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ALDRIN ADAMS and the CHEESE NIGHTMARES

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Penguin Random House UK

First published 2021
001
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Text design by Lizzy Laczynska
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

ISBN: 978–0–241–44167–1

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens
London SW11 7BW

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FSC® C018179
www.fsc.org

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For my wife, Mary.
Together through all the dreams –
and all the nightmares.





PROLOGUE

It was the **darkest of dark**, **dark nights**.

And Habeas Grusselvart was in a very peculiar mood indeed.

He should have been happy – ecstatic even. On his gigantic wall, full of TV screens, he could see hundreds and hundreds of people experiencing the most **horrible**, **HORRIBLE nightmares!**

Like Asafa Mitchell from Brewin Drive, who was at that exact moment being chased home from school by a pack of snarling dogs. In an effort to escape their snapping jaws and dagger-like teeth, he turned down an alleyway – only to discover, too late, that he'd run into . . . into a dead end!

'MUMMMYYYYYY!!!!!!'

Over on Adelaide Road, little Amy Twamley was getting ready to celebrate her sixth birthday with a huge party, to which all of her friends were invited. She was standing in front of the mirror, brushing her hair, when she smiled at her reflection. It was then that she saw that all of her teeth had fallen out – and in their place were hundreds and hundreds of . . . disgusting maggots!

'DADDDYYYYYY!!!!!!'

And, on Waterloo Terrace, poor, frightened Frankie Fidderer was trapped in the upper branches of a very tall tree. Terrified of heights, he clung to the trunk like his life depended on it. Which, of course, it did. Then, out of nowhere, a wind started to whip up. It quickly grew in strength until it raged with the force of a hurricane and shook the tree so violently that the branch on which Frankie stood suddenly **snapped** – sending the boy plummeting, head first, towards the hard ground below.

'AAARRRGGGHHH!!!'

All over town – and, indeed, in towns like this all over the world – children were waking up and **screaming** for their mums and dads. And so were quite a few grown-ups, for adults aren't immune from the terrors of the night.

Usually, this thought would have filled Habeas Grusselvart with great delight. He was, after all, a supervillain, and this was his supervillain *thing* – creating blood-chilling nightmares to spread anxiety and unhappiness throughout the world, so that he might one day rule the entire planet through fear.

And he was very, **VERY** good at it.

But tonight, for reasons he couldn't quite put his finger on, his work gave him no pleasure whatsoever.

All he felt was a strange sense of unease.

He pressed the button to summon his personal assistant, Beddy Byes.

'Something is wrong,' he told him. 'It's just . . . a feeling I have.'

'A feeling?' Beddy Byes asked. 'What kind of feeling, Oh Great and Masterful One?'

'Almost a disturbance,' Habeas explained. 'Like something is about to happen. You see, if I didn't know better, it's almost as if . . .'

But then his voice **trailed off** and he didn't allow himself to finish the thought.



