

1991

"It sat silently, hoarding its secrets."

THIS PARTICULAR STORY BEGINS IN THE DUSKY HOLLOWES OF 1991, remembered as a rotten year through and through by almost everybody living, dead, or unborn. I'm sure there were a few who had it good, maybe even made millions off other people's misfortune, but for the rest of us, there wasn't a glimmer. January dawned with tracers over Baghdad, the Gulf War. It was a bad year for Saddam Hussein and the Israeli farmer (Scud missiles, weak harvest), the Politburo of the Soviet Union (dissolved), and the sawmills of British Columbia (rising stumpage fees, etc.). An estimated one hundred and fifty thousand people died in a Bangladeshi cyclone. The IRA launched a mortar attack on 10 Downing Street, shattering the windows and scorching the wall of the room where Prime Minister John Major was meeting with his Cabinet ("I think we'd better start again, somewhere else," said the prime minister). In the Philippines, Mount Pinatubo erupted, ejecting 30 billion metric tons of magma and aerosols, draping a thick layer of sulfuric acid over the earth, cooling temperatures while torching the ozone layer.

It was a brutal year for the ozone layer.

Here in America, it was no better: the rise of Jack Kevorkian, Magic Johnson's HIV diagnosis, Donald Trump's dwindling empire. Rape, mass murder, and masturbation.* The country slopped along in a recession, and meanwhile, I wasn't feeling so good myself.

To kick things off, I got dumped in January. I was twenty-six years old, making about \$5,000 a year, pretax. I lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with my roommate, Miles, both of us graduate students in the creative writing program for fiction, a.k.a. Storytelling School. We each had a futon and a stereo—and everything else (two couches, black-and-white TV, waffle iron) we'd foraged from piles in front of houses on Big Trash Day.

That year, I toted around a book entitled *The Great Depression of 1990*, one bought on remainder for a dollar, and that predicted absolute global meltdown . . . *in 1990*. But I, for one, wasn't going to look like an idiot if it hit a year or two late. The advantage I had over most everyone else in the world was my lack of participation in the economy, except to issue policy statements, from the couch, before our blizzardy TV screen of black-and-white pixels. The eleven o'clock news brought us Detroit anchorman Bill Bonds and all the bad acid and strange perversions of the year—the William Kennedy Smith trial, the Clarence Thomas hearings, the Rodney King beating—all delivered from beneath his superb toupee, woven it seemed with fine Incan silver.

Nineteen-ninety-one was the year we were to graduate, and as the months progressed toward that spring rite of passage, a funny thing happened: We, the storytellers, could not get our stories published—*anywhere*. We typed in fits of Kerouacian ecstasy, swaddled our stories in manila envelopes, sent them out to small journals across the country. The rejections came back in our own self-addressed envelopes, like homing pigeons.

So we stewed in our obscurity—and futility. We were Artists. We

* Mike Tyson, Jeffrey Dahmer, Pee-wee Herman.

worked as course assistants and teachers of Creative Writing 101, reading Wallace Stevens poems to the uvulas of the yawning undergrad horde, moving ourselves to inspiration while the class spoke among itself. We kept office hours in a holding pen with sixteen other teachers, and then went and drank cheap beer at Old Town Tavern, swapping lines from our rejection letters. As it began to dawn on us that the end of our cosseted academic ride was near, the tension ratcheted so high that we started spending extra time with the only people who were consistently more miserable than we were: the poets.

In pictures from our graduation, we—my posse and I—look so innocent, like kids really, kids with full heads of hair and skinny bodies and a glint of fear in our eyes, gazing out at the savage world and our futures. You can almost see our brains at work in those photos, now just hours away from the cruelest epiphany: Those preciously imagined short story collections and novels, copied and bound lovingly at Kinko's, called *The Shape of Grief* or *What the Helix Said*,* qualified us for, well, almost . . . exactly . . . *nothing*.

