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Illegal Milk

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I had no idea what we were doing was illegal.

I was six at the time.

And not well-versed in the milk pasteurization laws of Prince Edward Island.

And yet, there I was. With my grandfather and father. Three generations. Bandits all. Breaking the law.

My grandfather, for background, was born on his family's farm in Sangsar, Iran, in 1911. In those days, the village had one street, one roundabout, narrow alleys, and small, clay-colored homes, all with brown doors.

That the village even existed was a miracle.

Two hours north were the lush green valleys and rainforests of Mazandaran Province on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. Ten minutes south were Darjazin's pomegranate orchards, with fruits sweet and plenty. And in between was Sangsar, on the slopes of the Alborz mountains. A dusty village whose name translated to both "on rocks"—for where it was built—and "rock-headed"—for those who lived there.

If you were traveling to Sangsar from Semnan, as many did at that time to escape the summer heat, you'd turn right at the roundabout, walk up the alley, then scale a rocky incline along the bank of a river for some forty minutes before reaching the farm.

Once there, you'd find a robust operation specializing in wheat, sheep, and goats. The land covered hundreds of acres, "from this mountain to that mountain," with spring water sourced from an underground reservoir. Gun-wielding robbers on horseback visited more than once, holding workers hostage till payment was made, and on one occasion, they abducted my grandfather for several days until the wheat they demanded was given.

When my grandfather got older, he left Sangsar and got a job with the railroad as an administrator. In 1938, a new rail line connecting Garmsar to Mashhad began construction, and after the station in Semnan was built, my grandfather transferred there to become one of its first station masters.

And that's where my father was raised, in Semnan, a large town some twenty minutes south of Sangsar. So, with my great-grandparents nearby, my grandparents would put my father and uncle in a taxi and send them to the farm for visits. Some visits were short, a few days here and there, but visits in the summer were lengthy, with one or both brothers remaining on the farm for months at a time.

And they loved it.

It was the mid-1950s, and the visits started when they were young—six and eight—the perfect ages for exploration.

Some days they'd spend wandering the mountainside with the shepherd, Busali.

Other days, they'd swipe my great-grandmother's only salt container—the size of a sugar bowl and made of clay—and abscond to the garden, where they'd sit in the dirt, pick cucumbers and tomatoes off the vine, dip them in salt, and then run off and play once their bellies were full, scot-free, until my great-grandmother noticed her only salt container was missing and started cursing at the boys for them to bring it back.

On still other days, they'd climb into their favorite trees and pretend to drive them like cars, using aluminum plates as steering wheels and neighboring branches as accelerators and clutches—brake pedals not needed when driving a tree.

On lazy days, they'd play in the fields, wheat taller than their heads.

On ambitious days, they'd go to the pear tree, as tall as a palm, and enlist the help of their older cousin—the only one with a throwing arm strong enough to reach the pears with a stone, and accurate enough to not obliterate the pears in the process—to knock down the fruit for their enjoyment.

“But the best days,” as my father says, “were the mulberries.”

The farm had a row of mulberry trees that you could traverse, branch to branch, from one end of the property to the other, and when it was time for harvest, all the cousins would ascend the trees and shake the branches, causing the mulberries to rain down onto the outstretched sheets held open by their grandmother and aunts below. The mulberries themselves were gigantic—each one the size of your thumb—and those not eaten fresh were boiled down to syrup for use through the winter.

Those were their days, spent wandering the land.

Then came their nights.

In the summers, my father and uncle would move their mattresses outside, onto the clay roof of a structure recessed into the mountainside in front of the farmhouse above. And here, some six thousand feet above sea level, surrounded by mountains, a hundred miles from city lights or pollution of any kind, the entire universe was theirs. Creation a garden. Galaxies in bloom.

And every morning, in front of this structure, on the roof of which they'd slept because the air was cool and the mosquito nets recalled camping, the process of making the farm's dairy products began.

Atop a roaring fire, workers would place a giant copper cauldron, some three feet wide by three feet deep. They'd fill it with two hundred gallons of raw, full-fat, unpasteurized milk, from sheep or goats. And then, once boiled, they'd turn it into cheese, hard yogurt, or one of two local delicacies, *arsheb* or *chikoo*. Then everything was packed into sheepskin barrels when done, stored in a cool place, and sold to shopkeepers.

