



# BUTCH

I worked on the kill floor of Maple Leaf, drenched in blood and guts, drowning a new labour force moving briskly through

We're deep in the shadows. In the bowels of a building with walls that sweat gristle and blood. A modern-day plant, more like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* than *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*.

We're standing in a semi-circle on the kill floor at Maple Leaf Pork in Brandon, Manitoba. Twenty-five fresh recruits, our mouths agape.

Mike, a short, squat, factory floor veteran, stuffed into a bloody lab coat, is leading our tour. Hundreds of hogs swing by on a conveyer line, flayed and shackled up by their hind legs, their heads dangling by a flap of skin, they smack together like bowling pins.

We stare at the blank faces of the men who thrust in and

out of the hogs' bellies with knives, yanking out glistening tubes of red and gray entrails. Bowels, hearts and livers that will eventually be chopped up, packaged and shipped off for the dinner table.

"We'd harvest the farts if we could," Mike offers with a certain morbid glee. "Yup. We use just about everything. Only three per cent of the pig goes to waste around here."

My tongue suddenly feels like it's caked in the stench of sweat and scared animal. My head begins to swing like a seesaw.

"Don't you dare puke," Mike snorts, grabbing at my helmet to take note of my name, which is displayed on the front, in bold lettering. "Suck it up, Princess."



# HERED

Maple Leaf Pork in Brandon, Manitoba, in the nauseating stench. I was part of rough the carcasses. This is efficiency?

By Susan Bourette • Photographs by Thomas Fricke

I'm praying for a miracle. That I won't toss my cookies. Or worse, be tossed out tush over teakettle, my first day on the job. "It's the smell," I respond weakly. And then with all the moxy I can muster: "I'll get used to it."

With that, Mike cocks his head and inhales deeply before he begins his spiel. One he has surely mouthed dozens of times before: "You know what that smell is?" he growls rhetorically. "That," he says, leaning in for emphasis, "That's the smell of money."

Certainly Michael McCain believed he could smell the money, despite the waves of nausea that swept over him as he toured his first company plant in the mid-90s. His family has just bought a majority stake in Maple Leaf Foods

Ltd. following an ugly and very public bust-up of the McCain family french-fry empire. As company president, McCain had been tapped by his father, Wallace McCain, to stage a turnaround of Maple Leaf's moribund meat division.

From behind the bronzed glass of his elegant Toronto office, McCain cast his glance south of the border for lessons in how to fix the mess. It wasn't just his company that was fraught with trouble. It was the entire Canadian pork industry. He believed Canadian companies could compete in the newly competitive North American framework. But not without sweeping changes. "What are we waiting for," he asked a conference of industry colleagues provocatively. "Wal-Mart to come to town and put us out of business?"

McCain got down to work with his management team. They drafted a strategy to build the company into a pork powerhouse, gobbling up competitors such as Burns Foods Ltd. and Gainers Inc. But the centrepiece of the company's recipe for success was a plan for a world-class processing plant in Brandon. The location would give the company proximity to cheap grain in which to feed its pigs, space in which to grow them, and allow Maple Leaf a ready transportation route to the burgeoning Japanese pork market.

In terms of sheer size, the Brandon plant's capacity was staggering: At full tilt, it was capable of slaughtering and processing 90,000 hogs a week. It was to be a technological marvel in a landscape of aging, lethargic plants across the country.

"You didn't have to look far to see that inefficient plants, older assets and lack of scale made the Canadian industry significantly less competitive," explains Michael Detlefsen, an executive vice-president in Maple Leaf's pork division. "We needed to build the scale to get the cost efficiencies that would allow Maple Leaf a competitive advantage in the global market."

But Maple Leaf also envisioned cost cuts that would herald a new era of rancor between the company and its workers.

The company was already drawing up a blueprint for its state-of-the-art plant when it told 850 workers at a plant in Edmonton, Alberta that they would have to accept whopping wage rollbacks. It was similar in scenario to the decade long battles that had already played out in the United States. Not only had the U.S. industry undergone a massive restructuring and consolidation, it had also tightened its grip on workers. In an aggressive campaign to reduce costs, many U.S. companies invoked special bankruptcy laws that allowed them to shred their union contracts, and drive down wages.

