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The Cheese Story – EuropeNow

www.europenowjournal.org/2018/09/04/the-cheese-story/

*This is part of our special feature on **Food, Food Systems, and Agriculture.***

1.

I check myself in the mirror one last time. Black sweater, high neck, navy blue pants that you won't see under my long apron. Dark-frame glasses. City smart, I'd say, no different from that *mevrouw* I saw selling gloves in E*. I pull my hair back tight. Later I'll hide it under the cup. I always wear a cup around the vat. A middle-age woman who cares for herself. That's what I imagine they'll see in the picture. I also imagine my son, Bart, just beside me. His strong arms, bared, hold a strainer. It is heavy enough to tone his biceps. I told him, we should not look despondent. A picture in a national daily is an opportunity and we must take it.

At the last moment I throw on a silver necklace. It lays nicely against merino wool of the sweater.

A black Taurus is parked in the creamery's driveway. The newspaper wants the footage from our surveillance camera. They asked for photos by the vat as well. It is possible, I said, and made a note to myself to line up the cheese against the back wall. In a photo it will be difficult to see that the cheese is young, way too young to be sold.

Four days ago we had two hundred wheels of cheese, perfectly ripe. A hundred and fifty of them made with Beemster milk, extra creamy and sweet, and extra costly. In late October those hundred and fifty cheeses were ripe enough to sell. Each weighed twelve kilos. I calculated: eighteen thousand euros, that's what I wanted from the sales. We'll see none of that now.

A heavy-set man rolls out of the Taurus. He is a photographer, but he told me he also is here to write the story. He didn't tell me but I know: they are understaffed at this national daily. His eyes are rested on the corrugated metal roof of the barn we replaced just recently, all four hundred square meters of it. I wanted the area where we do culturing and draining tiled. It cost us last year's savings but in the current market, I thought, we'd have our money back in no time. I was sure of it.

He extends his hand, his mouth is a self-satisfied smirk: "You fixed the fence they cut! I read the report." I wait. "A clean job they did." I wince at the remark.

This clean job left dirty feelings in me. That morning when it all happened it was not yet six and pitch-dark, like it can be in October. My plan was to start with the rennet, wait for the curd to form, and then call in Bart and Anna to do cutting. Anna is our hire. She sleeps in the basement. Her room does not get much light, but she wanted a separate entrance. She has her Romanian girlfriends come by, and sometimes there is a man, and once I had to tell her to keep it quiet. Bart does not have a girlfriend, and Anna is only two years his senior, and she has that wiggly walk when she puts on heels.

I tried to exit the house, to go to the barn, and the door wouldn't open. I turned the knob several times; I tried the dead bolt, the key, and pushed and then pulled, but the door didn't budge.

"This is when you knew to call the police?"

Well, I didn't. I picked up phone to call the Huijsmans, to see if they could check our front door. Their farm is on the other side of this fence. But I do not tell him that. Instead I say, "The line was dead; they cut the wire."

The short man nods: "And they used cheesecloth wrapped around feet to not leave any prints. No fingerprints either. Your cameras detected no movement and it seemed like the cheese just disappeared into thin air. Isn't what you said in the police report?"

I snuff at him. Police! I practically ran the investigation. The youngsters that they sent could hardly have been my Bart's age. I taught Bart to read when he wasn't seven yet. These two could not put two and two together. I told them what questions to ask. Five cheese farms robbed in Holland in one week. Ninety thousands euros is the reported loss – and they still did not see a connection!

"But you did?" the reporter pulls out his smartphone. I wonder if they now have an app for newsmen too. But then I remember that he is really just a photographer.

Well, yes, I tell him, I did.

"Mind sharing?" he asks.

I pause, I gather myself. A quote in the national daily is an opportunity.

“This is all quite simple if you think about it, as simple as any good theory can be. Where is cheese a scarce commodity?”

I read in his very paper, I go on telling him, that more than one million Russians looked to buy villas in St. Tropez and houses in Amsterdam last year. Russia ranks sixth in the world for tourism. They spent thirty-five billion dollars on food, entertainment, and shopping, annually, all in foreign countries. But back home, in Moscow, food has all but disappeared from the shelves of the supermarkets. I read, the imposed sanctions hit hard food imports. No European produce makes it in, and certainly not dairy. People can buy all of the Riviera but back in Moscow they can’t find even a block of decent cheese!

