

MAG030– Case #0130111 – “Killing Floor

ARCHIVIST

Statement of David Laylow, regarding his time working at an industrial abattoir near Dalston.

Original statement given September the 1st 2013.

Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I used to work at a slaughterhouse. A ‘meat processing plant’. I won't say which one. I don't want to get in any trouble. It was up near Dalston, though, so you can probably figure it out. Not so many around out there as to make it hard. Not so many around anywhere. It's not something most folks want nearby. It smells awful if you're not used to it and people tell me they get a weird vibe. I never did, at

least not before all this happened. Maybe that says something about me, though.

There's not so much difference between people and animals, you know? Not saying that I'd be keen to kill a person, or that humans are all stupid. No, I'm saying that animals are smarter than you give them credit for. They look dumb, sure, but I know what I'm talking about when I say that every damn animal in that place knew exactly why they were there. You don't need to be smart to know when you're surrounded by your own mutilation.

When I first started I did a lot of the driving, and right from loading them up, you can hear it in their whining. They know what's going on, they know where they're going. I've heard a lot of engineering and science types talk about "stressors", "novelty" or "cortisol levels" when discussing how best to avoid "triggering fear or flight responses". If it lets them keep enjoying their steak, they can use whatever

words they want to, but every wide-eyed cow I've ever put into a squeeze chute knows exactly where that ride ends.

You hear grisly tales about the torment of animals in the slaughterhouse, and the things done to them by the cold, relentless machinery, but so often the casual human brutality is overlooked. A worker and an abattoir are rated on many things, and one of them is how cruel or distressing they are for the livestock passing through. If you're abusive to your animals, you won't get as high a rating, but that's about it. You're not going to lose your job unless you really overstep the line, and sometime you have a bad day. The sort of day that it feels good to work out on a bit of pig flesh, as it goes towards its end.

I mean, I wouldn't really have said that sort of cruelty was common beyond the occasional kick or sometimes using an electric prod when it wasn't needed. It was just that, if you did see it, you didn't care. And you

knew that no-one would care if they saw you do it. For all the braying and whining and screaming, in the end it was all just noisy meat.

Weirdest thing is, you start to kind of see people as meat too. Not in a food sort of way, you know. I don't wanna eat my co-workers. It's just that, when you spend all day taking these living, breathing creatures – animals that move and cry and tremble in fear – and you turn them into lifeless blocks of dead flesh, it's hard to believe in any special spark that makes us humans any different. We run and shout and file on through our lives as simply as any cow, and after a while you can't help but realise that we could turn into a lifeless carcass just as easily. Easier, even, given how much smaller we are. I mean, I'm not some weird killer or anything, but after a while it's hard not to see everyone as moving meat.

I used to work on the killing floor, you know? Not long. You're not allowed to work on it for long. In

your whole life, I mean. I don't know what the exact amount of time you're allowed to do it for is, but it's pretty short. I only worked it for a few months, and now I can't work on any killing floor anywhere. Ever. It's actually a weight lifted, the knowledge you don't have to do it anymore, but you're still there, aren't you? It's not like you've left the slaughterhouse. I heard once that those rules came in after they did some research in America. This must have been sixty years back now, but they started to look into the crime and murder rates of abattoir workers who manned the killing floor. Of the people who'd worked the killing floor for over ten years, do you know what percentage went on to commit murder? One hundred percent.

I don't know if that's true. Tony Mulholland told it to me once, when he quit the place. Maybe he was just trying to mess with my head or make a point, but it feels right. I mean, I only did it for a few months, but you kill enough things that don't want to be killed

and you start to look at person's head and wonder where you'd need to place the bolt gun.

I'm sorry, I know this isn't why I'm here, I just feel like I've got to try and make you understand what it's like, killing things and butchering their flesh for a living. I mean, I don't do it anymore, obviously. Still, you've got to understand where I'm coming from.

It all started on the killing floor. I was in charge of the bolt gun. Technically, the animals we slaughter are killed by bleeding them out, something about the meat quality, I think, but it's the bolt gun that means they don't notice. They call it "stunning", but that's never sat quite right with me. You drive a bolt right into the animal's brain, destroying just the right part of it so that they can be bled without resistance, and apparently without pain. I've only ever done the stunning; I've never been on the bleed crew, so I guess in some ways you could say I've never actually killed any of the animals. And sure, maybe they

might still have a bit of movement in them after the bolt, and maybe their heart still beats, but for all they talk about “stunning” or “irreversible brain damage”, pulling that trigger sure felt like killing to me.

