

Chapter One - History

This is a story about cheese. Of course, there will be wine since they pair so well together and one wouldn’t want to be considered a poor host. Throughout most of the universe, wine and cheese invariably lead to sex which begets love or vice versa, depending on whether the scene is written by a poet or a movie director. Several passionate love affairs will take place and there will be the occasional tryst involving a cow. But mostly, this tale is about cheese.

However, before we get to the actual conflict, a bit of history is necessary.

With the pandemic raging and bodies literally falling by the wayside, the major pharmaceutical companies threw caution and profits to the wind to find a vaccine. Every molecule from ape droppings to zebra snot was tested on volunteers, with the only result being rashes and strange dietary changes. From tropical plants dug near the equator to mosses collected on the ice of the Arctic Circle, the foliage was broken down into its component parts and distilled to fill a syringe. Even the moon dust stored in the basement of the Smithsonian was hauled out and swirled into a saline solution.

The results weren’t worth cataloging. Brilliant scientists were stymied until they noticed the low mortality rate in states where cannabis had been legalized. Conservative governments had prevented testing with the still illegal plant, despite millions of anecdotal reports of cures from jock itch to cancer. The solution had been in their bottom desk drawers all that time. One toké was never enough, and the flowering top of the heroic plant from the sixties was about to unfurl its cape once again.

A vaccine was produced and injected into ten-thousand people who showed no symptoms and tested negative for the virus after four months of reporting. The CEO of the drug company that discovered the silver bullet was inoculated on live television. Cameras followed him across the street as he walked into a hospital and through its intensive care ward the following day without a mask. He shook hands with all fourteen patients there—conscious or not—smiling for the cellphone cameras held by the nurses and doctors.

Daily tests for the next thirty days on the overweight, sixty-two-year-old diabetic came back clean. He had walked through the valley of the shadow of death and survived.

In the early spring, all of the first three million doses of the vaccine that were produced went to the military, the government, and the lobbyists who supported big pharma. Wars were still being fought. Our borders needed to be protected. The donkeys and the pachyderms had arguments to settle and exorbitant lifestyles to maintain. Police officers got their injections at roll call.

In one month’s time, every dose was injected into an arm. The next supply of the vaccine was promised before summer. It never came.

The vaccine had a side effect that most described as miraculous. However, the three million people who received the injection were aghast. The molecule that attacked and killed the virus also reacted with cells of the human lung and the microbes that lived there, forming a new bug that was exhaled with every breath. This new, single-celled organism grew regardless of whether or not the host had the virus. And once released into the atmosphere, the tiny invader multiplied faster than a hutch of drunken rabbits.

This microscopic speck of life did no harm to any other living creature. It didn't grow mold on indoor plants or spoil the citrus crop. Beaches were never shut due to some bizarrely tainted tide or dead marine life washing up on the shore. All the tiny collection of atoms wanted was to eat.

And its diet? Glad you asked. Gunpowder and nitrocellulose—the modern version of black powder. The subminiature creature had a voracious appetite for the propellant that pushed a lead bullet out of a gun. It was small enough to squeeze between the crimps that held the projectile in place until the hammer struck the primer which exploded the powder. The bug—named Dud because it turned all the ammunition in the world inert—worked at subatomic speed. Within a month, every pistol, semi-automatic, rifle, shotgun, and cannon were rendered useless.

On submarines, the torpedoes could be launched, but their explosive charges were nothing but gray dust thanks to the sailors who breathed on them as they were loaded. They would strike their target and bounce off, sinking harmlessly to the bottom of the ocean. Several were inadvertently swallowed by passing whales as they descended. One, in fact, was disgorged by a sperm whale into the stern of a very expensive, transatlantic yacht. It was the first recorded case of marine life taking sea pollution into their own fins.

Missiles mounted on fighter jets could still do major damage to another aircraft, but they would never again explode. Air-to-air combat was reduced to kamikaze attempts at glory. Helicopters still proved formidable, lifting large boulders in their rescue nets and dumping them on strategic targets. However, even the fastest chopper was a plodding attacker when it was loaded down with rocks. An enemy could walk out of the way of a falling chunk of granite.

Privately owned weapons were as useless as a fire hose without water. Even stocks of tightly packed ammo down in a survivalist's bunker turned to lead paperweights as soon as they were torn open and shoved angrily into a weapon. Gun collectors wept. Major weapons and ammunition manufacturers closed their doors and sent their workers searching for new jobs. Macy's Fourth of July fireworks celebration was replaced by massive LED displays hanging from any available helicopter not carrying rocks.

A wave of pacifism, the knee-jerk reaction to the wars, cries of battle, and threats of nationalism that had overtaken the world, celebrated the death of guns. Long before a small group of inventors had tinkered together a pistol that worked on high-pressure air cartridges, they

were outlawed in anticipation by all the major governments. Knives, swords, bows and arrows were all that were left.

