

THE HENCHMAN

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Every man needs a job. The lucky one gets to choose his tools. A rifle behind the seat, ammo in the glove box. His knives. The Slaughter Wagon with a swinging arm winch on the back. If Cully built an Aframe and threw the cable up over the top he could lift the Slaughter Wagon right off the ground. While that might not seem particularly useful, a man needs to quantify now and then, sometimes in bright red letters:

CULLY MINOR. MOBILE SLAUGHTERING. CUSTOM CUTTING.
MAMMALS ONLY. VARMINTS KILLED FOR FREE EVERY BLUE MOON.

People may not want to think about what he does, but Cully's the one they call. Whether the animal's hiding in the shade of an oak tree or eating Mama's dahlias, near the road or down in the creek bottom, makes no difference. Mrs. Dalloway wants pork for dinner? Pork she'll have. The bacon will have to wait, everyone knows that. Some things take time. A cleaver. Smoke. Process.

From pasture to plate, Cully offers full service. Backstrap, steaks, liver medallions, hamburger. He makes rolls of summer sausage the size of a baseball bat. Jerky. Patties. He wraps it up, just like Christmas. Stamps a date and signs his name. He'll pack the meat away in your freezer if you ask. Pork chops in the front. Lamb near the frozen berries, because pie and lamb make January taste like summer. Sometimes he'll throw in a bottle of Marla's barbecue sauce or a suggestion for a dry rub.

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The hides he saves for Father Olivier. The big priest loves his leather. Leftovers go to dog food for neighbors and the pound. Maybe a trophy hunter doesn't want anything more than the head and the antlers. Cully's not going to let meat go to waste. People need protein in their diet, and Sheriff Gordy keeps a list.

Mostly he butchers cattle and pigs. Lambs, lots of lambs, usually before they get past the cute stage. Even if people have a hard time killing an animal that bleats, they love their lamb: butterflied leg, shoulder chops, ribs. Barbecued or stewed.

Panfrying is a damn sin, if anyone asks Cully.

He doesn't apologize for the bloodstains on his sleeve. Is there pleasure in killing an animal? That's the wrong damn question.

Cully's heard the stories. He started a few of them himself, but he never said shooting a man is no different than shooting an animal. *First of all, there's the meat...* He did say that, but just to get a rise. What people believe, they believe. That he smiles when he pulls the trigger. *He has a hundred heads mounted in his barn. Boar and buffalo! An iguana and three snakes. He wears a badger pelt to bed and feeds his fruit trees a slurry of crushed bones and liver.* Let them make fun, then watch their testicles retreat when there's a real job to be done.

Creatures die, by nature or choice. Sometimes bad luck. Maybe a deer gets hit by a truck. Someone has a pet whose time has come. Even if a man's got a weapon, he's not going to shoot his daughter's pony. Everyone needs a henchman now and then. A man who doesn't flinch. Lots of daddies carry Cully's card in their wallets.

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People talk about their animals—even the ones they’re going to eat—before he puts them down. They’ll walk Cully through the pasture, point out the view, grouse about the wet spring or the dry summer, turn over a cow pie with their boot. Naming a pasture animal Jake or Sheila doesn’t change the fact that someone fattened them up for the dinner table. Sometimes he’s as much psychologist as slaughterer. Maybe he’s brandishing a cleaver, a knife and fork in his apron pocket. A napkin tucked in at the collar. But he’s ready too with the rosewater and the solemn music if need be. Doing what he does, he’s learned how to listen. He’s learned how to not hear a thing.

Death happens. There isn’t always a reason. Something a man can tie a bow on. Animals are not martyrs. Cully’s not interested in their spiritual history. He doesn’t wear that yellow raingear because he’s Noah.

