

Sausage · *Stacey Levine*

A FACTORY of upside-down bicycles; this was the way to make sausages; pedaling so quickly with my hands, my feet; never a thought for stopping; unable to know if I was sitting or standing; unaware if the daytime was starting, or ending?

My every muscle was willing; the meat was all ready, well ground, as if chewed, I churned wild circles, miles of bloody brown sausage accumulating beneath my wheels; perhaps I lagged; I was worried, filled with shame; but wasn't my work earnest? Wouldn't I produce to the heavens? My limbs were adept, for squeezing forth sausage in regular shapes, and my fingers strong, too, for each night, very late, I sewed the skins shut with a heavy black thread, knotting it twice to keep everything in—

The Warder entered: huge, circling, judging our production, the condition of our bodies; Yes, I nodded, in answer to everything he said, while sensing, as ever, that I had done something wrong; indeed, the Warder's very presence implied that this was so; he laughed uproariously, for a reason I could not discern, then, in a sudden rage, boomed that our legs were pathetic, weak, weaker than rags; they must be oiled, strengthened, the muscles stretched; he stooped then, massaging my calf with a thick handful of fat, and put his lips to my ear, whispering, "There is a strong chance that this ointment will not help you at all. And I worry, you see, for when your failure occurs, it is my failure too; I depend on you; so, in a sense, does the entire nation; we need sausage; it is now a staple; now, don't suddenly move, or draw attention to yourself; in other words, be true, even-keeled—display high spirits! Don't let your mind stray. Have you ever seen me lose my temper?"

He left, thumping shut the barn door (these buildings were solid, hand-built decades before, twenty stories wide and tall); so churning wildly, I breathed for more sausage; ashamed that my attention ever had wandered; how could it have, with our work being so vitally important?

Sweating heavily at my station, I grew worried again, frightened of failure, and so suddenly, from sheer nervousness, I pushed forth monstrously, producing more sausage than in the entire hour previous; and production was relief, as the Warder had always said; he was right, too; drenched, exhausted, emptied of strength, I decided that I should immedi-

ately change, and learn to selflessly give—of myself, and my body, as if giving a gift—

Though this year had been one of record production; the ninety of us issuing more sausage per day than ever had been achieved; our numbers were steady—incredible numbers, rising daily, so that it became no longer possible to tabulate our work in the usual way; thus newer, higher numbers were found to express our rates, though these numbers themselves became quickly outmoded, outpaced; then, even higher, more superlative symbols were employed, and in approaching the horizon of numbers, the barrier to infinity, we grew giddy, as if on a ride; managers worried, as precise counts were lost; secret meetings were planned, military exercises; yet through it all, an enormous excitement, for, with our bodies, we had produced such fantastic amounts—with the sheer force of our wills, too, our wishes to be good, and with the help of regular punishments—

The meat was always ready, boiled hard, in vats; the skins lay in rows, clean, stretched; everything in order; nothing was the matter—barring, occasionally, a ripple of emotion—anger, or pleasure, churning inside us, as if deep beneath the crust of a mountain—

Our wants were satisfied daily; our mats lay spread in the barn; ten minutes of sleep before each back-to-back shift; to eat, sausage-gruel in huge amounts, and to drink, steaming cups of blood, as much as we liked; ample time, too, to take one of the confused, blurred creatures that wandered these yards, and lead it away for relief in some corner of the dark—

“Good, very tender,” said the Warder, having entered, stooping to test the links with his teeth; “Continue,” he cried, shaking, “Today work for size; tonight, for speed! Achievement, achievement—but I worry that you will not—” then he turned away, dropping his huge, hairy head to his palms, overcome; “My god,” he whimpered, “I can’t manage my own doubt—”

—Alarmed, we pedaled faster, ninety bicycles whirring in place; upon my seat, I pushed harder than ever, continual bursts of dampness like storms at the back of my neck; sausage dropped through the rafters, to the floor in gleaming coils; “Ah,” groaned the Warder, raising his swimming eyes, “you must animate yourselves, don’t fall behind—” So I pressed on, dripping a meat-scented sweat, whispering the highest known numbers to myself—

—For there was nothing else beyond these walls, only the empty town of Nicholls, and beyond that, the silent, wind-soaked plains of “France”; no other nation besides our own, a fact we had learned long ago, in our youths—

During these weeks of stupendous growth, I grew, at certain moments, somewhat cocky, even brash, once slipping from my station, muscles shaking, laughing to myself from sheer tension; I sought a lone, dry corner, swallowing down a piece of beer-soaked bread (having stolen it shamelessly from a nearby trough—an act which, eventually, would weigh gravely upon my list of wrongs); I grew thoughtful, serious, legs apart, thick, powerful; resembling, in these moments, as it happened, the Warder; bellowing tremendously, instantly embarrassed, I struck myself with the back of my fist; then, I heard a whisper spurt through the air, landing hard in my ear, as if mad to get home; this sound was clear, and told me to take charge, as it were, to stop suffering needlessly because of my work; a plan came to me clearly then: I would assume responsibility for all the mistakes, foibles, and wrongdoings of another sausagemaker, now dead.

