

Dead Sheep

Short story by **Allison Fine**

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This morning at 8 am I open my door. The floors are wood and they squeak. Outside my door stands a woman dressed to clean the stove in Poltava, Ukraine, 1875. Persecution and Russification have done its duty on her face. Around her head she has twisted an ugly, dirty printed cotton *shmatta* some might call a scarf. She may have been shot. I think it might be a head wound. You can never be sure about these things.

-The guy next-door thinks you're a lunatic, she says in Russian, which I just happen to understand. She has Balto-Slavic undertones. I find this amusing.

-You play your trumpet all night—the same three notes. It's driving us crazy.

-Who's the guy next door?

-What difference does it make? He hates you.

I look down at her feet.

-I don't like your shoes.

She points a finger at me. Her hands are like large potatoes with claws.

-Watch out. You think being a man is a biological fact? She turns away and clomps down the stairs in her ugly, brown shoes.

I already know her history. It is bleak. And her future—well—she appears to be a friend of Stalin. Although he is dead. And I know, without a doubt, that I do not own a trumpet.

Closing the door I hear the sound of partygoers outside my window. They are just coming home at 10 o'clock in the morning. It feels like the fermentation of a Mongol invasion. So, they have obviously partied their asses off all night, focusing primarily on their urges. I have an urge to pillage them, plunder their women and wipe my face with sheep's blood. Instead, I open the window and shout:

-I am from the bloodline of the Kipchak Khans!

-Are you fucking crazy dim-watt?

I shut the window.

I was born a man but I am a politically correct woman.

Sheep's blood gets on my brain and I mull it around for a while. What's in slaughtering sheep? Where is the challenge? They have no brain, they follow along as sheet are wont to do, even when you throw them to the ground they don't struggle. It's only when—the knock at the door again. What's with these people?

This time it is someone else.

-Hello. I am Kathleen H. Good.

-What does the "H" stand for?

-Horrible, she says.

-Well—there is nothing much to say for that.

-Ich mochte mich in der Freude an Ihrer Penis aalen.

-I don't know German, I tell her.

-You got one word, didn't you?

-Yeah.

I shut the door on 'horrible'. If I had a trumpet I would blow it. Back to sheep. It's only when the knife cuts the throat and the sheep smells his own blood that the fighting begins. He knows his own death. And he doesn't want it. By then it's too late. Then you have to drag it from the pool of blood to cleaner ground. Then you strip the skin from the back legs and hang the body up with a stick between the back legs. Then carefully, oh so carefully, you begin to strip the skin off. After getting off the skin you open the sternum. After this you begin sorting the good organs from the bad organs.

Feelings of profound empathy come over me. I could touch myself I am so bathed in the glee of self-appointed integrated worldwide compassion. It is my job to fight for the unfortunate! But sheep will be slaughtered in any event, no matter what.

I sit down at the small three-legged table an ex-girlfriend left here. She moved all her stuff out, her Old Navy shirts, the silly and weird skirts with non-matching purses from Target, the multi-layered colored things that draped themselves all over my bedroom and the bathroom for three months while she decided whether this relationship was going anywhere, whether I was going anywhere and of course the answer was no, no one was going anywhere, at least not where she imagined she wanted to go, and the aggravation of constantly shifting boredom did us both no good. We simply substituted the boredom of being alone with the boredom of being alone with someone else. It was a rotten three months and the sexual aspect of it did nothing but make me horny for the real thing.

Yes, one might conclude I suffer deeply. The suffering, predicated on memory, myth and imagination, haunts me with an unpleasant consciousness and further, a deep

fear that others will see through my hypocrisy. And let us not forget, no small part of my suffering has to do with the slaughter of sheep. I know this, but I keep it to myself. Killing a sheep is an ancient rite; we must not rattle the cage with circumstantially driven stories about animal rights. Animals have no rights. Humans have no rights. Rights do not enter into the consideration at all. We are screaming our bloody heads off up until the moment we die and that's it. I walk over to the 3-legged table to write this all down before I lose it. Underneath a magazine I see a tiny little newsletter sent me by mistake. Something about "incarnating your creative authority." This makes me curious, although I guess even before I read it that it has a lot to do with psychic, spiritual and earthly resources and it will probably plunge me into grief about my inability to generate power and money and my codependence on the kindness of strangers. I always have a feeling of dread when I approach newsletters like this because I know my own comparatively stupid and weak gestalt will be no match for the self-development they attempt to fertilize. My soil is blank! I conclude and then, of course, there is a knock at the door.

But just before the knock at the door, I think about the sheep.

The graphic nature of animal slaughter is no longer part of our everyday life, but I witnessed in Romania where men (and some women) still get their meals by slaughtering, picking, pruning and digging for it. Everyday they deal with life and death and suffering—for these farmers it is simply the circle around and around again. Man has Dominion over the animals; we know this. The power of this Dominion demands that we sacrifice ourselves at the altar of Fear and what greater fear do we have but fear of death? And so, we give it to others—this death; the blood of the lamb. We can

go into the Paschal lamb later. When we drink the sheep's blood we are drinking the blood of fear.

When you pull the intestines out of the sheep hanging by its sternum, one must be very careful so as not to rupture the organ and create a nasty smell. This is a smell no one wishes to remember. It stays on your clothes and your skin and your hair for a very long time. It is not the sort of smell that brings women over to you with desire. Sheep intestines and *eros*—not a good mix. At this point in time one must remind oneself that this collection of skinned organs, drained of blood, was once an animal because it does appear very much like a thing.

Are the sheep conscious of their slaughter?