PART ONE

1

CHEESE FOR EVERY MEAL

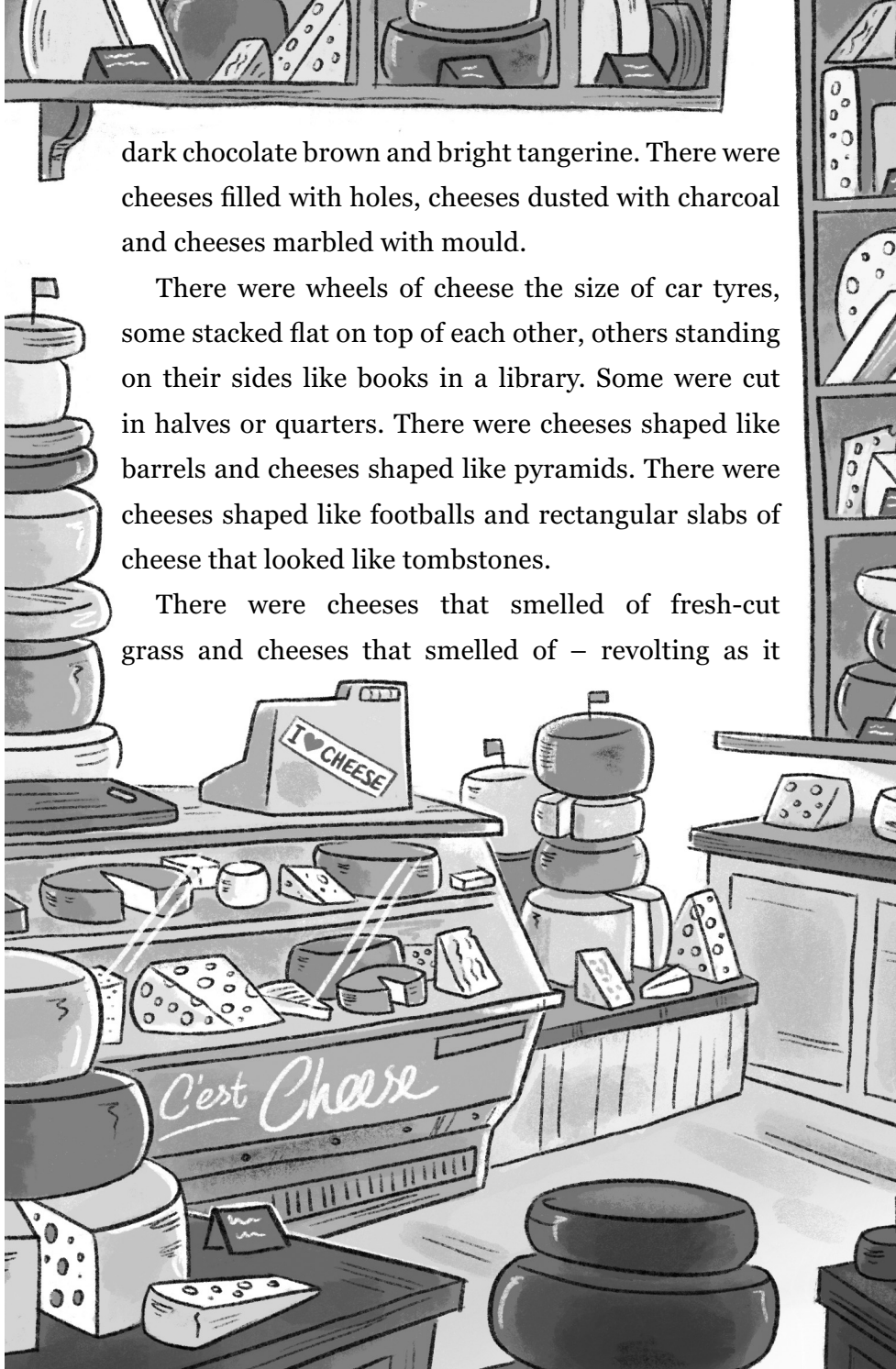
Most people have a happy place – a favourite spot that fills them with warm, fuzzy feelings of joy. For Aldrin Adams, it was his mum and dad's cheesemonger's shop. It was called ***C'est Cheese***, and everyone agreed that it was the best cheesemonger's for miles and miles around.

To Aldrin, though, it was far more than just a shop. He found comfort and delight in the smells, the colours and the shapes of the hundreds of different varieties of cheese that Cynthia and Doug Adams laid out with loving care each day.

There were white cheeses, orange cheeses and yellow cheeses. There were brown cheeses, blue cheeses and even green cheeses. There were cheeses covered with brilliantly coloured wax – fire-engine red, dark chocolate brown and bright tangerine. There were cheeses filled with holes, cheeses dusted with charcoal and cheeses marbled with mould.

There were wheels of cheese the size of car tyres, some stacked flat on top of each other, others standing on their sides like books in a library. Some were cut in halves or quarters. There were cheeses shaped like barrels and cheeses shaped like pyramids. There were cheeses shaped like footballs and rectangular slabs of cheese that looked like tombstones.

There were cheeses that smelled of fresh-cut grass and cheeses that smelled of – revolting as it



sounds – sick! There were cheeses that smelled of – equally disgusting – sweaty feet and cheeses that smelled of butterscotch ice cream!