There was another man who worked the floor, bleeding the animals. His name was Tom Haan, and I had never really spoke to him. For the longest time I wasn't even sure how much English he spoke – he was from China, I think, and hardly ever said a word. The first time I really heard his voice was that day, the day it all started. I'd been feeling strange about work ever since I started on the killing floor, and had finally asked to be moved positions. Now, the official company policy was that any request to leave the killing floor has to be granted, but in practice no-one asks to be moved. It shows a weakness that most of the people working there aren't comfortable with. I did it anyway, and had just received word that, from the following day, I was being moved to butchering

the carcasses. I don't remember how I felt. My feelings weren't really working back then.

Anyway, it was as I was processing the last of the cows for that day that Tom Haan came over. I didn't really pay him much attention, but he leaned close, gripped my shoulder and said to me in perfect English, "You cannot stop slaughter by closing the door." I felt a chill pass through me, and I wanted to turn round and demand to know what he was talking about, but he'd already returned to the bleeding crew. I was a bit shaken for the rest of the day, and knowing that these were the last animals I'd need to actually kill made each pull of the trigger harder, not easier. I just turned off my mind and let my mechanical motions take over. Cow into the holding pen, lock its head in place, gun against temple, pull the trigger. Over and over again, until I felt like I was almost in a trance.

It was the silence that finally brought me back to myself. I was waiting for the next in the line of cattle to be herded into the room, and I noticed that I couldn't hear anything. There wasn't the scared lowing of the animals, the far-off whine of saws or the rumble of any one of the hundreds of machines that hum and churn to keep the abattoir running. I waited and waited, but no more cows came. Looking around I couldn't see anyone. There was no clock in that room, nor did I wear a watch. A buzzer would usually sound when breaks rolled around, and I hadn't heard anything.

No more cattle seemed to be coming, so I put down the bolt gun, and walked over towards the bleeding area. There was nobody there, and more than that, the place looked clean. Spotless. As though no blood had ever been spilled there. Had I stood there, passed out or something? Had the day ended and the place been cleaned and I hadn't even noticed?

I headed towards the exit door, deciding that I'd either find someone to ask what was happening, or I'd just go home. The door opened onto a corridor that I didn't recognise. It looked like any other corridor in the slaughterhouse, except that it wasn't the one that lead towards the exit. I went to try the other doors that lead out of the killing floor, but none of them went to the places I remembered them going. Behind each was another hallway that seemed to lead deeper into the abattoir. I stood there for a few moments, and I genuinely pinched myself. I had to be dreaming or hallucinating or something. It wasn't a dream, though, or a vision. Everything had changed, and I was somewhere new.

I surprised myself a bit with how quickly I accepted this situation. I went out the door I originally went towards, thinking that if I didn't know the layout of this building, then I might as well start by trying to follow the old route out as much I could. The corridors just seemed to lead into each other, though,

and soon I was completely lost. I did notice, though, that some of them appeared to have rails along the top, like those used to move the hanging carcasses. Some of them even had hooks on, shiny and clean. These rails would never normally follow the passages of the slaughterhouse like this, and that fact bothered me, though I'm not quite sure why.

I called out, at least at first, hoping that there was someone, somewhere in this maze, who might hear me and answer. There was nothing. Some doors led into empty rooms, containing only still clean machinery. Meat-bone separators, splitting saws, scald tanks, each standing there, shining and silent. Waiting. I didn't hang around long in those rooms. As I said, I don't wear a watch, so I don't know how long I wandered. It felt like hours, though.

Eventually, I turned a corner to see a small, metal staircase spiralling upwards. I had no reason to think I was below ground level at all, but it was the first

thing I had found that wasn't just twisting corridors and silent rooms, so I went up. The stairs curved upwards for a very long time.

When I reached the next floor, my heart sank to see more corridors stretching away from me, though these ones all had the meat rails snaking along the ceilings, and many of them were unlit. I stayed out of the darker passages. One of them had a window looking out, and all I could see outside was a metal abattoir roof stretching away to the horizon. The sky was a dull pink – the colour of blood being washed into a drain. I left the window very quickly. Finally, by complete chance, I noticed a door I recognised. It was the dark green exit door that should lead out of the building. I didn't even stop to consider that it might not lead outside; I just opened it and stepped through.

My feet didn't land on the tarmac of the outside. They didn't land on the concrete or metal or tile of

the slaughterhouse floor, either. It was dark, so I didn't immediately realise what I was treading on, except that it shifted slightly under my weight. I looked to either side, and saw the metal barriers penning me in, and the conveyor belt beneath me began to move. I realised where I was, where it would lead, and I screamed.

Turning to run, I almost expected a horde of cattle behind me, pressing me onwards as the runs are designed to make them, but there was nothing there, and I fled out the door. I slammed it behind me and... and I began to cry. It was like something numb within me had shattered, and I couldn't... I just couldn't.

