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# Fourteen Years Old

by Stanley B. Trice

Donald began his only bonding experience with his Papa at supper on a cold Friday evening in early December. Mother and older sister Glenda heard Papa announce that fourteen year old Donald would go with him the next morning.

"Where're we going?"

"We're going to help Jack Victory on his farm. He's a client at my accounting firm and he needs our help." Papa did not look up from his pork chops.

"Jack is also an important client. You can't mess anything up," Mother warned. Donald figured she was trying to teach him stress. He did not intend on messing anything up, but now that Mother mentioned it the thought started praying on his mind like a fart squirming to get out.

"I want to go," Glenda said. Being older by two years usually gave her lots of authority.

"No, your father and Donald are going. It'll only be men there." Mother said. She chomped on a piece of pork coming off the end of her fork.

Donald looked at the slab of pork on his plate and aimed his fork at the carrots. His whole life up to that point involved spying on his sister and her friends that did nothing but mess with his head on what he should be doing to be a man.

"That's not fair. I want to go. Donald is just gonna screw things up."

"Jack Victory doesn't want women there. It's his farm and he's an important client." In other words, Papa was explaining that ass kissing was necessary to keep a wealthy customer happy. Donald wished Papa wanted him to go for other reasons.

"What do men do when they get together?" Donald worried that he would act more like Glenda.

"Leave it be." Papa said as he left the table to watch the news. Glenda glared at Donald. If she could have grown a penis just then, Donald thinks she would have hit him with it.

Morning came suddenly when Papa turned Donald's bedroom light on an hour and half before sunrise. Donald popped up in bed thinking Glenda was attacking him. "Get dressed. We're leaving," Papa said.

They left the house with everyone still sleeping. Donald had been up prior to daybreak before, but this time the air felt different and an aura enveloped the dark trees as they sped out of the driveway. Papa did not say anything and Donald was glad. He had a nervous twitch in his stomach and probably would have said something stupid and started on his way to messing things up. Silence felt better.

After twenty minutes, they turned down Jack Victory's dirt road coming to a rambler farmhouse with only the kitchen and porch lights shining on them as they approached. Jack Victory sat on the porch in a rocker with a coffee stained mug in his hand and a white cigarette poking out of his mouth. Papa raised his hand and Jack raised his in some type of ceremonial salute that Donald failed to copy. He did not think he should be noticed this early in the relationship. He did not think either man classified him as noticeable, anyway. Donald hung behind Papa trying to pick out details that would give him clues as to what he was doing there before

sunrise.

Donald heard noise and turned around to see another pair of headlights negotiating the dirt road. It never occurred to him that there might be others. He had competition and more men to mess up in front of. Papa left Donald standing in the darkness.

Out of the dark car climbed Herb Jawlosklynski and his high school sophomore son Leroy. Donald knew Leroy enough from school gossip to know that he did not want to know him. The sophomore inherited religious opinions from his father that Donald dreamed about in his nightmares.

Herb and Leroy stood shorter than Papa, but taller than Donald. Herb had a pregnant looking belly and Leroy stood on weak, thin legs. Their shallow jaw line made Donald think about people with stumbling thoughts and misdirected ambitions. All in all, they did not look that strong.

Donald thought he had a chance. He realized Farmer Jack had a stare on him through the cold air.

Farmer Jack threw the remains of his coffee out across the porch and into the darkness. Without a word, he led them all from the house, down a short hill, and toward a cinder block building in the middle of a blank field. Darkness surrounded them except for dim lighting emitting from the building like a night beacon. Farmer Jack pulled open the large wooden door with an aluminum handle made from the random beating of some hammer. They took turns stepping inside until Donald came last, like a priority thing. A flash of overhead neon revealed the first evidence of their duty. That, of which, was to kill.

"I got a hog to be butchered and I don't want the air heating up and we get into a race with maggots."

They all stared at the assemblage of slaughtering tools arrayed around the room's walls. A long stainless steel table filled part of the room's space. A walk in freezer from ceiling to floor took up the rest. "This is where we'll cut up the meat and put it to bed."

A system of knives hung on the pegged wall like trophies. Axes short on the handle side had exposed crisp points. Donald wanted to run away, but it was dark and cold outside and someone might throw something at him.

"No time to waste," said Jack. They exited out the back and across a hort path up to a smaller cinder block shed with an outside pen. Rough oak slats held enough splinters to torture an extremity into eternity.

They continued inside to the sudden squeal of a hog that sounded like the howling of terror on a late night horror movie. Donald approached cautiously. They others approached with testosterone bubbling. Donald stood to the back of this crowd.

