



SILAS KAUFMANN

# No Small Thing

By TOM McMILLAN

**B**AXTER WAKES IN the cab of his truck, right there in the slaughterhouse parking lot. He swings both feet out the door right as his forehead splits open. Sweet Jesus. Baxter groans and vomit splashes the gravel, soaking his boots. Men snicker nearby. Waking up 20 feet from work probably counts as lucky, but Baxter knows that luck is just a lie they tell kids in movies. Luck never made his life no better. Can't see it starting now.

Ahead, people are streaming into the slaughterhouse, big-bellied men and lanky women in rubber boots. Baxter should join them but doesn't. Deep in his brain he feels memories barking like dogs in the dark and knows that he needs to lie down, get some sleep, but the air reeks of manure and his head is pounding and he's nearly late. Should've never started at Western Meatpacking, should've never let Donny Markesan run that line about performance bonuses and job security. Bonuses? Baxter hasn't seen a raise in years.

Outside, cows jostle in dusty pens. Necks bent, noses low. Calm for now, but once that intake gate opens, a hundred and fifty head will start banging against one another, bellowing, tails swishing, sensing danger but too dumb to stop it. Baxter never liked cattle. Popping the glove box, he chases Percocet with leftover Pepsi, then hip-checks the door. Easy, boy. You got this.

A/C is blasting inside the slaughterhouse today. Baxter trails behind a couple of men he doesn't recognize. Two hundred workers on the day shift alone now, still mainly Cambodians but more white faces show up every day since oil prices bottomed out. The

party's over in Alberta, and he can't help hating these newbies' clean boots and eager rush to the processing line.

"Yo, big boy," Ricky calls from the balcony, vinegar in his eyes, "you were tripping out last night."

Ricky's full of shit, so Baxter flips him the finger. Even if he had a bad trip, it was probably Ricky's rat poison that did it. For a second, Baxter thinks about stopping and asking what exactly happened last night, but security cameras watch everything so he keeps moving down the line. Even with earplugs, the kill floor is a roar of screeching pulleys, clacking hydraulics, banging compressors. Above the drop chute, a toaster-shaped machine

The Percocet isn't working. Got to level off. Last night's whisky and coke are still mangling his brain, but there's no time now. The chute door slides open and a black Angus stumbles forward. Baxter leans in, presses the captive-bolt gun to its forehead, fires. Most cattle drop straight down, blood bubbling out the indent left from the steel bolt, but this one slams back against the door, bellowing until Baxter shoots again.

Blood's in the air now. The other cattle start pissing themselves in fear and a bitter ammonia stench fills the kill floor. He gags a little. Each time a cow falls, two guys grab it from below, cuff a chain around the carcass and hoist it onto the line.

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dangles from the ceiling. He grabs it, a memory flooding in of playing cops and robbers with Cassi years ago in Miller Park.

That memory's too cheerful, too optimistic. Baxter grinds his boots into the metal grating. He watches the chute, waiting for the buzzer to scream, for that first cow to drop. Knocking, they call it. A funny name for killing cattle.

"NEVER MET ANYONE WHO could handle knocking for more than a couple years," Donny told him during the job interview.

Two decades later, Baxter's hands tremble as the buzzer sounds and cattle start rumbling up the curling ramp.

Knock and wait; knock and wait. The steady rhythm lulls him until last night starts coming back in trickles: drinking at the Barley Mow, snorting lines with Mason and Ricky, and, wait, banging on Cassi's blue front door. Baxter almost drops the captive-bolt gun. Why visit his cranky daughter's house? Why now? When a runty Shorthorn, 70 pounds dripping wet, limps out of the chute, Baxter steps forward and knocks it as the break siren sounds. Thank God.

Outside, the sun burns a hole in the azure sky. By the time he reaches the truck, Baxter's dizzy with hunger and hangover. An old Skoal tin sits in the glove box beneath a bunch of takeout napkins and unpaid parking tickets, a

dime bag of crystal tucked inside. He dabs a pinky into the white powder and snorts, his nose stinging, tingling.

Baxter's up, he's alive, and he grabs for the phone.

"Jackson residence," Cassi's husband answers on the third ring, sounding tired.

"Morning, Dave."

"Jesus, save the apologies, okay? You woke half the neighbourhood last night."

"Last night." He squints, fighting to remember. "I was just, uh, wondering—"

"You can't come to the party. Cassi made that very clear."

Party? Glancing down, Baxter flips open the calendar on his phone. Sure enough, it's July 13, his grandson Nick's seventh birthday. Or maybe eighth. Baxter hasn't seen a picture since Redford was premier.

"She won't want you loaded around the kids."

"Tell her I'll come straight."

"Impulse control isn't your strong suit, Bax."

"He's my grandson, Dave."