My country, on the other hand, makes four main kinds of cheese: Gouda, Edam, Leerdammer and Beemster. There are a few more but these are the main ones. Value and price increase with age. Cheeses older than a year and a half are the most valued. A wheel of our own ripe Beemster can sell for as much as 200 euro.

I look at the short man and his stout figure. His gaze turned inward although his eyes are still directed at me. I hold my gaze steady; I continue.

I know every place my cheese goes; we stamp each of them with a registration number, and the number is unique, and I keep it safe on my computer. Same do Huijsmans, and the Mathaijssen down the road, and those two farms in the North whose names escape me right now but I know them and they know me. My point is, you see, it is not possible to sell cheeses that have been stolen, not in the Netherlands.

Then suddenly I remember. We have had a customer, he was a regular: would come twice a week, he drove from Poland. A nice guy, Bart would say to me while I stashed the money away which the guy would give us. I thought he was Bulgarian, or the Eastern Block type: he paid cash, always. We haven’t seen him since the robbery!

When the gravel in my driveway returns to be motionless, and the black Taurus is a mole against the milky sky, with the blotched earth of a ploughed field separating us, I know I have done my job. Tomorrow the nation will wake up to a sensation.

2.

A chunk of the fetid cheese has been placed on my desk for the probe, its sticky aroma now filling the room, earthy and thick. A phytosanitary certificate issues by the Cargo Inspection sits next to it. I take few seconds to admire the two-headed eagle of Russia on the seal, and notice an ink smudge over its left foot.

I have now worked at the Cargo Inspection Section of our Customs Department at the K* border crossing for twelve years — and my mind is sharp and memory vivid, and this is not because I forget anything that I read my President’s executive order time and again, out loud. I imagine the words falling with a thud, poignant in meaning, leaving indentations where they land. This is how I know the words of the decree are important: “Meats of

bovine animals, fresh, chilled or brined, fried or frozen and especially smoked. Their edible organs, poultry offal. Aquatic invertebrates, crustaceans, mollusks. Edible dairy. Fruits and nuts. Textiles, outdoor clothing, leatherwear, footwear. Dutch flower bulbs."

I always get carnations for my mother on her birthday and those don't grow from bulbs. Otherwise I have no one else to give flowers to. My mother likes to say that it is because of my job that I have no wife and no kids and we are still living together but I don't think so. I feel about women the way I feel about mollusks and crustaceans: the wet darkness of their existence in multitudes is unbeknownst to me.

Before joining the Customs I was a pedologist, with the diploma of Smolensk Academy of Agriculture. But then, who needs pedologists when there is no agriculture left, the farmland abandoned and all food imported? I could not find work for three years and we lived on my mother's pension. My mother took early retirement, her health was ailing and on the days of magnetic storms and solar activities she was so bad that I had to shop for groceries myself. When a new President came to power, border security was hyped again, although it took him a couple years to persuade simpletons in the parliament that new dangers are rising in the unipolar world. I applied for work at K*. I was good with labeling and filing. I got the job.

The day I collected my first salary I went to the supermarket and bought a wedge of Gouda for my mother. She sat at the kitchen table where I put it, silent, and touched the crust with the tips of her fingers, just brushed it so lightly. From the look on her face I worried she would start talking about the war again, as she often does when she is emotional, and I don't know why because she was born when the war had already ended. But she'll cry anyway for all the dead, who didn't come back from battles, and all the years that she calls "hungry." When I feel down and out of sorts she comes to my room, stands by my bed and says that peace is what my generation has no appreciation for, spoiled as we are. I usually laugh at her follies but recently my feelings started changing somehow. There has been war, too much war around us.

The other day, at work, they called us in and sat us down, and said that these are hard times, the times of war, and now we have to be more vigilant. Although no shells will be landing around and no jets flying over pyres will be going up on which flesh will burn, and trenches will be dug in which it will be buried… I was beginning to get jittery in my seat when someone from the Seized Articles Department I didn't know that well leaned over to explain that they were talking about smuggled food and how they now need to arrange for its destruction.

They took us out to the field just behind the wire fence and showed the trenches that were dug, four of them, each at least three meters deep and as long as our loading bays. A grey sky the texture of cotton hang heavily over the mounts of mud on either side of a trench. The soil is mainly peat and loam around here, with frequent silt striations. My chest filled with sadness when I saw oligotrophic and eutrophic deposits thrown together, the ancient histosols disturbed.