"I know it's time for a hog killin' when I start to see the bottom of my freezer. This hog is near to 210 pounds and 'bout five months old, good 'nough 'though I like 'em to be over 220 and older." Farmer Jack stood staring at the big hog which stared back at him. It seemed too fat to get up from its squalor that it laid in.

Donald tried to avoid the condemned animal's large round eyes. But, Donald looked at the fat hog with its frightened, frantic look seeping out of its widened eyes. Donald imagined a tear. Soon, its organs would cease function and its brain waves would stop waving. Donald would partake in this murder. Being a vegetarian became more appealing. He envied Glenda. Right then, she was cozy in bed quilts dreaming about making herself prettier and more attractive to boys

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who killed animals.

All five of them stared at the doomed hog. It stared back at them with sad, curled eyes. Its short erect ears drooped and it gave a quick snort from its long snout causing more dribble to fall into the shit it laid in. Its killers looked like mottled priests preparing for the sacrifice.

"It's a Berkshire. One of the old line breeds that's hardy and durable. Against its black coat, it has those white points and splashes in the face and lower half. You see, this is a well muscled breed that's good for leanness and high yield."

"That kind's got some premium quality pork in it," said Herb. Donald wondered if he knew anything about swine. "Got them large loin eye areas and finishes off good."

"It should be a high grade with good marbling." Papa said.

Donald wondered where Papa learned about hogs. He hoped Leroy kept quiet or he would feel pressured into saying something. All Donald could think to ask was where did all the muck come from.

"They make pretty good fathers," said Leroy.

Were they supposed to have studied up on hogs? Donald did not even know they would be there staring at a low gravity animal staring back at them with eyes pleading for clemency.

"This is a barrow. Not much at fathering without the right equipment," said Farmer Jack.

Great, Leroy got that one wrong. Donald took this to mean the competition's end.

"This suit guy once tried to sell me a feeder pig that I know weren't use for much. I could tell looking at it that it wasn't much more than sixty or seventy pounds. That told me right there that the animal was slow growing or stunted and weighing too much for its ten weeks of age."

Donald experienced information overload. Suppose Farmer Jack asked me questions later on this stuff, he thought.

"Look at this animal with good internal body dimensions. That's a good sign for the pig to eat and grow. That makes for a hardier and efficient growth." Farmer Jack said.

"What's good efficiencies?" Donald needed explanations to be a part of Farmer Jack's world.

"Means it takes less feed to make the growth." Farmer Jack said. "I've had hogs with daylight or coon footed. Lost you yet, nousey?"

"Yeah." Donald spoke instinctively before understanding sarcasm.

"If it has good leg length, then you can see daylight 'neath the pig. Raccoon footed hogs walk with a flatter foot and do better on concrete. Time to get workin'."

Sensing terror, the hog struggled to a standing position. The excess fat hung down and manure waste dropped to pool underneath. Farmer Jack moved toward the frightened animal and it squealed and ran around to the other end of the small inside pen. It would not go outside again alive where the oak boards could leave

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splinters the size of short daggers.

All four men donned thigh high rubber boots from a web infested corner and surrounded the running hog forcing it into a corner of the pen. Without a boot to fit, Donald stood outside the sty hoping the muck didn't get him. Quickly, Farmer Jack grabbed the hog's front feet and flipped it on its back causing a whistle squeal like the trapped hog should sound since it would soon be killed. Muck splattered up and hit Donald in his face. He didn't dare move to wipe it off. No one else did.

Farmer Jack pulled out a two thick ropes and bound first the front then hind legs in a blood cutting tie. Next came a wicked metal hook long enough to strongly snare the loop in the hind hoofs and allow all four to drag the squealing hog across the dirty brown muck and manure.

The hog squealed in terror as they came to the gate. Donald had position to do something and he stepped back. He got a stare from Farmer Jack who had stepped through the gate dragging the kicking hog across the floor in front of Donald who only heard the squealing.

Out of the pen, but still in the small shed, Farmer Jack pulled out a thicker rope and threaded it through the hook's loop on the end while slinging it through a pulley dangling over them. Donald and Leroy grabbed some part of the struggling hog as the rest of the men grabbed the thick rope and hoisted the desperate animal upside down. The about-to-be-executed hog swung its large head around sending Donald to the floor.

Donald wallowed in what muck he could find thinking about broken bones with his Mother's curse of clumsiness ringing in his head. Leroy pulled him up and Donald felt a sudden urge of brotherly love until Leroy called him stupid. Farmer Jack grinned while holding a short saber of a knife with sharpness that glittered in the dull overhead light. Herb took the .22 rifle from the pegged wall.

