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God of the Cheese Wheel

Abstract

The cheese shop on Shattuck is famous. It boasts the largest selection of cheeses foreign and domestic in Northern California, and is known to give an almost unlimited number of free samples. Most of the employees—called cheese consultants—are retired chefs now spending their golden years guiding the faithful to the best pairings for a plum tart or a dry champagne. On the afternoon I finally enter the shop, after years upon lustful years of walking past, I have three dollars in my wallet. My student loan payment is overdue again, and I'm praying HR won't audit my time card. But as I stand in the doorway, the glass counter seems to gleam with particular insistence. Underneath, bright stacks of wheels and rounds—Bries and Montasios and Jarlsburgs, Munsters upon Asiagos upon Camemberts—form an altar of aromatic temptation. Surely I can go in, sample one cheese, and leave. Surely this is possible. I cross the threshold.

Keywords

cheese, fiction, food

Cover Page Footnote

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October 18, 2013

God of the Cheese Wheel

Fiction by Molly Jean Bennett

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Inside, the air smells of truffle and fresh sourdough. The ceilings are high, the windows large. Five cheese consultants move about behind the counter, each helping one customer at a time. I take a number from the dispenser and retreat to the far wall. As I wait, I watch a young man approach the register. On the other side of the counter, his consultant holds a large basket of cheeses she has just finished wrapping for him in thick, waxy paper. The man wears a black blazer and pair of jeans that cup his taut ass. A start-up CFO or a finance guy, I deduce, probably heading home to a sparsely furnished condo in the Oakland Hills. He takes a hundred dollar bill out of his wallet. He puts it on the counter and smooths it with his palm, as if offering one last

affectionate pat to a baby grizzly before releasing it into the wild. His cheese consultant takes it, and hands back a few bills—ones—and a sprinkling of coins, which the man immediately deposits in the tip jar. At the other end of the counter, I overhear a tall, silver-haired woman repeating herself. *Yes, some kind of a goat Brie, but not too goat-y, you know? I can't have it overpowering the Adriatic fig spread.* I worry the paper number between my thumb and forefinger. I could just go, I think. I could leave right now. But a cheese consultant calls 86! and I step forward.

Welcome, she says. *First time?* My consultant, stout and beaming, peers up at me through frameless glasses. With her white hair piled in a precarious bun, she reminds me a bit of my mother before she got sick.

Uh, yes, I say.

Wonderful! And what are we looking for today? I have not properly anticipated the interaction. Suddenly it seems crass to simply request a sample. Surely one needs a story.

Ah, um, well, I'm going to a potluck later, and want to bring something, uh, special.

Perfect. And this is an appetizer cheese? Something versatile, yet, of course, exquisite. I'm sure we can find just the thing.

Great, I say. Rubbing her fingertips together, my cheese consultant surveys the cases up and down. She purses her lips in concentration.

Hmm...yes, yes. I'll start you off with this Majorero. Just came in last week. It's Spanish, a bit like Manchego, but nuttier. She lifts an ample wheel with a reddish rind from the case. Placing it on the counter in front of her, she carves a pearly flake, sets it on an embossed napkin, and hands it to me. Slowly, I lift the cheese to my mouth and place it on my tongue. The Majorero warms and spreads. I close my eyes. I have the distinct impression I am eating sunlight.

Good, eh? my cheese consultant says. When I open my eyes, she is smiling up at me. *Well if you like that one, let's try something a bit bolder. How about this Morbier?* She points to a brown lump near the front of the case. *When I was much younger, I worked at a restaurant in Dijon for a few years. This was a local favorite. Very high quality, very fresh.* She begins to cut a small slice. I should pretend to take a call. I should remember I am late to an appointment. But she hands me the cheese, and I take it. This cheese is softer, and sickly yellow with a gray vein running through it, but as soon as it touches my lips I realize that it too is perfect. I feel myself yielding.

My consultant brings me slivers of Gouda, Lavarot, and Leyden. As I praise each one, she brings more. I begin to lose track of their names. *This one is buried underground in a burlap sack to age. This one can be pressed only on the longest day of the year.* I try a dark brown Norwegian cheese with the consistency of butter and the flavor of caramel. I try a Spanish cheese shaped like a woman's breast. *This one was reserved strictly for the Pope in the Middle Ages. This one comes from cows that have grazed only on the loamiest pasture in Provence.*

The last of the Norwegian morsel slides down my throat. My cheese consultant looks at me expectantly.

So which ones will you have? I say nothing. *It's hard to choose, I know.* She is still smiling, but keeps glancing past me at the large crowd of customers now bunched around the counter. *Do you have a price range in mind?*

Uh, well... I reach into my pocket. Three dollars, maybe less. Bus fare. It's not too late to fake that phone call. Or I can run. Technically, I haven't stolen anything. To leave now would be slippery, rude, but not criminal.

Or perhaps you'd like two soft cheeses and two hard? Say, fifty grams of each. You seemed to like the Mahon particularly.

Then, at the edge of my peripheral vision, I see an old man emerge from the back room. He moves with great effort, apparently struggling with some yet-out-of-sight object. My consultant sees him too, and turns quickly.

My God, she says, is that our new darling?! In unison with everyone in the shop, I crane my neck to see that the man is bent over a giant cheese wheel. It has the girth of a young ox and is tall enough to reach the man's chest. Perspiring profusely and cursing under his breath, he uses the fullness of his weight to roll the cheese wheel forward. Murmurs spread through the crowd behind me. *I've heard of this and veins of black truffle all throughout and must be a fortune for a wheel that size.* My mind feels oddly placid, as if suspended in a still, clear pool. In measured strides, I make my way to the man and his cheese wheel.

Let me help you with that, I hear myself say. Guided by some force outside myself, I step behind the wheel and roll it out of the man's hands. I do not move it to the place that has been cleared in the center case, but instead propel it slowly toward the front door of the shop. The room is silent. No one follows me. The cheese wheel is smooth and cool under my palms. Its waxen rind reflects light, appears even to emit it, and

shines like Christmas. As I roll the cheese wheel over the threshold, the shop erupts behind me. I don't look back, just continue down the sidewalk.

Later, there will be the mob of customers and the bitter bite of sidewalk in my mouth. Later, there will be police and questions and the agreement that *this was all a misunderstanding*. But the scent of truffle and goat's milk will never wash from my hands. The surface of the earth will seem somehow smoother, as if molded on the rind of a great cheese wheel.

Standing upright on a flat surface, Molly Jean Bennett is 5'4", which is the exact height of the average U.S. American female, as well as the median height of the Southern Cassowary, a charming flightless bird. She is a second year MFA candidate at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia, where she writes poems, etc. and teaches creative writing. Her work has appeared in *McSweeney's* Internet Tendency and *The Missouri Review* Podcast.