked chickens were freaky. I shelled out for the more expensive free range birds.

Tom said he liked the gemod chickens because all the hormones made his wife's tits bump from C cup to D. I never pointed out to the stupid bastard what that could mean to his little five year old girl. It would make a good joke in three years when he was sweating and crying at buying her a training bra before he'd taken off her training wheels.

Alyssa got home at seven just as I was sprinkling the last bit of seasoning on the breasts and pouring a glass of water for each of us. She tossed her keys on the kitchen countertop and sat down heavily. She was still in her scrubs; her brown hair tied back in a tight ponytail. Each finger was stained with iodine and it dotted her forearms like patches of jaundice.

“Long day?” I asked planting a kiss on her lips.

“Be happy you shoot cows all day,” she said nipping my bottom lip.

“What happened?”

“We had a birth today and when Dr. Grant gave the woman her baby she and the husband just flipped their shit. Apparently, they wanted their child to have green eyes and they were blue instead. I was so pissed, the poor baby was crying and they were just yelling about the money they’d spent.”

“Christ, that’s awful.”

“I mean, they calmed down after a few minutes and started to play with the baby but stuff like that just leaves a bad taste in my mouth, how do people like that get to have kids.”

“Obviously by having more money to throw around than a dumb cow killer and a nurse,” I said wrapping my hands around her shoulders and rolling my thumbs up and down.

Alyssa sighed contently and leaned forward so I could do her whole back.

“I didn’t say you were getting a back rub.”

“You started one, now finish it,” she grunted.

I worked over her upper back for a few minutes rubbing down the shoulder blades and across Alyssa’s spine. Her lab coat came off and I started to work up from her tailbone. Her shirt bunched against my wrists as I slipped my fingers beneath her bra. Her breathing was getting ragged so I pulled my hands around and cupped her breasts, kneading them.

“You are the worst masseuse,” she purred, “Just when my back starts to feel better you always start groping me.”

I gave Alyssa’s boobs a firm squeeze, “You sure you want me giving you a back massage?”

She pulled my hands out of her shirt and turned in her seat so I was looking straight at her. Then she kissed me.

“Should I go grab a condom?” I asked and she pulled away. I knew I shouldn’t have mentioned the rubber; I should’ve just gone and grabbed it. Now we were going to have another parenthood talk.

“You know how I feel,” Alyssa began.

“I do but you could’ve changed your mind, walked past the maternity ward, and seen a cute baby.”

Alyssa rolled her eyes, “I don’t want our baby to be sick.”

I sighed. We’d fought about the medical stuff a lot. She held back because of my genes. My great aunt Jennifer had Downs Syndrome and so did a few of my cousins. You dealt with it and none of the women in my family had ever run from the idea of having more kids because they might have the disorder. It bugged Alyssa though. It bothered her a shit-ton.

“What do you expect me to do about it?” I said. “I can’t change my DNA. We both want children. We can adopt or do it naturally, but I’m seriously tired of having the talk about my defective genes Alyssa.”

“I never said your genes were defective,” she said.

“Well it sure feels that way when you make a big deal about having a sick baby. I mean do you want some blueprint baby so we can argue over blue, green, or fucking pink eyes?”

“I would never do that, I just want to...”

“You just want a baby without my flaws,” I growled. She always needed to micromanage, make things as safe and perfect as could be. Risk terrified Alyssa, no it crippled her.

An awkward silence followed before she reached out and grabbed my shoulders. I still could smell the iodine on her skin. She tried to coax me into looking up, but I continued glaring at the chicken on her plate. When she apologized we’d talk, not before. Instead, she stomped out of the house slamming the door behind her.

I broke into a cold sweat and felt my core knot up. Alyssa got pissed easily, but was she really walking out? I strained my ears hoping, praying that I wouldn’t hear the rumble of her car.

I started to get up, ready to chase her down the driveway, but back she charged, the door slamming behind her. She had pamphlets. They looked like the ones put in convenience stores to attract tourists.

Alyssa took a deep breath. It was her convincing breath, her calm down and talk rationally breath, her say the wrong thing and you’re not having sex for the next week breath. I closed my mouth and opened my ears.

“They’ve been doing this thing at the hospital for parents who want to prevent diseases but don’t want to do the designer baby process. They mix your DNA, take all the good traits

from your sperm, strip out all that bad ones, and just add in another man's DNA chains where the breaks occur. I've seen the babies. They're all healthy Joel," she said handing me the pamphlet.

