

Working in the Shadows  
by Gabriel Thompson



## CHAPTER 7

In 1989, the announcement that a poultry plant would be coming to town was cause for celebration. Russellville and its surrounding communities were desperate for jobs, with the county's unemployment rate holding steady at about 10 percent. Dozens of jubilant stories were filed in the *Franklin County Times*, the local newspaper. Six hundred processing jobs would need to be filled; 300 chicken farmers would be contracted to raise birds; an estimated \$40 million would be infused into the economy. "This just may be the shot in the arm our economy has been needing," noted one reporter. A member of the economic development board that helped attract Gold Kist described poultry plant work as "the finest type industry," before adding that many employees would earn \$4.35 an hour. Two months later, speaking at the plant's groundbreaking ceremony, Governor Gay Hunt heralded it as a watershed moment for economic development. "Alabama has become a pro-business and pro-jobs state. When we have people working

together like you have here, our children won't have to leave the state to find jobs."

Russellville had been in competition with other poor towns, and in order to attract "the finest type industry," taxpayers had to sweeten the pot. The local water, gas, and electric boards made sizable contributions toward the \$100,000 used to subsidize the purchase of the land for Gold Kist, and the water board invested another \$200,000 in piping to supply the facility. State funds, too, were committed: More than half a million dollars were allocated to upgrade roads leading to the plant and hatchery.<sup>3</sup> Such is the model for much of the economic development that occurs in the American South: Poor regions make large concessions to corporations and are rewarded with minimum-wage jobs in return.<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1990s, with the poultry industry booming, Gold Kist expanded the plant and added another 750 workers. But when VF Jeanswear, maker of Lee Jeans, announced in 2001 that it was shuttering three local plants—resulting in a loss of 1,300 jobs—it became clear that the story of economic development in Franklin County was less about adding jobs than replacing them. Workers at Lee were unionized, earned wages that averaged between \$10 and \$11 an hour, and had free medical insurance: It was an occupation on which one could build a stable life. Indeed, the loyalty of Lee's workforce put any poultry plant to shame. Nearly a third of the workers at Lee's Russellville plant, which opened in 1972, had been with the company for more than a decade; one in five had been there at least twenty years. "This is a dark day in Franklin Country," remarked a representative of the chamber of commerce. "I can't remember anything this bad happening to us as a community. There are not that many jobs in Franklin County to replace these jobs."<sup>5</sup>

I arrived in town eighteen years after the surge of optimism that followed the opening of the poultry plant. The county's unem-

ployment rate still stood at over 8 percent, and the dream of high-quality jobs had vanished: Poultry processing was soon discovered to be punishing work for poverty wages. Claims of a new day dawning no longer held water, as parents who had stepped foot inside the plant certainly didn't hope their children would one day join them. But while the early hype had died quickly, the plant jobs were still "better than nothing," as one local told me.

As the most important industry in an impoverished region, the chicken company wielded significant power; this was most evident in the positive press it received. Over the years, the *Franklin County Times* ran upbeat articles that profiled the chicken industry, interviewed a few satisfied chicken farmers (obviously hand-picked by the company), and included feel-good statements by plant managers. Most of the articles looked like little more than company press releases. Searching through the paper's archives, I wasn't able to find many attempts to tell the story from the bottom up, through the voices of ordinary workers. On the drive over to the plant on my second night of work, Kyle offers up his perspective on poultry work.

"It's a fucking struggle every night just to get my ass in," he says, the glowing lights of the plant illuminating the cloudy sky. "And when I worked here before, it was the same thing: four years of forcing myself to come in. I don't know how I lasted that long. I was always one point away from getting fired."

"Why'd you quit?" I ask. (After a few more days of work I realize this is the sort of question a poultry plant worker never needs to ask.)

"I just got to a point one night when I couldn't take it. How long can you do work that a trained monkey could do? I didn't even tell my supervisor I was going to the bathroom or nothing. I was stacking boxes: I put a box down and walked out of the plant, right on home in the dark. Had to bang on the door 'cause

4 Cindy was asleep and I didn't have keys. But she was real cool about it. She said, "We'll make it through. I don't know how, but we'll make it."