There were cheeses that crumbled when you cut them and cheeses that **oozed**.

To Aldrin, it was just a magical place.

He even loved the language of cheese – the colourful words his mum and dad used to describe to customers the textures of all the different varieties they sold: ***brittle, grainy, oily, chewy, fluffy, runny, springy, sticky, flaky, chalky, dense, dry, firm, smooth, pressed, spreadable, creamy, supple.***

They had a whole other set of words to describe the different flavours: ***fresh, fruity, yeasty, garlicky, sweet, grassy, perfumy, earthy, musty, buttery, floral, pungent, sour, funky, ripe, oniony, soapy, gamey, fermented, mushroomy, chocolatey, lemony, limey, complex, herbaceous, tangy, milky, meaty, nutty, rustic, smoky, almondy, peanutty, walnutty, spiky, winey, zesty, sharp, ripe, rich, persistent, peppery, outdoorsy, barnyardy.***

He was sure his mum had made up one or two of those words herself – especially barnyardy, which didn't sound like a real flavour at all.

Aldrin loved spending time in the shop, especially at this time of the day, when the final customer had left and Cynthia had turned the sign on the door to **'CLOSED'**. Because that was when he got to handle all these weird and wonderful cheeses. Every one had to be removed from the wooden shelves and wrapped in plastic shrink-wrap, before the shelves were swept of crumbs and scrubbed clean.

He had watched his mum and dad do this from the time that he was a baby, crawling around on the tiled floor of the shop. And, now that he was older, he was allowed to help.



Aldrin Adams was – how to put this sensitively – a bit **heavier** than the average eleven-year-old boy.

What made him that way was his inability to resist eating his mum and dad's stock. And with all that earthy Cheddar,

and grainy Parmesan, and nutty Edam, and salty feta, and caramelly Gouda, and creamy Gruyère, and buttery Brie, and mushroomy Camembert, and milky mascarpone at his fingertips – well, who could really blame him?

Aldrin ***loved*** cheese the way other children loved chocolate, or hamburgers, or ice cream. A perfect day for him would be one in which he could eat cheese for every meal. And, in between, he would snack on those little round Babybels that his mum absolutely adored and insisted on stocking, even though cheese snobs would turn their noses up at them and say that they didn't belong in an artisan cheesemonger's.

Cynthia was standing on a stepladder, taking down a block of delicious, grassy Montgomery's Cheddar.

'I was thinking,' she said, 'we might *all* go to the London Festival of Cheese this year – we've never been as a family. You'd love it, Aldrin.'

'Mmm,' he replied.

'Cheesemakers from all over the world come to display their wares. You can have a free sample of absolutely anything you want.'

'Mmm,' Aldrin repeated.

Cynthia was surprised by his less-than-enthusiastic

response. She looked at her son over the top of her glasses.

'Aldrin Adams,' she said, 'what are you eating?'

Aldrin didn't answer her. He couldn't, because at that moment his mouth was stuffed with burrata, a soft and stringy cheese that tasted a little bit like yogurt and just so happened to be one of his absolute favourites.

'Mmm-mmm,' Aldrin said, which was meant to sound like, 'Nothing.'

'You're absolutely sure there's nothing in your mouth?' she asked. 'You didn't, by any chance, eat that burrata that was there, did you?'

Aldrin felt his face redden. He shook his head again. But suddenly he could feel that delicious cheese melting on his tongue and the urge to actually chew it became too great.

Cynthia laughed.

'How are me and your dad supposed to make a living if you keep eating **EVERYTHING** in the shop?'

Doug chuckled as he checked the temperature gauge, just like he did every half-hour. The shop had to remain cool at all times to prevent the cheese from spoiling, which is why it was usually colder *inside* than it was *outside*.

'Sorry, Mum,' Aldrin said through a mouthful of

creamy mush. ‘It just looked so good!’

‘There are *other* foods in the world,’ she reminded him. ‘Most kids your age like sweets, or chips, or cream cakes.’

‘I just love cheese, though.’

‘Well, make that your last piece of the day,’ she told him. ‘We don’t want you having nightmares.’

‘Cheese doesn’t give you nightmares,’ Doug said. ‘That’s just an old wives’ tale.’

