

**Ulf Durling: Hard Cheese**

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Originally published in Sweden in 1971 as

**Gammal Ost** (Translated by Bertil Falk)

In Abrogatan in Sweden three elderly men meet regularly to discuss crime fiction. They are Johan Lundgren, a retired printer and narrator for the first part of the book, Carl Bergman, a retired bookseller, and a local doctor, Efraim Nylander. Each week one of them will summarize a detective novel they've just read and challenge the other two to work out whodunit. They keep minutes of these meetings. But this October night in 1969 is different because Carl has good news which he's heard from his son Gunnar, a detective sergeant with the local police force. A body has been found! Not just anywhere but in a locked room! "We looked at each other, amazed and dumbfounded. It reminded me of one Christmas Eve when, as a child, I looked in disbelief at a set of tin soldiers I had dreamed about but never dared hope for," says Johan, and the others feel much the same way. This is their chance to put all those years of reading Carr, Christie, Queen and others to good use and solve the mystery. The facts are simple: Axel Nilsson has returned to town after a long absence and has taken a room at The Little Boarding House. Earlier he had been found in his room slumped at the footboard of his bed, The door was locked from the inside and he appeared to have died from a head wound. No one could have left by the window. The body is stained with red wine and in the wastepaper basket are a wet towel and a piece of cheese. There is no trace of the sticking plaster he obtained from reception, or of the person who was in his room earlier.

The narration now passes to Gunnar Bergman. His father and his cronies have passed him a meticulously detailed report of their theories and conclusions about the case. He finds this hilarious, a welcome relief from his official duties. He's also a bit pissed off that these three senile old fools (as he thinks of them) are interfering with actual police work. There's no mystery as far as he's concerned: after a few drinks in his room with a friend Axel locked the door and then, being the worse for wear, fell and banged his head. But, be that as it may, this is the ideal opportunity to investigate Blom, the owner of the boarding house. The police

have known for ages that he's Up To No Good, but they've never known exactly what he's been doing; now they have an excuse to poke around and find out what he's been up to. But can Axel Nilsson's death really be that simple, or is Gunnar missing something? Maybe it's the cheese.

You're unlikely to work out the surprising solution to this mystery, an original reader may have had more chance but you'll have an enormous amount of fun. Quite simply **Hard Cheese** is the funniest book I've read in a long time. Gunnar Bergman is a great comic creation. He's in charge of the station because his boss is down with bronchitis and he's been lumbered with it all. He became disillusioned with police work years ago, he only joined because he'd been watching too many gangster movies only to find that his days as a patrolman were mostly spent handing out parking fines. As a detective his work mainly involves typing. Lots and lots of typing. He knows he's an idiot, but that's something he'd rather keep to himself. He has a very dry wit. This is his observation on Melin, one of the constables: "We used to engage him for particularly sensitive operations. He's particularly well equipped to order and pick up sandwiches from Modin's cafe. We used to vary between meat with cheese and salami- type sausage, so that he would not find police work too monotonous. In that way he could learn to focus his attention and follow instructions to the letter, important things for a policeman. Otherwise he is utterly useless. I told him to walk around and knock on the room doors, making a note of each room number and the names of the guests. If Melin managed to survive that ordeal by fire, he could maybe rise up in the world. He could, for example, have a sandwich with liver pate next time."

So; a locked room mystery, great characters, and a twist in the tale all add up to an irresistible read.

Nick Kimber