

Mystery Meat 12: Niko's and the Morning After



The Logger spread them open slowly with his calloused hands, revealing the creamy meat at the center.

“This looks good enough to eat,” he said, raising his bushy brow provocatively.

A Niko's gyro is the perfect hangover food. What began as a serious interrogation of the prime suspect in the Fox Valley murders had devolved into a drunken tussle on a flea-bitten one-eyed bearskin rug sprawled out before the fireplace.

Empty mason jars drained of still hooch littered the shotgun shack living room. The Logger gallantly ran his shirt tail around the rim of a glass before filling it with a mixture of Barq's root beer and Mellow Yellow he'd asked the delivery driver to bring along with the Greek fare.

“This here is called Mormon Moonshine.”

The sweet mix rushed through my veins and jump-started my circulatory system. I reached into the take-out bag for a shish-kabob of marinated chicken, mushrooms, and green peppers. Dining at his place was a good idea. Niko's Gyros, “Quietly famous since

1988,” has its own brand of cramped charm with diner booths, wilted posters of Greece, and an arcane Gallaga machine that came of age when the TRS-80 was cutting-edge technology, but the lights were a little bright after a grain alcohol bender and the blaring classic rock radio might split a sobering brain like an ax to the back of the head. I couldn’t suffer Pantera and pepperoncinis at the same time.

The Logger bit into a sandwich of tender lamb meat broiled on a vertical spit, tomatoes and onions wedged into pita bread, and topped with a Tzatziki cucumber yogurt sauce seasoned with dill, garlic, and maybe a hint of minced mint. It was one of those heavy satisfying meals required to recalibrate the body’s equilibrium.

“Nothin’ like a gyro,” he said, pronouncing it like gyration or gyroscope rather than hero.

He had ordered one of everything on the menu: extra feta, Kalamata olives, jalapeno poppers, cheddar nuggets, and a Greek salad. I snacked on a side of Cajun potatoes that had the pleasant powdery sensation of a bag of Andy Capp’s Hot Fries submerged in grease and salted with bayou spices.

“I don’t tend to sleep with prime suspects in murder investigations,” I said.

The Logger smiled an open-faced genuine smile and tipped an imaginary hat, “Well I’m rightly pleased you made this exception.”

He was hard to figure. The burly lumberjack turned up at the scene of every crime and made no attempt to conceal his identity. Waitresses and waiters described a bearded man in a black and red checked shirt to police sketch artists. He had become a regular post office pin-up boy.

“Your girlfriend Betty said you threatened her when she ran off. She claimed she was forced into waiting tables to make ends meet and that’s when the killings started. Someone met foul play at every restaurant she worked. Each time I showed up to take statements, a diner recalled seeing you slipping away from the scene.”

The Logger sighed and sunk into a couch bowed in the center to accommodate a lonely man who wasted days before the black and white TV rigged up with rabbit ears and foil. He took his time to unwrap a honey drenched baklava. The translucent phyllo dough was spackled with finely chopped nuts and bound together with sweet syrup. The top layer feathered away from the dessert with each bite.

“I don’t rightly understand it. I can’t pay to keep the stove hooked up. I do most of my cooking in the pit out back or head into town for breakfast and dinner. My routine has been the same for years.”

I tore off a single indulgent piece of a culture clash known as the gyro cheeseburger.

“Why did Betty leave you?”

The Logger waved his hand around the room, “Look at this mess, who wouldn’t run off to find something better?”

His converted barn house was littered with boxes of traps, chainsaw cut bears with stoic totem pole expressions, stacks of varlet pelts, kindling whittled into animal shapes, and old bundled newspapers creating a hoarder’s maze from room to room.

“She ran off with some slick feller who could give her what she wanted. I saw Betty riding in the back of a shiny black car with her new boyfriend. He was one of those types with cigarette holders and silk coats.”

The Logger slipped a picture of a sweet smiling blonde out of its frame and tossed it in the dying fire. The edges curled and sweltered before turning black and flaking into ash.

“Did the man she ran off with have a thin moustache?” I asked, seeing my client’s face clearly in my mind.

“Now that you mention it, he did have a skinny little line above his lips. I don’t know if I’d go as far as calling it a moustache, but there were two slight shadows over each side of his mouth.”

He had described the parenthetical facial hair of a liar.