



THE HEAT OF BEASTS

David Fine

The ground consumed acid resistant soles. Flames licked shadows of smoke that rasped lungs. Inflamed eyes burned with the earth as the entire planet seemed as hot as the surface of the sun. The world was on fire. Our task was to stoke the flames.

‘Occupation, Mr Shepherd?’

‘Trained Killer.’

‘Entitlement to Job Seekers’ Allowance may be lost if procedures are not taken seriously.’

He didn’t look up. Social lobotomies lack curiosity. He couldn’t care less if I was a vegan, vegetarian or a packet of Linda McCartney sausages. In the Grand Third Way Third Term of Office Scheme of Things we were both meaningless statistics. Dumb animals. I should know, I’ve killed thousands, tens of thousands of the silly sods, and that’s no lie. Most of you have eaten bits of creatures I’ve killed. You would not believe how a high pressure steam hose leads directly from

the arse of a carcass into the guts of a “traditional recipe” Farmers’ Wife Country Pie.

‘Trained Killer,’ I repeated. George growled. ‘Ten year time-served since King’s Manor Comprehensive.’

‘You are willing to travel.’

It wasn’t a question.

‘Sorry, have you a toilet?’

That was it. Out the back, over the wall; I’d seen someone walk in who I didn’t want to meet. Maybe not even with George. He missed the bones brought back from the slaughterhouse. Animals are far easier to trust.

Closing the Livestock Market did me. Lyddlminster liked pretending it was a market town. A Jumpers Shop, County Hotel, Bunton’s Outfitters who sold moleskin Barbour jackets to National Trust members who didn’t know one end of a cow from another, and didn’t want to either. They hated the Livestock Market: its rich smell of shit getting up the noses of rich shits. Lorries backing onto A6018; nowhere to park their immaculate 4x4s, they didn’t want farmers ruining their idyll of country life. Not when they had to be in the city each working day to enjoy it. Why else vote New Labour? Why else choose to live in the countryside?

The farmers hated the Market too. But no one had come up with anything better, and at least they knew they got up the noses of everyone else. Cussed lot, farmers. The Market was my job. Not that I went there too often. Animals go to market three times— grazing, fattening up, slaughter. The third time they leave in a lorry and come to me. There is no warmth amidst a herd before slaughter. Their body temperatures drop, heart rates rise. They understand. They have a look in their eyes that says ‘We know what happens next’ and there is

nothing you can do about it. No cajoling, persuading or pretending, as with humans. Delusion is impossible. They know, and let you know too, in their eyes. In time you get used to it, but never over it.

Foot and Mouth meant no movement of livestock, no markets and no job. Not that I minded. I was a slaughterman, plenty of work elsewhere, and money for timed-served slaughtermen willing to travel and kill. Good money. Bloody good money. It was like BSE all over again.

That's how I ended up in Malmsey. You don't think of Devon as a war zone. More cream teas and people who go to a supermarket called 'Zanesbrizz.' For nearly three months you couldn't stay anywhere without the smell of burnt rotting flesh. You saw convoys of artics full of carcasses heading for the big burial and incineration zones. The smoke left your eyes smarting for days. Army Land Rovers rushed past dead building sites: you couldn't hire a JCB or unskilled labour for love or money. Farm workers switched sides to take out farms just down the road. They shoved aside trailer barricades, listening out for the cock of a shotgun held by someone they probably knew. But close your eyes and there was that smell— rank putrefaction and fear. A Junior Minister puked his guts up over the head of MAFF on the platform of Okehampton Station and went straight back to Whitehall. Seen enough. It was the squaddies who put me up to it.

Never grasped so many readies in all my life. At a fiver a steer cash-in-hand I didn't know what else to do. Normally it takes time. The animals have to be hung, drawn and quartered, at least shaped up for the butchers. Here it was bang with the bolt gun behind the ear, and onto the next as a JCB shovelled it up into a wagon before its legs had stopped twitching. It got to me. Not just the slaughter from dawn to dusk and dawn again under the arc lamps the REME boys laid on. It

was the look of the farmers at their farms. The same as their sheep and cattle. Exactly the same— trusting, yet let down in their trust. Remember? They understood. No one, not even the Government were going to delude them. A look in their eyes that said: *We know what happens next and there is nothing you can do about it.*

For tuppence they'd have killed the suits from MAFF, except they needed the compensation. They watched us work through the night. Hard sweaty work, on a hard hot sweaty summer's night, windows open, wafting in a barbequed county. Clammy sheets, not even an offer of a sip of water. If you stopped, the heat chilled.