The military retooled itself with crossbows, catapults, and slingshots. Officers were once again seen wearing scabbards. Hand-to-hand combat, already popular thanks to a series of coming-of-age karate movies from the infamous year of 1984, was taught in all public schools. (What would Orwell have thought about the Dud?)

Violent crime plummeted. A robber with a switchblade against a bodega owner with a baseball bat had become an even match. Bank guards with Tasers had little to fear from a sword-wielding criminal. Every one of the electrical gadgets had been snapped up by financial institutions for protection. Pocket knives replaced fountain pens as the most common Bar Mitzvah gift. Around the globe, police officers shed their Kevlar vests and began twirling nightsticks again.

Wars came to an end. Sure, minor skirmishes still took place. On both sides of the 38th Parallel, Koreans had constructed trebuchets and dug tiger pits filled with pointed stakes. But sentries spent their time playing sudoku puzzles and stuffing kimchee into mason jars. Soldiers came home and were tasked with the rebuilding of their countries. New bridges, highways, and airports were constructed by the former warriors. The Union of Nuclear Scientists rolled the Doomsday Clock back to noon when it was announced that all the explosive triggers in the atomic warheads had been rendered inert.

Religious fanatics from the Middle East to the Midwest came to the realization that their killing days were over. The promise of virgins and cultural supremacy was never going to be fulfilled. While they still prayed fervently for their tribe to be the one and only in the eyes of God, Allah, Jah, or Sponge Bob, they turned their efforts inward and closed the doors to their temples.

The microscopic solution to the worst pandemic in man's brief history made the cover of *Time* magazine. The scientists who had worked on the project were offered movie deals, penthouse suites, and fast cars. It became much cooler to be a pharmacological researcher than a rock star. It was rumored that the Rolling Stones were working on their fourth farewell album titled *"Let It Feed"* with a pixelated image of the new bug on the cover.

Nightly news broadcasts featured nothing but positive announcements: the economy was booming, the murder rate was plummeting, and the cannabis yield was expected to be five percent higher than last year. With the threat of the virus eliminated, life on planet Earth had been reborn with a better "normal" than before.

People hugged, walked up to strangers on the street and chatted about the weather. Restaurants were once again serving packed tables. Bowling alleys lit all their lanes. Outdoor target ranges were filled with picnic tables. A feeling of euphoria unknown since the repeal of

prohibition spread across the globe. Dud was the savior, not some mysterious hippie type in a flowing robe that was still rumored to return even now that peace was restored.

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On the Isle de Boeuf located in the middle of the Doubs, a river forming the boundary between France and Switzerland, lived a farmer named Boulong who had never needed a gun. The island, just over fifty-seven acres, had a Swiss chalet, a barn large enough to fit a ten-cow milking machine with an attached cheese processing plant, an eight-foot diameter hot tub, and a wooden dock.

Boulong's great-grandfather had settled on the Isle de Boeuf when the island had no name. He claimed the land for his family and began raising cattle, hence the French version of the moniker. Boulong's father had built the chalet and hot tub. The current owner had installed the modern equipment to handle the manual tasks his family had performed before him.

Average height and a bit overweight, Boulong was a dairy farmer who did nothing to hide his station in life. Even though he bathed regularly, the bovine stench had impregnated his skin and could never be removed. His legs were muscular but not half as developed as his broad shoulders and powerful arms. He'd stopped shaving and began trimming the day his wife left him.

Both his mother and father were long in the ground. He'd added their ashes to the cow's daily food and let the bovines decide where to lay them to rest. It was in their Last Will and Testament. Just as it had been for generations. Boulong's ancestors never left the island.

Sabrina, his ex-wife, had left for that reason alone. The thought of her earthly remains passing through the digestive system of a cow was too much to handle. She'd given birth to the twins, waited a year, and then left with a German tourist who remarked that she had, "A smile befitting an angel with blue eyes that were truly windows into heaven." Of course, he'd said it as he overpaid nearly a hundred Euros for a five-Euro block of Boulong's cheese.

And thus we have our first appearance of cheese...

During the time in Earth's history when the largest dinosaurs roamed the area, the Isle de Boeuf didn't exist. The Doubs was part of a glacier and the land below it flat. The area that would one day be Boulong's Paradise was transformed into the huge creatures' favorite feeding ground with lush vegetation and cool, clear drinking water as the glacier receded. Daily, a congregation of beasts stomped in for a meal, spreading whatever news dinosaurs discussed while they dined. And being the largest creatures on the planet at that time, they emptied their bowels right where they stood. No one complained.

On the day of the great meteor and moments before the soon-to-be extinct animals had a chance to wonder why it had suddenly gotten so hot and bright, there were thousands of prehistoric creatures munching on trees and relieving themselves. Boulong's Paradise was full of crap long before it was full of cows. One bright flash and the dinosaurs were museum-ready. Only their super-enriched, completely baked poop was left behind.

