

my life as a hired killer

A Fictional Account by Jim Chapman

In the mid-1970s, at 15, I went looking for an after-school job, but there weren't many around. My options were to catch chickens, carry plywood and shingles at a job site, lube cars at the gas station, pick up Coke bottles from ditches to resale, flip burgers and so forth.

Sometimes jobs came open unexpectedly. For instance, one day an excited fellow came flailing into the local hardware store, where a bunch of us were leaning and drinking Cokes. He had to pant a minute to catch his breath.

"Any y'all know how to run a skidder? We needin' a skidder man bad, 'n hit'll pay good."

The fellow suggested that I'd be an ideal candidate; a tall, skinny, gangling country boy like me could reach a lot of switches and levers and wouldn't mind the yellow jackets cause I had such little meat on my bones that I'd hardly feel the stings, anyhow. He was saying, in his charming way, that maybe the logging industry could offer the career satisfaction I was seeking over the long haul.

I briefly tried to imagine myself pulp-woodin' – perhaps strapped to the top of a bucking logging truck as I winched in and loaded log after log in the hot sun, breathing in truck exhaust and pouring sweat and worrying about the taut steel cable suddenly breaking and slicing my head off with a smart whizzing sound.

Maybe I should have accepted the man's offer, but I declined.

"Maybe you ain't man enough to run no skidder," said the fellow, clearly irritated.

"Well, I'd like to keep my head attached to my body for a few more years," I said.

Once, a cigar-chomping, burr-headed man tried to get me to be a vacuum cleaner salesman.

“They’s a pile – and I do mean a pile – of money to be made, I just need an assistant, a young feller like you, maybe. Get you a necktie and a little training. Shoot, boy, you ought to think about it!”

Yeah, it was a temptation. Maybe in 10 years I could be like this fellow, burr-headed, heavy-set, smelling like a wet cigar butt and driving a station wagon with mag wheels and speculating aloud over every passing woman’s rear end and how it ought to be spanked.

As tempting as the offer was, I couldn’t do it. Surely there was a better job out there waiting.

A school counselor tried to help me suss out my options. She suggested that the things I enjoy doing naturally are a good indicator of the type careers I might enjoy. She said the trick was to find what I enjoyed doing first. What was it I did for fun, in my spare time?

“Right after they catch the chickens in a chicken house, me and my friends swing sticks at the wild birds that get trapped in there. They come past you a hundred miles an hours. It’s just like a battin’ cage, only free.” I tell her.

“Dear Lord!” she said, collecting herself.

She reframed the question, thinking to put it into a context that I might more easily grasp.

“OK, for example, let’s say that you enjoy whacking at these ... birds ... in the chicken house, OK ... well, maybe you are a good candidate for, let’s say, pest control? Who knows? They say some folks love setting those loaded bait balls, roach hotels and foggers in crawl spaces and attics.”

I shake my head, telling her, no, it was more of a hobby thing. Besides, you don’t really hit many of the wild birds. It was more of a swing and miss situation. Plus, I didn’t think of it as a career option.

“Ma’am, honestly, I don’t want to set bait balls for a living,” I leveled with her.

I told her I like country stuff, so maybe that was a help. You know, old timey stuff, like the stuff they have in the popular “Foxfire” books, things like reading the “signs” and living like a pioneer up in the mountains. Maybe I could be a pelt trapper, or something.

She knew the books and suggested, in a folksy voice, that sure, hey, if grandpappy taught me to slay and field dress a hog, and I enjoyed it, why not be a butcher and earn a good living – take home extra fancy pork chops, every night?”

“Did you want to be a butcher?” I asked her.

“Oh my dear Lord no! I most certainly did not,” she exclaimed. “That’s why I spent years and years in college preparing for the profession in which I am now engaged.”

“What profession is that, ma’am?”

Long pause.

Well, she asked, what was I drawn to? Did I have a neat memory of seeing someone in a work setting, perhaps? Someone that enjoyed his or her job?

Oh yeah! I remembered seeing a guy on TV who was enjoying his job. “Well, I like that guy on TV, uh, Marlon Perkins, with the TV series about wild animals. He was cool. And “Sea Hunt,” too, where they horse around with stingrays, sharks and alligator stuff. So yeah. Something like that, with Jeeps and gator boats and tranquilizer guns. And war stuff, too, yeah, with tanks blasting through walls. Yeah, I could do any of that,” I told her.

Long pause.

“I was thinking more along the lines of a skill or trade,” the counselor said crisply. “A vocation. Something that people are willing to pay you for, because there is a need for it. Like, a welder, doctor, stenographer, shop owner, computer operator or dental assistant,” she said, clearly irritated.

“So, beyond manhandling wild beasts and blasting through walls,” she asked, “what did I actually enjoy – that involved some sort of skill?”

“Well, I do like to draw,” I said, brightening.

“Well, there you go! You can become a commercial artist,” she said. “That’s where companies pay you to draw for them.” I tried to imagine myself as a commercial artist. Actually, I had no idea what they did, except they got paid for drawing. I imagined they all drove convertibles and wore berets. Probably made a decent living, too. Lived on houseboats and had parrots on their shoulders. Probably wore a vest and a pinky ring. Had a girlfriend named something like Roxette who spoke a second language.

