

## The grand opening



For some people it's the smell of sunblock. Or pine trees. A burnt marshmallow from the embers of a campfire. Maybe your grandfather's aftershave.

Everyone has that smell. The particular scent that transports you, even if only for an instant, to the long-ago, faraway land of your childhood.

For me, it's the smell of Limburger. Or Camembert. Sometimes Stilton. Take your pick from the stinkiest of cheeses.

My mother's shop was on Euclid Avenue. But believe me, it's not the Euclid Avenue you know now, with thirty-dollar manicures and stores that sell nothing but fancy soap in pais-ley paper.

Back then Euclid Avenue was the kind of place where a kid like me could find something to spend fifty cents on. And I did, almost every day, at Fireside Liquor. It was the summer of 1986 and I wasn't buying alcohol; I was only thirteen. But fifty cents bought me a Good News: peanuts, caramel,



chocolate. The red label declared it *Hawaii's Favorite* candy bar, an odd claim, but one that made it seem, and even taste, exotic.

I'd never been to Hawaii. I'd never been anywhere to speak of. We didn't have much money, only what we got from Dad's life insurance policy, and what we did have had all gone into the Cheese Shop.

That's what it was called. The Cheese Shop. No stroke of brilliance in the creativity department, but the name said what it needed to say: Come inside and you'll find cheese. Any sort you can imagine.

On the day we opened, Mrs. Mutchnick, who owned the fabric store across the street, a grandmotherly type with her hair barely holding on to its ever-present bun, brought over a gift. It was a most unexpected opening-day gift. Not flowers. Not champagne. And I couldn't possibly have guessed when I unwrapped it (because Mrs. Mutchnick presented it to me) that this gift would come to change my life.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

First, there was the issue of the health inspection. There are basic requirements. Things one must do in order to open a store that sells food.

Keep your shop clean. I mean truly clean, not what you try to pass off when your mom looks at your room, with everything shoved in a drawer or under your bed. You must keep your establishment absolutely spotless.

Have running water, hot and cold, and a working restroom.

Your freezer must be a certain temperature, which is different from the temperature you must keep the refrigerated



cheese cases, which is different from the temperature you must keep the shop itself.

And generally, things need to smell good, which is easy enough, unless you happen to be in the business of selling stinky cheeses.

This is precisely where we ran into trouble with the inspector.

He'd enter the shop nose first, as if it, and not his pea-sized brain, were in charge of the rest of him. He came around often, too often, in the days leading up to the opening, rapping his clipboard on the shop front window and doing a little wave with his spindly fingers.

His name was Fletcher Melcher. I know it sounds like I'm making that up, but I'm not. And I'm not making up the forest of hair that lived in each of his nostrils either.

We called him Retcher Belcher, about as inspired as calling Mom's store the Cheese Shop, and he almost succeeded in keeping the shop from opening, which seemed to be his very purpose for walking the planet.

The day before we were to sell our first wedge of cheese, the freezer decided to stop working. And who should arrive only moments after we'd realized this? Right. The Belcher.

I'd taken the bus to the shop. Mom had arranged for me to ride a new bus from school, one that took me to the vicinity of the store rather than our small house not far from the beach. Nobody talked to me on this new bus, but that wasn't much of a change from what it was like to ride the old bus.

I was coming from Fireside Liquor, about to open my Good News, and I could see through the storefront window that Mom was in a state.



She was all flailing limbs. Her usually short and spiky hair had taken on that puffy look it got when she ran her fingers through it obsessively. She was yelling at Nick while he stood by and took it calmly, as only someone in possession of two particular qualities could.

One: Nick was unflappable. Some people would attribute this to the proximity of Fireside Liquor. But Nick wasn't a drunk; he was a surfer, just turned nineteen. Mellow to the max.

Two: Even if he knew almost nothing about cheese, Nick could fix practically anything.

The bell jingled as I walked through the front door. A sound that would later come to drive me mad.

"Drew," he said, and he put both of his hands on my shoulders. He fixed his green, sea-glass eyes on mine. "Thank God you're here."