A long sigh ripples out. The phone scratches against the buttons of Dave's shirt but Baxter can hear his daughter's voice down the line, muffled but sharp.

"Call back next week," Dave whispers a moment later. "I'll work on her."

"That girl's too pigheaded to forgive."

Dave pauses. "That's no small thing, is it."

The end-of-break siren cuts off Baxter's reply. He's got no choice but to drop the phone and stuff the Skoal tin into his pocket. It's quarter after 10. He's got seven hours to get invited to Nick's birthday party. Will need to scrounge a present too. Both jobs have to wait, though, because inside, the chute door is already sliding upwards. Baxter seizes the bolt-gun, presses it against the next heifer's temple and knocks again.

A LULL OPENS UP AROUND 11:30 as the new herd gets wrangled up the ramp. He leans back, inhales cool air. Classic Baxter: show up drunk and uninvited to Cassi's place, shouting that he's changed while proving the opposite. For years he's been hoping to get his shit together, drag his ass out of

## The heifer doesn't move. Baxter slaps his legs. Video cameras monitor every section and security will spot him soon, if they haven't already.

this drain he keeps circling.

The week before he first started knocking, Baxter found his preteen daughter sitting alone on the steps of their apartment, surrounded by all the objects Heather didn't take to Florida. My fresh start; that's what his ex-wife called their divorce. Better off alone; that's what Baxter heard.

"They kicked us out," Cassi said neutrally from the steps. "What happened?"

The stuff sitting on the sidewalk wasn't much, but it was his: the dusty television, the fake fern, the foldout couch and plastic dinnerware.

"I mailed the cheque," he said, catching the girl's hard look. "It's all a mistake."

"You smell like beer."

"It's not Daddy's fault, okay? Now let's go find some boxes."

A week later Baxter got hired at the slaughterhouse. If he didn't stop using, at least they never got evicted again.

The chute door opens. Baxter knocks but the stupid beast twists at the last moment. The bolt clips its neck, hot blood spraying across his apron, hairnet and facemask. A disgusting mess, and this is about the time of day that Baxter starts picturing himself driving home to that bungalow he rented in '95. He sees Cassi wearing spotted pyjamas, wet-haired and smelling of soap, eating Cheerios. Baxter pictures it, knowing that when the siren blares he will drive home to a prefab trailer filled with busted IKEA furniture and a longhaired cat named Tex.

ON BAXTER'S 40TH BIRTHDAY, Cassi asked how anyone could stomach slaughtering helpless animals for a living. It was late in the night and the year, almost Christmas. They were driving back home from Calgary, road signs crisp and clear in the headlights.

"Steaks don't die of natural causes," Baxter said.

"I'm becoming a vegetarian," the girl replied as they passed KFC. "Meat is murder."

"My ass. Meat is meat."

Cassi's eyes rolled like Baxter had declared the earth was flat. "You can't get anything right."

A man only turns 40 once. The whole ride home Baxter had been nursing a Jack-and-Coke hidden in a travel mug. Buzzing a little, he killed the radio and veered towards McDonalds' glowing lights. Ordered two Big Macs from the drive-thru and set them on his daughter's lap, ordering her bony ass to eat.

"Meat put food on our table," Baxter snapped. "It paid for your fancy school and that slutty shirt you're wearing."

Her jaw stiffened. Baxter expected a fight, but the girl unwrapped a burger and shoved it into her mouth. Tears salted Cassi's face and she turned greenish, but she swallowed every bite. Heather called the next morning from Orlando, asking why, why, why. Baxter had a hundred reasons but none made any sense.

WHEN THE LUNCH SIREN erupts, he hangs up the bolt gun and races to the bathroom. Red Bull and last night's whisky splash the toilet bowl. He wipes his goatee with scratchy paper towel and grips the counter. His body feels emptied, his head hollowed out. Lunch is Dr. Pepper and leftover KFC that someone forgot in the break-room fridge. The cold chicken tastes gritty on his tongue.

"Break's over," Donny shouts over the loudspeaker.

Sighing, Baxter tucks the chicken thigh into his pocket for Tex, thinking he should've finished high school, maybe gotten an apprenticeship at the cabinetmakers. Showed Cassi that her father was capable of quitting something, maybe not hooch, but knocking, yes, knocking. Almost on cue, a golden-red Limousin totters out of the

chute. A beauty but a hundred more are marching behind, so Baxter's finger twitches, and the last thing that heifer sees is a lonely, wrinkled face watching it die. He's sorry he came to work today. Sooner or later he's always sorry.

Western processes 3,500 cows on a full day. Nearly two million pounds of beef. By early afternoon, Baxter's knees ache and his pulse jumps each time that door slides open. Dropping the bolt gun, he reaches into his pockets and feels around, already knowing what's inside: Skoal tin in the left, chicken thigh in the right. Bits of bone and hair cover Baxter's apron. He runs a glove over the bloody mess and, giving in to the voice inside, tears off the plastic smock. He drops it to the floor. He leaps down the platform.