I had not known this man, but I would now set out to possess all his wrongs: in this way, I saw, my own guilts would be obscured; I would atone for him publicly, thereby winning respect from the management; I would live freely, then, never again burdened by the weight of my actions or their consequences.

So the next morning, early, I went to ask permission, duly, officially, before a panel of porcine judges assembled in the lower barn (chairs stacked high against the rear wall, and stored between each, a thick layer of special winter sausage fully encrusted by salt, meant to nourish the management, keep them warm against the deadly cold); I was vocal; I expressed myself clearly: I wanted to possess the dead man’s wrongs, and repent for him, since I was exemplary—

With the banging of a gavel, they assented, scarcely looking up; it was decided; I was to live the rest of my life atoning for the dead one’s wrongs; now, it was official; now, at every turn, I would be enfolded by his innumerable ill deeds, my own movements free from suspicion, for the first time in my existence—

Such relief! All my life, I had somehow needed this; exuberant, I stepped up to embrace the administrators, judges, and even the mayor, who briefly had stepped in (though in claspings him, my lips brushing his scented beard,

I realized that he was devoid—not numb and overfed, as with diplomats, nor brainwashed, as by religion—but empty, blank, outrageously, of any mental content or register, resembling, even, faintly, a birth monster—and then, from sheer excitement, he mewled, looking to the ceilings, bobbing his head, and everyone laughed, for he was a docile, well-loved man, and filled his post perfectly, I had heard)—

Giddy, I raced toward my station, springing past stalls, careering through aisles, sluice gates, pulling up my pants, invigorated, thrilled by the thought of the dead one and his wrongs, and then, by chance, I passed his pale body in the dim hall, where naked, like others, it was strapped against the wall, embalmed, on display, completely shaven, head dropped down, for he had simply weakened, then died of work, a crime under jurisdiction of both factory and state. Diagrams and arrows, supplemented by a brief text, were printed on his flaccid torso to explain exactly how the veins of his heart had burst and collapsed—this occurrence being entirely due to his own problems—poor habits and disorganization, most probably, it read. Secured in a bottle to his left lay the heart itself, ravaged bloody roots springing from its top; all had been his fault, only his, the tract read, since he had been unable to keep up with the details of work; and misfortunes like these were just part of life, which could happen to anyone, at any time; still, this man’s case was rare, it said, a fact that made everyone thankful and glad; and soon, it went on, there would be a celebration for all living employees, who were all wonderful with detail, and, in general, good; so, as a rule, deaths like these would not occur if we were dependable workers and always produced as much as we could—

Having run all the way, I arrived at my station, nearly forgetting who I was, producing sausage to such delirium, yet luckier than most, I felt; and surely not dead; though perhaps, in fact, the best worker in the place, since I was so wholesome, full of energy, and so completely without wrongdoing that even I was astounded; yet somehow, during the night, I again began to doubt; I checked the list I kept beneath my mat: indeed, I had committed no outstandingly wrong acts, except for the minor infraction of the bread—and this I could explain by saying that I had been seeking to emulate the Warder, and so had needed to eat more and gain weight; surely I would not be punished for this, and so, I decided, for now I was safe—

Jumping to my station, throwing my head back with relish, raising a rough, corrugated stick we often used to show purpose and excitement,

pedaling backward (a trick we knew for making sausages fancier, bloodier, less congealed, stronger in color), I was now perfectly free; now, things were different, my luck holding fast because of the dead one's deeds; no more burden, guilt, or remorse; my wheels raced steadily; below, piglets scrambled across the floors in packs; surely I was good, and produced properly at all possible moments—this being the pride and requirement of our factory and nation—all was fine, I reassured myself, combing my hair, rearranging my smock, forking, when no one was looking, steaming heaps of meat into my mouth—

My neighbor to one side, an elder, wheezing, exhausted, bathed in a dark, slick sweat, raised his head and cried out, “Forget the dead one—your scheme is transparent! It's shameful, this business of racing about as you do, trying to get away with everything you can!”