Workers struck in Edmonton. Less than two weeks later, Maple Leaf shuttered the plant doors, only to announce plans weeks later for its facility in Brandon. Manitoba had

Now, more than four years later, the plant is struggling to keep its slaughter and dismemberment in full swing. In an industry beset by a worldwide glut in the meat market, the plant is currently churning out pork chops at half capacity. A bigger problem for the money-losing plant? The speed of the production line is outpaced only by the number of workers fleeing the facility.

It is against this backdrop that I arrive on the doorstep, application in hand. Two weeks later, I'm hired. For \$9.45 an hour, I will work the factory floor along side some 1,350 other jawbreakers, pig chasers and kidney poppers, in one



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won a heavily contested competition for the plant. The provincial government had anted-up \$7-million in subsidies and tax advantages, while the City of Brandon kicked in another \$13.5-million.

Maple Leaf then got its wish. It proceeded to negotiate a new deal with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, slashing wage rates by 40 per cent at the new plant. Union members were apoplectic. They accused their leaders of selling out the membership by secretly bargaining lowball wages at the Brandon plant, while workers were on strike in Edmonton and being pressured for concessions in Winnipeg.

By the fall of 1999, the \$150-million, state-of-the-art plant was finally completed. It opened amid great pomp and pageantry with both provincial and city officials extolling the benefits to the community. Everyone, it seemed, was happy. Everyone but the workers.

of the most dangerous and gruesome jobs in the country. For eight hours a day, I will work in "byproducts," slicing the cheeks out of hogs' heads. To see for myself whether Maple Leaf Pork lives up to its billing, in the words of former federal NDP Leader Alexa McDonough, as a "terrible and manipulative" employer. How bad can the work possibly be? I'm about to find out.

Monday. My first day on the job. Just past 6:30 a.m., and an orange orb hovers low on the horizon, casting a faded wash over this pretty patch of prairie also known as Wheat City, some 200 kilometers west of Winnipeg. A steady stream of pick-ups and rusted-out station wagons is already on the road. Their headlamps bounce along a dead-end stretch of highway, toward a low-slung, leviathan of pipe and steel, situated in a field of hay bales. A fifteen-minute drive from the city.

The parking lot is already teeming, filled with dozens of

young men in muscle shirts and women pinched into low riding jeans. They walk two by two, the sound of gravel skidding beneath their feet. In the distance, a truck is busy unloading today's hog kill. The constant drone of the engine muffles the sound of their collective squeal.

Juan Luis Zavaleta is already at work. Splattered in blood as he hacks away at a carcass to extract the bung – the hogs' intestines and anus. It's a task he and his kill floor brethren will perform 21 times each minute, 10,000 times a day.

Meanwhile, upstairs, high above the kill floor, 25 of us are gathered in a yawning room. It's festooned with a smattering of Maple Leaf posters trumpeting its products; loins, hams, ribs and pork bellies. The floor beneath our feet is rumbling, set into motion by the thrum of the butchery machinery below.

Robert Panontin, a porky, narrow-eyed, 30-something dressed in a company shirt and canvas pants, arrives and pounds the table with a raft of documents. As the company's labour relations representative, he's got a job to do: To scare the Be Jesus of out us. The statistics aren't pretty. He knows most of us will go AWOL long before we reach probation, like some 4,000 other workers since the plant opened. Many because their hands had become too crippled working all day with a knife. Or because the work is too dark and surreal.

However, it's a problem that extends far beyond the Brandon city limits. In fact, there's a revolving door of workers across the continent. Turnover rates of between 40 and 100 per cent annually are common among U.S. industry behemoths such as Tyson Foods Inc. and IBP Inc.—companies that helped mastermind the low wage scale.

How have they coped? Largely by tapping into a steady supply of immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America. In recent years, it's become a hot button issue in the United States. Some argue that immigrants undercut American workers for jobs that once paid among the highest in the industrial sector. Others believe immigrant workers are being exploited.

No one, however, has come under more scrutiny than Tyson Foods of Springdale, Arizona. The company, which now has a labour force that is 40 percent Hispanic, is facing a litany of charges over its labour practices. Following a sweeping undercover investigation, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted the company for conspiring to smuggle illegal immigrants into the company. If convicted, it faces fines of up to \$100-million.

There have also been rumblings about Manitoba's new immigrant workers. Faced with the same limited labour pool for demanding, low paying jobs, Maple Leaf has also looked to Mexico and Central America for workers.

Jan Chaboyer, president of the Brandon and District Labour Council, believes immigrant workers are especially vulnerable because they are often too afraid to speak up in the fight for better working conditions. "Personally, I have a problem with indentured labour," Chaboyer adds, referring to some 100 workers who have come to the company on a two-year visa. "If they're good enough to work here, they should have landed immigrant status."

