

THE SCALE ROOM

by

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The skinny personnel man left me with the chunky man in the long white coat.

"This is your foreman," the personnel man said and he gave the foreman some papers and walked away.

"Call me Al," the foreman said studying out the papers, "Cocko ti?"

"Dobro" I said.

"You're hunkie," the foreman said.

"That's right," I said.

"Got quite a few hunkies working in the kill. Good workers. You ready to start today?"

"That's right."

"OK," he said, "I'll take you down to Supply and we'll get you fixed up. You got anything at all of your own?"

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I didn't know exactly what he meant.

"I've got work clothes," I said. "Safety shoes."

He wrote something on the papers.

"OK," he said, "I'll get you fixed up."

I followed him out of the green office into the hot smelling cement stairwell with the greasy black pipe railings.

"It gets pretty sloppy in the kill," he said as we clattered down the steps. "Water and stuff. You need rubber boots and a rubber apron for sure."

"How much do they cost?"

"Oh, seven, eight bucks. Boots and apron." We were back on the first floor.

"I only have two bucks on me," I said and stopped.

"That's OK. You just sign for the stuff and the company will take it out of your first check." He pushed in on a wide steel door stencilled: SUPPLY ROOM. There was a small unarmed man behind the counter reading the sportspage of the morning paper.

"Goddam," he said without looking up, "They'll never go to the Rosebowl this way."

"Who?" Al said.

"Wisconsin," the man said.

"They can't anyway," Al said.

The man looked up.

"Whattaya mean, can't anyway. They could if they won a few more games."

"They already went to the Rosebowl once so they can't go this year anyway."

The onearmed man stared at Al in disbelief.

"Is that right," he said.

"That's right," Al said, "It's in their rules."

"Whose rules?"

"The Big Ten."

The onearmed man looked at me for the first time.

"Is that right?" he asked.

"That's right," I said.

"I'm goddamned," he said. "What the hell kind of a rule is that?"

"Fingers," Al said quietly, "I got a new man here. Can you fix him up quick?"

"Sure, Al." The supply man folded his sports page and pushed it down the counter. "For the kill?"

"Yeah," Al said. "Find him a good pair of boots though. I don't want him getting wet feet."

The onearmed man reached down and slung up a kneelong pair of shiny black boots on the worn metal counter. The boots smelled like new army raincoats.

"That's a hell of a rule," the supply man said. "You mean if they go to the Rose Bowl once they can't go again?"

"Not for three years," Al said. "Try these on for size," he said, shoving the boots at me. "Better take off your shoes first. You wear the boots without shoes."

"What color apron do you want," the supply man said.

"I don't know. What's the difference?" I said untying my street shoes.

"Price mostly," the supply man smiled, and bent himself over a paperpad on the counter, holding it firm with his elbow stump

in order to write with his right hand. "Black, brown, yellow and olive drab. Brown's the cheapest."

Al nodded at me.

"OK," I said. "Brown."

He threw a tight brown rubber square on the countertop.

"You want me to give him some knives?" he asked the foreman.

"No, he won't need no knives," Al said. "He's gonna work in the scale room." The supplyman leered.

"Oh, Old John screwed up again, huh. I never figured that bastard could count to ten without using his toes."

"He's gonna push hogs for John," Al said tightly. "John's going good, he's doing good now."

The supplyman shrugged.

"All I know is what I hear from the Dago," he said.

"Dago don't run the kill by a long shot," the foreman said.

The supplyman moved his shoulders again and asked for my name and the foreman pushed a piece of paper across the counter.

"Take it off this," he said. "You will never spell it otherwise."

The supplyman squinted and halfuttered my name.

"Thats bohunk aint it?"

"Thats right," the foreman said. The supplyman smiled.

"Cocko ti" he said to me.

I finished pulling on my left boot and stood up working my toes in the stiff cold rubber casing and I wondered how many people there were in this place who could say how are you in Croatian.

"Dobro," I said.

The supplyman leaned over the counter and looked at my feet.

"Boots fit?"

"Sure," I said. "Fine." He nodded and scratched his stump.

"You wear a size 12 shoe, right?"

"Eleven and a half," I said.

"I can always tell a mans shoe size by how tall he is," he said to the foreman.