“I did what I had to do,” I calmly said. “It was an honest impulse; I don't have to explain myself. One thing, though, honestly: I feel better and more vigorous than I ever have. Don't repeat this, but I earned my freedom through cunning, and no one else before me has done that—but then, I was never really part of the common pack. Why don't you stop being petty, and congratulate me? I no longer live as do you, continually constricted and guilty!”

He laughed long and hard, tears streaming down his face. “Your head is in the clouds! No one is here to constrict you, or otherwise make you feel bad. The guilty are guilty because they do not fit in!” he said, and slid from his station, bent, still laughing, wiping his body with a blue rag.

“How do you know this?” I said, gripped with worry suddenly.

“Because I have a bigger heart than you,” he said, standing there naked, pointing to his own chest, digging the finger in hard as if to break the skin. “I know the truth, for I am clean, appropriate, and have never strayed a day from work. Now, you labor for this factory, and for our nation—these being of course exactly the same entity; don't behave as if they were your adversaries! That will ruin you. Instead, just relax; give in to the notion that all is naturally in place. The pressure we all feel is no plot, no one person's fault. It's just a part of a successful life at work.”

I rebuffed him, but in a sense, the old man was right; he had only been trying to prepare me for the next sequence of events, which began a few moments later, when I received, at my station, a strong, sudden message wired from the Manager-in-Absentia, which went like this:

“Just leave it, and let it go. Give yourself the luxury of a few moments’ rest, since soon we will make you do things you don’t want to do at all, and actually make you want to disappear. Do you fear the surprise of learning you are wrong? I hate to shatter your happiness, for I know you are proud. It was nothing in particular, not even your most recent act that brought you into the limelight; it was the accrual of years of your inability to settle down. We will take our time; we will let you know; do you wonder what will happen? Now, repeat the word ‘fiasco’ after me, over and over; repeat it now, in dialect precisely as is mine, not—I warn you—in parody; repeat it honestly, and with effort, because—and this is God’s truth—there is a job now available in the mountain district, and in order to be considered for it, you must be able to successfully reproduce a mountain accent, not just once, but consistently, in a variety of circumstances.”

All this, contained in the crumpled message, was followed by a second, more recent note, saying the job in the mountains was still open, though it might soon close, and that this would be an excellent position for anyone with talent, it read, like me, and with the ability to blend in imperceptibly with anyone or anything.

My neighbor, now back at his station, bathed in rivers of sweat, lunging, straining for sausage, about to faint, leaned toward me, whispering hoarsely, meat on his breath, “Tear up the message! And let me tell you the most important thing!”

At which point a lean figure entered the barn, rolling the fainted man away, smiling, wiping his hands, clapping three times, then saying, “You should stop behaving in ways that belie your unconscious.”

“But I’m not,” I said.

“Oh, yes you are! You’re completely transparent—”

“Who are you?” I said.

“I am Rolf,” he answered, “but that doesn’t matter. In fact, it’s important that you know little about me. But I care about you, and so will say this: in taking on the dead man’s guilt, you have displayed your troubles as if the workplace were a theatre—very inappropriate, and what’s more, you don’t seem to realize it. Which in itself is important, for it shows us that you cannot see life as it really is, but only as you experience it—including your feelings about me—hesitation and distrust, I believe, and only because my clothes are smart and pressed, which you sophomorically perceive as some kind of threat—

“Nothing exists but your own broken desire, come, come. What is taking on the guilt of another? It is hiding, in fact, from the responsibilities we really must carry. Don’t worry; I am the sole person who knows of this. Now, don’t pretend; you are not going to walk away; where would you go, in the middle of ‘France?’ I know, for example, that you have frequent, sudden urges to ingest sleeping tablets—that is not permitted. Sorry! Back to work,” he said, “on sausage, and your problems; begin a résumé, too, answering the question: ‘have you ever in your life been dismissed or fired?’—for all hiring managers are universally righteous; employees are not, and in order to hire new men, employers must have true, exact accounts of what before has happened, grounding present judgments soundly on past circumstance.”