So far, Maple Leaf's immigrant recruitment strategy has met with mixed success. Of 65 Mexican workers recruited beginning in January 2002, only 16 remain. Some fled because they had trouble adjusting to the Canadian way of life. Others because they believed that the \$19,500 they earned as a starting wage – less than poverty level for a family of two -- would stretch further than it proved to in Bran-



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12,000 to 15,000 pieces





## A Maple Leaf worker makes six different cutting motions to process a day. That's three million cuts a year.

don. However, the company has had more success with workers from El Salvador. All but one of 44 workers recruited have stayed with the company.

Industry analyst Kevin Grier believes that the struggle to find workers will continue to prove vexing for companies across the country.

"It's hit everybody across the entire meatpacking industry," says Grier, of the George Morris Centre at the University of Guelph, which specializes in agribusiness issues. "It's not just Maple Leaf. It's also the major packers in Alberta. They're all facing the same problems."

He says companies will be forced to pay low wages to compete in what is essentially a commodity-based business that is widely affected by price shifts.

Steve LeBlanc, Maple Leaf's human resources manager in Brandon, denies that wages contribute to the labour shortage. "Our wages aren't the issue," he says, adding that the turnover rate is expected to sink to 65 per cent this year from 100 per cent over the past few years. "They're actually very competitive as far as our local market goes."

Meanwhile, back in the training room, Panontin is busy working the floor, exalting the perks that will bulk up our pay packet and keep us punching the company clock. A perfect attendance record over three months? An extra 50 cents an hour tacked on to our check and a shot a company draw for \$1500. We can also rack up "pork bucks," allowing us to buy our roasts and ribs direct from the factory floor at just a fraction above cost.

Panontin eyes his unlikely group of greenhorns warily.

There's Tina, a velvety-eyed, 30-year-old mother of four, with hair sculpted like a porcupine. Her background is in retail. She already looks spooked as she stares at her hands, folded in her lap. At the next table, there's Jenn, mid-20s, a golden-haired, anthropology graduate in wide-leg pants and shy smile. She looks least likely to fit in. But, in fact, she's the hen most suited to the roost, having worked gutting bears at her grandparents hunting lodge in Northern Ontario. At the back of the room there's Joe, a transplanted Newfie with big teeth and a know-it-all sneer. He's fresh from working the oilrigs in Alberta. And there's Andrew. Built like a boulder at 6'2" and 270 pounds. He's already on the fast track to the big bucks. Four years working as a short order cook have given him what the company values most: knife skills. The group also includes two Chads, Enoch, Phoebe and Tim, whose back after quitting eight months ago. He's been assigned to the overnight sanitation shift, cleaning up hogs' guts and feces.

Panontin hunches forward, resting his beefy hands on the table. A Listen Up posture.

"I just want you to know we're watching you like a hawk," he warns, surveying the room to gauge whether his tone has invoked the intended effect. "You have signed an employee/employer contract with us. We've agreed to pay you a wage and you agree to come to work. We are looking for commitment."

It's simple. All we have to do is show up. When we can't, call in. Sounds reasonable.

With that, Panontin clamps his mouth tightly, gathers his



ous injuries every year, meatpacking is by far the most dangerous job in Canada. Whether it's an accidental stab wound from a co-worker, or a fracture from a falling carcass, the slaughterhouse is rife with potential perils. Greasy, slippery floors cause many of the trips and falls. But it is repetitive strain injuries – the upshot of wielding a knife at awkward angles all day – that account for the bulk of sick days and long-term disabilities. It's little wonder. By one tally, a typical Maple Leaf worker makes six different cutting motions to 12,000 to 15,000 pieces of pork a day. That's three million cuts a year.

The first time Zavaleta stared down at the conveyer belt, he knew his body would give out long before the machine ever would.

With a chin affixed by a five-inch tuft of hair molded into a swirl, his heavy-lidded eyes reminiscent of a Renaissance painter, the 32-year-old looks an unlikely slaughterhouse worker. In fact, Zavaleta is not only a trained Mexican butcher, but an accomplished artist who finds his inspiration in the blood and guts of pigs.

Zavaleta wants to stay on. He's just not certain his body is willing.

"Every job at Maple Leaf is hard. It's messy, brutal work," he says. "You work eight hours a day, five days a week and you're body is going to wear out."

