

*The Line*

by

Shandel Beers

Ever since Carlos saw Mercer's hand get crushed on the fabrication line, he can't get the image out of his head—the moaning. Everything brings it back to him. A snake flattened in the parking lot becomes Mercer's fingers sticking out from under the stamper before Carlos realized what was happening, before he ran and pulled the emergency release cord, freeing Mercer, who sunk to the ground. A foreman ran down to the floor, yelled, "What's going on here?" barked some orders, and then, everyone cleaned up the blood, Mercer was taken away. The line was moving again in—what?—ninety seconds? And that was that. He looks at the ground beef Isa asked him to buy. He can't do it. It is Mercer's pulverized flesh. How much of it is stuck to the machine? How much of it continued down the line? Will a suburban mom be driving children to a shiny new school someday in a Camry that still has microscopic vestiges of Mercer's blood and bone stuck in the transmission? The bile rises in his throat. He grabs a package of chorizo instead. This will have to do. He can't tell Isa. He can't lay this burden on her. Every day of her life is a horror, plucking chickens, squawking, and still alive, swinging by their feet from a conveyor belt. He brought her here. Iowa. He spits the name from his mouth like it is acid on his tongue. He will not tell her, even though he knows she can tell something is wrong. He will keep working the line. He will save enough money to get them out of here. He will do whatever it takes.