"Crap," Al said. "Give him a cap too and you can go back to your Rose Bowl."

"Size seven and a half," I said.

"I could have told you," the supply man said. He got out a white cap with a black visor and shoved his paper pad at me.

"Sign it any place on the bottom. Put your locker number down too." I took his eversharp and wrote my name. As he gave me the duplicate carbon he grinned at the foreman.

"Say hello to the Dago for me, Al."

"Comeon," Al said as I swept up my stuff, "Let's go up where the working people are."

The foreman made me a hogpusher right off the bat but it was a full four weeks before my body accepted the job. But that time the hog kill was into the busy season because the farmers soldout their pigs for the winter months and the company ran in a night shift and hired all the men it could get and thats when Big Wayne came to work in the coolergang with the Dago.

The hogs had just started the resin bath up the line on our first night and Old John and the Dago and I were sitting on the greasy wooden bench in the scaleroom when Al came back with the big blonde boy.

"This is Wayne, Dago," he said. "He's your new man for the coolers."

"Hello," the big boy said and he put out his right hand before he saw the hook that encased the Dago's wrist. He stood

there awkwardly.

"Wheres your gloves," the Dago snapped. "You'll freeze your goddam hands of in the coolers."

The big boy looked at Al.

"The supplyroom was out of his size. I'll get him some."

The big boy lowered his hands because Old John and I were staring at them. The hands were big.

"I'll be OK," he said. "I'm used to a lot of cold anyway."

Dago was struggling his one heavy black mitt onto his left hand and he stopped and looked up at the new man.

"Your ass," he said.

They stood facing each other until Al finally said again that he would find Wayne some gloves and then Jumbo came in and every body started in on him as usual.

Jumbo was not too smart and he could be seen through his nose and though he was thirty years old he had always lived with his mother who was a widow and drank up all of Jumbo's pay checks. It was a standing joke how she waited by the Number One gate on Fridays and he signed over the pay envelope to her and would go off to the Railroad Tap to have it cashed.

He would be in the coolers until his strength gave out. He was like a little boy with his strength. Dago had to watch over him constantly or the jokers on ~~the~~ lard pulling would have Jumbo ramming his fists into the cement block walls to show what a punch he had.

"You coolergang?" he asked Wayne now surveying out Waynes brawn.

"Yeah." Wayne said.

"Me too," Jumbo said and shoved out his hand. "Shake."

Wayne took the hand and it was obvious that Jumbo was intending to impress him with that nutcracking grip. Their hands were locked waisthigh only momentarily. In a flash Wayne had spun Jumbo around, the dummys arm bent tightly into the small of his shoulder blades. As he arched backward to relieve the pain pressure on his arm, Wayne gently and firmly crashed him onto the wet steel floor mat under the scales. I think Jumbos scream was more surprise than anything else. Wayne flung his arm free.

"Whattaya, tough guy" Dago said evenly.

Wayne was wiping his hand on his overalled thighs and working his fingers.

"Your ass," he said to Dago.

The hogs starting coming into the scaleroom then and Old John and I started to work and our new night gang walked slowly down the steaming gambolways into their coolers.

The scaleroom was inbetween the hog kill itself and the coolers. Up at the other end of the sprawling, clattering, sharpening, cutting waterfloored building the hogs came into the shackling pens day and night and were lifted screaming onto the gambolways into the kill. Heads down and hanging in close ranks they looped and circled and came around the big plant on the continuous overhead track into scald baths and resin baths and wash baths past the waiting men with axes and saws and the razor knives. The hogs were burned and stripped and gutted and emptied out and washed and cleaned and all their cutaway parts dropped down metal chutes in the floor to bins below where they were processed into things like soaps and fertilizers and meat products and hundreds of things.

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They say that the company used every part of the pig except the squeal and that there were company scientists working on that so that the foreman could save their own voices in the hell noises of the kill.

The automatic overhead track became manual at the scaleroom and my job was to push them into the room by hand onto the overhead scale and when there were ten, Old John would click a knob on the electric scale and the scale would record the weight and number of hogs and then clear itself for the next weighting. Old John also punched out the figures on an adding machine set in a water-proof pedestal. Then I would push the entire ten onto the automatic track for the coolers and they would click and clatter away into the misty passageways bound for the Dagos gang and they would route them to the proper coolers to set and harden before the next day when the meatcutters began on them.