He turned and left; my knees collapsed; ashamed now, exposed, and twice as much as before; the dead man’s guilts were no protection against this Rolf; I clutched myself, running through the yards, embarrassed to disbelief, for it was true, I loved to sleep, but had such difficulty in achieving it; I entered the storage cellars, piglets galloping, screaming overhead; bending to search the crease of my smock, I found the tablet neatly hidden there; I swallowed it, and fell to sleep, dreaming of knives that ran in organized legions, each with a short, distinct, Christian name, Gore, for example; fear saps one’s strength like nothing else; waking the next day, I was wracked, worried about achievement, about never catching up, or living the rest of my life in the margins, among the ranks of the unproductive; I was immobile, too, unaccustomed to refuting the likes of Rolf, but instead, all my life, in school and throughout, had always obeyed clear instructions (or else furtively enacted the precise opposite of these, for which I was always summarily found out and punished); but now, I could not think, hating myself and my weaknesses, my failed plan to escape guilt and become another; hating, for a moment, the entire factory, and even our nation—

Though receiving, suddenly, a rushed message, delivered to my station, curiously, by crow—this due, perhaps, to the lateness of the hour, or the shutdown of electricity in patterned on-off intervals—not meant at all gratuitously, we were told, but in a playful spirit, instead, to invite decipherment of such patterns, to strengthen our minds and keep them alert—this message informing of a special tax to be computed relative to the amount of sausage I produced; and after a year, I would be charged multiple

payments, and also a tax upon my legs, and on the bicycle I used; I was wild with fury, blowing out a great wind of screams, clattering through the slaughter area, sweeping entire sets of tiny wrenches from their shelves, stabbing the air, inhaling whole dust clouds; forced to give up what I earned, loath to do so, shamed still more that I did not have the sum to pay; arms windmilling, hurling clots of mud to the ceilings—but suddenly I stopped; yes, of course I would pay the tax, I thought mincingly, but not the precise amount; just a few cents less, or even more, as I chose; only this, to cause irritation and disfigure the accounts; and regardless of these thoughts, I still loved our nation, of course; and wanted to achieve, as the Warder admonished; so did everyone, the managers, and even Rolf; we wanted to achieve, and contribute, and of course be good; otherwise, everything here might grow diffuse and dissolve, and then we would have no nation at all—

Sprinting up ladders, past gristle bags, buckets of swash, plundered mattresses, I aimed for my station, producing sausage faster than ever, then jumping down, stuffing barrels full, grabbing the handles and hurrying toward the greeting center, so anxious to do well, driven as never before, going to the bathroom in the middle of the hall, turning around, hands warmly extended to customers now streaming from their cars, all of them buying and eating hugely of sausage, voracious, hardworking people, I am sure, big as houses, cheering at anything, singing while driving on their vacations, nostalgic for times that never existed; bearing sausage away on their backs to trailers, laughing, whooping, whipping the air three times with their fists, growing impatient, demanding satisfaction, so running back to my bicycle, I produced just that—sausage, pouring forth at its freshest, to be consumed within moments by unknown persons—

Angry, perhaps, though most of all, I was deeply ashamed—for myself, and for everything that ever had been, for miscalculating miniscule details of my movements that the Manager-in-Absentia might somehow see, for taking on the guilt of another, trying to lose myself in order to be more free, for not having known the notes of the scales, nor the geography of Madeira; ashamed, too, before Rolf, who seemed to know my every thought, running to his flimsy, molding desk on the dock to update careful weekly notes, though every afternoon, coming to fetch me at the abandoned schoolyard where I ran the miles-high tor to strengthen my limbs, calling

to me from across the field (concerned, paternal, I desperately wished), “Did you vomit blood?”—his coat flapping fiercely in terrifying wind—

—Nowhere else to go beyond these quiet streets of Nicholls, or, beyond that upon the empty plains of “France”; no one at all, especially not the elusive *Warder-in-Absentia*, nor his assistant, an accountant who pounded across the wooden floors, disingenuously tipping her pencil in salutation, running, leaping upon her boss to suckle; disengaging, then racing back to her underlings to convince them she was real, pleading, “I am an accountant! And charmed by your masculinity, I’m sure!—For it gives me something to work with; I know this territory well; now wait, while I excite you, just to gain control—” nor even her administrative equal, though she would not believe it, a beefy, sluggish bureaucrat, who, slumping unattractively at his desk, rasped during the night, “No! I cannot talk to you now!” though he feverishly imagined protracted, cruel conversations, purple-faced, trudging in circles around a toilet, saying his own name out loud in a kind of power fantasy; huge lungfuls of breath; expelling joy from his mouth at the very idea of commanding dirty creatures down the aisles and to work; soon to have his voice function as does a telephone, connected to every room by wire; connected, eventually, into the very natures of all people, which would bring everything to perfection, really, for him, the omniscient administrator, with his own clannish team of clerks, now all of them ready for golden promotion, and promoted they would be, without question—

