

BRUCE NELSON

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

It was inevitable that the knife would cut him. It was 1954 and Ivan had gained second place in the State Meat Inspection Theory examination, had studied hard and felt confident about starting his new career as a meat inspector. In a high meat-consuming society like Australia, his new skills would give him the opportunity to "care" for his fellow man in a way that was both altruistic and rewarding. He would be an important cog in the wheel of animal disease control. He saw meat inspection as a noble profession. So he might have to condemn a beast from time to time! Sure, it would be a blow to the owner but it would be a gain to the industry in the longer term. He felt proud and important. At twenty three, this would be his first job in which he would be making important decisions, decisions affecting public health and the nation's economy.

His department outfitted him with new overalls, long rubber boots and a shiny white waterproof apron. The inspector in charge handed him a brand new butcher's knife with a six inch blade. He gave him a new sharpening steel; Ivan's hands tingled at the touch of its rough ribs. Then they gave him a pouch and belt to carry them on.

"Get your knife sharpened to a razor's edge," the inspector in charge told him, "and you'll need to smooth off that steel or it'll tear the edge off your knife. Rub it with a house brick, a grindstone's too severe."

"Thanks," said Ivan, "I will." But he'd already decided to back his own judgement. Many a knife he'd seen flogged into submission by a vigorous housewife on a rough old steel. He would sharpen his knife on his electric sharpener at home; if that was good enough for filleting fish, it would do for slicing meat. He'd worry about the steel later. He would have to rise at five a.m. to start work at seven at the bacon factory, which was on the other side of Brisbane, and smoothing steels and sharpening knives would take too long. He needed a good night's sleep.

Nothing had prepared him for the shock as he stepped into the slaughterhouse next morning. The killing floor, where he was to spend his day, was a large rectangular shed with corrugated iron walls. Midway along one side, men were shackling pigs by their hind legs, hooking them to a chain which lifted them onto an overhead rail for slaughtering.

Ivan could not take his eyes off the slaughterman. Dressed in a khaki cotton beret and with a waterproof cape over his singlet and shorts, he held one of the forelegs of the struggling pig up out of his way, and with a short

double-edged knife held in his other hand, he made a deep incision at the base of the pig's throat, as precisely and deftly as a surgeon. Then he sought and severed the major blood vessels near the heart of the frantic pig. The slaughterman was unhurried and almost casual in his actions. He seemed oblivious to the pig's struggles and screams and even to its blood pouring like a scarlet fountain over his protective cape. Ivan was horrified yet he could not look away.

For the next few minutes the pig bled to death. From the point of shackling until death, there were about a dozen pigs wildly kicking and screaming in terror. Once dead, Ivan saw them released into a vat of brown, foul-looking, scalding water. Mechanical grabbers lifted them out at the far end of the vat and fed them into a tunnel of flailing rubber arms which removed most of the hair and dirt from their skins.

Next, the pigs were hooked by the hind legs to rollers on an overhead rail which ran across one end of the shed and down the length of the other side. From the start of the rail to midway down the opposite side, the pigs were shaved and eviscerated, then moved on to washing, weighing, grading and chilling. Most of the activity took place in the evisceration area, concentrating the noise, heat, smell and congestion there. All Ivan saw repelled him, but dominating everything was the noise.

The noise! The noise hurt! To Ivan it was like some demented orchestra - the crash and roar of heavy machinery, the hissing whistle of steam and water hoses, the harsh rhythm of steel on steel, and most distressing of all, the incessant descant of the dying pigs' shrieks. The noise reverberated through the shed and hammered at every bone in Ivan's body.

He stood motionless until, with a shudder, he remembered why he was there. He knew that meat inspection was based on the examination of lymph nodes which occur throughout the body and organs, the animal's filter system. The lymph nodes would tell him where to look for trouble. Ivan was assigned to viscera inspection with an experienced colleague, while a separate group of inspectors checked the bodies. Butchers removed all internal organs from the pigs, from tongue to anus in one linked mass and threw them onto the viscera inspection table where one inspector worked from each side.

"Take your time," the inspector in charge told Ivan. "Watch Jim for a while and try to get used to the routine." Ivan nodded and smiled. Jim took a set of viscera and finely sliced each lymph node and also examined each organ, looking for any sign of disease. This required precision and speed. When satisfied that all was normal, he pushed the viscera down a chute at the far end of the table for further processing. If an irregularity was detected,

the inspector would either condemn the pig or alert other inspectors to check its body thoroughly.

Water continually rippled over the viscera table to help clean it and to prevent the guts from snagging on the furry wood. A hellish kaleidoscope of blood and faeces streaked through the water. Ivan was prepared for blood and gore but not on such a scale.

One butcher, picking Ivan as a new chum, gave his mate a wink, waited for the right moment and heaved a set of innards towards Ivan. With a movement imperceptible to Ivan, the butcher's knife sliced the intestines in mid flight. Instantly, Ivan was covered in black, reeking pig shit and a great cheer from the butchers filled the hall. Ivan wanted to vomit. He rushed to the wash-up point, a hose attached to a dual hot and cold water tap, and soaked himself and his clothes. But however much he washed himself, he couldn't feel clean.