The average weight for ten hogs was around fifteen or sixteen hundred pounds and the big trick was to move them out fast so the ones coming in didnt pile up in a bunch at the end of the automatic track.

On the nightshift we were to come in at three and work straight through until about seven for a half hour dinner break.

The stickmen took it easy in the kill because there were new men on the line and the hogs came in so slowly that Old John stuck his head out a couple of times and looked down the line to see if there had been a break down somewhere.

"Petersen said they got 5000 on dayshift," Old John said. "We'll be lucky to get 3500 out tonight." I chewed my gum and didnt say anything. John looked worried.

"Lot of bad cuts coming through." he said spointing to the carcasses split in two up the backbone dangling loose from the clotheshanger like hambols. I worked the pieces of them carefully onto the scale rail and he filled his mouth from the Copenhagen box in his adding machine drawer. "Bad cuts," he snuffed. "Lots of new men."

He clicked the scale knob and punched on his adding machine and I pushed all the bad cuts onto the cooler track.

They stopped killing at six fifteen and fourty five minutes later I pushed the last two hogs onto the scale rail and let them hang and Old John worked his adding machine and I took off my apron and washed off the blood and hosed down my boots.

The cooler gang along with Al was waiting when he checked his figures.

"1862," he said solemnly, "1862."

"You bastard," Dago said, "I bet that breaks your heart."

"We'll get 3500," Al said. "They're gonna kill 3500 tonight." He looked at Dago and over at Wayne who was washing down his boots with our hose.

"I couldn't get any gloves for him," he said to Dago, "How's he doing?"

"Ask him," Dago said. "There're not my hands freezing."

"It's OK. I been in colder places," Wayne said.

Dago wasnt smiling as he nudged me with his cold hook and we walked out to the lockerroom to get our lunches.

"That bastard," Dago said with the crumbs falling from his lips, "Got his big goddam hands into everything already."

"Who?" I said.

"That Wayne. Four bolognas he ate already. I ought to kick Jumbos head in." Jumbo looked up from the lockerroom floor.

"I didnt do nothing."

"You showed him where the balogna was. You ate one in front of him. What the hell did you expect him to do, watch you eat?"

Jumbo munched on his hard boiled egg.

"I told him not to eat any," he said.

Big Wayne came around the corner of the steel aisle then and opened his locker and took out his lunch.

"Thats right, Shorty," he said to the Dago and he sat down. "Jumbo told me not to eat any sausage," he smiled, "And then he ate one."

Dago was burning. He was touchy about his height and he was touchy about Jumbos intelligence and he was especially touchy about this new man.

"I dont want any trouble with the front office," Dago said. "They start getting big short counts in their meat packs and the first guys they'll hit is the cooler gang. They'll have so many guards walking through this place, you'll think its the First National Bank."

"I dont think they miss a few little sausages," Wayne said.

"Listen, smart boy," Dago snapped. "You been on this job four hours and already you swallowed down four bologna rings. Thats a pretty good average. I wouldnt exactly call that a few little sausages."

Wayne unwrapped a sandwich and began to chew.

"I left enough for you, Shorty. Us big men need to eat big meals."

"I'm telling you now so you get it straight."
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"I got it straight," Wayne smiled. "Straight from the horses mouth."

I didn't know what was going to happen for a minute and finally to my relief nothing happened and I started chewing again. We ate without talking and balled up our lunch bags and started in to smoke. Jumbo was humming a polka tune. Wayne got up and closed his locker.

"I dont want to be hardnosed, Shorty," he said, "I just dont like being horsed around, that all."

"Nobodys horsing you around," Dago said.

"Thats right," Wayne said. "Nobody is. I wouldnt know the guy who owns this place if I saw him. But one thing I know is that he aint working in the hogkill or in the coolers."

Dago dragged on his cigarette and didnt say anything.

"Do you own this place, Jumbo?" Wayne asked suddenly.

"No," ^{Jumbo} he said, "No, I don't own this place."

"Does Shorty?"

Jumbo stared and blinked slowly around at Dago and couldnt speak.