Which is what led me to a local deli, a place called Zingerman's, to see if they needed an extra sandwich-maker on weekends. This was Zingerman's before it did \$44 million in annual sales and possessed a half million customers, but it was already an Ann Arbor legend, a fabled arcade of fantastic food, a classic, slightly cramped New York-style deli in the Midwest, with a tin ceiling, black-and-white tiled floor, and the yummiest delicacies from around the world. The shelves overflowed with bottles of Italian lemonade, exotic marmalade spreads, and tapenades. The brothy smell of matzo ball soup permeated the place. On Saturday mornings, before Michigan football games, people thronged, forming a line down Kingsley Street. The sandwiches cost

* Mine was entitled *Augie Twinkle's Lament*, and detailed—some might say excruciatingly—the progress of a minor league pitcher to his final game on the mound, where, after being shelled, he exits over the center-field fence, discarding his uniform, piece by piece, in grief-stricken striptease. From there, left only in his codpiece, he goes on a laundry-stealing binge . . . and the rest, you'll have to trust me, is heartrending, humorous, and deeply compelling.

twice as much as anywhere else, and whenever we splurged as students, we'd go there and stand in the long line, the longer the better actually, just to prolong the experience. Then we'd order from colorful chalkboards hung from the ceiling, detailing a cornucopia of sandwiches with names like "Gemini Rocks the House," "Who's Greenberg Anyway?," and "The Ferber Experience," each made on homemade farm bread or grilled challah or Jewish rye, stuffed with Amish chicken breast or peppered ham or homemade pastrami, with Wisconsin muenster or Switzerland Swiss or Manchester creamy cheddar, and topped with applewood-smoked bacon or organic sunflower sprouts or honey mustard.

In the days before the rise of gourmand culture, before our obsession with purity and pesticides, before the most fetishistic of us could sit over plates of Humboldt Fog expounding on our favorite truffles or estate-bottled olive oil, Zingerman's preached a new way of thinking about food: Eat the best, and eat homemade. Why choke down oversalted, processed chicken soup when you might slurp Zingerman's rich stock, with its tender carrots and hint of rosemary? Why suffer any old chocolate when you might indulge in handcrafted, chocolate-covered clementines from some picturesque village in northern Italy, treats that exploded in your mouth, the citrus flooding in tingles across the tongue with the melted cocoa spreading beneath it, lifting and wrapping the clementine once again, but differently now, in the sweetest chocolate-orange cradle of sensory pleasure? Judging by the towering shelves of rare, five-star products from around the world—the quinces and capers, the salamis and spoonfruits, the sixteen-year-old balsamic vinegar and Finnish black licorice—the quest for higher and higher gustatory ecstasies never ceased.

If Zingerman's preached a new way of thinking about food, it was by practicing the old ways, by trying to make latkes as they'd been made a hundred years ago, by returning to traditional recipes. The idea was to deepen the experience of eating by giving customers a sense of culinary history and geography, to ask questions like: *Why* are bagels round?

To my mind, such inquiry and excellence deserved me, and even if I was only going to build sandwiches, I would beam my own excellence in perfect slathers of mayo and mustard. After all, I needed a job, and the food and the karma were so good at Zingerman's, it felt like a place I could make home for a while.

So one June day found me hiking up the steep stairs to the office above the deli and presenting myself as the answer to Zingerman's problems, whatever its problems were. I came armed with my résumé bearing the proud monogram MFA, and within three minutes, two of them spent waiting, one of the deli mistresses set me straight.

"We don't have anything right now," she said, as seven phones rang at once, and turned back to business.

A few days later, the deli called. They wanted to see me regarding a special opportunity. I beelined back to the office and stood before the deli woman again. "I noticed you've done some proofreading," she said casually, her eyes skimming my résumé to jog specifics. "Ari writes all the newsletters himself, and we could use someone to check it each month." It wasn't for sure, my new boss cautioned. And it might be four to six hours a month. We could try one first. To see how it went.

I thought I heard something like eight dollars an hour. "Done," I said.

I left with a folder clutched tightly under my arm and a new *sproing* in my step. The newsletter, the monthly newsletter! It sat in stacks in the store. Everyone from the ebullient hard-core gourmands to the morose doctoral students read it while waiting in line, especially because it contained a menu and you couldn't read the chalkboards from a mile away. But it was more than that: It was part foodie bible, part travelogue, in which Ari brought to stirring life his global search for goodies as he played out the thrilling Indiana Jones lead. From a business point of view, the newsletter had always been a bit of marketing genius, and now it had become Ari's trademark, one his followers craved reading as much as their latest *New Yorker* issues.

The Ari in question was Ari Weinzwieg, co-owner of the Zinger-

man universe and a man of panache, chutzpah, and wide-roaming palate. Once he'd been a University of Michigan history major and collector of anarchist literature; now he was caught in a daily downpour of money from the clouds of patrons at his doorstep. Ari was tall, handsome, with dark ringlets of hair, the overeducated man's Jeff Goldblum. Everybody seemed to want a word. He was ARI, gourmet argonaut, the Sherlock Holmes of nosh and niblets.* I'd seen him once or twice in the deli, wearing spandex shorts, just in from a run. He was always trailed by a gaggle of pretty people. Long, lean, hypnotic, the magic man of food—AHHHH-REEE.

