

Avatar

by Thea Read

A rusted and sagging chain link fence separated the barren dirt of his yard from the neighbors'. Weeds crackled and whispered along its length every time the wind coughed by, and trash and cigarette butts lay scattered about, spontaneously regenerating or else just repositioning themselves at whim, as long as no one was looking, which was most of the time. He kicked at a half decomposed fast-food cup, angry that it was there, and even more angry that he didn't bend over to pick it up.

One of the things he hated about himself was his disinclination to get involved in lost causes.

He stumped along up the broken cement of the walk leading to the front door of his rented home, dis-cheered as always by the door's dull orange paint and the old muddy dog prints scabbling up to the knob, legacy of the previous occupants. The back yard likewise showed canine evidence—pitted and by turns muddy where the dogs had run and lush where they'd emptied their guts, he'd risked a broken ankle each time he'd ventured there, which wasn't often. The only things worth a damn in the back yard were the apple trees, but not this time of year, when they were barren and exposed like everything else.

He didn't bother digging out his key when he reached the orange door. Who was he kidding, pretending the place was secure? He grabbed the wobbling knob and thumped his shoulder against the door, giving it a bit of a kick at the bottom for good measure. The door popped open with only token resistance. He stepped inside and closed the door several times until it latched.

He stood inside the entry, took a deep breath, and was instantly disgusted. Out of the wind and space from outside, the odor rising from his work clothes was more than noticeable. The smell was greasy and metallic, and because he knew what it came from, he nearly gagged on it. Since he had yet to organize such a spot despite having lived there for nearly a year, he was momentarily at a loss where to go inside the house to divest himself of the filth clinging to him without spreading it around. In the end, he travelled around to the interior door leading to the garage, opened it, stepped inside, and removed his clothes while standing in front of the washer and dryer. The window in the garage was curtained with cobwebs that were thick enough to inspire more disgust, but not thick enough to conceal. He decided he didn't care who saw, and besides, there was probably nobody looking anyway. Throwing his clothes in a stinking heap onto the concrete floor, he stumbled back through the door and walked naked to the bathroom.

Stepping gingerly under the hot spray of the shower, he positioned his neck so the stream of water hit just right in the hollow at the back of his head, sending pleasant shivers of heat throughout his limbs

and torso. Cupping his hands before him, he closed his eyes and tried to relax.

Nightmarish flickers flashed behind his closed eyes; he let them come, too tired to resist or direct them.

The previous evening...

"I don't want to see a movie in which a bunch of people are pointlessly slaughtered, that's why," he said. "It's not my idea of entertainment."

"Well, Nick," said Nick's date, "that's the point. The movie isn't supposed to be entertaining."

"Then why am I about to pay \$24 bucks to sit and watch it?"

"Because it's edifying," came the implacable response.

Feeling a sense of déjà vu, Nick heaved a sigh. He was reminded of the days when he'd started college just out of high school as a sociology major; it didn't take too many short and gory documentaries about the Viet Nam war presented by crusading graduate teaching fellows before he began to suspect the pointlessness of each breath he took. Nonetheless, too polite to dig in his heels and refuse outright, not even in self-defense, Nick nodded his head and gestured with his hand for his date to precede him.

"Susan," he said as she wafted past him in a light cloud of floral scent. She turned to look at him enquiringly. "You're buying the coffee afterward. The good stuff."

"Fair enough," she said, smiling not unsympathetically. They entered the theater.

Nick was not at all surprised at what he saw on the screen before him. Appalled, but not surprised. The movie was brilliantly written and directed, the cinematography was excellent, and the horror it played out was inescapably typical. Idealistic white people went to a foreign land to "make a difference," fell in various kinds of love and developed abiding relationships with the people they thought they were saving, only to watch helplessly as they were literally hacked apart by an enemy that differed from them in no way other than that they were the ones with the machetes. To top it off, the white people barely escaped with their lives, which were subsequently burdened horribly with precisely that escape. When the movie finally ended, Nick felt like he was nothing more than a tube from mouth to anal orifice, and his brain no more than a thin veneer of fragile tissue covering an unnaturally vast hole full of nothing.

Susan gazed at Nick as they stood outside the theater while other patrons streamed past them. Whoops, she thought to herself, taking in his slack features. She grabbed his elbow and dragged him off to the nearest coffee house.

Nick felt himself swim back into a sort of syncope with current events, noting that he was walking along a sidewalk with Susan pulling at his arm. The smoky scent of really good coffee squeezed in amongst

the memories of what he'd just seen. Then he could taste it, as well, and he realized he was inside, with a steaming hot cup in his hand—he'd just taken a sip, apparently. His cell phone rang.

