

The Price of a Meal

The fire roared to life under the skillet. Splash of olive oil in the pan. As it warmed, I inspected the meat. Well-marbled, liberally seasoned on both sides with salt and pepper. After an appropriate amount of time, I tossed the hunk of meat into the skillet. Ah, that damned sizzle. I could never resist a good steak. I seared the meat on one side, then flipped it, adding butter, the last of my rosemary and garlic, and the works. I grabbed a clean spoon and basted the meat, slaving at the faultless crust it had formed. After rendering the excess fat on the side, I let it rest for a few minutes, then transferred it to a plate.

Taking pains to cut against the grain, I examined my handiwork and nodded in satisfaction. Medium-rare, the *only* correct way to eat a steak. After saying grace, I delicately laid a piece on my tongue, rolling it around in my mouth gently before taking my first chew. Smoky, salty, juicy, and a lovely caramelized crust. Rich umami taste with a luxurious mouthfeel and gratifying solidity. As I swallowed, I detected the faintest hint of nuttiness from the butter I had used through the retronasal olfactory pathway. I washed the last of the juice down with some sparkling water and turned on the TV. The harsh drone of the newswoman sliced through the pleasant atmosphere of the dining room. What was her name again - Jane, Joanna, Juliana? Something like that.

“...and today another is added to the list of missing persons.” I looked up.

“Jonathan Deere, a 28-year-old policeman, is the last victim in the mysterious disappearances since the meat crisis, and has been missing since 0100 last night. If anybody has any information regarding Jonathan Deere, please let your local police station know.”

Jonathan Deere, I mused as I swished the sparkling water around in the glass. So that was his name. He was really very handsome for someone I had found in a dumpster. Delicious, too.

I washed the dishes, then cleaned my hands twice — once with antibacterial soap, once with hand sanitizer. I lingered at the cupboard door, then came to a decision and opened it. The last can of peaches - Jonathan Deere deserved the dessert.

It started maybe 20 years ago. Alcohol, cigarettes, even caffeine and soda were all banned in the common interest of public health. It was during this period of fanaticism that the meat industry slowly began to monopolize.

Since the 1800s, when Justus von Liebig first introduced the idea that muscular energy came from animal protein, the widely accepted belief was that meat was the way to go. With the sudden gap in advertisements left by massive corporations like Coca-Cola and Pepsi, the meat industry took its chance and secured permanent dominance. They brought out the old playbook of funding studies, advocating the benefits of animal protein and bringing the idea of ‘the manly-man’s food’ back to the forefront of society.

Additionally, with multiple breakthroughs in gene-editing techniques, meat could now supply essential vitamins and nutrients that previously had to be acquired through vegetables. Certain strains could even provide carbohydrates. Plant industries tried desperately to hold on but were eventually edged out. Feed, too, became synthetic and cheaper. Movies and books that advocated vegetarianism were dismissed as groundless propaganda. A few scientists tried desperately to fight the current, working day and night, churning out countless studies and research papers to champion vegetables. They were never heard from again.

Before we knew it, fruit and vegetables had disappeared from our diets. Sure, we sometimes missed the crisp bite of an apple, but everyone was healthy. No one could complain.

Until the virus hit.

It was the brainchild of a military scientist. With the ever-increasing reliance on meat products, the scientist postulated the idea that a threat to a country's meat supply would be devastating. The next great leap in biological warfare. A virus with no adverse effects on living livestock but consumption of infected meat would spell certain disaster.

The tests carried out on test flocks were exceedingly successful, but no one accounted for the virus' self-preservation. Within the second test trial, a variant of the virus evolved the capability to be transmitted from carrier to carrier. The scientists noted this with great interest, called it a day, and went home. All tests were carried out in a hermetic room, so there was no chance of it escaping so they were unconcerned. What they didn't know, however, was that the variant had also evolved the capability of using humans as carriers.

As the world enjoyed their super-steaks and power-pork and first-class-chicken, as the heads of the meat industry counted their cash, one little airborne particle from a sneeze from one of the scientists made its way to a nearby cattle ranch.

Within a week, the entire country was in a panic. Millions died in the first wave, then millions more when the virus mutated to infect pigs, chickens, goats, fish, and crustaceans. Entire industries collapsed. I, as a butcher, was one of the first to lose my job. The government declared a state of emergency.

