Up for work

It was the job that found us. Not one you'd go looking for. Teenaged brothers at a loose end for a week before Christmas, on school holidays. Daddy said we had work. No questions asked. Handy we thought, a ten-minute cycle from home at Carniny to Galgorm Parks - the townland of my grandmother's birth.

We were always up for work. We had been brought up to it. Whether picking spuds from the cold autumn clay on some farm outside the town, or the multitude of jobs we grew into at Granny and Granda's farm in Leitrim, or for me working in one of Ballymena's many shops.

Here there was no job application, no cv. There was no interview. No chance to ask questions. Working conditions? Career prospects? It was a small chicken factory, its block walls and corrugated asbestos roof bursting out of its small-farm beginnings. The boss was a farmer, and a businessman, I was later to discover. He was also an elder in our church - a spiritual leader - like daddy.

"Tommy?" I guess he asked, "I have a place for your two lads for a week before Christmas, if they're interested. It's very busy coming up to the holidays. I need the extra help."

Daddy would never have turned him down; in deference to his air of confidence, the hint of authority that seeped from him, a man with ambitions. I guess that if daddy had been a solicitor or a teacher he wouldn't have been asked. Or if he had been, it would have prompted him to find some alternative, rather than have us spend our week before Christmas, killing and gutting chickens.

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Johnny - name changed and imagined.

'Johnny, you're not the full shillin, son.' Me Da used to say regular. 'But there'll always be work for ye. Always wans want ye. Tell me if they ever rough ye up tae much.' They did, when A was young. But A never tauld him. A learned tae handle meself. When A lost me temper something happened tae me. All A knew was everyone scattered. An A was left standin on ma own. A did a lot of that, standin on ma own. A know they all thought a was soft in the heed. A just saw things different.

A worked in a wee chicken factory for a wheen a years. Course they gave me all the jobs nobody else wanted. A knew that. Cept when new ones come in. They did them fur a while – shovelling blood intae bins, loadin the lorry for the weekly dump, boys that was bad, specially in heat o summer. Thosens there thought a felt nothin doin that work. A did. A didnae like the place, just got used tae it. We all got used tae it. A was nae different.

The wemen groped me. A didnae mind it, most o the time. First thing in the morning. The smell of fresh soap still on me. Afore the stink of the place had soaked into me, into them all. Sometimes across the gutting table they would wink at me. Obvious like. The rest o them watchin. The big one, Joan, she would hauld her hands wide apart like A was *that* big, her pretendin tae be shocked. A always started tae laugh, giggle, couldnae stop. Then everyone started up. A had tae go and stand on ma own for a while. Till a settled.

A was the one who slit the throats of every chicken that went through the place – well most o them. A'll tell about that in a minute. An them birdies endin up on all the fancy tables frea here tae Belfast. They didnae know A had me hands on them.

The line worked maybe every other day. A used to sit on me plastic chair, way me three or four sharp knives. It was a kinda dull corridor, the flur made tae catch the blood. The line of stunned birds hangin upside down comin at me like there was no stopping them. There *was* no stopping them. When a cut their throats the blood spilt over ma white plastic gown and boots, japinn me face as well.

Well, one day A fell asleep. In ma chair. A didnae know it. The chickens movin on past me. A woke tae a wile roarin. Heeds lookin at me from either end of that bloody corridor, all gulderin and laughin. The line had stopped. The birdies were waking up in the scaldin water doon the line frea me. The chickens in front a me hangin upside doon, swinging about at all angles. Took me A while tae come tae ma senses. Tae know where A was. They never let me forget that day.

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Working in a chicken factory teaches you a lot about life and death, class and capitalism. The look of it, the smell of it. I had been with Granny as she dispatched chickens and geese for Sunday dinners, helped pluck them, and was familiar with the messy nature of life and death on farms, but this was different, the noise, the scale, the smell.

It was a temporary job that I never put on my CV, but one that my brother and I kept up the following summer and for a couple of years afterwards. That first year we gave all our earnings to our mother. Later when I had my driving licence, I jumped at the chance to deliver the oven-ready chickens around the war-torn streets of Belfast; ignoring the added danger of an old backfiring Transit van. I had escaped from that putrid place.

There was always a smell, always worse in summer. Blood and guts, and feathers, going off in bins that should've been taken to the dump days before. There was a putrid mix of chicken shit and viscera that the powerful hoses and no volume of water could ever eradicate. But you got used to it. When you arrived in the morning you donned a long white cape and boots and the world was transformed. When you got home you dropped your stinking clothes in the garage.

Johnny had something different about him, 'especially challenged' you might say now, and at the time he got some vicious slagging. I knew him from the Boy's Brigade, our regimented church youth club. Generally, he got along well with everyone, but we knew that when he lost his temper it was best to stay well clear of him. He was strong as an ox and could do severe damage. Sometimes when he stood on his own after some incident or other, looking flat and lost, you wanted to give him a hug and tell him it was alright. But you never did. In the small factory when he put on his white waterproof gear and with a slight sway to his walk, he reminded you of a white penguin; that was until he became splattered in blood from head to foot.

Within earshot of the squawking, flapping birds being fixed upside down on the line, Johnny bled the stunned chickens. He sat in a chair, his boots in the pooled blood, drawing his knife across their throats as they moved in front of him. Further along the chickens were

submerged in scalding water, before rubber flails would remove most of their feathers. Four or five of us stood on inverted milk crates to pluck the rest of the wet feathers.

One day someone screamed “Stop the line!” after the birds had started to show signs of life when they were being beaten with the flails. The line jerked to a sudden stop as the chickens swung wildly. We ran to where Johnny was sitting. He had fallen asleep, head to the side, arms dangling, palms open, under the line of swinging birds.

The boss called us around a wide stainless steel eviscerating table one afternoon, empty except for a weighing scale and a knife. About ten of us spread out around three sides of the table. He was a tall heavy-boned man, well spoken, who carried his ownership easily, nothing overtly aggressive. Mind you, when he let out a roar at us, all heads would turn. He pulled on a white coat from a wrack on the wall, picked up a knife and flashed it across a sharpening steel. The way you see butchers do it. Second nature. Delicate sweeps of the blade to sweeten the edge. Peter, his gaffer, set a chicken on the table, chilled and headless. With a firm hand on the chicken, the boss slipped the knife into its back end, deftly cutting a U under the bishop’s nose, like we’d been shown. He inserted his hand and drew the entrails out in one sweep, then checked to see if the cavity was clean. He dropped the hollow carcass on the bench, for effect maybe. Nothing new here. He hadn’t said a word, though all eyes were on him.

“Now. Watch!” He said pulling out the back-end flap and holding the attached piece of fat between finger and thumb. He cut it off. “That's what you're all doing,” The fat landed on the scales with a splat. “One ounce,” he paused. “Peter, how many we killing a week?”

“Four and a half thousand a week. More coming up to Christmas, say six.”

“Let's take four and a half thousand a week, by one ounce. What’s that in pounds?” he asked, knowing the answer. “Just under three hundred pounds of chicken. At seventy-five pence a pound that’s about two hundred and thirty pounds a week. Two hundred and thirty pounds a week I’m losing!”

“But’s just fat,” somebody started.

“That’s the point, it's not just fat! It's the same price as the rest of the chicken. You know what’s in your pay packets. And you know how many of yous that would pay. A whole lot. So, leave that wee bit of fat on there for God sake! I don't want to go through this again.”

And now, as sure as Karl Marx wrote Das Kapital, every time I cook a chicken, there it is, at the back end, a useless flap of fat, that no one needs, but that we all pay for.

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