"It's got long rifle bullets in it. Shoot just to the left of my X on the hog's forehead." Farmer Jack grinned.

Herb gave the gun to Leroy who swiftly placed the muzzle between the hog's eyes. Papa and Herb held the hog's head in a vise of muscle. They had a moment of nothing as the hog calmed down and accepted its condemned position upside down. Suddenly, Donald heard a short pop and the hog shot its hoofs in four different directions at once. It tried to squeal, but simple grunts came out instead. Leroy was sitting on the concrete floor trying to stand while steadying the gun barrel on the hog's head. Papa and Herb could not stop the hog's twitching. Farmer Jack took the rifle from Leroy, pointed it at the hog's forehead, and put two quick shots off. The stillness from the hog's mass of flesh hung all around them. Farmer Jack handed the rifle to Donald who had no idea what to do with a murder weapon.

Farmer Jack took the short saber of a knife and swiped it across the hog's exposed throat as Herb and Papa yanked the head up and back exposing more throat and bringing a torrent of blood plummeting out into a large pan on the concrete floor. They all stood in the stark quiet of the pre-dawn morning watching the hog's life pulse into a galvanized pan. The moment lasted for several minutes and Donald wondered if this had something to do with male bonding. Leroy took the rifle and hung it back on the wall.

Like a distant bell, a distinct gurgle emitted from the hog's throat setting the blood into a trickle. Quickly, Farmer Jack spit out orders as he swung a battered back door open to reveal burning hot fires outside. Donald could see flames lick the round sides of an enamel bathtub with the boiling water breathing hot vapors into the cold air.

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The pulley that the dead hog hung from came out of a steel arm that let them swing the carcass outside and over into the bathtub of hot water. Blood drops left a splattered trail that Donald carefully avoided as he followed the hanging animal into the cold air. Outside, Farmer Jack used a come-along as a winch to sink the hog into the boiling water. The smell of charring wood and the odor of singed hog hair hit the inside of Donald's nose at the same time. From then on, Donald always associated wood smells with death.

After a few more minutes, Farmer Jack, Herb, and Papa pulled the carcass up (the slightly broken winch mechanism only let it down). With many grunts, everyone pushed the steaming carcass onto a wooden table next to the bathtub. As they stood outside in the cold, Donald got a wide scraper put in his hands. As quick as possible, he followed the others and began to scrape the coarse hair off the tight hot skin using the scraper that slipped in his sweating palms. No one said a word and Donald sensed that time was of precious value.

Donald did not know how long they scraped. Only that it was suddenly over when the bare hog was hoisted onto a beaten metal cart with oversized rubber wheels. They wheeled the hairless animal down to the cinder block building at a high trot.

Donald held onto the cart's edge trying to forget the feel of warm, hairless hog skin and coarse hair. He realized through the smoke of their heavy breathing that the golden sun had breached the line of woods in front of them. He grabbed some part of the hog's torso that made no effect at all, but caused him to stumble on a dirt clog. Leroy walked behind him and kicked him out of the way. Donald guessed that was good so they didn't all fall down on top of him. Donald got up quickly, although that put him into catching up and holding the flopping, curly tail.

Inside the cleaner cinder block building and up on the stainless steel bench, the slaughtering began. Farmer Jack dug a hook into each rear hoof tendon and motioned for Donald to crank a metal bar in the corner of the room. Of course, he could not budge it and Papa took over. They both cranked while Herb and Leroy pushed the hog onto the stainless steel table. Donald realized that this was the first thing he and his father ever did together. Donald wished it had not been hoisting a hunk of raw meat into the air.

Papa shoved his son to the end of the silver bench with Leroy beyond him. Papa spoke so quick that Donald could not even listen. Donald's eyes darted from the bench to the butcher's paper hanging in a role on the pegged wall. He wanted to tell Papa to slow down. He wanted to run away because he understood nothing and thought of himself as the biggest fool and why did he have to endure high school next year. Donald felt something leak in his pants.

Oh no, I'm peeing on myself! How was this happening? I'm sure men didn't do this sort of thing, he thought. Donald dared himself to look down and saw a trickle of water splash off the bench edge he leaned against and onto his pants. Beside him, Leroy held up twine string to capture his role in the murder/cover up.