His third outstanding quality: Nick Drummond was impossibly good-looking.

"Get your old lady under control, will you? Take her outside for some fresh air. Or maybe even a smoke." And with that he disappeared into the freezer.

This was Nick's stab at humor. Mom didn't smoke. Except for her love of cheese, she was pretty much a health nut. She did yoga. She meditated. She wore an earthy-smelling perfume, except when she was at work, because Mom believed that nothing should interfere with a customer's right to freely whiff the cheese.

"We're up a creek," she said.

"Chill out, Mom. It's gonna be cool." I'd only known



Nick about a month, since we'd started getting the shop ready to open, but I was already perfecting his lingo. Anything to make him notice me.

"No, Drew. It's not *gonna be cool*. Fletcher Melcher is on his way. Daisy called. He's just asked for his check."

Daisy owned the diner three blocks up. That the Belcher was taking his lunch there could only mean one thing: he was on his way to us. He had it in for Mom and the shop, and every merchant on Euclid Avenue knew it.

"Nick'll take care of it," I told her. "He can do anything."

Mom reached over and stroked my hair. She smiled at me wistfully. "Oh Birdie, you're too sweet."

She walked behind the counter, grabbed an oversize wheel of Jarlsberg, and cut us each a slice. A disconcerting clanging came from inside the walk-in freezer. Mom winced. I pointed to the slice in her hand, then pointed to her mouth. She took a bite.

Jarlsberg: the comfort cheese.

As predicted, the rapping of the Belcher's clipboard on the front window followed. As did his little wave. Mom reluctantly motioned him inside.

He stuck that nose of his into the air and made a beeline for the cheese case's thermostat. Forty-four degrees. Perfect.

He walked around the back of the counter. Ran his fingertip along the butcher block. Checked the sink. The hand soap. Slithered his way past the shelves of crackers and jars of olives, toward the back office and the ill-fated walk-in freezer.

He reached for the handle and jumped back as the door



seemed to open itself. There stood Nick in one of the parkas we kept nearby for anyone who had to spend a stretch of time inside the freezer shelving sauces or lasagnas, ravioli or chicken pot pies, the things we sold other than cheese, because no-body, not even Mom, could live on cheese alone.

Nick smiled, his cheeks red with cold. He looked like he'd just gotten off a chairlift at the top of a snow-covered mountain on a gloriously sunny day.

The Belcher pushed past him. He checked the thermostat, grudgingly nodded, and moved on to the employee restroom.

Mom shot Nick a thumbs-up. He did an extravagant bow. When Fletcher Melcher finally took his leave, Nick told us that he hadn't fixed the freezer; he'd only messed with the thermostat. So back on went the parka, and back went Nick into what was left of the cold, and thirty minutes later the freezer was working again, and sixteen hours later we were officially in business, because Nick Drummond was nothing short of a miracle.

And later the next evening, when we had our grand opening party, with platters of cheese and wine in plastic cups, Mom wandering through the crowd receiving hugs and flowers and unsolicited advice, Mrs. Mutchnick closed up her fabric store and crossed Euclid Avenue with a gift.

It was wrapped in a piece of striped fabric, tied loosely on the top with twine.

*What a clever gift, she'd thought. Perfect for someone in the business of selling cheese.* She didn't have to go any farther than four blocks to Pacific Pets and Pet Supply to buy it.

She brought it right over to me, though she'd intended to



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give it to Mom. She gave it to me, she said, because I looked lonely.

I looked like I needed a friend.

“You might want to open it now, dear.”

I untied the twine. Inside that striped fabric wrapping was a small wire cage, and inside that small wire cage was a rat.

He was an ordinary rat. He didn't talk. He didn't have magical powers, a lesson to teach me, or wisdom to impart. He was just a rat, and although at first he made me squeamish, I grew to love him terribly.

But that isn't why he changed my life.

It was because this rat, black with a white belly and whiskers too long for his small face, one afternoon escaped his wire cage, and led me to a boy named Emmett Crane.