It was as I sat there, collapsed against the wall, that I started to smell it. The coppery-sweet scent of blood. It had a strange sort of comfort to it, as it was the smell of the slaughterhouse as I had known it, before I found my way to wherever I was now. I began to

follow it, just walking along, turning wherever the odour of blood was strongest. And it did get stronger, much stronger. As I turned corners and walked through dark rooms, the smell became thick, pungent, far more than it had ever been before. By the time I stood outside the dull steel door it came from, I could barely breath. From the other side came a loud, mechanical churning. I shouldn't have opened it, but where else was I going to go?

It led to a small catwalk, around the edge of a large, circular room. No, large doesn't do it justice. It was... immense. I could barely see the other side of it, far in the distance. All around the edges were the ends of conveyor belts, and I could see butchered carcasses rolling off them, feeding into the vast pit that took up the rest of the room. The pile of stinking, bloody bodies, more than I could count. Pigs, cattle, sheep, I think I even saw a few humans in the pile, though without heads or limbs it's hard to tell the difference between them and pigs. The vast heap shifted and

moved, as something mechanical far below chewed through it, but it was always being topped up, fed by those conveyor belts, carcasses falling limply on top of each other like dolls. I couldn't see the bottom, though whatever was processing the pile was so loud as to almost drown out my thoughts.

What else could I do, but turn around once again, and run?

I don't have the faintest idea how long I ran for. All I know is that eventually I fell to my knees in the dark and I lay there for a while. The sound and smell of the pit had faded away, and I began to hear another sound, the chunking thud of a bolt gun. At this point I was just about sick of following strange noises and smells around that goddamn place, so I turned around and started walking the other way. It didn't help. Whichever way I went, the sound just seemed to get louder, echoing through the empty hallways.

When I opened the door back onto the killing floor, I just didn't have any surprise left inside of me. Sitting there, in front of the stunning box, was Tom Haan. He was facing away from me, but I could see him, slowly and deliberately, placing the bolt gun against different parts of himself – his legs, his stomach, his shoulders – and pulling the trigger. By the time I reached him, he was little more than a mass of bleeding wounds. He mutely handed me the bolt gun and I took it. With his one working hand, he guided my arm until the gun rested against the centre of his forehead. But he didn't make me fire it. I did that myself. He fell limp to the floor. I don't know if he was dead, but I hope so. I'd hate it if that place had to bleed him.

The door behind him led to a corridor I recognised, and the next door I found marked 'Exit' opened to a sunny day so bright that I could barely see. There were people there, other workers, but no-one paid me any attention. I left the slaughterhouse, and didn't go

back. I kept expecting the police to call me about Tom, but I never heard his name mentioned again. Not even when I handed in my resignation. I wish I felt bad about his death, but I don't. I don't feel anything at all.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Hmm. More meat. Interesting. I had Sasha do some basic corroboration of the particulars of Mr. Laylow's tale, and everything appears to be more or less accurate. He was employed by Aver Meats in Dalston from April 2010 to the 12th of July 2013, at which point left his post, which was confirmed to be the stunning the cattle for processing, in the middle of his shift, along with Thomas Haan, one of his colleagues. They left through the main entrance, ignoring the other workers, though no-one reported them acting strangely aside from that. Neither returned to the abattoir and Tom Haan has not been seen since.

We contacted Mr. Laylow for a follow-up statement, which he gave readily enough, though it largely deals with his lingering problems eating meat, which I would say are symptoms of PTSD but he has strongly declined to seek treatment.

Tim and Martin had a bit more luck investigating Tom Haan, though only really enough to confirm that he seems to have completely vanished following his departure from Aver Meats on the 12th of July. No missing person report was filed, and he appears to have had no friends or family. The landlord of the house he rented in Walthamstow, claims that the last rent he received from Haan was at the beginning of July. This landlord was quite put out when he disappeared, as apparently he had been renting a house in Clarence Road for almost a decade, and it was in quite a state of disrepair when he left.

Immigration authorities are somewhat useless. They have informed us that he missed a meeting with his advisor later that year, but it wasn't until October, so gives us little to go on. His bank account has also registered no activity since July the 6th. No official effort has been made to locate him, and the police were reluctant to open a new case, so we didn't push it.

There's little else to be looked into, as Mr. Laylow's description of an endless slaughterhouse is, to put it generously, unverifiable. That said, there have recently been moves by Aver Meats to extend their Dalston plant. They have planning permission, but are apparently having trouble retaining builders, four of which have already quit. Only one of them, Darren Lacey, agreed to talk to us, but all he would say to Tim was that the building "already seemed to be way too big." And he said he couldn't get over the smell of blood.

End recording.