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Delicatessen

Saša Skenderija

K&T Meats is my favorite butcher shop on Broadway, in Astoria. It resembles me of those in Vitez, Maglai, and other small Bosnian towns, except this one's jointly owned by six or seven immigrants—Greeks and Romanians—who, apart from English, speak a meat-market hash of all the Balkan languages, even Hungarian, since their customers' meat recipes, products, and foods come from there. They've all been here ever since the shop opened in 1983, as I discovered from the Polaroid pictures and newspaper clippings taped to the glass partition around the cashier's cage, where an elderly silent woman always sits, with thick eyeglasses and a chronically annoyed expression on her face. Their entire social life takes place behind the counter displaying sliced fresh meat underneath wreaths of sausage and slabs of smoked meat hung in rows from the ceiling. All but one are there every working day, the same for nearly 30 years, from 10 to 6, including Saturdays. One is always in rotation for his two-month vacation, quite unusual for the States, when he flies to the Balkans, from where he'll return with new wrinkles and the gray hairs of his old country that otherwise would remain unnoticed by his colleagues and patrons immersed in the day-to-dayness of growing old in the shop.

They were the first neighbors I started getting closer to after settling in Astoria two summers ago. They were intrigued by my visits, at times of day when only housewives roam, while husbands and *serious people* are at work, and by my pretentious nostalgic enthusiasm for raw meat and meat products from the old country. I explained to them: I work online from home, and I'm a writer, more precisely a poet. Some of them still remembered from their school books the names I cited to back up the seriousness and legitimacy of my vocation—the Greeks recognized Seferis and Cavafy, the Romanians Eminescu and Stanesco—so I became a kind of daily attraction and somebody to fuck around with. They told me they'd never even heard of a Bosnian poet, let alone seen one, and certainly not a Bosnian who had read or even knew the names of their poets. Their Astoria Bosnian customers are mainly small businessmen, café owners and craftsmen, and none of them ever buy pork. “Well,” I said, defending myself and the diversity of my native soil, “we also have Bosnians who write and read poems and eat pork.”

I grew closest to tall, shrewd fifty-year-old Simeon from Banat in Romania, who enjoys—or rather endures—the status of an intellectual in the butcher shop. As soon as I showed up at the door, the others would greet me in unison and call Simeon: “Your poet friend is here!” Then Simeon would “adopt” me at the counter and, while serving me, put me before the bantering jury of his workmates. He might ask me, with a dead serious expression on his face, what I intended to make with the ground meat he was packing in cellophane. I would say meatballs, or something like that. Next, without changing his expression, he would offer to grind me half a pound of “penguin,”

advising me in confidence that that was the best mixture for meatballs. “Of what?” I would ask in confusion, trying to decipher his woolly Romanian accent.

“Of pen-gu-in,” he would repeat in a serious tone, whereupon the rest of the butchers would burst out laughing.

He would stretch out a conciliatory hand across the counter, pat me on the shoulder and say with a sad smile:

“You’re not mad at me, are you? Real poets can take a joke. At least you see the kind of assholes I have to cope with here,” glancing at his co-workers and evoking an even heavier salvo of laughter.

In time, I can’t tell exactly why, he gave up teasing me, to the disappointment of the others. I was still his exclusive customer, and our culinary-poetic dialogues across the counter got to be more and more friendly and, I might say, sadder and sadder. When I came this summer to get some camping provisions for a trip to Fire Island, Simo surprised me by checking up on the completeness of my camping equipment. The next day he brought in his own *real* camping rucksack, lent me a *real* camping lantern and a *real* camp knife. After my vacation, I went to K&T to return the borrowed equipment, and put a carton of my favorite Czech beer in the rucksack as a gesture of gratitude. I didn’t find Simo there. He had gone on his rotation-vacation back home, so I left everything with the other butchers. When he got back after two months in Romania, he looked at least two years older and even more forelorn. I went by the shop to thank him personally for the equipment and asked how it had been back home. He answered in one syllable: “Bad.”

“Did you like the Czech beer?” I asked.

“What beer?”

“The beer I left in the backpack!”

At this the other butchers, who as usual were listening in on our conversation, burst out laughing.

“Well, now you see what kind of assholes they are,” Simo commented with resignation, “they stole it and drank it all.”

I went to see Simo yesterday, gathering supplies for my New Year’s Eve party. First I stopped by the liquor store and picked up a few bottles of excellent (yet cheap) Chilean Sauvignon Blanc called “Nostalgia.” And while I was ordering various meats from Simo and putting items from the shelves in my basket—*Radenska* mineral water, *Vegeta* spices, cabbage leaves for *sarma*, *our* mayonnaise—I left my bag of wine on the counter. The butcher crew couldn’t resist stealing a peak into the bag, and as soon as they saw the “Nostalgia,” they jumped on my back:

“Hey, poet, this is bad wine. You drink it and nostalgia takes you over. Then you drink more and you get drunk and you start writing poems, and—snip! —you hang yourself. Fuck that kind of wine! Why don’t you buy our Greek/Romanian wines? They are much better—no nostalgia in them. Only sunshine, sea and laughter.”

Simo bent over the counter towards me and smiled sadly:

“Well, you can see what I have to go through, who I’m wasting my life with.”

I take the bags of meat and provisions and say:

“Happy New Year, my friend Simo!”

At the door I call back to them all:

“Happy New Year, neighbors!”

“Happy New Year, poet,” they answered in unison, “hey, wait a minute, you forgot your bag of nostalgia!”

”No I didn’t. That’s my New Year’s present to Simo and his friends.”

“What do you mean, friends?” shouts Simo from the counter, “these are all my enemies!”

“OK, then,” I say, “I’m leaving the wine to my friend Simo, and nostalgia to his enemies.”

I went out on the street. Festive Broadway outshouted the banter and laughter from the butcher shop, from Astoria’s old boys, my *compadres* in meat, wine, and the same stars.

Translated by Wayles Browne, Stephanie Krueger, and the author
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