I opened it up and stared at a man, his wife, and their baby. Below there were a lesbian and a gay couple with the same family dynamic. **A Healthy Family Can Be Yours!** was written at the bottom. I flipped the page and there were more facts and blurbs. Donors gave their sperm to banks like before. A machine spun them to pieces and the fragmented DNA just got inserted into the broken chains just like Alyssa had said. There were pictures of the donors, smiling white men, black guys, an Asian. I smiled, thinking they'd gotten in a pamphlet for beating off into a cup.

"What do you think?" asked Alyssa, mistaking my smile for curiosity. She leaned in and put her head on my shoulder like she was reading along even though I knew she'd already read the whole thing at least three times.

"Why do you have such a problem with my sperm?" I asked, setting the pamphlet aside.

"I don't," she said. "I just want it to be the healthiest baby it can be. This is good science."

"It's also taking away part of me Alyssa. You get to have all of you in the baby. How am I supposed to feel being all mixed up with some man I don't even know? Shit, I think I would feel better if you got a surrogate. At least then it would be a whole person."

Her lip curled back then and she gave me an uncomfortable stare. "I want you to be a part of this, you are my husband. I want your baby Joel."

"Then let's just have sex and see what happens."

“We don’t make enough money to take care of a special needs child; we still have a mortgage hanging over our heads, my student loans and payments on our vehicles. I’m not short-changing a child when this danger could be avoided.”

“Why does it have to be about the money?” I growled. “My family pulled it together when my cousin Greg was born with Downs syndrome. He has his own place and a job now. Aunt Grace was a single mother and raised him and two other kids.”

“Your Aunt Grace also had a shitty life and ended up an alcoholic once her house was empty,” Alyssa shot back.

“Will you shut up. Christ it’s sickening. You could’ve had whatever good life you wanted but you decided to marry me, and I’m gonna tell you, no matter what, we are not going to have a ton of money, not unless you win the lottery or get in the will of some rich old man in your ward. So healthy baby or not, a kid is going to cost us a lot.”

And then she cried. They weren’t crazy uncontrollable sobs like the ones which shook me when my dad died; they were angry tears, ones she was trying to keep back so she could keep arguing but just couldn’t.

“Listen you selfish prick,” she croaked, trying to get back control of her voice, “every day I see those parents with sick children, and yeah most of them have cancer or terminal diseases, but there are some with genetic disorders and their parents all have these dead tired fucking eyes and I don’t want that. I want to have our lives intact Joel. Why can’t you understand that?” she asked, wiping the tears away.

They did look happy, all those families. I knew that my poor Aunt Grace had done the absolute best she could and having Greg had been a real burden, more than Keith and Bella had been. I loved Alyssa but she didn't have the same energy Aunt Grace did. Maybe she wouldn't be able to handle a child with special needs.

"I'll think about the procedure," I said.

"Really, you're sure?"

"No! I'm not, but I know this stupid shit bothers you, so let's look into it more," I grumbled.

The tears were gone and her lips were on mine. I was mad; sort of hurt still, but I loved her with her stupid insecurities. We had sex on top of the pamphlets. I couldn't look at those pictures; see those men with their shit-eating grins. One of them could be co-dad with me.

I left early the next morning, chasing the night away as I showered and ate a bowl of raisin bran. I went out the door as the first elongated yawn came from our bedroom. Things were quiet on the drive in, not even a single Methodist, Baptist, Evangelical, or Roman Catholic was protesting. It was almost annoying. I could've used a roadblock. I was ready to be a dad, had been ready almost as soon as Alyssa and I had married. She'd always had the hang ups, not me. Yet now there was this solution and all I could feel was how much I didn't want what she'd so wholeheartedly embraced. I felt like I was watching MY baby die. Maybe I would've accepted some anonymous sperm donor, but dozens? Christ, whose baby would she be having? Would there be a doctor to come in and say the baby was 64% mine? 81%, 39%? A healthy baby was all that mattered, that's what my dad had always said. It was true; all you wanted was a healthy baby. The percent shouldn't matter. But dad had known we were 100% his children.

I slammed on the breaks. I'd come into the parking lot too fast and nearly took out a stop sign with my turn.

"Nice driving, Joel," cracked Tom.

"I know, right? I guess I'm just a bit tired because of how late I stayed up with your wife last night. Oh wait, she said not to tell you, sorry Thomas."

"If you can roll her fat ass over and find out where to stick it you win a prize. I have to wait nine months to give it to you along with a swift kick to the nuts," he shot back after a long drag on his cig.

