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Italian Butcher Shop Blues

Fingernails stained purple, I walk the quiet, cobblestoned streets of Barolo, Italy. It is early evening. My day has been spent harvesting the Nebbiolo grape crop for Luciano and Luca Sandrone, brothers whose distinctive features – one’s red suspenders and the other’s bald head – will certainly plague my dreams. I’ve been working in the vineyard for a month as a way to stay in Italy, as a way to be less of a tourist. At the moment, I’m a little stunned by the day’s heat and hard physical labor. Stunned, relaxed, and suddenly very hungry.

I step toward the counter, the butcher hidden from view in the back room behind the meat case. I hear the sound of a handsaw. I look to the walls, mostly blank, save for a poster of a bikini-clad woman holding a porterhouse in the air. The poster is signed in silver ink by “Valentina,” and addressed to “Franco.” Next to Valentina, encased in a black frame, is a picture of Barolo’s castle with a man-shaped shadow clinging to its east wall. I step closer and see that the man, like a comic-book superhero, is adhered to the ancient orange stone at least fifty feet off the ground. The man is facing the camera, sun in his eyes. His head is enormous, too big for his body, as if he’s been pieced together by Barolo’s resident mad scientist. A thick black moustache, curving over the sides of his mouth, is spread nearly horizontal in the force of his grin. He’s dressed in rock-climbing gear, leg muscles bursting in effort, his hands gripping a strange and bulbous rope. I step even closer to the picture, my nose nearly pasted to the wall, my breath fogging the

frame's glass, and see that this man is rappelling down the façade of the Castello di Barolo on a fifty-foot string of salami.

Before I can laugh, before I can even exhale, I hear the sound of thick flesh behind me, spreading into a massive smile. I turn. It is, of course, the man in the picture, Franco the Butcher, his moustache crawling over his face like a caterpillar on steroids. He wears brown-framed glasses that stretch from his eyebrows to his upper lip, from his black sideburns to the bridge of his boxer's nose. A billow of black hair shoots geyserwise from his head, calling to the florescent lights. His hands, strong enough to lift me by the top of my head, are streaked with blood. And yet -- I never thought I'd describe someone like this -- Franco the Butcher is *jolly*.

“Ciao,” I say, “Franco?”

“Si, si, Franco,” he replies in a quiet, gentle voice, a voice as hairy as he is. He rubs his hands together as if compressing the air into a pancake.

“Queste carne,” I say, running my hand over the expanse of display case, “e bellissima.”

“Grazie,” Franco says, truly touched by the compliment to his meats.

I watch as he rounds the counter, kicking sawdust from his shoes, and joins the scales, knives, and cleavers on the back wall. I examine his wares, salamis of all kinds: white salamis, red ones, pink ones, purple; salamis that nearly stray to black; duck salami, donkey salami, Barolo salami, truffle; salami as long as my legs, salami as short as my thumb; and there, twisted into cylinders as thick as my forearm, *salami di cinghiale*. Wild boar. Wild boar salami. I repeat the word in my head like a cured and fatty mantra, “Salami, salami, salami, salami...” until I descend into a cow-pig meditation. I wonder

which meat held him to the walls of Barolo's castle. I wonder if he celebrated his climb by eating his equipment. I smile and he sees it, his hands now on his hips, his white apron smeared with blood and fat.

“Americano, no?” Franco slurs.

“Si, americano,” I say, “ma adesso, in questa macelleria, sono italiano.”

Franco laughs at my wish to be Italian, then sighs, turns abruptly left, waves to me and utters, “Viene, viene qua.”

He leads me away from the salami display, and I watch reluctantly over my shoulder as these lovely jeweled life-vests float further and further away. Franco stops in front of the fresh meats: tenderloin, strip, porterhouse, sausages, pork chop, whole chickens, whole ducks—feet intact and orange, webbed and clinical in the light; pigs' feet, pigs' ears, pigs' blood, veal chops, veal scallops, headcheese, and sweetbreads. And tripe, beautiful white tripe spread wide in its container like a Chinese fan; *trippa*, resting in recline like the Aurora Borealis on its lunch break. Franco reaches for the tripe with an ungloved finger. It yields like a lover to his touch. The tripe, for lack of a better word, is *kissable*.

I feel my feet slowly spinning across that high-school dance floor, slowly building a tango confidence to ask the beckoning girl out for a cup of coffee.

“Ti piace trippa?” Franco asks.

I shrug. I've never had it before. But how can I not like tripe?