And so, naturally, the newsletter was a revved-up reflection of Ari's peregrinations, and as such was never meant to be literature. His was a breezy, conversational style, full of exclamations (*This is the best!*) and enthusiasms (*You gotta try it!*), a pleated high-school pep squad for his personal pantry. His greatest strength was a knack for making you hungry. Back at my apartment, even as I imagined Ari up in first class on a flight to St. Petersburg in search of the world's best beluga caviar, I dug a couple of pencils from the drawer, then pulled the folder from my backpack, placed it on the desk, and began perusing the pages. On first read, it was good, if a bit rustic. There was the occasional clunker, but that was to be expected. I made some marks, deleted a few words, added a suggestion. I got up and fixed a grilled cheese. Sat back down. Made more notes. Were we being a little *too* effusive about the Jewish noodle kugel? Couldn't we add a more savory detail re: the sour-cream coffee cake? What about expanding our adjective horizon beyond "tasty" and "delicious"?

By late afternoon, I'd completely rewritten the thing. Ari's style was now more . . . *Cheeveresque*. I couldn't wait for him to return from St. Petersburg, or wherever, so I could entirely rewrite his next newsletter about beluga caviar. I put the folder aside, revisited it once more

* In a *New York Times* article from the Business section on May 3, 2007, about the populist rise of Zingerman's, Michael Ruhlman, a food industry expert and writer, summed up the deli's success over the decades like this: "There's not a lot the consumer can do, really, to get Iberian ham, but Ari can."

late that night while eating cold noodles. Yes. Perfect. Bill Bonds came on: Boris Yeltsin was standing on top of a tank in front of the Kremlin; the Soviet regime had been toppled.

Things were looking up.

Back at the deli a few days later, reaction to the revolution—my first edit—was surprisingly muted. “I think we’re trying to keep Ari’s voice intact,” said my boss, handing back my edit. *Maybe we should let Ari be the judge of that*, I wanted to say. But really, I needed the job. So I gathered the pages into the folder again and, home at my desk, armed with a plump red eraser, brought him back to life. I added more exclamations. In the margins, I wrote: “Wouldn’t this be a good place for a ‘delicious’?” I reminded myself that I was thrilled not only to get paid for reading but also to be reading anything besides lit-crit books that quoted heavily from Lukács’s theory of reification.

During a time when microwave popcorn passed for dinner, the subject of fine food also offered a vicarious thrill. While I couldn’t afford to eat well, I could certainly *aspire* to. So I read with an enthusiasm that matched Ari’s on the page. I could taste the pickles and smoked fish. I could hear the cow moo and the butter churn. I was drawn deeper and deeper into his savory world, though I never forgot my place as foot servant. The truth is, Ari Weinzwieg never would have recognized me if we’d smacked into each other before the loaves of rye.

That, however, didn’t dampen my enthusiasm about our next order of business together: the October newsletter, which was Zingerman’s second annual celebration of Spanish food. The deli was working in concert with the Spanish tourist board and artisanal food makers there, and sometime earlier that year, Ari had eaten his way across the country in search of delectables. Something about the evocation of warm sun, sangria, and gluttony just as the low ceiling of gray lake clouds closed over Michigan for the next half year struck a chord, and while *my* only visit to Spain had come on a chilly European jaunt during my junior year abroad in London—there were Uzi’d *policia* in the streets of Madrid ten years after Franco’s death

and an elaborate night trying to find Salvador Dalí on the Costa Brava*—the country flashed back now through Ari's prose.

That October newsletter was his aria, his masterpiece, his opus. The writing seemed to come from a different man. The passion was unbridled. ¡Vaya! He sang the praises of Spanish olives and Rías Baixas wine, Salamancan ham and a host of cheeses that included Manchegos, Cabrales, Majoreros. I tightened and added a few "delicious"es. I padded an entry about sherry, lightened another about olive oil. I turned the page—and suddenly, from nowhere, came an entry that needed no intervention whatsoever. It was about a special cheese Ari had hunted down, and it appeared under the heading "New and Amazing," three paragraphs buried among six type-packed, oversized pages—crammed between a primer on Sephardic Jewish cooking and an ad for a paella-making clinic.