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He killed his first animal the year he turned fifteen. Eva Blayney’s mare must have gotten into some poison. The animal would lie still a moment, then bolt upright and throw her head against the gate. One eye was already gone when the horse corkscrewed over a broken rail and ripped a hole in her gut, the air salted with shit and blood by the time Cully got there. He still can’t remember what he was doing in the stall, just that he’d brought a neighbor a box of apples. Eva was so torn up with grief she couldn’t hold her rifle steady. Couldn’t get the bullet in the chamber. Cully did the honors, but not without fear and not without heartache.

There’s no thrill in ending a life.

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He was making a man's wages by the time he left high school. Working outdoors. Living in the loft of Eva's barn and falling hard for a palomino blond who played the violin.

He hawks up a ball of spit and lets it go. He's not going to hide from what he does. There's no apology to be made. The bullet hits bone, the casing mushrooms. There's no trail of remorse. No forgiveness to be had. He's not an assassin. What's done or not done is only that. There's an aftermath, sure. Scuff marks in the dirt. Stains. A meal.

He's wearing his uniform today, the yellow pants and jacket, his duck suit, though no one's ever seen a duck that color except in cartoons. And since he bought the jacket that came without the hood, there's not even a bill to suggest he might be related to waterfowl. Where do people get their ideas? Have some respect for a working man. Cartoons?

Fog rises off the creek and silts into a baby blue sky. Cully's eyes wander past the field to the far line of oaks, up the rise and back to the hollow. He blinks. Fickle stuff—distance. Right here, why not just be where he is? Mud on his boots, the scents of a farm. A rifle on his hip. There's nothing like a barnyard to put the world at ease. Where *is* becomes *was*. Where *was* is far and gone away. There are mouths to feed.

He bites his tongue and sniffs at the morning. The season and the light, the breeze off the Coast Range. What's Sunday have on Tuesday? Who needs bells and brimstone? Worship doesn't give a damn about the calendar. Grace comes and goes.

What a man believes is sacred. Mortality and meat don't explain everything. Some

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stuff defies not only the effort, but the sense. Like that knot Cully spent three days last week trying to untie. Eventually he pulled out his knife and cut the rope. By then he was sure he'd done the right thing, both the three days of effort *and* using his knife.

"I put my faith in surprise," he told Marla last night. He laid his fingers on her cheek, kissed her, pleased with his eloquence, the way he wrapped his tongue around a big idea. Brought poetry into the bedroom. Rhythm before rhythm. He should have known better.

She took the opening. "Will you be coming to church with me this Sunday?"

He told her he'd be doing his worshiping in a barnyard from now on. His smile put space between their lips.

"Oh, Cully." Marla's hands put space between their bodies.

A man shouldn't always spout. Let those thoughts bubble up, rise of their own accord, but he shouldn't always put words to them. Once he's pointing true north, he should follow the damn compass. The blood abandons the brain for good reason and a man has no business thinking, much less talking. Words only muddy the field. Whatever minor inspiration kickstarted his tongue should have been slapped down. He'll take a sledge hammer to it next time. Theology can cripple a man, God damn cripple him.

His fingers on Marla's face and her hands on his ass, nothing between them but warm skin. He should have stayed with that. Reality found him on his back with his eyes open wondering when he was going to learn to keep his mouth closed. Nothing made sense. Not the moonlight knifing through the window or that pitiful sac of possibilities

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between his legs. He wanted answers that were not forthcoming. Like, how did the species survive, much less evolve? How did a man and a woman ever come together? Really. Were there launch codes? He sure didn't have them.

Nothing made a pisswad of sense until Marla licked his nipple. Everything made sense then, when she came over him and the moonlight cut across her throat and he saw the pulse beneath her skin. How her heart was quicker than his. Her breath more desire than demand—that's what defined the sexes, more than how they came together. She wasn't all need and desperation like he was. How could she want him? She slid over his thigh, leaked onto his fingers when she pressed his hand to her. She opened herself and took him in. Brought scent and skin and noise to the night. Brokered the peace. Ended the confusion.