Donald watched the evisceration take place like watching a romance movie in slow motion. Farmer Jack sliced open the hog's front from crotch to head. Herb and Papa pulled the carcass open as Farmer Jack used a hatchet to finish breaking the thick breast bones. Donald heard cracks like the snapping of tree branches and twigs. He tried to erase the grimace he felt his face could capture forever. Donald glanced at Leroy and saw an excited, joyful look that made Donald thought of sexual climaxes, something he learned from Glenda and her girl friends.

"Got no use for the pizzle and you got to make sure the urinary tract is tied tight along with the anus. Don't want to taste piss or shit when you eat pork. Don't go well with the meal." Farmer Jack had an energy that made him sound like a young elementary school teacher just out of college. With a smirk, Farmer Jack shook

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the pizzle at Donald who thought it looked like a penis. It went into a large vat at the table's feet before Donald could be sure. Donald once heard Glenda ask her girl friends what it would feel like for a hard penis to slip inside them. Something like a tampon, they concluded. Donald learned a lot by secretly listening to Glenda mature with her girlfriends.

Suddenly, the hog's guts started spilling out. Farmer Jack used his two large, callused hands and most of his hairy arms to pull and cut deep inside the hog's torso cavity. It looked like the hog vomited inside out. All Donald could make out were pink swollen clumps of organs and long tendrils of intestines and other tubular structures that he could not identify. They all fell across the lip of the bench and into a large vat at their feet. "Gotta be careful here," he taught. "Any cut, tear, or puncture is gonna contaminate everything."

They all silenced themselves not wanting Farmer Jack to make a mistake.

Each entrail, formerly warm and well fed, slithered out of the open slit, felt the cold air, and breathed and steamed in retaliation. Like a newborn taken from its mother. Farmer Jack threw the body parts into a deep glass bowl of ice cold water sitting on the steel table.

"OK, folks. Let's cut this carcass up into the primal cuts first."

The operation went into production line status. Donald caught the cut up parts in his cold hands and frigid fingers. His anxiety lifted as he grew into this routine of wrapping. He wondered if he had butchery talents.

In his hands, Donald could feel the warmth from the slabs of meat and knew that the heat originated not from the hot bath, but when it was still alive. Donald felt rugged and he tried to keep down the panic he inherited from handling the dismembered hog. They had destroyed a life and would digest it at some event labeled meal time. Donald passed the wrapped hunks of meat to Leroy who said nothing except a comment once in a while about the enjoyment of pork.

As the sun rose higher through the pane glass window stained with grime and dead flies, everyone worked silently and meticulously. They now knew their roles. Donald's cold hands and feet reminded him that the cold temperature would soon give way to warmth and they were racing against the Sun's heat. Tiredness rose in him along with the numbness in his legs. Donald believed that men derived pleasure in task management. Donald had no clue what the pieces of cooling meat were passing through his cold hands.

At some point in time, the raw meat stopped heading Donald's way. The hog was now just so many wrapped parts in the freezer behind them. Donald looked at the dirty red stains spilled on the silver table and wondered where Papa learned to cut up a hog.

The clean up erased the remaining residue of the hog like murderers cleaning up their murder site. They sent down the drain any memory of the animal's existence. The hog was now just packaged meat so that no one would ever know it once lived.

After the clean up, they followed Farmer Jack one more time like rats following the Piped Piper. What else were they to do? They were now part of a secret club of hog killers and slaughterers and murderers. Donald felt like the missing hog, wondering if he ever lived on this planet.

Terrible as it appeared, they re-entered the murder scene. This time, no animal cries rose out of the silent, empty pen. Donald could not even smell what should

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have been the hog's last smells. He dreaded another murder. Only they remained.

The Sun broke through the window grime bathing them in streaks of gold. They looked like conquistadors as Donald could not feel his fingers although his feet had finally reached a level of thawing pain.

Farmer Jack appeared with a long neck bottle. Leroy gave him a quick nudge in his ribs. Donald hoped for a reward like an old book of wisdom passed down through the farming generations or at least some chocolate candy.

Farmer Jack took several gulps from the bottle's dark liquid. Then, he gave it to Herb who took almost the same amount of swallows. Papa took one gulp before handing it to Leroy who took almost as many gulps as Farmer Jack Victory. Donald thought for sure Leroy had finished the bottle. But, he did not. Donald found it heavy in his hands.

The weight became a challenge. Donald brought it up to his lips and Donald sensed Leroy staring at him. Opening his eyes, Donald realized instead it was Farmer Jack.

The acid drink burned Donald's throat and he lost his breath with cough. A second gulp did not help. Some spilled out of his mouth. He could feel a burning sensation enter his empty stomach. He put the heavy bottle in Papa's hands who appeared nearby.