Back at his post, Ivan felt foolish and conspicuous. He concentrated fiercely on what Jim was doing until Jim said, "You inspect the next set, Ivan."

Ivan's stomach muscles knotted and his hands trembled. He picked up a node with his left hand and carefully drew his knife across it. It seemed to slip off the node. He tried again, this time slicing the surrounding tissues but not the node. He felt that everyone was watching him so he pressed the knife very firmly across the node. The edge bit into the node, through it and into the skin over the knuckles of his left hand. He dropped everything, including his knife, which clattered along the concrete floor, losing what sharpness it might have had.

"Let me have your knife and I'll sharpen it at lunch break," said Jim handing him one of his own knives, and satisfied that Ivan's cuts were only superficial. Ivan at once appreciated the difference between butcher-sharp and kitchen-sharp.

Under his hot protective clothing, Ivan could feel the sweat trickling down his neck and under his arms. He envied the butchers in their blue singlets and shorts, and their ability to ignore the blood and dung which they wore like a trade mark.

By late morning, Ivan was not so much relaxed as aware of a lessening of his tensions. Up till now he had been concerned only with his task, now he began to register details around him. He noticed crusts of faeces and blood hidden deeply in crevices and joints of the tables and fittings. The only cleanser that could reach that grime would be fire. The smell was becoming tolerable, in fact he didn't notice it anymore unless he thought about it.

But the noise! It was incessant, rattling inside his skull every second of every minute. It kept reminding him of how unforgivably cruel this killing process was. But he dared not let his mind focus on this yet; his only goal was to survive this day.

The callousness of the workers staggered him. They seemed totally indifferent to the agony of the dying pigs and even when a live pig was accidentally dropped into the scald-vat, their only concern was that the meat might bruise. Shortly before the lunch whistle, the shackle holding a newly-stuck pig broke. The pig broadsided onto the floor, scabbled to its feet and raced blindly through the hall, trailing a crazy pattern of blood until, too weak to strive further, it simply lay down and died. Everyone stopped to watch its struggle; some found it hilarious. Ivan was immobilised by the horror of the scene, his body tensed, his breathing almost stopped.

At lunch, Ivan stripped down to his underpants. All his clothing was wet with sweat. Stale smelly water trickled out of his upended gumboots. He had never known such prolonged sweating nor such lethargy.

"How's it going, Ivan?"

"I feel like one of those jockeys who sweat off too much weight before a big race and are too weak to ride," Ivan muttered.

"Stick with it, son. You'll get used to it."

He devoured his sandwiches and sweet coffee and spent most of his lunch break on his back on the cool concrete floor, oblivious to everything. He shuddered with revulsion as he forced himself to climb back into his protective clothing to resume work. His soggy overalls were stiff with blood, fat and grime. Two and three quarter hours more of this hell; would he see it out?

The heat and humidity were intense. Ivan felt weak and sluggish as he hacked and cut his way through the endless procession of pig guts.

"Jim!" It was the inspector in charge. "They're getting jammed at the body inspections. Slip down and give them a hand for awhile...Think you can manage on your own for ten minutes or so, Ivan?"

Ivan's stomach lurched but he nodded weakly. There didn't seem to be any other answer he could give.

This was what the butchers had been waiting for. They slowed the evisceration to a crawl, causing a back-log. Another butcher was moved in to help and suddenly the chain became a frenzy of action. Stomachs, lungs, livers, blood, excreta began raining on Ivan from every direction. Within minutes the table was a mountain of viscera - writhing, sliding, falling. In a panic Ivan cut, slashed, pushed, prodded and mutilated the seething mass in

front of him. Was that a tuberculous lesion? Were those parasites important? Which carcass belonged to which viscera? Ivan blinked back tears of frustration and anger. Didn't they know how stupid they were? What a relief when Jim returned. He motioned Ivan to put his knife away and swept the pile of guts down the chute, restoring order.

"When it's like that," explained Jim, "there's nothing you can do. It's best to save time and start again."

For the first time in his life, Ivan experienced a sense of profound failure, and he felt shame that he might be responsible for contaminated meat being served on someone's plate.

Later, it was Ivan's turn to help out on a carcass back-log. All his movements now were robotic. The agony of heat and pain and frustration had left him. All he felt was a fog of numbness. He hacked in dumb routine at nodes, first the hind-quarters then the middle, working his way down each body to the head. Everyone was working under pressure. A butcher working beside Ivan flung the next carcass along just before Ivan straightened up and turned towards it. It came hurtling at him with a clatter. The warning shout came as the point of his knife caught the pig in the ribs. Three fingers of Ivan's right hand slid along the blade's edge which bit deeply and stopped at bone.

ROSANNE MUSU

HOOK

Thumb jabbed.
Red spurt from a cruel barbed fishhook.
Eyes squeezed shut out pain.
Jaw clamped holds in yelps and
suddenly