

The Côte des Neiges Cattle Rustler

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That iconic image of a steer. You know the one, mapped out in names like chuck and round and brisket? It was in my head when I was looking at my vocational options. I had never been good with wood or electricity but I loved knowing different cuts of meat. I talked to a butcher I normally chat with at my neighbourhood supermarket in Montreal, asking him if they only took on guys out of vocational school, or if they might be interested in teaching butchering on the job, to someone like me (a writer, for god sakes). I was introduced to the head butcher and got hired immediately at their other more upscale store. I began this new profession two days later. There would be no school.

I started at the bottom. I carried giant plastic cutting boards to the sink and sprayed them with hot soapy water, bent awkwardly to wipe deep inside the display counter, learned codes for the wrapping machine—221 for the boneless chicken thighs—and packaged and placed a lot of meat. The closest I got to butchering was slicing chicken breasts into scaloppini and grinding beef, turkey and chicken.

On this particular day, my upper back was burning with pain. This new vocation was not agreeing with my 56-year-old body, as I found myself halfway through a 50-pound box of boneless chicken breasts that I had to place, one by one, into Styrofoam trays.

Steve, most days on fish duty, was ploughing through with a lanky ease. No complaints, as he lugged boxes and stood at his counter for hours, cutting up salmon or breaking up imitation crab.

Although, a decade younger than me, he had extra years on his face. He had served time in prison and had no qualms talking about it. He had been taking me under his wing, showing me how to take apart the machines or prevent ground beef from turning brown. But he also gave me attention I

didn't want. Hearing that I was Jewish and a writer, he saw great things with my talents and culture. He wanted me to collaborate with the other fish monger who liked to draw, and who was off that day. "You and Mahmoud are gonna create the greatest story. He's an Arab. You're a Jew. It'll be amazing!"

But his own story, which he told me on this day, about how he was convicted at 19, was much better than anything Mahmoud or I could come up with.

Steve grew up in Côte des Neiges, away from the neighbourhoods his fellow Greeks called their own. He explained that he had an uncle, who was well-connected and provided him with regular money. He had special jobs for his nephew, one of which had him taking the bus from the city to a location where he could hike to a remote part of the Quebec-New York border. Once there, Steve would throw a drug-filled backpack over the fence and then head back. It was a spot where his uncle's American associates would retrieve the bag. Steve would return weeks later to the same spot and wait for a cash-filled backpack to be thrown over to the Canadian side.

Simple and efficient. His uncle was happy and Steve was making money.

"But I did a lot of drugs in those days," he continued, turning around from his work space to face me. "So, one day, I'm stoned. I drop off the shit and I'm walking, and I don't know where the fuck I am. There was no GPS in those days. I couldn't find my way back. And I'm walking and walking, and then I hear a loud BANG. Someone shot at me. I wasn't hit. I think, 'What the fuck?!' And I run and I hear another gunshot. And I see a fucking farmer with a gun."

Over the years, the owner of the dairy operation had seen several of his cattle stolen from their grazing areas. He thought he had finally found the "son of a bitch" that had cost him so much money. The man trained his rifle on Steve and forced him to walk through the field to his farm house, and, once they were inside, called the cops. Steve needed to make a call himself, to his uncle, and the man

obliged. His uncle immediately realized how this looked. Who just wanders along the Quebec-New York border? He knew it would be a matter of time before the authorities connected his nephew to the drop-off point and to his associates.

“Tell them you were planning to steal his cows,” his uncle told him.

“What?”

“No matter what, you’ll be arrested. Better that you cop to trying to steal cows and do a bit of time than they nail you for running drugs. That would put you away for a long time. You plead guilty. No investigation. No trial.”

I had finally got to the bottom of the box of boneless chicken breasts and was carrying the last of the big plastic trays of chicken, bending low to slide it along the bottom brackets of the rack. I realized that the tendon I had pulled the other day, along the side of my leg just above the ankle, resulted from this move. Ever since that time, I would feel pain going down the stairs to the lunchroom or retrieving the packaged stacks of Styrofoam containers to restock.