While the entire group, along with Rolf, hands folded, eyes moistly beckoning, called, “Come, come, what is this nonsense, we sympathize; we’re friends; we want to understand, so that you are no longer beleaguered by your own tendencies; never mind the bread; but as for the tablets, we know they are hidden in your smock; we know you want to use them to leave your body and become inert, but frankly, at the precise moment that we discovered them, those tablets became ours; that is—the movement is smoothly complex—for us, knowing is the same as a swift, confiscating action, like an algorithm we compact until it behaves exactly as we want; all is settled; we have the tablets and you do not; do not sleep; instead, let’s now talk, and examine your mind as it is put forth in the texts, the ways you misperceive the world due to your own defensiveness, all the bad things you imagine we do to you; each rather unconnected to the truth—do you feel a roiling in the soul now, that comes from remaining unchanged? Say

‘please’; let us now look at all the shame you’ve ever endured, and collect it together as in a little half-shell, so you can feel it all at once, along with the fallacies to which you cling, and then, perhaps, you will see yourself more clearly, and something important can be achieved—”

“We will learn why you chose to take on the guilt of another, and tried to be more free, and tried, sometimes, to escape into sleep, with the white tablets you so cunningly ground into powder—as if we could be fooled—! As if we would believe they were, perhaps, tooth cleanser—?”

Tearing through the yards, I slammed into the cellar, panting, motionless, peering all night through the weephole and into the slaughtering barn, waiting for a clear space for which I might run, straight to the lower barns where administrators, standing puzzled, would watch me rocket forwards and back, bursting upon myself like a broken bomb, as they always knew would happen, for I was always, utterly, and completely found out, forever entrenched in Nicholls, here on the silent plains with nothing at all beyond—and we knew this as fact—

“—Considering everything, you’re doing quite well,” Rolf said. “We were waiting for this to happen; you will come around and soon be better; don’t fuss; and soon, it’s back to work, for you’ve missed far too much, but can make it up if you really push—”

And looking straight at me, though I was still concealed behind the door, he stepped forward, wagging his finger, gently speaking through the hole, “Come out, come out, time to greet the customers, for they are here now—”

—Which they were, packed into their cars, men of five hundred pounds begging for sausage, collapsing as they emerged, crying out, “This country is my best friend,” and “Our beliefs are literally part of the land!”—demanding that nothing ever diverge from our clear, accustomed ways of life and truth—though before leaving, many of them pulling me aside, whispering, “Please, before we go back, let me service you just once, upside down, flat on your back; then, holding you still, just once again—”

But all of that was long ago; in the days before this most astonishing year, we ran from the remotest wood-cracked rooms and halls to the indices attached to all street signs of the town, each of which said, “You are in ‘France,’—take care, don’t stray, keep robust; this is the land of enormous plenty; someday, certainly, you will get your due, but for now, check yourself daily; look toward sausage, and the truth”—these placards we

shattered; now, they are forgotten; it is five o'clock on the huge, slanting plaza; the crowds have gathered to celebrate, refusing all news that protest is unwarranted—and still we do not know who or what is victorious, or if that is even the pertinent question; I am not who I once was; kiosk windows fall open, knots of people expand, newsgirls shout, "It is nine o'clock, and due to a rather global pressure, a motion has been passed for the work day to be called off! The popular forces demand it; all manner of change will be discussed; we will wait, then decide our course, but for now, there is everything to do and see; go to your windows; did you not know it?—Look at all the people who are willing to join us—"

This was our nation, the true nation, after all; we thought we had no home, but in fact, we do; the commotion will continue; push your stockings down, loosen your underclothes and belt; in the War of Independence, doors on the plaza opened, and ten thousand dark-cloaked bicycle riders emerged, legs outstretched, heading for the clock tower, gliding as if upon amber, an exalted whisper on everyone's brain, unique and indescribable, like the birth of each new child: "Here are our desires; here are still more, such as we know"; deepest relief, since our voices' true sounds were heard; a great, healthful confusion has arisen; here is what we wish for; here is what we never had; by dawn, we will have unravelled the worst, and stamped down the rest; let me be with them, let me begin to learn; someday, will I have grown? Will my fears dispel? Will I have my own wife? At the millenium, who will I be? Will we have kept our gains? Soon to come are uncountable storms; the blackness of the air is invigorating, though—