The rats ran over your boots. We tried to get to the pubs before last orders, and even if we did, the regulars stared us out, then pretended we weren't there. You could tell without being told. Fuck off. We were an army of occupation, the Wermacht or Allies in France. Fraternisation Verboten. Locals off-limits. Fuck the fuck off.

'Dead and alive 'ole,' said one of the corporals. 'Need some S.' Double-take time, you don't think of Her Majesty's Forces mainlining Class A drugs: gin for the officers, beer for the ranks. 'How the fuck do you think we survived Kosovo, you lame-brained oick?'

'Get those veterinary samples back to the labs as quick as you can, Corporal.'

Next thing I knew we were blasting up and down the M5 in a King's Own Fusiliers' SWB Land Rover packed with enough dope to make Malmsey smile forever.

Who gave a fuck? In the heat we just went on killing, and killing, and killing. There was nothing else left in this world except to kill. Eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, and in your dreams you still smelled the fear and blood and shit. The pissy I-know-I'm-about-to-die-sort-of-shit that doesn't come clean off the concrete or the barns

or the JCBs. Lorries and wagons, your boots, inside your nostrils no matter how hard you hose and scrub the sky itself which seemed to rain piss-shit, especially when the sun shone, from the REME arc lights that broke the night up into a million dead lost soiled soulless stars.

It wasn't meant to come out as poetic as that— that's the drugs. Nothing poetic about rotting flesh being burnt to a crisp.

It didn't matter. Not with the up-down M5 King's Own Land Rover a three-lane needle straight into my veins. The heat made us kill. I started to look forward to it. Woke up itching to kill the next hundred cattle, taking bets on how many would fill a wagon, singing the Rawhide song; "Rollin', Rollin', Rollin', keep 'em dawgies rollin', Rawhide." Switching the bolt gun from right to left hand, in behind the ear of rawhide, BANG. Shoving the dead cattle, sheep around to make one enormous sheep cow pig, then it happened. We seemed to be inside a gigantic animal, and inside this gigantic animal were all the other animals we had killed except they were alive, and instead of killing them with bolt-guns we were injecting them with all this stuff which made them grow bigger and faster, which meant we grew bigger when we ate them, bigger and bigger, faster and faster until the earth was ready to burst.

Nobody noticed. Everyone carried on eating and drinking as though nothing had happened. And when it did burst, it was your head exploding into a million different colours and a trillion million other wonderful things, the most wonderful being that you were still inside this gigantic animal. On fire.

Inside something bigger than us, the Dome, bigger than London, UK, the EU, US, George W. Bush, bigger than the Universe itself, enjoying it all. It was great. We were on fire.

You're right. I was an addict. Addicted to drugs, addicted to killing. Easy enough with plenty of animals to kill and readies to spend. SWB back to Lyddminster with Corporal Smackhead, quick fix with Gonjo and The Parka behind the Show Ring of the Old Market. I didn't miss The Girl.

I didn't even miss George. A few notes for the old bat to keep him in dog food and ankles. He looked at me as though I was another dog, a bitch he was aching to screw. It was starting to get scary, which was great too.

Then it ended. We had barbequed the National Herd. The fields were empty, plain, green. No more killing to be done, or paid for. We had killed everything there was to kill, even the rat epidemic, and we weren't wanted. Not by MAFF, the army and certainly not by the locals. We were the smell of fear and putrefaction, we were death. It didn't seem too bad, still had a whack of dosh, just keep on going. Except there was nothing else to do but go back.

The Girl cut me. I thought she might be pregnant; she'd failed at stage one of *Pop Idol* but screwed Simon Cowell instead. Who cared? The smack ante went through the roof.

'Not our fault,' pleaded Gonjo.

The Parka belched.

'We're being squeezed. Honest. Everyone is. Fuck all getting through customs, not since the Knock bellied that freighter that crash-landed in Cheshire. Something about smoke from foot and mouth fires.'

Even the invidious farts of Parka had disappeared. Three sharp suits I didn't know were waiting at a table we took to be ours at Quiz Night in The Black Bear. They were dressed like professional footballers but were about as old as spin doctors. They drank Venezuelan beer brewed in Wrexham from bottles shaped like specimen jars. Gonjo and Co were no longer in business. They'd been taken over by Designer Blokes Inc of Saville Row. Who wanted to deal.

'Your dog,' they said, 'Staffordshire terrier?'

George looked up and growled.

'Staffordshire Terrier Rottweiler cross with a touch of Ridgeback, Doberman, German Shepherd and fuck knows what else,' I corrected. 'Ugly looking brute.'