Of course, a desperate attempt was made to replant crops. Farmland used for other purposes like flowers and palm oil was desperately cleared but to no avail. Previously, it was claimed that there were only 60 harvests left. But with the skyrocketing of ranching, the time for harvests had already ended. All seemed lost.

Until a small business began buying and selling outsourced, uninfected meat and canned produce. The prices they offered would have been blasphemous in normal circumstances, but this crisis was far from normal.

Naturally, the poor were hardest hit. But it was not until the business appeared that the situation changed from being something societies tried to tackle together into a struggle between the haves and the have-nots. These companies had essentially taken the only available food and made it accessible only to the rich.

The forces of law and order, already breaking down, collapsed. For some time, the streets were filled with the dank smell of death and desperation. Eventually, though, the tycoons set up a rundown justice system, not in the interest of the common good, but because delivery trucks on their way to the country mansions and fancy safehouses were frequently intercepted by hordes of the starving. It still happened sometimes. A truck would be held up, the driver shot, and the contents stolen. More often than not, a policeman would step in and smash their faces into pulp on the pavement.

Other times, though, the perpetrators would get away with it. Still, the risk of livestock infection was high, especially without any of the protective measures that the rich had. Either way, it meant ripe pickings were always available on the street.

I finished the peaches, savoring each delicious bite. Memories of a time gone by. I dropped the empty can into the garbage bin and prepared myself for bed. I always slept well after a good meal.

The following day, after eating some leftovers, I pulled on a pair of gloves and disposed of the contents. I had set up my butcher's shop in my garage and outfitted it with a meat grinder and freezer. I used a small knife to clean the last of the meat from the bones, then ground them into a fine powder. Maybe I could use the ground bones as fertilizer to grow my own crops.

I swept the bone dust into a closed container and sprayed everything down with industrial-grade disinfectant. You could never be too careful.

After washing my hands, I set out again to find food, shouldering a bag filled with latex gloves, ziploc bags, and a cleaver. The reinstated government was making a halfhearted effort to clean the bodies off the roads for 'public health.' Still, there were always more bodies to be found, if only you were willing to put in the work.

The streets under my shoes were slick, grimy, and smelled of urine. I resisted the urge to pull out my hand sanitizer - that would make me stand out. I continued walking, keeping my head down and avoiding eye contact until I came across a deserted truck. I silently thanked the Lord. An intercepted delivery truck always meant spoils for the scavenger. I made my way around the truck, propping open the door to inspect the dead driver. His head lay slumped on his chest. A hole in between his eyes continued to slowly bleed. Someone had probably shot the delivery driver but had gotten spooked and made a getaway. Spooked by what, though?

I didn't spend time thinking - each second spent thinking was another second closer to being caught. I rummaged in my bag for my gloves and cleaver to begin dissecting the body but was distracted by a faint sound. I froze again, trying to discern the origin. It came again. Gripping the cleaver in my hand, I plastered myself against the side of the truck and made my way around. My blood roared in my ears. I quickened my pace, dropped my bag, and held the cleaver in my hand, ready to deliver the killing blow-

I heard it clearer this time. A distinct 'moo.' My shoulders relaxed. I unlatched and opened the container at the back of the truck and drew a sharp breath in awe. The cow let out another plaintive 'moo.'

It had been so long since I saw a live cow, and what a cow it was. I stood there in admiration, my eyes tracing its every curve. Maybe I didn't need the driver. It would be nice to taste real beef again.

I thought of my father's old revolver as the notion occurred to me. I remembered sitting in his lap, rapt with attention as he told me about an old game called Russian Roulette.

The cow took on the shape of a bullet, slid gently into the gun. I watched the cylinder spin, slow, and finally stop. A single chamber lined up with the barrel. The ultimate game of chance. I heard the gun cock.

Click.

"Put your hands up in the air!"

I cursed under my breath. Sloppy. Way too sloppy. I slowly raised my hand, concealing the cleaver with my body.

"Turn around!" he instructed. I did as he said, noting the dingy badge and tattered uniform. He crept closer, keeping his gun pointed at my head. "What are you doing around these parts?"

"I live here," I vaguely gestured in the direction of my butcher's shop. "I saw this truck outside and stepped out to investigate."