"Though I've saved this one for last," wrote Ari, "don't let me mislead you. This is really an outstanding piece of cheese . . . so anonymous I discovered it by chance in London. It's also the most expensive cheese we've ever sold. Makes me a little nervous just putting it on the counter."

The item went on to describe how this piece of "sublime" cheese was made in Castile, in the north-central part of the country, and how, when Ari had visited the cheesemaker himself, the Spaniard had shared vivid memories of his grandmother making the very same cheese and imploring him to keep the tradition alive. When asked by Ari how he justified making such an expensive cheese, the man had said, "Because it's made with love."

But there was more: Each day this cheesemaker collected fresh

* We ended up at Dalí's seaside villa in Cadaqués, where a friend and I crept to the door at midnight to hear the artist's favorite music, *Tristan and Isolde*, at full volume. When our knocking went unheeded, we retreated to Dalí's high garden wall and drank two bottles of wine, which, along with high winds and a bevy of bats, fanned the flames of that haunted night until, terrified, we leaped at some sound and, entirely misjudging the drop, ended up sprained and bloody, limping miles before we found our backpacker hostel again.

milk from “his flock of one hundred Churra sheep.” The milk was poured into vats, stirred, and after it had coagulated, the curd was hand-cut into tiny pieces “in order to expel as much liquid as possible.” Each wheel of the cheese was then pressed to rid it of any remaining moisture and transported to a nearby cave. After the first aging, the cheese was submerged in extra-virgin olive oil and aged again, for at least a year. The stuff of his job—the minutiae, the care, the importance of time—happened to sound a lot like the job of a writer.

“It’s rich, dense, intense,” sang Ari, “a bit like Manchego, but with its own distinct set of flavors and character.”

There was something about all of it, not just the perfection of Ari’s prose, but the story he told—the village cheesemaker, the ancient family recipe, the old-fashioned process by which the cheese was born, the idiosyncratic tin in which it was packaged—that I couldn’t stop thinking about, even as I went on to contend with misplaced modifiers in a passage about marzipan. It occurred to me that there we were, living through cursed 1991, in a crushing recession—when the national dialogue centered around whether Clarence Thomas had uttered the question “Who has put pubic hair on my Coke?”—and along came this outrageous, overpriced, presumptuous little cheese, almost angelic in its naïveté, fabulist in character, seemingly made by an incorruptible artiste who, with an apparent straight face, had stated that its high price tag came because it was “made with love.”

Was this for real?

I went to the deli. At \$22* a pound for the cheese, I had no intention of buying any. I’d come, however odd it sounds, to gaze upon it. Thus I timed my visit for in-between rushes. I picked up the finished newsletter at the door and stood for a while, reading as if the words were not only brand-new to me but the most fascinating thing I’d ever had occasion to trip over. I watched a few other nicely dressed

* Twenty-two dollars equaling eight chili dogs, or seven falafels, or five bibimbaps, i.e., a week’s worth of dinners.

people—quilted jackets, colorful scarves—reading it, taking pleasure in their pleasure. Then I dove in, jostling through holes in the line, moving across the black-and-white-checked floor until I found myself face-to-face with the cheeses behind the nursery glass: There were the Manchego and Cabrales, Mahón and Garrotxa . . . and there was *my* cheese. It seemed to hover there, apart in its own mystical world. It came in its white tin with black etching that read PÁRAMO DE GUZMÁN. The package, which was almost oval in shape, bore the emblem of a gold medal for supreme excellence above all other cheeses, an honor from some agricultural fair, it appeared. And perched there in the display, before a pyramid of the tins, was a piece cut into three wedges. Unlike its paler Manchego and Mahón brethren, it possessed an overall caramel hue. It may sound strange to call a cheese soulful, but that's what this cheese seemed to be, just by sight. It had traveled so far to be here, and from so long ago. I let myself fantasize about what it might taste like, as I could only fantasize about a gourmandizing, dandy's life in which I might pen the words “. . . discovered it by chance in London.”

And this is when an odd shift occurred inside: That little hand-made cheese in the tin, and its brash lack of cynicism in a rotten year, gave me a strange kind of hope. I sensed the presence of purity and transcendence. I felt I knew this cheese somehow, or would. It sat silently, hoarding its secrets. How long would it wait to speak?

A long time, as it turned out. But when it did, the cheese had a lot to say. Unlike that day in 1991, when I felt so pressed to leave the deli in order to put the finishing touches on another one of my overheated homing pigeons of prose, it became nearly impossible for me to walk away.