In the hallway, bright fluorescent lights sting his eyes and he hears a man barking his name.

"We got some kind of problem?" asks Donny in his white supervisor coat.

"Nah, the gun jammed again."

Donny's eyes tighten. "Alright, hurry and grab the backup."

Baxter's feet race down the corridor, past the tool shop and toward the loading docks. He doesn't know where he's going but he savours the feeling of moving fast, heading somewhere. A siren sounds, letting the whole slaughterhouse know the line has stopped, calling an early smoke break. No point letting work stop twice.

Out back, a warm wind sprays dust across his cheeks. Storm clouds cluster above. He spits, slows. Twenty years here and he's never before stepped into a restricted area. A handful of rejected cattle stand in narrow pens, heifers with open wounds or visible signs of disease, and it surprises Baxter that nobody's watching, but maybe the wranglers are breaking too. On a whim he swings open the first pen. A Red Angus with pinkeye blinks back.

Baxter calls it. The heifer doesn't move.

He waves towards the open gate. He slaps his legs.

Video cameras monitor every section and security will spot him soon, if they haven't already. Desperate, Baxter pulls

the half-eaten chicken thigh from his pocket. Cattle don't eat meat but they're curious as kittens. The heifer's nostrils flare and it takes a small step in the right direction.

BAXTER DOESN'T think. Hand gripping the wheel, he simply drives. There is no speed limit, no cow lying in the bed of his rusted Dodge, only sweet forward motion. How long before the APB goes out? Minutes, probably. Meat processing is a billion-dollar industry and this pink-eyed Angus is stolen property, but there's nothing to do about it now except hug the yellow line straight into town.

By the time the elementary school appears, Baxter's forehead is a sheen of sweat. Parking, he cracks the Skoal tin, hoping to level out, clear his thinking for the moment ahead, but his hands are shaking badly. The tin slips in his sweaty palm, spilling the dime bag across the rubber mat. Cursing, Baxter thinks about licking it off before yanking the booster cables from behind the seat. He wraps one around the heifer's neck and leads it off the truck.

Already kids' faces fill the school windows. Tiny palms smudge the glass. The cow moves slowly, lazily. Eyes twitching, Baxter plants himself in front of the school like a flag, wondering if this was a good idea. He knees the half-tonne beast in the ribs until the cow stops eating the lawn. Debbie, Baxter thinks as a bald man in a mustard-coloured tie marches outside. We'll say your name is Debbie.

The man stops in front of Baxter and starts speaking; he loses the first words as they leave his mouth.

"...reason to be here?"

"I'm here to see my grandson, Cassi Jackson's boy." Baxter's eye twitches. "It's his birthday."

"So you brought him a cow."

"No, I saved it."

The man blinks.

"I've killed thousands of cattle."

Maybe it's the ugly tie. Middle management at a rundown elementary

school—this man must know all about mistakes. He'd probably understand if Baxter confessed, admitted all that he'd thrown away in exchange for a tight buzz and AAA beef. But before Baxter can say anything else, the man nods. "Wait here."

Police sirens ring in the horizon, close and getting closer. It's over, so Baxter closes both eyes, waiting for the RCMP to arrive. A feeling builds inside that he can't put words to yet. Only later will he realize that life is one long, forced march, nothing but foggy days that blur together until you step forward and righteousness comes knocking. By then, there is nowhere to hide. The ramp's too narrow and winding to turn around.

A bell clangs. Baxter hears footsteps and pictures a stampede of cops, maybe a pissed-off Donny coming to whip his thieving ass. He opens his eyes to see children filing outside, backpack straps cutting their shoulders, baby fat jiggling their cheeks. They stroke Debbie's neck and the cow stares back with indifference as Baxter squints, hunting for a face in the crowd. There, near the back, the boy scowling in an Oilers T-shirt.

"I saved her!" he shouts at him.

The boy stares at Baxter, at Debbie, at Baxter again.

"She'll never be hamburger meat."

Parents trickle out from the idling SUVs and pickups. Far to the left a dark-haired woman steps from a red truck, clutching a shiny balloon. Cassi? Baxter sucks in a breath. Warm delight rolls in his guts as the woman who might be Cassi moves closer. He's too far away to make out the face and there's no breaking through the crowd, so he waves. The woman hesitates, waves back. Baxter waves again with both hands. He waves so hard that his shoulders ache. He waves until the police snap handcuffs across his wrists, and even then Baxter kicks his boots and waves his fingers, all 10, so that Cassi knows he's here, he's arrived and he's sorry it took so long. ■

*Tom McMillan's fiction has appeared in the Toronto Star, on CBC and in Grain.*