A man in an orange jump suit spoke to us. “Officers, I will be quick. Last month we were tipped about a bypass, five kilometers long, going around the check point. Last week’s raid yielded nine trucks with Romanian apples and cherries, about 175 tons in total. There will be more, with Norwegian salmon passing as Greenland’s…”.

“All confiscated foods must be immediately exterminated. Cheese, fruit and vegetables go into furnaces. Fish, meat and poultry are to be disposed of in here. Two witnesses at each burial. Not a gram should go missing. Understood?”

He kicked the clump of soil nearest to his right foot and watched it crumble. He wasn’t sure — nor was I — if the soil would stay soft and the ground a grave, not a freezer for all the beef and salmon we will be dumping here.

We disassembled and returned to our desks. This time of year, when a cold rain falls incessantly, I do not like being outside the office.

Then, some days later, I overheard our Deputy Head telling someone on the phone that a phytosanitary inspection at the nearby crossing found peaches grown in Byelorus’. Imagine! — Peaches! — in Byelorus! — he shouted, laughing. They took us for the fools, kept peaches tagged with Romanian barcodes, imbeciles! He now wasn’t laughing, but growled. When mother and I chatted in the kitchen that night I said, how strange it was that Byelorussians, even babies, ate 70 kilos of apples each last year. That is, based on the statistics we recently received. Mother laughed at me and said that if I watched TV like a normal person, I’d known that our Slavic brothers sell embargoed Polish apples to us after rebranding them as from elsewhere. Counter-band is a big business, she said, for 800 euro a 20 ton cargo receives new certificates with a legitimate countries of origin, and for another 200 the packaging gets reprinted and replaced.

I now look again at the cheese, then the sanitary certificate. Dew forms on the rust-colored flesh where it was cut. The air is now soaked in the mouldy smell, and I tighten my fists to prevent my fingers from running along the surface of the crust with the registration number engraved in it, so smooth and perfect. Without looking at its certificate I know: no Slavic brother of ours has reached this perfection in fromagerie.

Countries that make their own cheese seldom understand what not making your own involves. Russia cannot boast some fromage de stroganoff. It did not invent a kalashnikov of Gruyere. We stand spellbound at the supermarket isle, a specialty shop, pulling out our cell phones to call our relatives and beloved, uttering the names full of mystery and enigma: Époisses de Bourgogne, Brie de Meaux , Tomme de Savoie, Queijo do Pico, Leerdammer.

When I leave my post to go home in the evening, I like to walk by the depot, through the loading bays and containers filled with the foreign smells, the foreign color pallet, the foreign letters. I associate the red-white-green of the Italian packages with olive-skinned girls gathering grapes in a suburb of Naples, and the Iberian ham with horses and hay carts, scythes and plows. It is more difficult for me to associate French things, my imagination spoiled by American actresses posing in French perfume commercials.

This last thought irritates me and my mind returns to the cheese waiting on my desk. I look at it. I sigh. I do not want to think about my mother: I am to sign this specimen's extermination.

3.

How are you doing today, my brother?

A *mus,* the measure of all things that matter to us, speaks here in his own language. My *oris* can only describe what my *oculus* may actually see. But then, our vision is never quite complete; the world is too transient for us to be ever well informed about it.

On the other hand, the view of the ankle of a flight attendant passing by this vent for an eye with some experience and knowledge offers more than a portion of the Universe. An airport is a world of its own, an apparent order of complexity that surpasses any nest with its burrows and tunnels. Don't be mistaken, though; it is not Eros but Tanatos that informs my feelings, my trepidation: the proximity of a human ankle is uncertain news to us.

Stretch your tired legs, brother, but watch out your whisks do not stick out. We got some time to kill. You fancy a cigar? Let me offer you a light. Draws cleanly, doesn't it?

You called me an adventurer, and that I am. But tonight I will tell you not a story of a heroic feat, nor of my life as it has been, but merely an episode staged by a cynic; at least this is how I intended it to be.

The world is now as if humans have swallowed it all up; changed everything. Made it in every way theirs. The forest and the trees, the fields, the corn, the mountains and the sea – everything is colored with humanness. Not of the outer kind, not with human action only, but human inner self, the feelings, the affect. The meaning, the senses and the sentimentality have become of only one kind: theirs. And once men have taken over, there seems to be no way back. Humanness has begun to spread like wildfire, men's inner life is given an outer form. I'll give you one example.

You've heard of the saying the "rat race." For those who first uttered it, and those who followed them, the words conjure up an image of a lab in which rats run through a maze to get to cheese. A pointless, endless kind of pursuit, you say, because you know all too well, that he who has success will run the path again; intelligence is a thing to be studied, to be exploited and put to human's use.