"Well, the truck is none of your business," he said brusquely. He shoved me to the side. I used the motion to sweep up the cleaver and deposit it into my bag.

There probably would have been more questions regarding the driver. However, I had left the door to the truck container open in my carelessness. The policeman stared in amazement.

"What a specimen," he breathed. He turned to me, the wonder of the cow wiping away any previous formality and unfriendliness. He grasped my hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name's Jack."

I quickly retracted my hand, once again forcing away the urge to get out my hand sanitizer. I responded in turn, refraining from giving my name. He didn't seem to notice, blabbering happily about the cow. "It's been so long since I've had real beef. I miss the way a steak used to taste back in the old days, don't you? I might as well take the cow for myself. I don't think anyone will mind much. There are always other cows they can buy."

I nodded politely here and there, but I might as well have been grinding water. He seemed happy, lost in his own fantasies of the hearty feast he would have that night.

I patted him gently on his filthy uniform, grabbed my bag and made my way home.

That night I dreamed of my father's revolver. I sat opposite Jack. I lifted the revolver, spun the cylinder, and held the muzzle to my head.

Click.

I handed the gun to Jack, who spun the cylinder again and put the barrel to his temple, all the while talking about the meal he had had.

Cordite smell and deafening echo. Jack's brains splattered the wall behind him. He keeled over, falling to the floor with a sickening thud.

That's what happens when you choose to play the game, I thought to myself as I pocketed the revolver.

I woke the next day craving another steak. Maybe I would get luckier this time around. While I waited for the right time, I cleaned my butcher's room again. Who knew what kind of disgusting viruses and germs I had tracked in yesterday.

I moved the container of ground bones to the side and got out the disinfectant kit. I had turned on the TV a moment ago but immediately turned it off, preferring to savor the silence in the house. I moved meticulously, painstakingly, making sure every surface was spotless. When I was finished with the butcher's room, I moved on to the rest of the house, organized the books, polished my cross before hanging it back up on the wall, then cleaned the whiskey glasses I had never touched.

As I pattered about for the fifth time, my stomach's complaints grew furious. Unable to wait any longer, I took my tools out from the alcohol bath they had been sitting in and set out again.

There weren't many cops roaming the streets at this time, and accordingly, I took my time choosing the best cuts of meat. There was definitely a great assortment to choose from, but none struck my eye as particularly delectable. I circled around the block once again and, this time, quite literally found dinner sitting on my front porch.

The woman looked to be about 30 or so. Well-muscled with a layer of fat, hard to find nowadays. A large gash ran up the side of her neck, and she lay flat in my driveway, legs splayed out at unnatural angles. I scrutinized her, taking measurements and estimating weights in my head. I checked that she wasn't breathing before making up my mind.

I grabbed her by the arms and began to pull. She was unexpectedly heavy. Within seconds I was drenched in sweat. My muscles burned from the exertion, but I finally made it into my garage. With a heave, I lifted her onto the table. I seized the cleaver, gave it a couple sharpening strokes with my whetstone, and prepared to cut the flesh.

The woman gave a quiet groan. I lowered the cleaver, startled. I reached for her neck, feeling for a pulse. There! Like the flap of a butterfly's wings. Weak and almost nonexistent, but still there. I dropped the cleaver, backing up so fast I crashed into the table behind me and spilled the bone dust.

This was not what I had bargained for. I was a simple, God-fearing man. Scavenging for scraps was one thing, done out of necessity. It was the only way to retain autonomy - I would not let my life lie in anyone else's hands. God loved His children and must have wanted them to survive under whatever circumstances possible. Was it wrong to simply preserve this body that was a gift from God?

But killing was another matter. A cardinal sin. To take even the last inches of life was punishable with eternal damnation.

As I held my head in my hands, I saw my father's revolver again. Five bullets slotted into the gun, the only empty chamber laying where the woman lay. I stood, my knees trembling and my palms slick with sweat. It was fate. Why else would she have been sitting on my front porch if it were not to be?

I picked up the cleaver, crooning gently, "You're okay. You're okay. You won't feel a thing. It's like going to sleep. You'll go to a better place."

Mumbling Psalm 23, I lay the cleaver gently upon her neck. A quick chop would do it. Put her out of her misery. I closed my eyes, trying to catch my breath. Why was it so hot in the room? I laid my other hand on top of the knife, ready to push down with enough force to instantly sever her head without any pain.