In 18 months on the job, Zavaleta has already been injured

## "We'd harvest the farts if we could," Mike offers with a c Only three per cent of the pig

training materials and readies to leave. But he stops short of the door and swivels: "I just want you to know I have a really good friend in security at the mall. If I'm doing an investigation on you, I'll go down there to watch his security videos. God help you if I catch you goofing off at the mall on video."

We sit in silence, beholding our labour representative with a collective wince.

It's a revolving door of corporate types with pep talks and motivational videos until we're handed over to Randie Mulligan, our health and safety representative.

"Hi-ya!" she trills, entering the training room like a cut floor Cinderella, her peasant dress in a whirl behind her, her shoes click-clacking across the concrete. Her blissed-up demeanor seems a bit at odds with the morning's lecture. With charts and handouts she offers hints on good grooming and work floor hygiene. How to keep the company "product" free of our microbes.

"Your quality of life shouldn't change while you're working at Maple Leaf," she assures us in one breath, and then warns in the next: Two-thirds of us will be injured on the job in the next three months.

"It's really a blood-bath in there from a human's point of view," explains Todd Scarth, director for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in Manitoba, who has studied the impact of increased hog production on labour in Brandon. "The newer plants are faster and far more dangerous. You combine that what we think is a turnover rate of 100% -- and that's a deadly combination."

Undoubtedly, with five times the national average of seri-

three times; twice hurting his back; another, breaking a rib. All from pushing into pig all day. He's just returned from four months of kitchen duty this week. He'd been off regular duty because of his latest back injury and it's already flaring up again. He thinks it's related to faulty equipment he uses on the line and he told his supervisor as much. He certainly didn't like his boss' response. "He said, 'You know Juan. I'm tired of you and your injury,'" Zavaleta says wearily, recounting the exchange. "There are so many people working harder than you without saying a word. If the [machinery] isn't working properly, that's part of the work here...Go back to your Mexican government to take care of you."

Meanwhile, the nurses' station is busy taking care of today's injuries. We pass by on our way for lunch at Hamlets, the company's main cafeteria. A half-dozen workers are slumped in chairs, waiting for treatment. A sign hangs on the wall above them: 560 it reads. That's the number of injuries last week.

Inside the cafeteria, the din of the coffee cups is muted by the singsong of the workers chain-link belly belts that chime as they file in line for today's grub. The daily special? Meat lover's delight. Pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy.

Jenn's not hungry. She leans forward, head bowed, one hand on the table, another holding a cigarette. She doesn't usually smoke. But the anxiety has been building all morning. In a few minutes, she'll be on the factory floor, hacking away at a pig's head. She thought she was ready.

"I had a nightmare last night," she sighs softly and pauses. "I was being chased by hogs' heads. It's still freaking me

out.”

She draws long on her cigarette. Then snuffs it out abruptly like she’s exorcising some sort of midnight phantom.

Soon, our posse is herded back to the training room where we’ll be fitted in the costume of the factory floor. Rubber boots with steel toes; whites still stained with the memory of yesterday’s slaughter; a belly belt to protect the organs; ear plugs, a hairnet and helmet; and a mesh glove that extends to the elbow. I’m now dressed to kill. Or at least butcher. I feel like a snow-white, Darth Vader.

Jesus Zavala, stands ramrod straight, hands clasped in front of him, looking like a no-guff, factory floor statesman. Jessie, as he is affectionately called on the shop floor, a Mexican trained butcher, has worked his way up to trainer in less than two years on the job at Maple Leaf. He is to be our mentor.

Zavala leads us deep into the basement of the building. A crypt, really, where there is no clock, no window, no vestige of the outside world.

It’s now 1:30 and their bellies full from lunch, workers on the picnic line are busy hacking pork for shoulder bones with a single-mindedness. Then men on the dressing floor are pulling bung, livers, hearts and diaphragms they place on a pulley of spikes behind them. If the line fails to keep pace, the kill men must slow down, backing up the slaugh-

for an hour of overtime. It’s mandatory – part of our collective agreement with the company. There’s a problem at the gam table. Several workers are off sick. Sherri, our floor supervisor, a pretty, woman of grandmotherly vintage arrives, clipboard in hand. Her heavily-caked eyelashes flutter as she peers out from behind gold-rimmed glasses. “Four,” she finally bellows in a husky voice. “I need four real strong guys on the gam table.”