“You like my story?”

“Incredible. And you went to prison for that?”

“Yeah. They called it, uh, ‘attempted theft of cattle’ he laughed.

So, the Greek kid from Côte des Neiges, who wouldn’t have known the first thing about leading a cow onto a truck or how to sell one on the black market, became that cattle rustling character out of an old western. The local dairy farmers and beef ranchers were content that a crime spree appeared to have ended and, with his guilty plea, Steve’s drug mule identity was wiped away. Decades later, he’d fall

nicely into his current identity of meat department worker, speaking to suppliers with confidence and helping out anyone who would come to the refrigerated area asking questions.

I, on the other hand, was having difficulty with my new identity. Every time I came through the store to take out the garbage or exited the refrigerated area to fill the display counter, enjoying the warmth, I would cast glances around for people I might know. I didn't want them to see me.

I had slowly told my circle about the job and tried to see the upside: I'm helping to support my family, doing honest, physical work and learning how to butcher, albeit from the ground up.

After coming back from taking the garbage, pushing the empty shopping cart up the entrance ramp, I scoped Suzanne, someone I had worked with in publishing. She was standing just past the cashiers. When I would see her in the neighbourhood, we would always commiserate about the industry. To make my way back to the meat department I had no choice but to cross her path. I wanted to magically dial down what would surely be her surprised reaction. I came closer to her and was prepared to give an even-keeled "Hi, Suzanne." She turned my way but looked past me. She was peering through the large selection of artisanal breads. Didn't she see me? I continued to push the shopping cart. With a quick look back, I saw her making her bread choice, a sesame baguette. I kept walking. She had not noticed me! I was just another store employee, invisible to her.

I went back to the refrigerated workspace. My hoodie over my store ball cap offered some relief from the fan's chill and also acted as convenient blinders. I felt a resentment to those from the neighbourhood who shopped at this upscale grocery store: how seriously they discussed wild fish, how carefully they selected untainted organic produce and how casually they accepted such high prices.

The meat department was the low end of this high-end operation. It was hidden in back, with its crew of guys who swore, sang and yelled. What passed for a joke was telling your fellow worker how

much his wife enjoyed you banging her; French electro-pop music poured out too loudly from an old radio; and much of the conversation was in heavily accented French, which I had a hard time understanding, or Greek, which Steve and another butcher, Elie, spoke.

My boss, J.F., always looked at me like I was never quite right for the job. Cutting out a tenderloin or preparing a marinade, he was always on to the next task, and I would follow his orders: take the garbage, fill the fridge, wrap the meat, clean the shelves, take your break. Any improvements in my work seemed to be erased by the speed and strength I lacked in his eyes. So many details of the operation would slip through my fingers. I was 17 again, working at the gas station booth in a suburban shopping mall parking lot, where I got flustered by the nonstop parade of cars and let cash pile up in the register, only to have the boss come by and fire me for not putting enough of it in the safe.

My body was not Grade A, more like what an inspector would tell a meat operation to throw out. The hot showers after every shift and a deep sleep each night erased most of the previous day's acute pain, but showers and sleep have no real ability to heal. I lost my previous life. I had been ready to say goodbye to it but I had filled that goodbye with images of my tying together racks of lamb, cutting steaks with a band saw and being your friendly neighbourhood butcher. That replacement life was a bit of fantasy. I didn't know how long it would take to climb up from the bottom of the low end. Like the stoned nephew who lost his way, got shot at and was about to be arrested, I wanted someone to show me how to change my story and lessen the punishment.

My wife knew I was miserable and I told her I needed to quit. She agreed, having herself left a bad job on her slow build to a second career. So, I quit. Story changed. My butchering career lasted a total of four weeks.

While Steve would forever be the Côte des Neiges cattle rustler, I would remain the work rustler, trying to find a job in this changing economy, trying to find my piece of pasture. That map of the steer, I became it, with some sections tender, others tough.