



## Gjetost

by **PETER SELGIN**

**R**eidun initiated me. An AFS student from Norway, she had a moon face framed with tight blond curls, with eyes so big and blue and forehead so high she looked like a giant beautiful baby. A concert pianist, she banged out Beethoven and Gershwin from memory, and played Rachmaninoff to raise the Devil. We spread a picnic blanket in a grassy clearing in the woods behind my house. I had brought a bottle of Mr. Boston apricot brandy from my parents' liquor closet; Reidun brought the *gjetost* (pronounced: "yay-toast").

Reidun was different from other girls. Not just because she came from Norway and played the piano. She wore a long, white, crenelated dress that swayed and billowed when she walked. That was one of the things I liked about her, that and her accent and her piano playing, and the fearless way she had of looking at and smiling at you. Along with a Swiss Army knife, she took the *gjetost* from her rucksack. The knife handle and the foil the cheese came wrapped in were both the same bright red. The cheese was a three-inch square cube, its shape suggestive of a gold ingot, of something dense and rare.

As I poured us paper cups of apricot brandy, Reidun cut thin slices of the pale brown cheese. It curled away from the blade like planed wood. This was her favorite food, she said. In Norway she ate it every morning for breakfast, sliced paper-thin with a metal cheese slicer and served on a hunk of Norwegian flat bread. As a child she had eaten it with glasses of cold milk in summer, and mugs of hot milk or cocoa in winter.

She fed the first slice softly into my mouth, her small, pink, piano-playing

fingers grazing my lips. At first it tasted, I thought, like a cross between peanut butter and caramel, but saltier, and with a hint of gaminess that burst into full-blown rankness as I chewed. I had never tasted goat cheese of any kind before. Its funkiness spread to every corner of my mouth and pervaded my sinuses. The sweetness made it both better and worse. The sticky cheese stuck to the roof of my mouth; I had to pry it loose with my finger. Reidun laughed. “Do you like it?” she said. She had the best smile. “Mmm, mmmm,” I said.

She handed me her cup of apricot brandy, which she found too sweet: a bad choice to go with goat cheese. It was summer. The woods around us were besieged with gypsy moth caterpillars, their ghostly gray tents haunting every other tree, the air alive with the sound of their invisible droppings, which mimicked rain. I was seventeen years old and not even slightly sophisticated for my age. What I still had to learn about life ought to have shamed and amazed me. I never imagined, for instance, that a cheese could be both rank and sweet, or that a pretty girl from Norway who played *Rhapsody in Blue* from memory could carry buckets of lust in her heart, or that within months she would break mine worse than it had ever been broken before.

Being an AFS student, Reidun lived with her American family, the Kosciusko’s, over in Chimney Acres, a development by the high school. Her AFS brother, Rardy, older than me by two years, worked at the bicycle seat factory or at his father’s Sunoco station—or both; I wasn’t sure. Rardy never shaved. He didn’t have a beard, exactly, just stubble. He drove a Pontiac with little or no muffler, wore his hair pulled back in a pony tail and dressed eternally in ratty, tie-dyed “I don’t give a shit about anything” T-shirts. Unsavory: that is the word which, had I thought of it back then, I’d have applied to him. Though I’d never gotten close enough to Rardy to smell him, I guessed that he smelled like an unshaven, greasy, unsavory goat.

When I first met Reidun at the AFS welcoming reception in the Knights of Columbus pavilion, she sat before an out-of-tune upright, heaving herself into Gershwin’s *Rhapsody*, head bobbing, nostrils flared, breasts heaving, sweat dripping from her face. As she threw her whole body into every note I leaned coolly against the wall, doing my best in the green Ethan Allen windbreaker that I wore fresh from work to look like James Dean. A crowd had gathered around to listen to her. It occurred to me, briefly, that “getting her” might not be

as easy as I'd thought. Since my parents were European, it had seemed to me entirely logical that I'd have the edge with a girl from across the Atlantic. Also, a year older, I'd already graduated from high school. Who were my competition but pimply-faced seniors and football-headed, Boone's Farm apple-wine-drinking hicks, and guys like Rardy Kusciusko that no sane woman could ever possibly want anything to do with?

Now, seeing the crowd gathered around her and the unbridled fervor with which she all but attacked that piano, I wondered if maybe my "worldliness" had met its match, and also if perhaps the green Ethan Allen uniform might have been a mistake, given the lovely crenelated white dress that she wore, and that draped itself to the buckled floorboards. In collaboration with a frilly white puffy-sleeved blouse and the round baby face the dress made her look angelic—a sweaty, heaving, bobbing, Gershwin-pounding seraph. And there I was, the jerk with the slippery smile in my Ethan Allen togs pretending to be James Dean, my tongue turning to dust in my mouth. Something smarter than me inside myself already knew she was out of my league: too mature, too worldly, too sophisticated, too something.