During the two-year stretch away from the plant, he collected unemployment and twice worked at Wal-Mart, earning minimum wage. (He is not alone: Many people—like his wife—bounce back and forth between the town's two dead-end jobs.) Though he found Wal-Mart less depressing than the plant, he soon soured on that experience as well. About the mega-retailer he says, "I don't care if they call us 'associates,' they still treat their people like shit. They never gave me enough hours or any regular schedule." So now he was back working with chicken—"for how long, I couldn't tell you." He opens the car door; we are parked in the lot, watching two dozen inmates on work release step out of a department of corrections bus and head into the plant. "Alright, I s'pose we should be heading in. Don't want to, but got to."

I'VE DONE A number of less-than-glamorous jobs in my life, from delivering pizzas and filing papers to selling electronics at K-Mart and installing drywall. Still, none of those low-wage jobs are adequate preparation for what I've just witnessed. For people who have never worked at a fast-paced, low-skilled factory job, it is difficult to communicate through words the weight of the endeavor. The usual adjectives—*monotonous* or *boring* or *endless*—point in the general direction, but are much too mild.

Paradoxically it's the mindlessness of the jobs that can make them so difficult. Think of a task you can complete with minimal concentration. As I later reflected on the man placing lids on boxes, the task that came to mind involved a giant arithmetic workbook. Imagine that your job is to complete the workbook, which is full of simple addition problems like  $8 + 6 = \underline{\quad}$  or  $3 + 9 = \underline{\quad}$ . Perhaps there are fifty such problems on each page and 500 pages in the workbook. The first few minutes might be fun—it feels good to be able to breeze through the pages—but the problems quickly start to repeat. There is muted satisfaction in finishing

the first workbook, but it is short-lived: Another takes its place. In no time the game has grown old, you're tired and bored, and you never want to be asked the sum of  $2 + 3$  again.

Which is too bad, because if you're stuck in a place like Russellville, you just might spend the next twenty years of your life in a job whose primary task is as meaningful and challenging as noting that  $2 + 3 = 5$ . I'm not arguing that people in the plant would prefer work that is physically or mentally taxing. But we all like to learn new things, find some purpose in what we do, and be at least occasionally challenged. This is an elementary observation, but it's easy to forget how many people never get that chance. Early on, Kyle asked me what my father did for a living. I told him that he runs his own nonprofit organization working to improve youth sports. "You know, that sounds interesting," Kyle said. "Does he like it?"

"He loves it."

Kyle got a dreamlike look, as if I was describing something exotic, like the contours of the planet Mars. "Huh. I always wondered what that would be like, you know, to enjoy what you do. Never did like what I was doing. Don't know nobody else who does, neither."

I GET MY first taste of true line-work monotony the following evening, when I'm told to stay in DSI. Since DSI deals directly with fresh chicken meat—unlike IQF or the combo department—for the first time I put on the standard plant uniform: a cheap blue plastic smock no thicker than a single piece of paper, a pair of cotton gloves under a pair of plastic ones, and a white hairnet.

At this point DSI remains a mystery. I don't know what the acronym stands for, or what it does. I do see two lines running parallel to each other, with workers standing on either side. Since keeping workers totally in the dark seems to be part of the business model at Pilgrim's Pride, I'm not surprised when Barbara tells me to follow her without explanation. We leave the twenty or so other DSI workers and walk up a low platform, where another short belt runs at waist level. I'm now standing above the workers.

"You———before?" Barbara asks. There are words in between that I can't hear. I pull out my earplugs and the noise of the plant rushes in.

"What's that?" I shout.

"I said, you ever tear chicken breasts?" She's now shouting too.

"Not really."

"Okay, good. Stay here and when the breasts come by, tear them in half."

Tear them in half? With my hands? I turn around in time to see her walking away and I put my plugs back in. This should be interesting.

I stand at the perch for several minutes, waiting nervously for chicken breasts. From this angle I have a view of a large section of the plant floor, looking out on both DSI and debone, but it's just too complex to make sense of. I realize that while workers are slaving away on the ground, an intricate system of machinery is constantly churning above us. I am reminded of those plastic marble sets of childhood, in which you placed a marble and then followed its progress along a circuitous path until it eventually landed at the bottom. Wherever I look I see chicken meat flying off belts, spinning around gears, dropping from one moving plane to another.

"What's going on, Gabriel?" Kyle ambles up the steps, wearing his hooded Alabama sweatshirt. "Looks like we're fixin' to be partners."

"You know what we're doing here?"