A half-dozen hands shoot up. Andrew, the quarterback-like, former cook, is waving his arm feverishly. Sherri picks off the men individually: “You, you, you and you.” Andrew smirks, and falls into the parade of burly men that trail Sherri down the hallway. “I have no idea what the hell the gam table is. But it’s gotta be better than the gore in there,” he avers as he rumbles out.

It’s show time for the rest of us. Zavala clamps on his hearing gear, slips on a pair goggles, and motions us into the massacre.

We enter a room that is a chorus of hum and hiss; clangs and thuds. But certainly no glee club. I step over strings of slippery, yellow gristle and pools of blood. Past plumes of steam that rise from the floor to my workstation.

It’s a creepy sight. On the right, workers are hunched over a conveyer line of disembodied heads. Some are sawing off ears with pneumatic knives. Others are skewering heads onto spikes. The thrum of the line triggers the beasts’

certain morbid glee. “Yup. We use just about everything. g goes to waste around here.”



ter. Quotas must be met or it will mean overtime. One hour. Two hours. Whatever it takes to get the job done.

Our first day on the line, and we learn we’re already in

mouths in motion, as though they’re in conversation. They round the corner, tumbling onto another conveyer belt. Piled three by three, they’re headed straight at me.

Zavala is already in a dance of kinetic perfection. With all of the skill and artistry of a sculptor, he reaches forward, picking a head up by the esophagus and begins chiseling. First slicing the cheeks out of the outside of the head, then the inside. He plops the flesh onto a smaller conveyer belt below, and thrusts the hogs’ head down a chute, on its way to rendering. “Now, you try,” he says, handing me a razor-sharp knife, and smiling with encouragement.

I grasp at a snout, and haul 20 pounds of head toward me. It’s heavier than I imagined and I stumble. The head rolls from my carving station, falling face up on my boot. Mouth ajar, eyes still open, cheeks twitching, it stares me up at me as if stuck in some sort of somnolent scream.

I do better next time. Soon, dozens of hogs’ heads later, I can feel the blood trickling down my cheek, and seeping into my bra. But what makes me really woozy? It’s the sensation of warm, sticky flesh on the other side of my plastic glove each time I lay hold of an esophagus.

By quitting time my carving hand is starting give out. My back aches. But it’s my cheeks that hurt the most from sucking in my lips all day, hoping to keep the blood and guts from getting into my mouth.

We gather around the sink to clean the little pieces of fat and meat from our tools. Jenn’s hosing down a scabbard when she lets out a yelp. The hose has slipped from her grasp and she’s shooting a spray of scalding water into the face of a fellow worker. The water has soaked into her glove.

Her hand is starting to blister-up in welts.

They're both sent off to the nurses' station.

By 6:30, I'm standing in a hot shower, trying to wash it all away. By 7:30, I'm able to eat for the first time of the day. By 8:30, I'm in bed, dreading the thought of tomorrow.

The next morning, we gather for roll call. There are three no-shows among the recruits. Jenn's been pulled from the line, and assigned to kitchen duty while the wounds on her hand heal.

There's a murmur of discontent in the room. Andrew's developed a serious Tylenol habit overnight. His body is throbbing from yesterday's work on the gam table: catching hogs as they toppled from a tumbler, slitting their tendons and skewering them up by their hind legs. "They were coming five at a time. Six at a time. It was crazy," he says, his face flaring red in exasperation. "I couldn't grab them fast enough. It's too fucking hard. I'd rather pull assholes any day."

Joe, the mouthy Newfie, wanted a job on the kill floor, but he's been designated to work in rails, stacking boxes of meat. "I really got screwed here," he declares. "First they tell me I'm doin' this, that I'm doin' that. You're not even allowed to take a piss unless it's on your scheduled break. This job sucks."

No one disagrees.

It's the last glimpse I'll have of most of my fellow trainees, many who have fanned out across the factory floor to fill in for both injured and absentee workers. For two more days, I hone my knife skills, carving into hogs' heads, until I'm both numb with pain and desensitized to what I'm doing.

By my fourth day on the factory floor, something odd happens. I'm suddenly feeling squeamish. Ready to puke again at the thought of touching flesh dead just 42 minutes. For the next few hours, I slow my pace until I am miraculously granted a reprieve: I've been tapped to help out in packing for the rest of the afternoon.

I spend the next few hours, picking diaphragms out of a

Drug Act and Meat Inspection Act through Congress.