‘An old wives’ tale?’ Aldrin said. ‘What exactly does that mean?’

‘An old wives’ tale,’ his dad explained, ‘is a story that lots of people believe to be true, even though it has no basis in scientific fact.’



‘And *you’ve* been eating the Manchego,’ Cynthia said, pointing at the giveaway crumbs of butter-coloured cheese that had lodged themselves in her husband’s enormous walrus moustache.

‘Guilty!’ Doug laughed.

They finished cleaning the shop and wrapping the cheeses, then they took a moment to admire their work before they switched off the lights and went upstairs to their flat for the evening.

‘By the way,’ Aldrin said, ‘in case you didn’t hear my answer, I would **LOVE** to go to the London Festival of Cheese.’

His mum smiled at him, but in a sad way.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked.

‘Come here,’ she told him.

Aldrin walked over to her and she enveloped him in a warm hug.

‘You’re a very special boy,’ she whispered, planting a kiss on the top of his head.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘You have a rare gift, Aldrin. You don’t know it yet, but you’re going to do extraordinary things in your life.’

Aldrin suddenly opened his eyes. He was back in his bedroom. He’d had that dream again. It was his favourite dream – reliving their last truly happy day together as a family, before he found out about his mum’s cancer. He wished sometimes that he could stay locked in that dream forever. But he always woke up to the reality that she was gone now.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room. He was staring at the vintage *Fromages de France* poster on the wall at the foot of his bed, featuring pictures of fifty famous French cheeses that looked so real you could almost taste them. Fruity Morbier, and tangy Roquefort, and fudgy Boule de Lille, and herby Pouligny Saint-Pierre.

He thought about what his mum had said to him that day. A very special boy with a rare gift who was going to do extraordinary things in his life. Did she really mean that, he wondered? Or was it something that all mums said to their kids? A year after her death, he was still confused by it.

Aldrin threw back his covers and swung his legs out of bed. Today was a big day. His first morning in a new school.

He pulled on his dressing gown, said good morning to his pet frog, Silas, then headed for the kitchen. Dad was already downstairs, unwrapping the cheeses and preparing the shop for the day.

Aldrin opened the fridge and took out a block of Comté, a firm cheese that was buttery in colour, smelled of warm croissants and tasted sweet and nutty. He took the stainless-steel cheese plane from the drawer,

shaved a thin slice from the top of the block and nibbled on it while he searched for his class timetable.

It had arrived in the post two days ago, but Aldrin hadn't seen it since then, so he looked in the bottom drawer, where all the clutter usually ended up, from junk mail to loose batteries, and from bits of string to remote controls for electrical items they'd thrown out years ago. He eventually found a white envelope and pulled out the piece of paper inside it.

But it wasn't his class timetable.

It was a letter from the bank, addressed to his dad. And, while he knew it was wrong to read someone else's post, once he started, he simply couldn't stop himself.

It seemed that Doug hadn't made any mortgage repayments on the shop and the flat for the past six months. The letter was full of big words and grown-up language, but Aldrin understood all too clearly the final line – and it sent a chill through him:

Unless all of your outstanding debts are met within the next thirty days, you will be evicted from your business premises and your home.

‘Morning, Aldrin!’ Doug called as he tramped up the stairs to the flat.

Aldrin shoved the letter back into the drawer and quickly closed it.

‘Morning, Dad,’ he replied.

‘I thought I’d give you a lift this morning,’ Doug said as he popped his cheery face round the kitchen door, ‘seeing as it’s your first day and everything.’

‘I was just, um, looking for my class timetable.’

‘Oh, I put it in your schoolbag. Did you have your breakfast?’

‘I’m having a slice of Comté,’ Aldrin said, showing him the cheese.

Doug’s moustache bristled.

‘You’ll have to eat more than that,’ he insisted.

‘I’ll have a second slice if I’m hungry,’ Aldrin told his dad.

‘What I mean is, you’ve got a big day ahead of you. You should have cereal or something. You can’t survive on just cheese.’

Aldrin thought about the letter from the bank. And, in that moment, he realized just how right his dad was.