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Surviving in a Meat Eating World

by Erica Short

The sound of the cleaver cutting through flesh and bone and slamming onto the stainless steel counter top resonates through the back of the kitchen and into my body, and I cringe. I close my eyes and turn my head away from the pile of legs and thighs next to me and let out a repulsed sigh. "This is so disgusting," I manage to say in between bangs of the cleaver. My boss comes up behind me and reassures me that I do not have to help cut apart the eight whole chickens dripping blood on the counter in front of me. "Good, because this goes against everything I..." I was quickly cut off by another sound of the metal blade on the counter top, the cook swinging the cleaver so fast it cuts clean through the bone and bangs onto the stainless steel. I watched as the other cook casually placed one of the chickens on its back and pulled apart the legs in preparation to chop them clean off. Bang. One swipe of the large, wooden handled cleaver and the legs fall to the side. The echo of the sound lingers for a moment, and then another bang.

I love cooking; the smell of sautéing garlic, chopping celery and red onions, pureeing plum tomatoes to make pasta sauce or stirring a bubbling pot of soup. All of the senses are engaged, including the one's that bring that queasy, nauseating feeling at the sight of cleaning and chopping meat. At time it is a difficult task, having to put aside my personal beliefs on the consumption of animals, but it is a part of my job that I have to do.

I do not taste most of the food I make, as it is usually meat or has meat in it, which brings quite a bit of anxiety when its meal time. As a cook it's my job to make sure the food I prepare is to the satisfaction of the residents at the assisted living facility where I work. I rely on whoever is working in the kitchen at the moment, desperate for any opinion, to critique anything I prepare with meat in it, always wondering if it has enough flavor, is it cooked all the way through, is it too dry, is it too salty? So far I have been lucky, having positive feedback from both staff and residents; "It doesn't need anything, it's perfect the way it is" or "The residents wanted me to tell you that they love it, no complaints whatsoever." It is for that reason that I continue to cook--that feeling of seeing a plate come back clean or a resident asking for seconds.

I do not have much say in what I cook, what the menu my boss writes up for the day is what I have to make. If it says roasted pork, I make roasted pork. If it says veal parmigiana, I make veal parmigiana. If I had the choice, I would make more meatless dishes, although I have no doubt the residents would mutiny. They often remind me that back in their day if you didn't eat meat, you didn't eat. I'm sure that if they were forced to watch how people slaughter the animals that end up on their plates some of them might

change to a vegetarian diet.

Often when I say vegetarian I get strange looks. I do not eat only lettuce, I do not wear clothes made only of hemp and I do not protest outside steakhouses. I made a decision to find out what I was eating and where it came from. I saw cows being hung from the ceilings by chains, waiting to be butchered and chickens with their legs and beaks broken and then plunged, alive, into defeathering tanks. Pig farms were keeping their pigs kept in gestation cages where they are unable to even turn over, and the temperature is kept warm so they use less energy, forcing them to come up to slaughter weight more quickly. While there have been actions by the United States government to monitor the methods of slaughter, such as the Humane Slaughter Act, the amount of slaughterhouses that actually follow the guidelines is debatable. It is not just the meat products that are sold in grocery stores that are the result of inhumane treatment. McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken have come under scrutiny from organizations such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals for the violent way they treat the chickens they use. They are housed in tight, filthy cages in order to prevent them from forming muscle. Once they are ready to be slaughtered, they are carelessly shoved into crates and shackles, often causing the breaking of their limbs. Once they arrive at the slaughterhouse, their throats are slit and they are dipped into scalding hot water and often times they are still alive during this process. At a KFC "Supplier of the Year" slaughterhouse in West Virginia, workers were documented tearing heads off live birds, spray painting their faces and violently stomping on them.¹

Obviously not all animals are subjected to this type of inhumane treatment and there are probably a good number of people who abide by the guidelines stipulated in the Humane Slaughter Act, which was passed in 1958 in order to protect the animals during slaughter using a form of stunning to prevent or lessen pain. However, even stunning an animal before death, which is one of the guidelines, still does not an acceptable method. Is there a method I would find acceptable? What is the purpose of inflicting pain on the animals? It is a question of morality. Is having prime rib or honey baked ham worth the pain and suffering of a helpless animal that is unable to defend or speak up for themselves? I never imagined myself a vegetarian, but I could no longer ignore the images of the animals being tortured and slaughtered that I was seeing so often. I loved meat and seafood so the idea of giving them up never came across my mind. There were instances where I voluntarily viewed images and videos of animals locked in small, dirty cages and pens, unable to stand or move. I chose to dismiss it and hoped that was an isolated incident, that animals don't really experience such heartbreaking conditions. I was very wrong. Most people have the same way of thinking when it comes to seeing or hearing where their food comes from. Knowing what you eat and where it comes from should be something worth finding out, although it could inevitably change a person's diet as a result. Ignorance really is bliss.

It has been so long since I have eaten meat that I have forgotten how it tastes. The smell of a turkey roasting in the oven or a steak on the grill is no longer appetizing. Coming from an entire family of meat eaters, it is difficult to be different. I have often times been disappointed that family dinners consist of large roasts or pastas with meat sauce and as a result I am usually left with just a plate of potatoes or asparagus. "Just pick the meat out" is the common response. It's not about just picking the meat out, which

1 "KFC/McDonald's cruelty to chickens." www.peta.org. 9 Aug. 2008

at restaurants is normally what I have to do, so I have given up trying to go out to eat. A person can eat only so much Fettuccine Alfredo before it looks nauseating. Meat does not need to be the base of all meals. Although I have decided to change the way I live to spare the lives of animals I understand that is not a reality for everyone and I can't expect it to be. It would be unfair of me to pass judgment on those who don't see the way I do. Animals suffer everyday in savage ways but it all comes back to the individual's choice whether or not to be a part of that. I would not try to press my opinions on those who disagree with me, but if they ask why I have chosen the lifestyle I have I will gladly explain the atrocities that occur within the meat industry.

Erica Short lives in Connecticut and continues to cook at a retirement and assisted living community. She is a recent graduate of Central Connecticut State University, receiving a Bachelor's Degree in English. This is her first publication.

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