However, for all of his efforts to ensure the food was safe, Roosevelt did nothing to improve the safety or well being of the industry's workers. In the newly competitive North American framework, some have argued, we've now come full-circle. Back to Sinclair's horror show: cheap, dispensable labour.

Perhaps Zavaleta, the Mexican worker, sums it up best. "It's a big paradox for the company. They spend millions training us and then they treat us like we're their slaves. Like we're completely disposable. And we eventually leave."

It's a particularly exigent issue given that Maple Leaf is now gearing up for a second shift at the Brandon plant in 2005. It hopes to boost its capacity to 90,000 hogs a week, from 45,000, adding 900 more jobs.

How will it staff the jobs given the province's limited labour pool? The plant's human resources manager LeBlanc says the company is confident it can find enough workers. He says Maple Leaf plans to continue to recruit heavily from local aboriginal communities, which currently compose about 40% of its labour force. It also plans to extend its foreign recruitment program, boosting its immigrant workforce to 12 per cent from 6 per cent.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' Todd Scarth believes it's time that local labour leaders and provincial officials take stock of all that a second shift at the plant will mean for both the community and for workers.

"When we evaluate the costs and benefits of the plant expansion, we must take into account whether these are good jobs," Scarth says. "Are they safe, secure, well-paying? Are they the kinds of jobs that would allow someone to support a family?"

Smithfield's Joseph Luter III, chairman and CEO of the largest pork processor in the world, stunned the industry last year when he advocated higher wages for workers.

"Workmanship in the plant suffers when we have high turnover, and that's a result of paying low wages," he told

Two-thirds of us will be injured on the job in the next three months.

giant tub and packing them, layer upon layer, into boxes destined for the Japanese market. I'm working as fast as I can when I hear the lead hand behind me: "Come on," he roars. "You're holding us up. I need you to pack like a mad woman."

With that, I begin throwing the meat furiously into boxes until the tubs that were once overflowing, are empty.

I leave at day's end along side hundreds of workers who spill into the parking lot, carrying their lunch buckets. Some wait for the bus. Others clamour into their pick-ups. In a little more than 14 hours, they'll be back. Living it. Hating it. I know I won't be returning. I can't stomach another day.

I leave thinking about Upton Sinclair's muckraking expose of the meatpacking industry nearly a century ago. In his novel *The Jungle*, Sinclair chronicled the appalling conditions of the Chicago stockyards and the lives of a family of Lithuanian immigrants working in meatpacking plants. The book sparked an independent investigation into the industry and helped Theodore Roosevelt push the Pure Food and

a conference. So far, Luter has failed to make good on the suggestion that workers should earn \$2 (U.S.) more an hour.

Even some industry analysts have begun to ponder the logic of Maple Leaf's pay scale. "Perhaps the strategy of paying relatively low wages is not so good or not so smart given today's low unemployment levels," wrote Shawn Allen of investment-picks.com.

But there are bigger worries on the Street. Many are keeping a watchful eye on the company's tumbling profits.

Maple Leaf, which is preparing to swallow rival meat-packer Schneider Corp. in a \$510-million deal, saw its profit nearly wiped out in the most recent quarter ending in September. Earnings for the third quarter slipped to \$299,000 or a loss of one cent a share, compared with \$19.3-million or a gain of 16 cents a year earlier. The company blamed low pork prices resulting from an oversupply of meat proteins and a sluggish Japanese market, which constitutes about eight per cent of company sales.

Michael Palmer, an analyst at Veritas Investment Research



Corp. believes the company could stage a turnaround with an uptick in pork prices. However, he says Maple Leaf executives have consistently bungled in rolling out their strategy, and failed to keep their promises. The Brandon plant is just one example, Palmer says. "They definitely positioned the plant as if it were going to vault the company to another level. I think they are disappointed in its performance. I certainly hope they are embarrassed because their projections are way of the mark."

Maple Leaf vice-president Detlefsen sees it differently. He says the Brandon plant is going through the same growing pains as any plant in the start-up phase. "We're tracking industry standards," Detlefsen says. "The business is not performing to where we'd like it to be because of the protein glut...We're happy with the plant's performance at this stage."

Meanwhile, I don't bother calling in to offer my resignation. A few days later, I receive a registered letter in the mail from the company. It says they have decided to terminate my employment effective immediately. "The Company recognizes that this line of work may not be for everyone and that you may be suited to a different line of work," the letter reads. "You are advised that should you chose to reapply for employment in the future, when your situation has stabilized, your application will be given due consideration."

I crumple it up and toss it in the garbage.