And that was the origin of my father's and grandfather's love for hard yogurt—that farm in the mountains, half a world away—watching it get made, then eating it fresh with vegetables and herbs from the garden.

That was their breakfast.

Hard yogurt on pita. Fresh-picked spring onions. Fistfuls of parsley.

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Fast forward thirty years, to the mid-1980s.

After surviving the revolution and being granted asylum, my parents and I were living in the suburbs of Halifax, Nova Scotia, with my grandparents settled a few hours away, just outside Charlottetown, on Prince Edward Island.

And although my parents were welcoming of city life, my grandfather was not. He had a garden in his yard where he grew his own vegetables, and he hated milk from the store. He tried using store-bought milk to make hard yogurt, but it wasn't the same—the homogenization and pasteurization processes wresting from the milk its nutrients, feel, and taste.

So he had two options.

The first was to make do—to use the milk sold in cartons. To be grateful and happy he could buy milk at all.

The second was to rebel—to find another solution. To refuse to accept the hand he'd been dealt.

And this may come as a shock, but my grandfather—a man raised by parents who saw rocks in the mountains and said, “Here will be a farm”—chose option two.

And the obstacle he faced was considerable: the law.

Selling raw milk was—and continues to be—illegal on Prince Edward Island. So my grandfather's quest for raw milk was not without danger.

But somehow, by ways undisclosed, he and a dairy farmer came to...
an arrangement.

My grandfather would get someone to drive him to this dairy farmer's farm, he'd walk around back, let himself into the facility where the raw milk was stored, fill four to six one-gallon jugs with raw milk from the stainless steel tank, place the appropriate amount of cash in the jar next to the tank, then leave with his bounty as quietly as he came.

Never once speaking to the farmer while there.

This was so that, should my grandfather have gotten caught, the farmer could truthfully claim that he saw and knew nothing, was watching TV, left the back door unlocked, and had no idea how or why cash had appeared, but was willing to accept it, regardless.

This continued for years—my grandfather getting the raw milk he needed, the farmer facilitating the exchange from afar.

And I had no idea what was being done was illegal.

Until one day.

When it was me, my father, and my grandfather at the farm—the scene of the crime. Sourcing the milk. Filling the jugs. No one around but cows in the field, the windmill behind us humming a tune.

When all of a sudden, from the door to the left, the farmer appeared—unaware we were there, locking eyes with us all.

My grandfather froze—let go of the spout, milk ceasing to flow.

As we all stood still, not making a sound.

For five seconds, ten seconds, twenty seconds, more...

Farmer and grandfather with identical thoughts: *that now he's a witness.* Both unsure what to do.

Until finally, silently, without averting his eyes, my grandfather slowly, deliberately...

...flicked up his chin...

...and gave the farmer a nod.

The farmer looked at my grandfather, my father, and me.

And then he reciprocated.

Flicking his chin.

Nodding back in return.

Before backing away, out whence he came.

No words exchanged. Instructions implied. The latch clicking shut as he exited from view.

Leaving us in the barn. Together. Alone.

We waited a beat.

Windmill humming. Cows in the field.

And then, quietly, deliberately, with eyes on the door, my grandfather pushed up. The spout clicked in place. The milk flow resumed. And we completed the deed.

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The car ride back felt different that day. The milk extra hot. Extra raw. Extra frothy.

When we got to the house, we got right to work—brought the milk to a boil, then let it cool, added the culture, wrapped it up tight, let it sit on the counter, then chill in the fridge. Once it was set, we put it in cheese cloth, wrung out the water, added some salt, hung it up high, and let the moisture drain out.

By the following morning, the transformation was done. Evidence cleared.

No more raw milk. Just some hard yogurt—very slight tang,
extremely full bodied, spreadable like butter.

We went to the garden. Got vegetables and herbs. Someone made tea,
black, Persian. We laid out the bread. Sat at the table. Turned on the
news. And then we ate breakfast.

My grandfather, father, and me. Three generations. Bandits all.
Having broken the law. The Island's Most Wanted.

Eating our prize.

Hard yogurt on pita. Fresh-picked spring onions. Fistfuls of parsley.