The Dago threw down his cigarette and closedup his locker and started back by himself up to the hog kill.

Wayne sat down again and shock another cigarette from his plastic pack.

"Stop me if Im wrong," he said, "But I thought Al was our foreman."

"Al is the foreman," Jumbo said nodding his head.

"What the hell is Shorty bucking for then?" Wayne said and his question was directed at me.

"He is sort of in charge of things in the coolers," I said. "Al cant be all over every minute."

"Well that Shorty is sure all over, only he's not gonna be all over me."

I shrugged and fieldstripped my cigarette and Wayne stared at me.

"You been in the infantry, huh?"

"Yeah," I said and got to my feet.

"Korea?" Wayne asked.

"The old war," I said, "Europe."

Wayne nodded.

"I was Korea myself. We almost starved in Korea. Maybe thats why Im so hungry all the time." he dragged on his cigarette. "Goddam Shorty reminds me of the army, you know Watch the Hook, we used to say. He couldnt pull this crap in the army."

I didnt tell Wayne that the Dago had been with the 32nd Red Arrow Against the Japs at Buna in '42 and that he had two hands up until then. I slammed my lockerdoor shut and spun the combination lock.

"Wo go by working people," Jumbo said. Wayne snapped him a salute.

"Yes, sir, general," he said.

"General Jumbo," Jumbo smiled.

"Dumbo Jumbo," Wayne said.

Jumbo saluted us gravely and we walked slowly in behind him as he marched back up into the hogkill.

It was nine thirty before I saw the Dago again. He came out of the Number Two cooler with a pail hanging from his hook and he dumped it on the bloodslick floor under the scale rail. It was salt.

"Thanks," I said spreading it with my boot. "It was getting pretty slippery." Dago set the pail in the corner and started pushing hogs into me.

"You seen Wayne?" he asked.

"Not since supper," I said. "I thought he was working on the coolergang."

Dago scowled. "You and me both," he said.

He swung his hook into the hanging belly of a hog and spun it viciously.

"He took off about eight oclock for the infirmary. Said his hands hurt him." He shifted the gum in his mouth. "Thats not all thats gonna hurt him when he gets back."

Old John shuffled over and stood listening.

"You and Jumbo been alone back there?"

"You goddamed right we been alone," Dago said.

Old John shook his head. "Thats Big Wayne, huh?"

"Big Wind," Dago said. "I'll give him something to blow about." Bastard doesnt deserve hands." He pulled in the number ten hog and picked up his pail. John clicked his scale knob and after I pushed the pigs onto the cooler track, Dago entered the streaming passageway, shuffling slowly behind the hogs on the gambolways.

"How about that, John," I said.

Old John dug into his Copenhagen can and balled out a wad behind his lower lip.

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"Bad," he said. "Bad. Lot of new men."

When we hit the twelve minute break for a smoke Al came back to quick check the totals with Old John. Dago and Jumbo came out of the coolers and took off their gloves, their faces tight and red with cold. Jumbos nose was running and Dago told him to blow it in our paper towels on the wallrack.

"Where's Wayne?" Al asked.

"In the John," Dago said.

"How's he doing?" Al asked.

"Peachy," Dago said. "Hes doing peachy. Got a great pair of hands."

Dago poked me in the ribs with the hook and we walked out to get our smokes.

"Two more sausages he ate," Dago said as we sloshed along the deserted line.

"Thats alot of bologna," I said.

"Hes gonna screw it up for everybody," Dago said as we entered the john.

Wayne came out of a stall tying on his apron.

"I told you you werent supposed to bring your apron in here," Dago said and he was angry.

"Youre always telling me something, Shorty," Wayne said.

"Are you the latrine orderly or something?"

"The~~re~~^yre not my rules," Dago said.

"They're not mine either," Wayne said. "You know where you can stick the rules." He started out the door.

"You gonna wash your dirty hands?" Dago snapped.

Wayne stopped. "You gonna make me?" he asked firmly and then went out ^{through} the door.

We washed our hands in silence. Dago didnt say anything for the rest of the break and we walked back through the moving line again without speaking.

