

THE HOOK

Zach Webb

The morning is damp with silence again. Wet fog hangs low above the field, burying the parallel road and weathered farm fence in a sea of white, so that I can only hear the passing farm trucks. I want to look away, put my mind elsewhere, like I usually do while working with my grandfather, but chalky hands of cloud block me in. We walk solemnly from the house along the old pebbled path, where years ago he had hoisted me on his shoulders to inscribe my name on a tree. I am only about eight at this point, but I know what Death smells like, and this morning reeks of it.

Dew clings to the bottom of borrowed farm-work trousers, too big for me. The sky and sun are forgotten memories. There's no turning back. My Grandfather hasn't explained where we are going, but somehow I know. Dutifully marching with him, but knowing that the only thing keeping me from running back to the fireplace inside is the feel of my worn clothes, my belonging to some stoic tribe of men before me.

We turn the corner around a sturdy oak, and a sharp grey slaughterhouse looms at the back of the old wooden barn. My heart sinks a little, and my clothes feel heavier. He hobbles round the back to the heavy metal door and leans on his farm-staff, silent, expectant. The creak of its rusted hinges screams, driving my hands to my ears. He catches my weakness sternly and beckons me silently to the adjoined pen.

Clouds of wool clamber to the fence, expecting food. My grandfather steps back: the choice is mine. Today I am Death. I walk back and forth, inspecting each sheep, hoping to find someone deserving. A rough, manly one eyes me angrily. The bully. If anyone were to die, it should be him. I look up at Grandpa, but he shakes his head gravely. I'm still scanning, looking for someone. In the very middle, I see the most beautiful sheep I've ever seen. A glorious lamb. Milky white fleece and hopeful amber eyes. This sheep has to be from another world, believe me. He glows with impossible pureness, innocence, a light amongst the dirt, mud, and rust. For a moment, I forget why we came, and just relish in it. All the other lambs are suspicious, probably remembering missing friends. But he's still leaning on the fence, hopeful, innocent. I imagine him frolicking across some divine field, sky aflame and soft grass brushing his legs as he runs.

My scene crumbles as my grandfather clears his throat behind me. The morning is white again, and that smell wafts in from somewhere. He clambers over to the gate and, clasp my lamb by his throat scruff, yanks him through. I know he can never go back, and I hate him for it. How dare he choose that one. Just to spite me? I can barely contain my rage watching my grandfather lead him. Lord knows that sheep is perfect. I feel the hate rising to the top of my sternum, ready to erupt. The sheep looks back at me knowingly, talking with its condemned eyes; "It's okay." Stomping back down to that unholy metal altar, I put my hand on his fleece and run my dirty fingers through his woollen curls. My tears land on his back and sink.

Blotches of orange and red pattern the interior tin panels of the killing chamber. Grandad says it's just rust from the moisture. A deeper crimson stains the floor, and I don't have to ask about that. A hook hangs chandelier-style from the ceiling, ominous, sharp, terrifying. It's rancid with Death in here; stewing in anticipation of the slaughter. I have to stick my head out for fresh air, and so I don't have to watch my grandfather roughly hang him up.

He wiped off the hook, and we never spoke of it again. Years later, the rusted iron still scrapes at the back of my brain. I see his eyes in my sleep. I always wonder if my lamb knew somehow what was going to happen to him, if that would make it better. Something about the way he looked down at me from that hook made me think he had known his destiny long before I arrived. Those innocent, curious, childish eyes now dusted with sorrow, forsaken. As the knife raised to his throat, still, he did not remove his eyes from me; bruised and beaten with Death, but alive and hopeful. His eyes looked sorry, but when I remember back now, I'm almost certain they weren't sorry for him. They were sorry for me.