"Chicken breasts. You tear them in half, they come to me, and I put them in boxes."

Just as Kyle takes a position to my right, the first few chicken breasts begin dropping from a belt ten feet in the air. They land on another belt with a plop and travel directly past my station.

The breasts are pink, slippery, heart-shaped, and much larger than I expected.\* A line of sinew connects the two halves of each

\* Industrial chickens, I later learn, are selectively bred to develop outsized breasts. This artificial tinkering is profitable for companies like Pilgrim's Pride; less so for the chickens. Along with suffering from broken

breast, which is what Kyle says I must tear through. Some rip easily, needing no more strength than what is required to tear through a thin stack of papers. Others are stubborn and take a second effort to separate; for these I dig my fingers and thumbs deep into the flesh and yank hard. Some, in fact, are connected so strongly by the sinew that I actually tear right through the breast muscle. Tonight the whole breasts don't give off much of a smell, but each time I tear through the dense muscle, a nauseating whiff of meat is released.

For a few minutes my vegetarian self is aware that this task is pretty gross. A number of the breasts are coated in coagulated purple blood. Others have a film covering the muscle that makes the meat hard to hold, and a few go squirting out of my hands onto the cement floor. Gobs of fat cling to the breasts; the fat is whitish and could easily be confused with scrambled eggs. When I tear the breasts, pieces of fat come flying at me, and within minutes they cover my blue smock. Other pieces are sent sailing at my face, landing on my cheeks and forehead.

As disgusting as this task is, it doesn't take very long for a routine to set in. Within an hour I've torn up the breasts of nearly a thousand birds that were recently slaughtered, but I'm no longer even thinking about chicken. I'm bored, my wrists are beginning to hurt, and my thumbs are locking up.

"This sucks," I shout over to Kyle.

He grins. "Welcome to Pilgrim's Pride!"

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legs that are unable to support their top-heavy physiques, many chickens have lungs and hearts that can't keep pace with the growth of their breasts, and the birds succumb to heart failure. It sounds like a freakish event—chickens felled by heart attacks?—but every year millions of birds perish precisely this way before reaching slaughter weight. Heart attacks have become so prevalent that the industry has even created a euphemistic name for the phenomenon: flip-over syndrome. This syndrome is virtually unknown among non-factory-farmed chickens.

The noise of the plant makes it very difficult to strike up a conversation, and during the first week the only people I've hung out with during breaks are Kyle and Ben. But Barbara eventually puts me at the front of the line, where I spend the shift tearing up chicken breasts. Here it is slightly quieter, allowing for communication as long as we yell into each other's ears. Which is how I get to know Jesús.

Thirty-eight years old and five and a half feet tall, Jesús has the type of stocky frame that suggests rugged athleticism, with scars along his forearms and hands that indicate a tolerance for pain. Along with a hairnet he also wears a beard net over his chin to cover a large goatee. I stay quiet for the first few hours, tearing breasts and tossing them to his side of the bin. He stands opposite me, tearing breasts, but he is also responsible for placing the separated meat on the belt. It doesn't take long to understand why Barbara has placed Jesús at the front of the line: He works at a very fast pace and never seems to tire. The bin fills with a combination of ice, water, blood, and breasts. I stop occasionally—when the supervisors aren't around—to open and close my freezing hands. I wait for Jesús to do the same, but he just keeps chugging along, tearing breasts and throwing them on the belt at a rate of at least one per second.

After our first break, I yell across the bin and introduce myself. He looks up. "You speak Spanish?" I nod and ask if he's from Mexico. He shakes his head. "Guatemala."

"How long have you been here?"

"Ten years."

"How much longer do you think you'll be able to take this?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" He looks confused.

"I mean, survive working at the chicken plant."

"Oh, a long time, for sure. This is good work because it's slow." (Jesús is the only person I hear who characterizes chicken plant work as "slow.")

"Feels pretty fast to me."

He smiles. "But not like picking tomatoes."