'Then you wouldn't miss him, would you?'

The bolt gun hit the table with a clunk. What could I say?

It all went to plan. Right down the line, to the finest detail. Once they saw me in the dole queue I had to meet them for the payoff, inside the old dead livestock market.

They weren't happy.

'You heard the news, Charlie Boy?'

'What news?' I said.

'Fucking clever-dick arse,' the short one said, cocking the bolt gun. 'The fucking Shipping Forecast?'

His words echoed round the empty Show Ring. You can always tell when vicious people get angry; they go sarky instead of saying what they mean. Animals never go sarky.

'You fitted us up, didn't you?'

I gave them the most dumb spaced-out Mr Innocence look I knew. Not that it mattered. We both knew they were going to kill me, just as I had slaughtered thousands of beasts whether they had foot and mouth or not. You could see him finger a pistol inside the pocket of his Hugo Boss. It was a simple question of whether I dropped my bowels before or afterwards. Believe me, I know about these things.

‘You took us for planks, didn’t you? “Double wrap the merchandise in extra-thick roofing polythene and shove it down the throats of a dairy herd ready to be imported to replace foot and mouth stock. Animal, not human mules. Dead simple, use your loaf. Can’t fail.”’

‘What went wrong?’ I managed to croak.

‘What went wrong? What fucking didn’t go wrong? Those fucking Friesians from fucking Friesland had BSE, that’s what went wrong. Whole herd put down, incinerated, along with our bloody double-wrapped dope. Nothing else in the news, Mr Shepherd. Not even your very sudden and imminent disappearance.’

I saw my body dumped into the back of their black BMW 4x4 chillerwagen, out of sight, out of mind, finito. Cold, not just cold. The two other blokes stared through their Wrap-Around Raybans at the doors to the Show Ring, just to check. These guys never felt the heat or cold, never felt a thing. It wouldn’t be too long; I guess I had that dumb look farm animals and their farmers had before I killed them. There was a click.

Of shotguns being cocked. One after the other. From behind the walls of the first viewing circle rose a ring of flat caps, gnarled old faces and gnarled old hands brandishing double-barrelled Purdies. No need to say anything. Hugo Boss & Co knew they were beaten. Automatics rattled to the floor.

‘Take your clothes off,’ ordered a farmer with a half-wink to me.
‘Not you.’

Inside a confined space, a shotgun makes a hell of a bang. My ears hadn’t quite stopped ringing before The Three Designers had stripped down to their suddenly soiled Sloggis. Bang, again! Straight at them this time. They started to jump about as though their pants were on fire, except they weren’t wearing any. They didn’t half look daft in their Raybans and sod all else huddled together in the centre of the Show Ring. Like lambs to the slaughter.

‘Salt,’ shouted a Farmer Giles. ‘Poacher’s Cure. The other cartridges are double powder and shot. You city bumpkins are thicker than pig shit, someone’s been having you on. Cows come with five stomachs. They digest anything; grass, clover, bonemeal, double thickness roofing grade polythene. BSE be buggered, those poor creatures were as high as kites, spaced out of their thick skulls. But you don’t know dick about animals, so bugger off back to the gutters you came from.’

I thought about those cows— what a way to go, seven steps to beautiful bovine heaven. In the Show Ring, the three bollock-naked Designers stood there with the dumb animal-before-slaughter look when they decided to make a bolt for it. In theory rats might be able to run faster, but I’ve yet to see any shift that quick.

The circle of farmers broke open their guns to slip out the cartridges. Two compared notes about mobile phones while picking up a discarded wrap-around to try it on for size under their tweed caps. Outside a police siren wailed.

‘Get a good signal round here?’

‘No.’

‘Me neither.’

‘That’s alright, then.’

Cussed lot, farmers.

I picked up the automatics, to hand them over. You could still smell the very burnt rich fruitcake smell of a recently discharged shotgun.

‘Thanks, son. Fancy some dinner? Ma may’ve remembered the horseradish— oh, keep forgetting, you’ve gone veggie.’

We walked home across the fields: Lyddlminster a dip behind the hill, the wet heavy earth ready for our boots and ploughs. Perhaps I could persuade the old bastard to go organic. Cannabis Indica.

To keep the earth on fire.

The publishers would like to reassure their readers that no animals came to any harm or injury during the making of this story.

First published by Pulp Net (<http://www.pulp.net>)
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/26/heat-of-beasts.html>

This file is for personal reading only. No element of this story may be reproduced, resold or retransmitted in any way without the permission of the author.