He automatically pulled the phone out of his pocket and flipped it open, bringing it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Need a driver, Nick."

"Okay."

He flipped the phone closed, said, "Gotta go," and walked out of the coffee shop. Susan's questions and then protests bounced off him like they were part of somewhere else.

Arriving at the chicken farm in the wee hours of the morning, Nick suddenly noticed he was at work. He'd driven the company semi from the processing plant all the way here out of habit. He climbed down from the cab and joined his co-workers unloading a mass of large, battered and filthy chicken-wired crates off the bed of the truck. Working in pairs, they carried the crates into the farm's warehouse where the chickens had spent their entire lives up to now, and began gathering the chickens up one by one. The chickens squawked and ran, but without a great deal of urgency. It was easy to pick them off.

The man Nick was working with grabbed a chicken and stuffed it carelessly into the crate, so that its leg caught on the side and broke with an audible snap. The chicken screamed. Nick whooped in a gasp of breath and gaped at his co-worker.

"Think you could be a little more careful?" he yelled without thinking about who he usually was.

Nick's co-worker started and gaped at Nick. After a moment, he rolled his eyes, muttered, "bleeding heart," and then said, "What's it to ya, kid, they're just grist for the mill, right? Gonna be dead soon, hyuck, hyuck." His co-worker resumed grabbing chickens. Nick continued to stare at the man, waiting to catch his eye after the next chicken, and when he did, he glared at him until the man slid his own gaze away. "Okay, okay, I'll be more careful," the man said. He wasn't, Nick noticed, so it was just luck that no more chickens were broken that he witnessed.

Returning to the processing plant, Nick carefully backed the semi up to the loading dock leading to the kill room, then again climbed from the cab to help unload the crates full of chickens. He paused to watch as the first crate was opened and the processing began. A rank greasy smell laced with copper wafted out of the opening to the dock. Nick was transfixed by the sight of a kill room worker as he grabbed a chicken out of a crate, wired its feet together, and then hung it upside down on a hook attached to a conveyer belt overhead. The chicken was jerked along to the next worker, who grabbed it by its head with one hand and swung the other hand in a glittering arc, slicing the chicken with a knife clean through the

neck in a shower of ruby blood. The worker casually tossed the disembodied head over his shoulder, where it landed with a bounce on a growing pile of other heads. He turned back in time to watch another worker farther down the line cut into the headless chicken and disembowel it with a graceful swipe, grabbing the viscera and chucking it with a meaty splat onto the floor, where it was sluiced away in a stream of red-stained water.

“C’mon, Nick,” someone yelled at him. He turned to help carry another crate off the truck. As the kill room workers opened it and began grabbing the chickens inside, it seemed to explode. A chicken dragged itself up to balance precariously on the edge of the crate, flapping its stunted wings and crying out, its neck extended toward the other chickens from the same crate. Then she fell heavily to the gore-strewn floor. Righting herself, she seem to watch as Nick had just done as her crate mates were hung and cut. Then she turned and ran, slipping awkwardly, toward a smaller open door next to the loading dock. It stopped abruptly, and Nick saw someone standing just outside the door—another kill room worker or some such. The chicken stood still until one of the kill room workers started after her, his gory gloves held out in front of him and cheerfully calling, “Here, chick, chick, chick, chick, chick!” The chicken ran out the door and turned sharply to the right directly in front of the person standing outside, zipping under the cyclone fence guarding electrical equipment nearby. The kill room worker ran after her, and nearly had her, too, only to bounce jarringly off the fence at the last second and land solidly in a puddle of chicken defecate. The man began a vitriolic spate of swearing that seemed out of proportion to actual events; Nick could almost see the chimera of hate wafting off the man sitting on the ground in a puddle of chicken shit. He felt his innards congeal as he imagined what it would be like to have that kind of emotion directed at him. After a few moments, the man on the ground picked himself up and stomped back to the kill room, calling for volunteers to go round up the escaped chicken.

Nick realized he was trembling. A hand clapped him heavily on shoulder, and one of his co-workers, having noticed Nick’s preoccupation, laughed at his side and said, “Well, we gotta eat, right?”

Back in the shower later that morning at his run-down rental-of-a-home, Nick shuddered despite the hot spray on his neck.

Is that all there is? We gotta eat?

Nick turned off the taps and climbed shakily out of the shower. He towed himself dry and got dressed. Like a man who had just met himself for the first time, he walked out his front door, tripped across the yard to the cyclone fence and stopped, looking down. After a moment and with unwonted grace, he bent over, picked up the half-decomposed fast food cup, carried it to the garbage can, and

dropped it in. He picked up the cigarette butts next, then the weeds...

© 2011 Thea Read