Marla's always with him. Even when he can't see her, he knows she's there. Whether he's sharpening his cleaver, hosing out the Slaughter Wagon, raising a beer at Big Mike's Bar or shifting into third on a back road: he's never alone. Standing in a barnyard with a rifle in his hands: she's there.

Maybe that's the damn surprise.

He purses his lips, wondering why he's holding back his laughter, when a sweet little burp of joy sluices past them like a baby's cough. He can't always be the hardened professional. Steely resolve and an iron heart. There's nothing wrong with thinking about the woman he loves right before he plugs a steer with a bullet and pulls out the bone saw and the knives.

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He's only a man, for Christ's sake. Let confusion be his path. Let him be soothed by a woman.

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The little girl comes out of the barn first, her tiny fist knotted around the lead rope. She wears pink plastic boots, and Cully worries the mud might suck them right off her feet. She's probably clenching her toes just to keep them on. She's wearing a dress, a God damn dress. Can't be more than seven. Her hair tied back in a ponytail. Hell, she probably runs the place. Cully wants to pick her up and put her on a pony. What the hell is she doing here?

"His name's Romeo," she says, as though Cully needs to know that meat has a name. As though he doesn't already know.

A bad joke percolates on the back of his tongue, since Romeo's a steer and couldn't possibly satisfy the needs of a post... He was going somewhere with that but the little girl threw him off. He drops the nose of his rifle lower. There's no shame in what he does, though sometimes he wishes he wasn't so obvious. Sometimes he wishes he could disappear, not make so much noise. But when he jacks a shell into the chamber, people listen. When he slips his finger onto the trigger, they see. He can't hide the boom and the splatter of his job.

Cully shifts the rifle across his hips because he's starting to feel a twitch in his left leg.

He appreciates how the little girl looks him right in the eye. She's not afraid of him,

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and Cully likes that about her. He notices her pink boots again, and lets her know he notices just by nodding his head. She twists the rope around her skinny wrist and gives it a jerk. Romeo follows on her heels. If there's any hesitation in either of them, Cully doesn't see it. The problem is the girl's father. The girl's got bigger balls than her daddy. He's back there in the shadows of the loafing shed, crying.

For Christ's sake.

The girl leads the steer through the mud and onto a dry rise in the corner of the yard, near the gate. Cully nods, and the girl gives him the rope.

"I hear you're the best," she says, like there might be some doubt, like he's going to have to prove himself to her, maybe shoot bottles off a fence rail.

"I am," Cully tells her, because he's certain he is the best at what he's here for. The little girl deserves to know that. She's not as tough as she comes off, and that's good. No one should be that tough.

Cully has no reason to question himself, but all the same he ticks off the little details of a clean kill. He's done it thousands of times before. Still, he owes the moment his focus. If he closes his eyes just once, he'll have to start doing something else. Setting pins at the bowling alley, collecting scrap metal. Killing's his job, but if he ever gets to the point where he just flicks a switch... He's no machine.

Every animal deserves ceremony, recognition. A clean kill.

A spot of sun strikes the mud near the steer's feet. Cully lifts the rifle off his hip.

"Okay, then," the girl seems to agree. She looks hard at Cully before going to

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rescue her father.

Maybe she is that tough.

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Five steers and a cow form a crescent around Cully, giving him barely enough room to work. The animals keep shifting from random nibbles of grass to trying to understand the gutted carcass that hangs from the yardarm. They realize their numbers have diminished. *What happened to Gladys and what will we do without her perfect stitch?* Or in this case, Romeo and his barnyard swagger. Any crowd hates to lose a good dancer.

Cully cranks in the yardarm and the carcass disappears into the box. He wishes he could make the little girl forget him. If he sees her some day at the school, or in a crosswalk, he'd like to think she might wave at him. Smile.

The saltiness of the kill lingers. The odd marriage of shit and meat. He looks up at the steers. They look back at him. Those warm brown eyes. Animals aren't stupid. They understand. They judge. Cully wipes his blade with an oily rag.