"Here give me a puff."

"I didn't think you smoked," he said, offering me a drag.

I had maybe ten minutes before my shift started. I prayed Glen would keep me away from the butchering stations. I wanted something mindless so I could think without being elbow deep in guts.

Tom gave me weird looks as I puffed away thinking about Alyssa and those damn pamphlets. After all the years of torment I'd dished out he was afraid to ask if I was alright. I didn't want to talk though, just think. Tom was a good guy, but I didn't want his advice. He was my coworker not my buddy. He stood around debating if he should say something until I flicked the cigarette butt on the blacktop and went to work.

Mercifully, Glen assigned me to work with a trainee offloading and killing gemods. For two hours I pressed the steel tube to the opening by the head, hit the button and listened as they

slumped. I got nowhere in my thoughts and fell into a rhythm of feeling shitty ,and shooting gemods. I decided to talk to mom about it; she'd have something to say.

Just before noon I pressed the cattle-gun to the crate and clicked the trigger, the rod shot out and a groan of pain shook the metal walls. I froze. This was a new sound, a pained sound full of life.

“Shit,” I muttered. Some jackass, some idiot farmhand had put the gemod in wrong. The head wasn't facing the hole, I hadn't hit the brain. The rod had just gone through someplace else.

I ran into Glen's office, he kept a pry bar and hammer in there to open up the crates. I found the two foot bar and cobalt steel hammer pretty quick and ran back to the animal which was throwing its weight around clumsily. The new guy was standing with the next gemod which was aggravated listening to the wounded one.

“Move,” I grunted, picking up the cattle-gun and shooting the new animal before it could get too stressed out.

“Get that thing out of here,” I said, thrusting the pithe into the trainee's hand.

The guy, no the kid, stood dumb for a minute so I shoved him down the line with the dead gemod.

With the new kid gone, I sunk the bar into the container's side and gave it a few good cracks. Heaving and shoving I popped the side off which crashed on the corrugated metal.

Inside was a normal looking gemod, about five feet tall and shaped like its square container. I'd shot the poor animal in its side, just below the spine and it lowed in pain as I approached. Blood seeping from the wound I'd made. The poor animal had been shoved in sideways. I could just see the dopey eyes and there was no way I could reach around the body to put a rod through its brain.

"Easy girl, easy," I muttered, petting the animal which shivered at my touch. I grabbed a haunch and tried to shift the thing around but it was too heavy to turn.

"Fuck," I said, grabbing the cattle-gun and stretching towards the head even though I knew I couldn't reach. With the crowbar I started to work at the other side, closer to the gemod's face. I got the crate open and grabbed the cattle-gun.

I looked into its eyes then. They were set too far apart like every gemod. Its tongue was hanging out, making it look even dumber. The neck muscles were too thick to allow much range of movement, but it still twisted away when I stuck the gun between its eyes. I don't know why I was hesitating. This was a gemod. It couldn't breed; it couldn't even fucking walk. They were bred to die, that's all it was good for. This creature would provide twice the meat that a normal heifer or bull could. It was good science.

I put my other hand up and rubbed the stupid squat muzzle of the gemod. It turned its head and mooed quietly. I pulled the trigger and a little blood spattered across my lips. The cow's head slumped and I grabbed the two remaining sides of the crate and shoved the dead animal through to be processed. The trainee had my pithe. He could mash it around the brain. I just couldn't.

My shift ended without any other troubles, all the other crates had been handled properly and I was able to kill a couple dozen more gemods before the bell rang. On the drive home I passed a truck carting more gemods to be processed by the night shift. A smiling cow was emblazoned on the trailer.

The animals weren't good for anything other than to die and feed people. That gemod it wasn't even good for itself. It hadn't lived, just grown. I thought about the pamphlet. I wasn't any good to Alyssa either. I would serve my purpose and she would get exactly what she wanted. She could shop around for whatever sperm satisfied her desires. My own balls weren't my own anymore. They would be purified, scrubbed of all their imperfections, and then polished with another mans seed. The sequences that had made Aunt Grace die of liver failure, the code that gave Greg his Downs syndrome, all gone. My DNA would never be good enough.

I got home and put dinner on the table. It was leftover chicken from the night before. Alyssa came home and I told her I wanted to get a vasectomy. We could get a surrogate father or adopt a child. I wish I could say she tried to talk me out of it, but she sat down and took it calmly.