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Memory of the Macabre

Miko Yoshida

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Get up, it's time to kill Rhea.

I had agreed the night before to go, not really thinking about what it would entail. Tired, I just wanted to have a quiet morning drinking coffee and opening presents with my family. It was too late now; I didn't really have the option to back out.

On Christmas Day 2006, I was in D'arcy, British Columbia, a small town where my mother, four brothers, and their father lived. The town, if you can call it that, had one gas station with a minimart. Across the street was the community center, where kids would play basketball inside the gym. It smelled of bannok—fried sugar bread—a beloved staple that once put out would disappear in seconds. Next door an abandoned church lingered with boarded up windows, a relic perhaps, of the residential school days. It existed, pallid and alone, its disuse not even worth a demolition. Let it stand there, the town seemed to stay, the ghosts of colonization be damned. The rest of the town was hidden away among the network of gravel roads and dirt trails. Cars sat on lots, like dinosaur bones. Dogs roamed the streets like a neighborhood gang. Everyone knew everyone and every car that rolled by got a head nod or a wave. That's my cousin, my brother would remark as we walked down the icy road, that's my uncle.

That day, there was a fresh layer of snow and my brothers' father told me we were going to go find Rhea and then slaughter her. My mom's free-range heifer had long ago managed to push her pen over and claim all the grass she wanted. Apparently, it was fine; animals would more or less roam around the town, grazing and exploring. Occasionally they'd get a call from a neighbor saying they saw a bear, so it might be good to check on Rhea. Another time two horses made their way into our car port and ate the dog food. They scared the shit out of me when I went to take the trash out.

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We managed to find Rhea and coax her with some whistles and strategic maneuvering into a neighbor's corral. My brothers' father, their uncle, and I made up the killing crew. My two sisters and four brothers tagged along. I wasn't sure why because they were aged seven, five, three, and barely one. My oldest sister was twenty, the other eighteen. They played in the barn nearby as the older men discussed the plan.

In a frag-o style, my brothers' father dictated the plan of execution. First, we would get Rhea into the push pen, which was like cow jail with no room to move. Next, we'd take the hunting rifle and shoot her in the head where a bolt pistol would normally go. It went smoothly to that point. But either we missed the vital part of the brain, or Rhea's will to live was too strong. She bucked herself out of the pen into the corral. Twenty minutes of carnage followed, witnessed by my two young adult sisters and my four baby brothers. Rhea went berserk; the bullet lodged somewhere in her skull activated the primal urge to survive no matter how dire the circumstances. She snorted and moaned, and steam burst from her nostrils as she tried to make sense of her new reality. My brothers' father took the only other tool we had, a butcher knife, and went to slit her neck. But the knife was dull and it took multiple stabs to finally sever the jugular. The neck began to bleed profusely; Rhea became a twisted sprinkler from hell, circling and spilling blood on the fresh white snow. I heard one of my brothers crying but I just stared at Rhea, unable to look away. It took her fifteen minutes to finally lose agency in her legs. She lay down, as if to take a nap atop a blood-covered canvas. After five minutes, my brothers' father went in for the final act of brutality—but maybe also compassion—and definitively ended her life. Rhea's tongue hung out like a ticket at a deli counter.

When we strung her up and cut her open, I had the task of scooping out her insides with my bare hands. First, we tied her colon shut. Then I had to climb inside of her through her

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disemboweled stomach and pull her insides out. It smelled like raw meat that had spent too much time out in the sun. The bowels hit the deck with the force of a human body, and I watched the steam rise as if we'd just put meat on the skillet. The smell of death was like a half-cooked burger.

As brothers and sisters we each witnessed, at different stages of life, what it means to kill an animal for food. One of my sisters swore off meat for a little while. Now one of my brothers is vegan but will eat game meat if he knows the person who killed it. Two of my other brothers are vegetarian. Another one has an affinity for animals and raises horses with his girlfriend. But for me, this was fifteen years ago and I don't remember Rhea every time I bite into a burger.

I think now think about our proximity to the source of a thing, and how time and distance affect it. Newton's law of universal gravitation says that gravitational force is directly proportional to mass and indirectly proportional to distance. In other words, the bigger the mass, the heavier the pull while the greater the distance, the weaker it is. In December 2006, I was within inches, witnessing the death of a 1,000-pound beast. That image stuck with me. I was terrified but resolved to face it, because I thought I had to know how the sausage really gets made. If I had to kill this animal once every few weeks to sustain a meat-filled diet, I don't know if I could do it.

During training, the cadre made us look at gruesome videos. We watched as a 'terrorist' sawed off a human head with a blade. We went through slides of mishaps showing blown off jaws and rebar piercing through a skull. Marine officers passed out in the overheated (maybe purposely) Quantico classrooms. They were ridiculed. I vowed to never lose it, even though my ears grew hot and my palms sweated. I was compelled to tape off that part of my mind, the natural revulsion toward carnage, and stand my ground.

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Then, during live tissue training in some remote orchard in California, we put anesthetized pigs through hell so we could learn how to save lives. We grasped the value of a tourniquet when stopping femoral bleeds and applied chest seals to the unconscious pigs who were shot and stabbed prior to each practical application. During the last phase of torture, unconscious sows lay in the kill house, some with hatchet blows to their skulls, others with shotgun blasts to the gut or with severed limbs to simulate IED damage. We triaged like professionals and evacuated the pigs with the same urgency I'd assume we would have in combat. At the end of the day, all the pigs were put down. We signed consent forms about what we could and couldn't say about it. On the way back, the only place to eat was McDonalds; our platoon piled into the deserted restaurant and ordered the entire menu. I only ordered fries.

Between 2010 and 2013, I was either in Afghanistan, prepping to go there, or just coming back. On my first deployment we took over the Sangin area of operations from the British. I remembered Rhea, who until then was a distant memory, when we started taking casualties. I barely batted an eye when we dragged two of our 'partnered' Afghans out of a house, each of them missing everything from their thigh down. They looked like the top halves of Lego men. It seemed all we had to do was find the missing pieces and put them back together.

When people ask me, I always sanitize the narrative. I make a joke about how I was 'lucky enough' to have experienced the full spectrum of possibilities. Sleeping on the dirt floor inside an Afghan house for days on end to having my own can with AC and Wi-Fi. I talk about eating first strike rations with bread that had the consistency of a chalky sponge, and the metallic flavor of the caffeine gum that came with them. I mention the TGI Fridays in Kandahar and the 'boardwalk' marketplace where you can get Beats headphones for \$20. These anecdotes evoke chuckles and some interest from the people I talk to, but I can tell, it's a different world, far away

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from where they are now. It doesn't really matter what I say. They thank me for my service and they move on. Most people seem unable to question things they've never seen. Most people seem okay with that.

The genius of being able to wage war without having to go yourself, or without having ever gone, is peculiar, much like the ability to sell and eat burgers without having to kill the cow yourself. We don't have to kill what we eat. We don't have to take care of the water around us to drink. We don't have to sew our own clothes to be clothed. We have an ability to choose to separate ourselves from the reality on the ground until at some point, it ceases to even be a conscious choice.