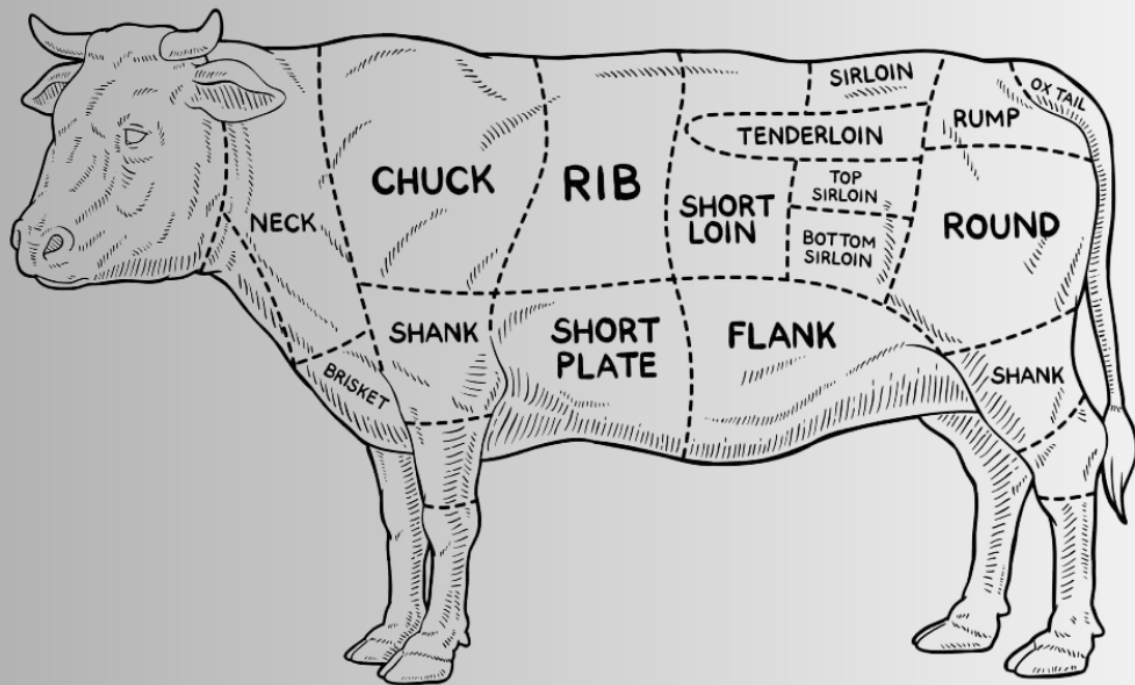


RUMP ROAST

A Short Story
By Timothy D. Minneci



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The butcher spotted the two men standing outside the front window of his shop. Though partially obscured by the iron rack of hanging lamb legs (48 cents per pound), calf flank (23 cents per pound), and various cased sausages, their affiliation and intention were plainly announced by the thin stripes running the length of the tailored double-breasted suit on the shorter of the two men.

The sound of a swinging big band crackled from an Art déco radio as the butcher refocused his attention. He carefully wrapped paper around Mrs. Stafford's half dozen veal cutlets (44 cents per pound) and neatly tied the twine into a bow. His calloused fingers nimble from the repetition, as rote as tying his shoe.

"See you soon, Mrs. Stafford," he said to the petite gray-haired woman who had visited the shop since he was a boy.

"And you as well," she responded. "Maybe at service this Sunday?"

“Shop keeps me busy, but I’ll try.” He watched her cross the weathered oak floor, past the glass case of steaks, roasts, ribs, and chops, and out the front door. The bell above chimed her departure.

The door slowed as it closed before a meaty hand gripped it. The larger and less sophisticatedly dressed man entered first. He looked around, face mostly jawline with two deep-set eyes. Finding no other patrons, he opened the door wider. The second man, shorter and suited, entered the shop and escaped from the chilled fall air.

Without a word, the short man nodded to the large man: he flipped the hanging OPEN sign to CLOSED. His thick fingers gripped the deadbolt lock and twisted, then he turned his back to the door, a sentry guarding his post.

The butcher observed but did not comment, preferring to count the bills in the cash register.

Well, this should be interesting.

The short man, black oiled-back hair with a newspaper folded under his arm, peered up at the chalk menu. “Price per pound. Bacon - forty-five cents. Beef Rib Roast - fifty cents. Calf Liver - thirty cents. Never enjoyed the taste of liver myself. Ham - twenty-five cents. Porterhouse Steak - sixty cents. Now you’re talking. Rump Steak - thirty-five cents. Whole Chicken - twenty cents. Whole Turkey - twenty-five cents. Woo, quite a menu. Quite a menu, indeed.”

The butcher remained quiet. His eyes barely registered the movement as he used a rag to clean the blood and sinew off a seven-inch meat cleaver.

The radio changed from an uptempo-swing number to a somber ballad as the short man reached the counter directly across from the butcher and eyed the carved wooden sign nailed to the wall.

“Sherman Meats, 1909. Would that make you Mr. Sherman?” he asked. A forced smile exposed the gap in his two front teeth.