Over several millennia, the dinosaur poop mixed with the developing soil, adding minerals to it that wouldn't be found anywhere else on Earth. By the time Boulong's ancestors had settled on the Isle de Boeuf, the grasses that grew there were among the most potent cow food on Earth. Boulong had two hundred milk-producers and twin sons that churned the milk into butter and cheese. The flavor of Boulong's cheese, unlike any other known to man, along with a perfect texture for spreading, won his products every award in the book.

The farmer loved his cows. Of course, not in the same way a husband loves a wife or a Liverpool resident loves the sun. He'd never given them names, knowing that one day they'd be dinner, but could tell them apart at fifty paces. Right now, his two sons made up his universe. The unpleasant experience with Sabrina had left him with no desire for another star in his personal sky for over a year.

The best dairy products in Europe were his only goal. Butter so smooth and creamy that it spread on toast with the ease of jam. Cheese that not only complimented an entrée, it made it better. Boulong had given up heating the hot tub and drinking wine for over a year to save enough money for state-of-the-art milking equipment. He knew that if he gave his cows the best, they would respond in kind, and it worked.

For more generations than anyone could remember, there had been only boys born in the Boulong family. The women came from off the island and were usually French. Mookie and Mikey, Boulong's twins, were destined to carry on the dairy production and began training in the barn when they were still in diapers.

The love and respect the farmer had for his children was greater than his passion for cheese, but not by much. He often saw the boys as employees and was prone to pushing them beyond the limits a father would expect from a family member. Having raised them without a mother around, they in turn saw no distinction between "dad" and "boss."

The trio worked from Monday at dawn until after midnight on Thursday, converting fresh milk from their herd into cream, butter, and cheese. Mikey handled the roundup, chasing down lost cows with their six-wheeled Gator and moving them into a holding pen next to the barn. His brother, Mookie, was the milker, bringing in ten cows at a time and connecting their udders to the milking tubes.

Boulong was the master dairy producer. His father's teachings, passed down through the generations, had also been given to the boys, but the farmer preferred to have his hands

controlling the processing equipment. Any one of the three could handle the other's tasks, but in military efficiency they did the same job day after day.

Retirement would come on the day Boulong took his last breath. Just as it had for his father, his grandfather, and every male who worked on the dairy farm on the Isle de Boeuf, while he was still sucking air, the farmer's first thought in the morning was always going to be cheese.

Boulong and his sons left his little island each Friday morning by boat, first going to the French side of the river to sell his cheese and then back across to the Swiss side with the balance. The island's French name was on most local maps, but it also had a Swiss name that had long been forgotten. Farmer Boulong called his home "Paradise" and paid taxes to neither government.

Chefs from six continents (and once, a drunken cook from an Antarctic research vessel) waited onshore for Boulong every Friday along with hundreds of locals to buy his butter and cheese. He always portioned the products into two lots: one for the French and an equal one for their neighbors on the opposite bank.

Unfortunately, this coming Friday was going to be a problem. One of Boulong's sons had fallen and broken his leg while bungee jumping in the Alps the previous weekend. He was able to help his father with the cheese production, but at a much slower pace. The other son had gone to Paris early in the week and was still missing. Boulong had called and texted, but there was no response. He would have less than one-quarter of the normal cheese production to sell.

To make matters worse, his girlfriend—an American tourist who'd checked out of her AirBnB seven weeks prior—had missed her period and her parents were insisting that she fly home for proper medical care. Despite the thirty-year difference in their ages, Boulong had been having the best sex of his life. *Certainly better than that bitch, Sabrina.* He was torn between having another child with his sixtieth birthday only a few years away and losing the girl's passionate lovemaking. It was a conflict that was not only keeping him up at night, but occupying his days as well.

Boulong had worked until dawn, processing the milk into butter and raw cheese. Earlier in the day, he'd cut and wrapped two-hundred-and-nine five-Euro chunks of the aged cheese and filled over a hundred tubs with his spread. Normally, he would have at least five-hundred blocks of cheese and triple the number of tubs.

I'm going to rip Mookie a new asshole when he gets home. God knows what that boy is doing in Paris. Hookers, pole dancers, dwarves? Enough of this shit. Probably went looking for his mother again. If only I knew how to cut off his cellphone...

Boulong shook his head. *I can't deal with another child.* He stared at his crotch for a moment and then spit. *Should have used a condom.*

With the first hint of sun painting the Alps to the east, Boulong loaded his skiff and looked at the much smaller than normal cargo. He could still divide it in half, but every customer

would get less and some would get nothing. Boulong shrugged. *The French have wine. The Swiss only chocolate. You can't pair cheese with chocolate.* He decided to skip the Swiss this time around and just sell to the French.

The dairy farmer from Paradise didn't think it would start a war.