“Yes!” I said. “That’s it! I’ll do it!”

The counselor beamed.

So that was that. I would be a commercial artist. It was all settled ... everything except the part about actually finding a job doing as a commercial artist. Back then, there were zero commercial art jobs around except in the cities.

Since I was be stuck in the rural environs, my strategy was to get a job as close as I could to commercial art as I could and then work into the art thing later, as opportunities presented themselves.

The closest thing to getting a job in commercial art turned out to be actually nothing to do whatsoever with art. I took a job at a slaughterhouse, since it was the only part-time job I could land. Plus, I had no car, and no license, so the job needed to be within walking distance.

My job was to clean up the slaughterhouse right after they butchered hogs and cattle. The place had to be scrubbed clean as a whistle for those pesky inspectors who wouldn't let a wad of gristle or a runaway eyeball that rolled behind the band-saw go without penalty.

I quickly learned that a soiled slaughterhouse is not for the faint of heart, with its blood splashes, bone dust, gristle and bloody cuts marks on every surface. I also learned we civilized people are funny. Many say: I don't approve of killing; but I do like my steak. And you see the problem here – eating steak requires a bullet to the brain, whether behind my barn, your barn or someone else's barn.

In our culture, we have arrived at a clever, workable solution to this dilemma. We simply pretend slaughter and processing doesn't exist. Out of sight, out of mind.

Actually, slaughter exists in a zone of plausible deniability, the place where things happen – but they don't happen *officially*. It is the same heavy curtain that shields you from seeing the embalming of the dead, or admitting you dated your first cousin years ago (but only once, at that motel, after all that wine y'all had).

It never happened. End of story. (Even to this day, we still operate until this model.)

My role was to disassemble band saws and sausage grinders and pull out the gristle and cartilage giblets. I also scrubbed the bloodied cutting areas, pressure washing and wiping down the place until it sparkled and could pass inspection. The blood and guts were stored in barrels and had an odd smell of wet copper until the gut truck hauled them away each week. I never asked where they took it.

I assumed they poured it out in someone's back-forty pasture; this partially explained the large number of buzzards in the area.

No, the job wasn't glamorous, but it did lend a bit of certain clout among my high school classmates, as it was not the typical hamburger joint or store clerk job. It made an impression on my ninth grade friends.

"Heard you landed a job?" they'd ask me at school.

"Yep ... in the slaughter business," I'd tell them, letting the chilling word "slaughter" sink in for full effect. Now, yes, it's true I only cleaned the slaughterhouse, but I implied that I did a lot more, such as dropping thousand-pound beasts with hot lead, point blank, right between the eyes. I lightly tapped my forehead three times with a finger, stone cold poker faced.

They studied me for a long second.

I implied that I carved up the carcasses with a special razor knife, balanced for zigzag fighting in tight quarters like elevator shafts or radio towers. It was real commando crap, man. I tell them the knife was designed using Nazi technology we captured back in the war.

They look at me blank, puzzled.

"The war, you know, the 'Big One,' blasting at Nazis ... uh ... Tiger Tanks Hitler?" I explain.

Yes! Now they nodded. And I told them about the secret labs our government operated, where goofily-grinning, captured Kraut scientists invented stuff like staged rockets, that awesome powdered drink mix "Tang" and fierce laser beams that could pierce a mouse's tit from Mars.

And those scientists are the very same geniuses who designed my butcher knife, I whisper, looking up slowly. I soaked up the admiration. I was pretty close to being like a hired killer, at least for a ninth-grader.

And I enjoyed my life as a hired killer. I really did.

The slaughterhouse folks were great people and took care of me, cabbage-wise, and are friends to this day. But even after the good money and the free bones for my dog, I began to suspicion something wasn't right.

I worried that I might not be the kind of person who could relax around the slaughter industry.

And it was not over the fact that when I left the building nightly, neighborhood dogs followed me. It was not that my hair was sloppily plastered to my head from the tropical-like heat/steam of the pressure washer. Nor was it the smell of spoiling blood in my nostrils.

No. It was none of that.

It was over the fact that what very little killing I had done, mainly squirrels, I felt very bad about. I worried about the squirrel family that was left behind, now fatherless, as daddy squirrel had been recklessly gunned down. What would become of the family? Did the animal kingdom have some sort of system that helped out? Would the baby squirrels point at me as I passed and say “that’s the killer that got dad.”

It caused me to pause.

And killers don’t pause.

It was then I saw myself as I was: too tender-hearted to be any good at it.

I hated that.

I preferred to be one of those Jack Palance “lug” types that didn’t mind a dirty bloodbath or taking a couple of nasty flesh welts from a bullwhip duel to the death, if need be. He was one of those guys who struck a match on his butt to light a hand-rolled cigarette and nobody had better say a damn thing about it, either.

I would never make a good killer and I had to accept that. I wasn’t even a good slaughter clean-up guy, after one season of being neck-deep in it.

If I were a gangster, I’d suffer spasms of guilt at the crucial moment and accidentally crash the getaway car right, just after we’d jacked up a bank. I’d get the whole crew caught.

And in the joint, I’d probably end up with a shiv in my back.

And as I lay dying, I’m thinking: I should’ve chosen another career – maybe even working on that pulpwood skidder – anything other than commercial artist, because just look where that got me.