He can read. Wonders never cease.

“Mr. Sherman is my father,” he said as he briefly glanced down, continuing to clean the knife, standing a good foot taller than the short man. “But he’s retired. What can I get for you today?”

“I’m here to talk business. How ‘bout we sit down for a moment?” The short man motioned to a small round table with two wooden chairs off to the side of the counter, the place where the butcher and his father often counted the register at night after closing. They paired this evening ritual with a pour of Grappa along with thin slices of speck or guanciale, a little extra virgin olive oil, and bread from the nearby bakery.

“Alright then,” he said with a resigned sigh. The butcher sheathed the cleaver and removed his bloodied apron, leaving them both on the counter, a worn blue cotton button down shirt and slacks beneath. He slid open the back of the glass display counter and removed a roll of pancetta (15 cents per pound), then grabbed a small wooden cutting board and knife, and set them down on the table. He expertly sliced thin cuts of the salt-cured pork belly meat and laid them across the board.

“My father insists this is the best in the world. He has it imported from a family farm in Umbria. He says the pigs raised there are unique, like no others. Something to do with the minerals in the ground. Who knows. He says when the time comes, this will be his last meal.”

The butcher sat at the table, and the short man did the same, the folded newspaper placed in front of him.

“Please,” said the butcher as he motioned to the cutting board.

The short man fingered a slice and inhaled the fragrant salt and pepper cure. He closed his eyes and gently bit down, letting out a soft moan at the decadent flavor, and savored the chew.

“Your father does this city a great service.”

The butcher watched him wipe his hands on his pant leg.

Did no one teach this cretin any manners?

“And what service is it that you provide, Mr.?”

“Benito Nardella, but please, call me Benny.”

“Okay, Benny. What brings you to the shop?”

Benny opened the folded newspaper. Inside laid a six-shot revolver, which Benny picked up and placed inside his suit coat pocket. He then turned the newspaper toward the butcher, and pointed to a headline from the week prior.

ANOTHER MOBSTER MURDERED: NARDELLA CRIME FAMILY CAPO FOUND
BRUTALLY SLAIN

“You hear about my uncle, Angelo?”

The butcher eyed the paper. “Sorry, work keeps me here. And my father, he’s quite old. We don’t get out much. Miss out on the news.” Benny crooked an eye at the butcher.

“Yankees won the series again,” he quipped.

“Heard about that. Same story, different year,” said the butcher with a forced grin.

“Your father, he knew my uncle.”

“Mmm hmm. Been in the neighborhood a long time. You get to know everyone.”

“It’s odd,” said Benny as he took another piece of pancetta. “So help me, because I’m trying to understand something. Your father opened up this shop many years ago. Yet when I checked my uncle’s books, your business was the only one not listed. My uncle was a very thorough man. So, this seems like a very unlikely oversight.” Benny popped the slice of pancetta into his mouth and grinned, then spotted a black cat sitting on the counter, staring at him with amber-yellow eyes.

“If you say so,” said the butcher.

The two men glared at each other. The song on the radio faded out to crackling static.

“Is that sanitary? To have such an animal in your shop?”

The cat leapt from the counter to the floor and wound its way under the butcher’s chair, who looked down at the cat and scratched under its chin. The cat responded with a low and steady purr.

I’d be surprised if this goombah can even spell ‘cat.’

“Oh, Clementine? She’s fine. Sniffs out all the rats. Isn’t that right, Clementine?”

Benny again brushed his hands on his pants. “Uh huh. Since I’ll be taking over for my uncle, it’s time to correct what appears to be an unfortunate error.”

“Correct what?” asked the butcher as he looked at Benny and then to the large man by the front door.

“Our arrangement. It’s simple really. The neighborhood, the city, it all runs because of my family. Our docks. Our drivers. Our longshoremen. Our unions. Our police. Everything in order. But that order isn’t free. It requires cooperation between all parties with a certain monetary component.”

“Mmm hmm. And what happens if a business doesn’t have an interest in participating in this ‘order.’ Perhaps they’re content with the status quo.”

“Change is life,” said Benny. “Look at the country. A few years ago, they promised a chicken in every pot. Now most people don’t have a pot to piss in. Yet here you are, selling steaks and pork chops like nothing happened.”

“People need to eat,” responded the butcher. “We keep our prices low, slim margins. Lots of businesses are getting in trouble taking IOU’s. We work directly with our suppliers. No middlemen. There’s no waste here. No extra hands in the till, know what I mean?”

The butcher again eyeballed Benny and the large man at the door, then continued.

“And what we don’t sell, we donate to the church for their community dinner each week.

Besides, I’ve got an elderly father to take care of. You find an extra nickel around here, you let us know.”

Benny rolled his eyes. “That’s all very heartwarming,” he said, his tone less congenial. “But how would it look to your neighbors to find out that they were making this necessary contribution to keep our streets safe and clean, only to learn that you declined? That you rejected this small but necessary contribution, and that they will have to pick up the slack, and more importantly, will leave you and yours unprotected.”

This poor bastard doesn’t know who he’s messing with. Maybe it’s time to let him know.