Donald's head spun and his stomach told him it did not like what it got. Each person took another turn and, in the end, Farmer Jack avoided the other hands and gave the bottle to Donald to finish. It did not burn as much as before, probably because his body had already started to turn numb.

"I don't bring my hogs to be butchered and cut up elsewhere. People who do that are just too lazy. They don't know the satisfaction of killing an animal you'll eat later. Damn, I can't wait to get a piece of that animal. When I get some of that ham and sausage turned, I'll get ya'll some of the meat. It ain't nothin' but good."

Again, Farmer Jack took the lead and they followed him toward the farmhouse. The Sun hit the east blaring off the aluminum siding and into their faces. It looked bigger like an angel appearing out of a mist. Up ahead, Jack's wife Helen stood on the porch with a large spatula in her dirty hands looking like that angel. Donald remembered his lack of food, the dirtiness of his clothes, the smell of hog blood, and the warmth of liquor coursing through his tired body. He felt rugged, big, and demanding. At that moment, he could fall asleep anywhere.

"Got 'em up for a good breakfast, Wife. You ready for 'em?"

"Get your ass in here, the whole of ya'll. I ain't got all day to mess in the kitchen."

They walked into a small kitchen with knotty pine walls. Fatty smoke sunk into everything and made the cramped heavy air delicious enough to eat. Donald thought he understood hunger for the first time as a wobbling dizziness took him to a back chair of the kitchen table.

They feasted like hungry lions, ravenous vultures, and scavenger wolves all at once. Donald did not care that the sausage probably came from a previously butchered hog or that the whole of the meal came from the iron skillet burned black with a history of lard. The running eggs, white bread toast, jar of strawberry jelly, and tubular sausage hit his stomach and chased after the liquor. Like a fading buzz, he felt he had been awake for days in the jungle.

Amid the energetic talk around the table, the stare Donald got from Farmer Jack

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brought him into reality. They sat next to each other without Donald realizing this. Donald stared back and Jack leaned forward.

"I'm tired of farming," he said in a deep whisper only Donald heard. The others temporarily ignored them like a drop into the Twilight Zone. "I can be like a Jekyll and Hyde when the rain comes too early or too late and the broken tines of the chisel plow need replacing. I can live like this because in the end I've accomplished something useful in the world. But, I'm getting tired of it all. This is not the life I dreamed about. I need to get out of this life, but I'm trapped. Don't you ever get trapped like me." The farmer leaned back as if nothing had happened.

Donald looked around, but no one else paid any attention. Donald felt the mixture of dark liquor and fried fat slip across his face as the farmer talked to the others in a loud voice. Some time later, they came out of the house full with a jumble of fattened hog. Farmer Jack's words kept Donald awake this whole time.

Donald never mentioned killing a hog to anyone. Papa and he never again experienced anything together. Years later when Donald graduated high school, three events gave him a good reason to go far away to college.

Glenda got pregnant and married Leroy Jawlosklynski. Leroy got along with Donald which was to say not. It was all right since Donald never got along with Glenda, either. He figured that Leroy and Glenda made a good pair. Glenda said she didn't mind the marriage as long as she received the bruises and not the baby.

Papa retired and tried to be a farmer. It was a good thing he had retirement income. At least the chores kept him outside and away from Mother who never got over Glenda's marriage or Papa's retirement. At least the baby was normal, she would say so often.

Farmer Jack died suddenly from a heart attack five months after Donald graduated. Donald figured that all those animals Farmer Jack slaughtered finally ganged up on his heart. He and his wife Helen never had kids so she sold the farm to developers who called the broken farm with the infested muddy pond a beautiful, tree lined, settlement on waterfront. A year after Donald graduated, all semblance of the farm laid under the rapid running of children, barking dogs, and car headlights.

Helen bought one of the developed houses. With the left over money, she traveled to Egypt to see the Pyramids, fell off a camel, and died after breaking her neck. The camel ended up being slaughtered and Donald wonder if camel meat tasted like hog.

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Since graduating with an MBA, **Stanley Trice** has had a dozen of his short stories published in national and international small press magazines in addition to several essays and over a dozen book reviews published regionally. Also, he has won several local writing contests and is a member of the Riverside Writers, the Virginia Writers Club, and the North Carolina Writers Network. During the day, Stanley commutes by train to Northern Virginia where he works on budgets and legislative issues. He uses the long commute as an opportune time to write. When he is not commuting, he is looking for publication of his science fiction book about monsters who may be no more than different looking people.

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