The golden brown gjetost was by turns musty and sweet, golden and goaty, delicious and disgusting. In its own way it was a lot like sex, that cheese, at least to this still categorically adolescent male, perfectly if precariously balanced between love and obscenity. Stretched out on a scratchy blanket in the woods, Reidun fed me slice upon slice, kissing me between slices—her kisses and her gjetost both washed down with apricot brandy. Soon those kisses turned to heavier things, including some that, though I had often framed them in my mind conceptually, I had never done with or to anyone, until everything started spinning and I reeled around to throw up on the leafy forest floor. Was it the gjetost? Reidun wanted to know. No, no, I assured her, shaking my dizzy head vehemently, as though anything short of a vehement denial would have made me some sort of gjetost prude: as if the ability to ingest that golden gaminess were the test of a strong and thorough masculinity.



The rest of that summer I hardly saw Reidun. I kept working for Ethan Allen, winding along Connecticut roads in a truck packed with dry sinks, oak din-

ing room sets, and sleeper sofas. When I asked her out Reidun made excuses, a birthday party here, a headache there. I wasn't concerned. She was new to my country, after all, with things to get used to—as I'd had to get used to the taste of gjetost. "Give her time to settle down," I told my green reflection in the truck's round side mirror.

From June to September I saw her twice. Once I took her to the movies. I believe we saw *Dog Day Afternoon*—or was it *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Whatever, it was a poor choice for a date, one of those films that climbs into your head and stays there for hours once you've left the theater, and just when you and your date should be furiously making out instead you find yourselves thinking. In my beat up leaky MGB parked in the rain across the street from the Kosciusko house I kissed and fumblingly fondled her, but Reidun's mind was elsewhere. At last and with a perfunctory peck on the cheek she left me to watch her run in heels through the rain up the driveway to her adoptive home. There, a kitchen light went on, and I watched Rardy Kosciusko's sleazy shadow slide past the window toward the front door.

After that she rejected all further invitations. I insisted on some explanation—in person, preferably. At last she agreed to go for a walk in the orchard with me, among rows of gnarly trees bursting with apples so ripe they perfumed the air with their cider smell. There she told me the truth, that she had come to America to sin, that she wanted nothing to do with romantic love—mine or anyone else's. I asked her what made her think my love was "romantic?" Reidun shook her head. "It's not possible for boys to feel any other kind. And you're still a boy," she said. "Boys—they fall in love. But I don't want love; I want lust." I assured her, tried to, that I had plenty of lust to offer her. She humored me with her smile. "You don't even know what it is. Not pure lust. As a fantasy, maybe, but not really." She took my hand. "You are very sweet, Peter. Sweet and sentimental. I don't want sweetness. Find a sweet girl. That's what you need."



I saw her one more time after that. It was Halloween. I had gotten it into my head to dress up like a gangster. I wore a double-breasted, blue, Nathan Detroit-style suit, with exaggerated pinstripes, a garish tie, a red geranium in my lapel button, and spats improvised out of linen handkerchiefs from deep in my papa's

dresser drawer. From Papa's closet I secured a gray fedora, badly crumpled, worn at a rakishly sharp angle so its brim overshadowed my left eye. Then two final touches: a fat unlit stogie and, back when such things were still to be had, a full-sized and quite convincing plastic toy Thompson submachine gun.

Dressed thus, in my aggressively un-gangsterly MGB convertible with rusted-out rocker panels, I drove straight to Chimney Acres, to the Kuscusko's house, Halloween my perfect pretext for knocking on the door. In the time-honored tradition of Dillinger and Capone I would acquaint our exchange student with the true spirit of my country, while also with any luck getting it through her thick Norwegian skull that I wasn't the cloyingly sweet innocent she imagined me to be: that I, too, had my salty, musty, lusty, goatish side. Did I think all this through consciously? Of course not. I just thought it would be cool to present myself to the object of my romantic longings as a hoodlum, to be seen as anything other than a naive and innocent seventeen-year-old kid.

Though Reidun herself answered my knock, she didn't remain for long. Seeing me standing there with spats and machine gun her round eyes bloomed twice as round. With her piano fingers raised to her lips she backed slowly into the house, then turned and ran off calling her host brother's name. Presently Rardy appeared. He wore a tie-dyed T-shirt. He hadn't shaved.

"What do you want?" he said.

"I came to see Reidun," I said, sounding not at all like a gangster. Here was a true convergence, I thought: the sweet kid done up as a thug and the real McCoy.

"You scared the shit out of her."

"It's Halloween."

"Halloween's tomorrow. Today's the thirtieth."

"No, it's not."

Rardy Kosciusko shook his greasy head. "Jerk," he said, and closed the door in my face.



I lied when I said I never saw her again. I did, but only at a remove and in hopeless contexts, arm-in-arm with her incestuous American Field Service brother. She had come to America in search of untempered lust, and found it

in Rardy Kusciusko. I meanwhile quit my Ethan Allen job and toured Europe, to broaden my horizons, sure, but also to help me forget about Reidun. There I sampled all kinds of exotic cheeses: runny and moldy, stinky and musty.

In time I would taste all kinds of desire, too, from piquant longing to salty lust; from pungent infatuation to tart jealousy; from sour envy to saccharine adulation. Yet never again would the sweetness of longing be so perfectly balanced with the musky, gamey saltiness of lust as it was that summer when Reidun first opened up my eyes—and my tongue—to hard/soft, musty/sweet, heady/mild, cloying/rank, golden/smuttery, delicate/obscene gjetost—that most paradoxical of all cheeses. As paradoxical, in its way, as love.