After the break, Dago opened the steel doors and I switched the overhead track into the front cooler and Dago came out carrying another salt pail on his hook for me. Then he filled up the empty pail with boiling hot water and disappeared back into the gambolways.

Jumbo and Wayne could push hogs right from the scaleroom now, and I wandered over to the wide doorway and stood surveying the empty smoking coolerroom. Dago motioned to the corner and there behind the pinnedback steel door was the waterpail with a bologna ring in it. I took off my gloves and broke off a piece of the sausage. It was hot, cooked tasting and ~~delicious~~ I nodded to Dago and he jerked his head over at Old John. I wandered back to the scales and Old John shuffled over to size up the cooler too. He stepped aside next to Dago as Wayne and Jumbo pushed in a load and Wayne saw him and the pail. The bulge in Old John's mouth was too big to be tobacco.

Wayne stooped and fished out the sausage in his big hand.

"I'll be goddamned," Wayne said.

Dago swung his hook and clipped the bolognarings cleanly out of Waynes grasp.

"Keep your goddamned filthy hands to yourself," Dago said.

Wayne brought up his fists and moved on the Dago.

"When I leave one for you it'll be in the johnbowl," Dago said.

Wayne lunged at him then but at that moment Jumbo cracked Wayne from the side with his great forearm and the blond head flung back and the left temple slammed into the steeldoor and Big Wayne crashed onto the slimefloor. Jumbo and Old John looked like they wanted to run. Dago bentdown over Wayne and felt with his goodhand and then lookedup at me.

" Help me move him," he said. "John, dont let them hogs pile up." John scurried away.

"Jumbo," Dago said dumping the hotwater pail, "fill this with salt and bring it back."

"Salt?"

"Comeon, move," Dago said. "Salt!"

He pickedup the remainder of the bologna ring and slipped itinside Waynes heavy shirt. He told me to button it in and I did, and then we dragged Waynes body out of the cooler entrance and onto the steelmatting under the hanging hogs. There were at least thirteen pigs jammedup on the scalerrail already and John was waving frantically. Dago rolled Waynes head to the left with his foot and then he kicked over the heavy woodenbench and began to yell. Uprighting the bench immediately he broke out into the hogkill screaming for Al and for a doctor and for help.

They had pulled Wayne off to oneside and were looking at him when Jumbo cameback with the salt.

" I got salt," he said. Al looked at him and at the bloodslick floor Dago sprinkled the pail under the hogs and we pushed them off together. They were piling up like a logjam and Dago screamed for Jumbo.

"Whats wrong with Wayne?" Jumbo asked.

"He's dead," Dago said.

"Dead?" Jumbo stopped and stared at the longbody. "Dead?"

"Comeon, get these hogs out of here," Dago screamed again. "Wayne

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had an accident."

The doctors had the body taken away and some men from the front office came to ask us questions while the last of the hogs tracked in off the line and then two city police detectives arrived and talked to us in the locker room until after midnight. Al came in with a slip of paper and gave it to the detectives. One of them worked Wayne's combination and opened the locker and looked through his street clothes.

We just sat there until we were aware of Jumbo slumped in the corner: ~~shoving~~. The detectives looked at him and at Al. The foreman ran his finger in a tight circular motion around his ear.

"This place could do it to anybody," one of the detectives said.

"Tomorrow he will probably want to know where Wayne is," Al said.

"That's a dumb question alright," the detective said. Then he said that was all and we could go home. The Dago shook Jumbo awake.

"Huh," Jumbo said.

"We can go home now," Dago said.

"I dream," Jumbo said. "Big Wayne and me going work good together."

Dago stared at him and dropped his hand from Jumbo's shoulder.

"Big Wayne and me," Jumbo said. "Good cooler gang." He got to his feet and punched Dago's arm. "We going work good with you, Wayne and me." He scooped up his lunch bucket and Dago watched him dully. In Dago's eyes I could see the long long smoking cooler rooms and the endless endless tracks of warm hanging bodies coming in from ^{the} screaming hog kill.

"General Jumbo," Jumbo said and I saw Dago was looking into my eyes for something.

I buttoned up my mackinaw and fell in be^{side}~~hind~~ Dago and then
the two of us walked slowly in behind Jumbo as he marched proud
and swinging down past the time clocks.

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