

MARKET DAY

"WAKE THEM NICE. BE NICE."

What am I doing wrong? she wonders.

Not one thing. That's what.

"Remember, it's early for them," says the man, turning on the last row of long lights. Then again, he tells her, "Be nice."

She loosens her grip on the broom, not coaxing them quite so hard. Plump sows and hard young boars grunt and push themselves up onto their feet and hands. Sleepy eyes blink. The blue-eyed sow with the freckled face gives her a different look. Angry, sort of. But there's something else, too. As if maybe it knows.

How could it?

It can't. It doesn't. And it won't ever, that's for sure.

"Keep them at this end," says the man. "I'll get the truck."

The broom is her broom. As much as these hands are hers. As soon as the man leaves, she swishes it harder, grunting defiantly, the animals knowing to keep away from her when she makes these kinds of noises.

Stupid animals.

The truck is huge, and loud in its own way. It pulls up to the building and stops with a big farting sound. Then the man comes around back and opens the truck's doors, and he says, "Here," while waving. "Help me with the ramp," he says.

The ramp is steel, and cold, and despite her help, heavy. It's still dark outdoors, the morning air cold enough for her breath to show in the lights. She smells herself while she works. She smells the man. He ate oatmeal and homegrown eggs for breakfast, and drank coffee and took a shit, and now he gives a big belch. From deep inside himself. "Let's get them onboard," he tells her. So she walks back into the building and grabs her broom again, urging the animals along by sweeping at the padded plastic floor. The floor is very clean. Because she uses soap and antibiotics on it, and she does her work so well. Cleanliness is important inside this building. For the sake of the animals, and more important, for the sake of the people who will buy them.

This is the day when they will be bought.

We're riding to the market today, she tells herself.

Grunting softly, she urges everyone to keep moving. A few of the animals shit and pee. Their messes don't matter now; nothing can be done about them now. One or two at a time, they ease their way onto the cold steel ramp, hands and feet acting afraid, not knowing the feel of the strange new surface.

Soft plastic is all they know.

The blue-eyed sow and the biggest boar are last on the ramp. The boar is strong enough to have worried her in the past, and now, shuffling into the truck, it seems to grow larger and more menacing.

"Watch that one," the man advises.

But she's already watching.

The boar turns its head just enough to look back at her, little brown eyes saying something. Warning her. she realizes. Almost too late. she braces herself. She lifts her broom and throws the