“Si,” I say.

“Ah,” Franco smiles, “serio.”

“Si,” I nod, “serio,” and I feel more substantial for saying so. I feel like I could knock down buildings with my bare hands. I feel like I could keep up with Franco the Butcher.

He lifts the tripe from its tray and, like delicate lingerie, it unravels in the air. I want to rub its texture between my fingers, I want to try it on for size. I imagine taking a few pieces home to Il Gioco dell’Oca’s kitchen, asking my friend Raffaella for preparation advice, and cooking a tripe dinner together: soup, casserole, napoleon, whichever. I watch as Franco cuts a small piece the size of a finger joint. He holds the white gem to the light like a coin.

“Ah, trippa,” he says, and hands me the piece.

Amazing, I think, Amazing that he sensed my desire to experience its texture.

The tripe coin is soft and perforated, rich and heady like a chunk of styrofoam soaked in black tea. I, like Franco, hold it to the light and can almost see through it. I think I’m seeing ghosts. I think I can see my family back in Chicago. They’re all sitting in rush-hour traffic, car radios blaring classic rock. I allow them all to return home safe, then lower the tripe to the counter to give it back to Franco.

“No, no,” he says, holding his bloody-but-innocent palms at me, “Prego.”

“Che?” I ask, not quite understanding.

“Si, si, prego,” he offers again.

I’m confused. I think he wants me to keep the tripe. I’m not sure what to do with such a small piece. I reach to put it into my pocket; possibly I’ll play with it like a rubber stress ball on the way back to Il Gioco.

“No, no,” Franco says, and I raise the tripe again from my pocket to the counter, “Prego.”

I look at him and shrug. I shake my head. Somewhere behind me, Valentina, in her golden bikini, is comfortably holding her porterhouse. Franco opens his mouth. For a second, I think he’s going to take a bite out of me. I lean back and he points to the tripe, then points to his mouth, and again says, “Prego.”

I get it now, but that doesn’t mean I believe it. He wants me to eat the tripe.

“Crudo?” I say.

“Si,” Franco says.

He wants me to eat the tripe raw.

What kind of culinary hazing is this? Why? Why? Don’t get me wrong, I have nothing against the pig stomach, but the raw ingesting of such items sends my own organs into disarray; my once hungry stomach now closes in on itself like a fist. My mouth goes dry. I’m having trouble swallowing.

“Prego,” Franco says again, and I feel there’s no way around this.

My stomach recoils deeper into my ribs and I want to cry. I hold the tripe to the light again and it goes from beautiful to revolting in no time flat. Raw tripe, if about to be cooked, is one thing, but raw tripe that wants to stay raw is another.

I look at Franco. His eyes are wide, his cheeks are glowing red. Jolly never looked so evil. I stare at the tripe, wriggling in the toddler laughter of my little sister whenever I got into trouble with my parents. I look to Franco. I look for a way out. The fluorescents burn into me like a spotlight. The audience is waiting; there’s no turning back now. After all, I told Franco I was “serious.”

I close my eyes and bring my fingers to my mouth.

I smell it before it hits my tongue: dust, metal, morning saliva, bathroom tile, campfire. It squirms in my mouth like a goldfish fighting for its life, a mini skinned bronco bucking my teeth, surely stirring a cowboy-shaped splatter from my stomach.

Hold on, I think, as the taste of pure gut struggles to pass over my taste buds, *Hold on*. I don't dare bite into it, don't dare explode the taste of unmentionable pig over my tongue.

So I swallow it whole, think of oysters, hold my breath, and wait.

"Bravo," Franco claps and laughs in descending octaves.

A sweat breaks from my forehead. I gag audibly, but keep it down.

Opening my mouth to exhale, I know I have passed a hideous test and am surprised to find that the taste, if not the memory, has already faded. I rode the bull and returned a little trampled, but ungorred.

Franco pulls a necklace of wild boar salami from the wall and hands it to me as my reward, laughing all the way. I can't believe I'm going to thank this man.

"Grazie," I say.

All Franco does is laugh.

As I turn to leave the *macelleria*, paper bag shifting in my arms, Franco the Butcher raises a bloody, tight-fingered hand into the air and, smiling his biggest smile of the day, dangles another slice of tripe into the light.

"Domani," he says, pointing to the horrendous thing.

I shake my head. I wave.

*Tomorrow, I think, opening the door to the street, Tomorrow I'm not coming
anywhere near this place.*