“Unprotected, he said,” the butcher muttered as he picked up Clementine from the floor, placed the cat in his lap, and scratched below the ears to her purring approval.

“Yeah. You know, I met your uncle. Twice actually. Once before the war when I was a kid. I just finished high school and had gotten drafted. Your uncle was in the shop, talking to my father. When I got my draft notice, I was terrified. Your uncle saw my face, pale as a winter ghost. He said to my dad, your son, he don’t look so good. My dad tied up his order and they said goodbye. Then he closed up shop, took me upstairs, to our apartment, and he said everything was gonna be alright. That Mr. Nardella knew people, important people, and would get me out of the front lines. I’d be a cook or something like that. It was all gonna be okay. But it didn’t happen.”

The butcher stopped petting Clementine and unbuttoned the cuff of his left sleeve, then the right. As he slid up the fabric, aged scars of once burned flesh are revealed, pock marked and discolored. He stretched them out in front of Benny.

“Maybe your uncle felt bad about this.”

Benny failed to hide his discomfort. “So you served your country and came back in one piece. It all worked out.”

The butcher stared at Benny, hard enough to burn a hole through his skull. “The veneer of civilization has dropped away. Do you know what that means, Benny?”

He watched Benny shift uncomfortably in his chair.

Getting nervous, Benny boy?

“A German soldier who fought in the Battle of Somme said that. Means in war, humans devolve. Regress. We’re surrounded by death. It smells. It gets inside you. It has a taste. Eventually you give into the regression or go mad. You stop seeing your enemy as a living being. They are monsters, and you are there to slay those monsters until they are all dead and you can kill no more. And then they let you go home. Back to your chicken in a pot.”

Benny looked back to the large man guarding the door, a mixture of impatience and confusion exchanged between the two.

“Yeah, well, that’s all not my problem, and what not,” said Benny as he reached into his suit pocket and retrieved the six-shot pistol, laying the handle toward him. “But I don’t think we’ve come to a proper resolution regarding our conversation. And I don’t plan on walking out that door until we do.”

The butcher raised a finger of silence to Benny. “Hold on, Clementine has something to say.” He leaned down and put his ear to the cat’s head. He nodded and spoke in a whispered hush to the cat.

“Boss,” said the large man. “I don’t think this guy’s playing with a full deck.”

Benny shot an angry look back at him. “Did I tell you to speak? He’s messing with us. Playing like he’s crazy.”

“Uh huh, yeah. I don’t know why.” The butcher pet Clementine between the ears and focused back to Benny. “Clementine is curious why you didn’t ask about the second time I saw your uncle.”

Benny huffed. “Is she?” He looked back to the large man. “This is one coglione figlio di puttana.”

“Yes, boss,” the large man said flatly.

Benny turned back to the butcher. “Okay. But this better be real good, ‘cause you have worn out my very considerable patience. When was the second time you met my uncle?”

The Butcher stroked Clementine’s back and placed her on the floor. He watched her slink away behind the counter and out of sight.

“The second time I saw Angelo Nardella, I chopped his head off with my cleaver. Nice clean cut. Right through the spinal cord without a hitch. Gotta hand it to the krauts, excellent craftsmanship.”

Benny froze.

“If you’re trying to be funny, it ain’t working,” he snarled.

“Your uncle tried to shake me down after my pop retired. He said, new management, new terms. You believe that? Does it mention how he died in the paper? Does it mention his head was found a block away from the rest of his body? It’s curious how someone would come to know that information.”

The veins in Benny’s forehead bulged as his cheeks inflamed.

“You sayin’ you killed my uncle?”

Looks like this horse has been led to water.

“We thought it was best. He was not a very nice man. Lots of not nice men in this town. Lots of monsters to slay in the Nardella family.”

The butcher casually leaned forward, picked up the knife, cut a piece of pancetta, and bit into it. He gave Benny a big smile as he chewed.

“You son of a bitch.” Benny grabbed for the pistol, his fingertips brushing the cold steel.

The butcher slammed the knife blade into the top of Benny’s hand, sending a shockwave of pain up his arm.

The large man by the door charged and fumbled in his coat for a holstered revolver. The butcher grabbed Benny’s pistol and fired two rounds, one into the chest, one into the forehead. The body of the large man collapsed with a thud on the floor, blood quickly pooling around him.

Benny desperately reached for the knife stuck through his hand.

The butcher waved him off with the snub barrel of the gun. “Not so fast, Benny.”

Benny pulled his unpinned hand away and held it up in surrender. “Let’s not do anything stupid, okay.” The fear in his eyes betrayed the stern voice.

“Clementine,” said the butcher in a sing-song voice. “C’mere, Clementine.”

The cat leapt into his lap and rubbed up against his chest.

“What should we do with our friend Benny here, huh?” Clementine looked up at the butcher, who returned the gaze.

I say we chop him up and serve him for lunch tomorrow. Rump roast sale, half price for the neighborhood.

The butcher leveled the pistol on Benny’s forehead.

“Clementine, that sounds like a great idea. Rump roast for 20 cents per pound, courtesy of the Nardella family.”

END