As soon as I felt the slightest bit of resistance from the bone, saw a single teardrop of blood well up beneath the blade and circle a half-moon around her neck, vomit filled my mouth. The knife clattered to the ground as I ran over to the sink. My body heaved dryly as my stomach tried its best to force its way through my esophagus.

I rinsed the inside of the sink off and put the cleaver into the alcohol bath. I avoided glancing at the body. I turned off the lights and slammed the door, leaving the woman in darkness. She would eventually die from blood loss. That wasn't murder. It was a preexisting wound. All I had done was move her to a more comfortable place before she died. There was nothing I could have done to save her either way.

I stumbled into the kitchen, wildly grabbing chairs and tables for support. I reached out for the whiskey glasses on the sink and poured myself a cup of scotch that had been left by my parents. I took a big gulp and swished it in my mouth to burn away the thick taste of vomit. I poured myself another, tipping the contents down my throat. It seared like a hot poker all the way to my stomach. I slammed the glass down, sending a crack splintering across the base. I shambled unsteadily into the bedroom, clutching my rosary, not bothering to clean up.

I slept fitfully that night. I seemed to hear wails to be let free, resounding through the walls and echoing so profoundly inside my skull that it ceased to be an actual sound and more like an ocean, sloshing over me, each wave colder than the last. I stared into the darkness, straining to hear past the howls reverberating through my soul, eventually passing out due to sheer exhaustion.

When I woke up, the cries had ceased. Nothing more than my imagination. I made my way back around to the butcher room to check on the body. It lay exactly where I had left it. It was cold to the touch, and there was no detectable pulse. I breathed a sigh of relief. The death was natural.

Working efficiently, I jointed the body and sliced it into filets, throwing away the bones and useless scraps, selecting the choicest cut, and stocking the rest in the freezer. There wasn't enough room for everything, and I am everything but wasteful. I took an extra two cuts of meat. I had basically starved for the last two days regardless, and it would help me get my strength back.

The meat lasted me about two weeks, and it was some of the best meat I had ever had. Truly a gift sent from the heavens above. God was sending a message to stay alive no matter what.

After enjoying the last hunk of meat with some more whiskey, I washed the dishes, sanitized the meat freezer, and turned in. I would go out to look for more meat tomorrow.

The next day I set out again, looking for food. The streets were unusually empty. I wondered what had happened. After circling the block a few times, I decided to wait a few hours and then try again.

I went home and lounged about, turning on the news again to kill time. It wasn't Jane/Joanne/Juliana this time, but a sickly-looking man who looked as if he had been dead for a year.

"We interrupt today's news broadcast to make a public service announcement."

I changed the channel, but there he was again. It seemed this announcement was significant. "As head of the newly reestablished Department of Sanitation, we will be carrying out daily wipes of the street for corpses, starting yesterday. Security will be heightened on the streets to prevent unauthorized seizing of bodies. These cadavers present a great threat to national hygiene and threaten supplies of livestock as carriers of the virus. Thus, the only way to truly neutralize this risk to our livelihoods is the Department of Sanitation, who will safely and effectively dispose of these bodies. Thank you."

I sat in shock as another newscaster took over. Those bastards. This was no ordinary news announcement. This was a death sentence. They cared nothing for national hygiene past saving their precious cows and pigs. I could recognize their true motives. This was a systematic extermination of the only ones surviving without them: the poor and the desperate. So they were seizing the initiative, removing the only safe and reliable food source. We would be forced to concede and cough up exorbitant amounts of money to line the pockets of those meat oligarchs.

I was snapped out of my thoughts by the rhythmic crunch of boots on gravel. The cavalry had arrived. I moved my curtain slightly and peeped through. These men wore camo from head to toe, sturdy military boots, and an ugly-looking submachine gun - like the soldiers of yore. I watched as they made their way down the street, splitting off at different junctions.

Every time a dead body was found, it was dragged right outside my house, which quickly piled up. At intervals in the day, the soldiers would be relieved and replaced with a fresh regiment. Twice a day, a large truck drove by, into which the bodies were piled and driven away as I watched, furious. I felt like Tantalus, the promise of a meal always just out of reach, ever eluding my grasp.