Over the next several nights, socializing across a bin of chicken breasts, Jesús tells me how he ended up in Russellville. In the process he corrects a key misconception at the plant: The immigrant workforce is not overwhelmingly Mexican but rather Guatemalan. Most Mexicans, it seems, have graduated to better jobs: Many are employed at various mobile home factories, while others, like Sabrina, have opened small businesses. Today, the vast majority of the immigrant workers at Pilgrim's Pride are from Guatemala. Like Jesús, they are indigenous and generally from one of two northern provinces: Huehuetenango and Quiché. As a child, Jesús grew beans and corn with his family near the town of San Miguel in Huehuetenango. He was fifteen years old in 1985 when he fled the country's civil war, but he doesn't go into detail except to say, "We suffered a little, I suppose." (Like many of the older immigrants, Jesús eventually gained political asylum; the recent arrivals are more likely to be undocumented.)

He first arrived in the potato fields of Idaho, traveling with an older friend who had already spent several years working for the same farmer. He spoke only Q'anjob'al, an Indian dialect. He spent six months in Idaho, working fourteen-hour days earning \$3.50 an hour. One day, a coworker in Idaho who had a green card and a car asked if he wanted to head to Florida. A week later, Jesús was picking tomatoes for Dubois Farms in the Florida farming community of Indiantown. A few years later, Jesús's wife, Leticia, arrived, and the couple spent the next decade picking tomatoes and oranges in Florida and blueberries in Maine and New Jersey. Like many Guatemalans, Jesús learned Spanish while working with Mexicans in the fields, although his wife still feels more comfortable conversing in her native Q'anjob'al.

Eventually farmwork began to take a toll, especially on his back. "They have you running all day carrying buckets of tomatoes," Jesús says. Several of his relatives had moved to Russellville and told him to come along. Ten years later, he has only good things to say about the decision. With their combined incomes—Leticia works in debone—and some help from family, they have been able to purchase two homes, and their seven-year-old daughter is getting the sort of education her parents could only dream about. "We've traveled enough," Jesús says. "We're in Russellville to stay."

**BEFORE FALLING ASLEEP** back at my trailer, I take stock of my first two weeks as an employee at the plant. I've met one woman from orientation now working an eighty-hour week to support her family. Another mother, exhausted because she can't afford child-care, is fired after being unable to stay awake while separating chicken strips. Now my neighbor has nearly killed himself because he didn't have enough money to pay for an air conditioner.

I don't consider myself naive when it comes to poverty. I know millions of people struggle every day for things I take for granted. I spent five years organizing tenants on the brink of eviction in Brooklyn, and another three years reporting on issues related to poverty. But I'm still not prepared for what I've encountered in Alabama. I've come to write about the lives of immigrants but have been blindsided by the degree of rural poverty suffered by U.S. citizens. I am reminded of how Barbara Ehrenreich characterized poverty in *Nickel and Dimed*. Forget about poverty as something sad but sustainable, she argued; instead, poverty must be recognized as "acute distress" and "a state of emergency."

The grinding, deadening work; the workplace diet of sodas and candy bars; the sleep deprivation; the frequent health emergencies; the complete lack of savings: *Unsustainable* is one of the first words that come to mind when I consider the lives of my English-speaking coworkers. (The immigrants in the plant seem better off—both mentally and physically—probably because they can favorably compare the wages and working conditions to what they have left behind in Guatemala.) To understand the nature of the distress, it helps to have access to the facts of their lives—to know about the car driven into a ditch and the son who wakes up just as a mother is ready to collapse. But the *presence* of distress is a more public affair: It is written across each face. The first thing an outsider at the plant will notice—it is impossible not to—is that every American worker over forty is missing some front teeth; and

the gummy smiles, combined with the thick creases that carve up cheeks and foreheads, make people look decades older. I often felt, on learning someone's age, that I had been transported back to the harsh frontier life of the early 1800s. An overweight, gray-haired man with a bent back and chronic cough, who I imagine must be nearing retirement, turns out to be forty-two. Before I can catch myself, I think: *He probably won't be alive in a decade.*

"Working the night shift makes you old quick," Kyle tells me. I won't be here long enough to feel its full effect, but my lack of premature aging is regularly noted. I've never been told that I look particularly young for my age, but at the chicken plant people are genuinely astounded when I tell them I am thirty years old; everyone assumes I recently graduated high school. Some people refuse to believe I am telling the truth after I insist upon my age. "If you don't want to tell me your real age you don't have to," one woman laughs, before asking me for the second time what I have to hide. I eventually say that I am twenty-two just to change the subject. I have felt fortunate for many things—economic stability, access to a college education, work that I enjoy—but it's never occurred to me to be thankful for the sum of all these good fortunes: Life isn't "making me old quick."