No, the retina of my eye does not hurt from a projection of that bold-tailed cousin of ours racing to a piece of a soft, fetid cheese.

Those who seek a more intellectual depth in understanding humanity should instead consider the Russian "myshinnaya voznya," flinging of the mouse. Here not a rat but another rodent like you and I is involved, and no running, but the hustle and bustle in the

cranny under your floor. The longing that the wretched rat felt, the exhorting of her muscles in a pursuit which felt so meaningful, a dream that led her through the maze – all is lost in the noisy motility of our folk.

My brother, tell me: what is it if not a colonial gestalt? A wicked way of annihilating us all by eclipsing our entire existence, situating our own conceptions and meanings outside and above us, intelligible. *Man is an animal that makes bargains*, but the animal part has been long forgotten.

Listen to me now carefully.

I saw a chance two years ago when Russia annexed Crimea and the powers-that-be imposed sanctions. While citizens of the Commonwealth enjoyed Boxing Day, Visa and MasterCard stopped servicing credit card operations in Crimea. Several months earlier, Australia banned sales of oil exploration and drilling equipment to Russia, and closed its financial market to Russian banks backed by the government. The European Union made more stringent the application requirements for Russian banks applying for loans.

A race has started. For each bond declined, every euro lost and transaction cancelled, Russians blocked meats of bovine animals, fresh, chilled or brined, fried or frozen and especially smoked, their edible organs, poultry offal, aquatic invertebrates, crustaceans and mollusks on their way to Russia. Food, my brother, food – not dollars and euros, not pipelines and missiles, but food took on a paramount significance posing threat to state security.

“The best form of saying is being,” I was once quoted but now let me say something different. *The best form of being is eating.*

Let us now see who romps, who races and who takes time to satisfy an aspiration to the best form of existence with care and aplomb, I told to myself a trusted few of our brothers. To make two tons of the finest artisanal cheese disappear, as if dematerialize, and with no consequence – no traps to avoid, no poison to find in scrapings, no ambushes by sterile cats. All eyes will fix on Russians hungry for cheese, and we, we will get away. That was my plan! It worked and how!

Mobilization was a no easy feat but I had to do it, and our sisters and brothers from every corner of the cornfield known as the ‘globe’ heard me. They came in, full force and with no hesitation. Hundreds of thousands, nay, millions of them arrived. They marched, they hopped on trucks and rode in danger of being discovered, all rushing to be on time. Many vanished but more made it and stuck to the deadline.

There were some wrinkles on the way, inevitably. That lady with Beemster renovated her barn recently, and the usual holes and cracks were reduced to occasional slits, which were not a problem on the way in but became an obstacle on the way out. The bellies of our brothers and sisters grew so large that some had to undergo induced puking and others were pulled out by their paws, with many joints sprained.

I will not restrain myself. I take the delight in the way we fork-locked her front door — bent the tips of the fork tines, slipped them into the doorjamb, closed the door and wedged a knife between the tines. The fork and knife were carried from her kitchen by twelve of us, and we stood on the backs of three hundred more to reached the jamb.

Other things worked in our favor. A truck was stopped at the Russian border loaded with cheese, and an imbecile from Cargo Inspection, instead of burning it, attempted to carry it home to his sickly mother. He got caught on the way and reports that trumpeted the Russia's black market diverged attention.

No one looked at us, centuries, nay, millennia of our proverbial love for cheese forgotten. Politics sets limits on that which can speak to humans: we, unfathomable, do not exist.

We understand each other, my brother with hopes similar to mine, hopes and convergent dreams. So, let us not miss our flight to Bolivia. La Higuera, was that our next destination?

Olga Sezneva *is a scholar, educator, writer, and art curator. She has taught sociology in the United States, Russia, and the Netherlands, where she also conducted research projects on cities and memory, media piracy, and migration. Olga's academic work has appeared in a number of international journals. In 2013, she joined the international artists collective Moving Matters Traveling Workshop, with which she writes and performs, and for which she curated two projects in Amsterdam, in collaboration with the Hermitage and Allard Pierson Museum.*

This is based on the true story first covered by Dutch newspaper NRC on August 1, 2018 ('De Kaas Werd Liefdevol Gestolen' / 'The Cheese Was Stolen With Love') and translated, with a response, in St. Petersburg daily Fontanka.

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