I used an old stopwatch to time how long it took for each soldier to make their round, hoping for a potential stretch of time in which I could drag a body into my garage without being seen. I soon abandoned this plan, as there were just too many soldiers. It wasn't enough time to hack off a limb, let alone drag a whole body back.

I considered the time when the soldiers were replaced. There was typically a 10-minute interval when the soldiers would be driven back to base, and a new group would then be driven back. I dismissed this idea too. A side effect of the body mound being situated right outside was that my street was swept the cleanest. Someone would have to die right as the soldiers were leaving. No sooner, no later, or the body risked being found - too much luck was involved.

I subsisted mainly on milk and supplements for the next few days, occasionally hearing gunshots and the tell-tale screams of a scavenger with his hands caught in the cookie jar.

It was not until the third day that the shivers started. I woke up in the middle of the night, my brow covered with cold sweat. This had happened the last time I stopped eating meat. The other symptoms set in not long after. Fatigue, nausea, muscle spasms, migraines. For the umpteenth time, I cursed myself for not rationing the meat. As the stabbing pain in my head grew worse, I rushed into the butcher's room to find anything that could stave off the symptoms. I reached into the trash can, pulling out the old bones and scraps that I hadn't disposed of yet, frantically licking and nursing at the bones. The fatty residue was practically ambrosia.

As the headache faded, I dropped the scraps in disgust. What kind of degenerate had I become? The worst part was I needed more. I beat my head with my fists, repulsed. The thought of the germs and bacteria on those bones sent me staggering to the bathroom.

While I held the toilet bowl, violently throwing up, I felt the migraine set in again. I knew what I had to do. It was the only way. I would not die to the whims of some avaricious businessman.

There was nothing perverse in performing the most fundamental biological function; staying alive. It is the opposite that is perverse; to allow ourselves to be obstructed by a moral code that we have been persuaded to believe is natural or divine.

I waited in the bushes by my garage, waiting patiently with a rock in my hand. The relief truck would be here soon, and the soldier circling around my block always took an extra lap, so he always had to run to catch up with the truck.

I heard the squeal of tires, then the grunts of the men as they piled into the truck. My eyes narrowed as I observed the last soldier jogging to get there on time. As he passed my house, I played the tape of my scream I had recorded earlier this morning. The soldier turned to seek the source of the sound, then turned back to watch the rapidly disappearing truck. He shrugged. He could always hitch a ride with the next squadron. I played the tape again, and he shouldered his gun, sauntering over to inspect my half-open garage door.

I struck, leaping from my hideout and slamming the rock against the back of his head. He gave a grunt and tried to turn around, but I hit him again, and this time he fell to the ground. I kicked his gun to the side, pinning his legs with my knees, wrapping my hands around his throat, and squeezing. His eyes fluttered open, tried to reach for his gun but found my legs on his arms. His eyes widened. He gasped noiselessly, weakly trying to thrash me off, but the blow to the head had weakened him too much. And I relished every second, feeling his pulse fade under my fingertips, watching death's sable shade overcast his eyes. I screamed my victory to the skies, gibbering and laughing, unmindful of how long it had been since the car had departed. I soaked my hand in his blood from his head wound and smeared it across my body and face, reveling in the smell of copper.

When I had slaked my thirst and enjoyed my triumph to the fullest, I dragged him into the butcher's room. I played some music and drank the last of the whiskey, dancing and humming as I cut into his flesh.

My nose twitched.

I recognized that smell from the first days of the pandemic. The smell of rot and corruption. I cut further and saw the unmistakable signs. Even with the death-glaze on them, the soldier's eyes seemed to be mocking me.

I watched the man's body turn silver, slotted into the last remaining revolver chamber. The headache started up again, pulsing like the tick of a clock, ricocheting through my head and whipping my brain into gray, bloody soup. There was only one way.

I left the cleaver on the table. The music continued to play as I quickly said grace and then took the first bite.

My finger detached with a satisfying *crunch*. Blood spewed from the wound. I felt no pain. The air smelled of atavistic lust and ecstasy. It was a sharp, bestial, acrid smell.

The finger tasted like heaven. I tore off another chunk of flesh.

I sat surrounded by a pool of crimson. I lapped at it, savoring the mineral taste. I surveyed myself in the liquid. I looked very flattering, even with the skin stripped off my bones.

Who wants steak?