This is the question I cannot answer, but since I have observed their panic at the smell of their own blood, I would conclude that at some level they know the end is near, and yet they still hope for freedom. Perhaps 'hope' is too complex an emotion to attribute to sheep, but I have a tendency to anthropomorphize anyway, so why not sheep? Even my beloved 3-legged table throws out quips on occasion. For instance;

*-You'll never get **that** published!* was a quip I heard from the table yesterday.

I had been writing a sheep poem:

*You rebelled with a positive snap
Your neck was broken
I truly missed you
The bleats unspoken.*

This will be a quatrain and I haven't finished it yet so the table doesn't know what he's talking about. Even my table has gender.

Now onto the knock at the door.

A beautiful man who looks like a famous artist stands at the door. Or perhaps he is a sheep killer with attractive silver hair in a cashmere blend topcoat.

-There's good news and bad news, he says.

-Yes?

-The bad news is that there is seven years of famine ahead.

-No sheep?

-No shit. The good news is that there is no good news.

-That's not good news.

-I know. I'm sorry.

I feel like inviting the man in for nothing else than he is the worst joke teller in the universe. But I am prohibited from practicing compassion. I'd rather kill sheep. I slam the door on him and a piece of his cashmere blend coat gets caught in the door. I reach for a pair of scissors on the 3-legged table and cut off the piece as a souvenir for his bad joke. I know I am a sheep killer but it does me no good to reflect on it. There is no solid truth to life; in fact we are all wading in a pool of vague ideas that have labels on them. Labels like: hurt, simple, truth, vanity, virginal, crotchety, bloated—these kinds of visual images make a gallery of distortion I revel in. I go to my table to write this down but comes—you guessed it—a knock at my door. I open it and there stands the man in the cashmere coat.

-You cut my coat, he says.

-Yes, but better I cut your coat than cut your throat, I tell him.

-I don't find that reassuring.

-I don't think you do. But have you ever witnessed the slaughter of a sheep?

-Look, he says, his hands held palm up as if in supplication, could we start over?

From where I stand there is no middle and no end, so how can there be a start?

-Where's the piece of my coat? He is getting agitated, I can tell, and I see the ragged edge of his coat where I cut the piece off. The imperfection of it reminds me of—what? The truth? Perhaps not. Rattling the cage, I must ask him—are there legal rights for animals?

-I've written a book about it, he tells me, walking into my place uninvited. People deal with property as things, even when this property is alive.

-I've been dealt with that way, I tell him and hand him the ragged square of cashmere I cut from his coat.

-Thank you, he says. Things--things possess passion! Even rocks. Their emotional content is just—slower than ours.

-Well, how can you frame that? I mean, a rock can't make an oral argument for itself.

-Of course. At least, not an argument we can understand. But some people say they can hold certain rocks and experience the consciousness and thoughts of those who held those rocks before them—many thousands of years before.

-I don't believe that, I tell him.

-You haven't got much hope, he says. The Stones cry out! Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, people don't listen. They never learned to listen to each other, for God's

sake—so, I don't I suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees; sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about sex. I have a giant fir tree outside my apartment, at the back, and we talk all the time—she tells me how hard a day she's having, or how good or whatever, and sometimes she just tells me I'm beautiful.

-Do trees have gender?

-Who cares! He explodes, there's really nothing you can say in universal Western concepts that is going to make a lot of sense! So you can forget about trying, except I do. I keep on trying. What's the matter with me?

-You want some water? I ask.

-No. I've had enough, he tells me, I should be going. Anthropologists would probably call this "animism", a view that is accepted by a great many people in the field of religion. We are put in a cultural evolutionary framework, and then we are supposed to move from animism to some great abstract conception of one god! Lord, we are stupid! Science describes things at a level of abstraction; by leaving out of account a whole range of properties that these so-called things have, such as color, beauty, consciousness—whatever! This is for many a very useful procedure, but it does not follow that the properties with which science concerns itself are more real than those it leaves out. Rocks talk! Yes, I am aware that this is an audacious claim made in the context of late modernity (or even post-modernity, if you insist) and in the context of a world indelibly marked by the accomplishments of modernism—whatever--modern shit is what I'd call it!

He suddenly stops.

-I'm done.

-Go on, I say.

-I can't he tells me, and neither can you.

-Probably not. How will you repair that coat?

-I'm working on it. Could I have a glass of water before I go?

-Sure. I get him a glass of water. As he drinks it I can see the clearness of the water in the glass reflecting a rainbow of colors from the sun coming through my window. Prussian Blue, Alizarin Crimson—the artists pallet of color coming through the tedious window looking out onto the street where now some of my neighbors sit on their stoops smoking, chatting, looking colorless and vague as they stare out into the street. I am staring at the man.

-Your name?

-What matter? He tells me. I am going. I don't think, to your credit, that you really are conscious of what you're doing so I don't blame you for thoughtless acts. He leaves, the square of cashmere in one hand, his body moving with some kind of grace toward the door, the hallway, down the stairs, out into the day which has turned cooler and driven the stoop sitters inside, except for a few of the die-hards and the regulars.

Is sheep murder a thoughtless act? I write in the notebook on my 3-legged table. People who slaughter things are not always wrong are they? Inside of this thought nestles another thought but I am not grasping it—elusive, small, vague; it threatens to

incarnate itself as frustration if I don't grab it, but I cannot. Some thoughts remain beautiful, fabricated or misrepresented, or not even thoughts at all.

There is a knock at the door but I do not answer it.

The sky is darkening. I see the shoes of the person underneath the door in the space between the door and the floor. I can hear the pause, the shuffle and the clearing of the throat of whoever stands there. Perhaps it is the Russian woman or Miss Horrible or someone else, but I don't care.

An entire day has passed.