Hard Cheese Artist Statement

For my senior thesis project I chose to create a graphic memoir, titled Hard Cheese, that explores autobiographical stories of my family’s history of bad luck. The project specifically explores moments that showcase the obnoxious nature of our bad luck, beginning with when I was born after an emergency c-section was ordered because my mom was in labor with me for thirty-six hours and there was no indication that I was planning on going anywhere and it was starting to get dangerous for the both of us. My extended stay is probably what led to being born with a serious case of jaundice which, unsurprisingly, was only the precursor to a whole lot of future childhood medical trauma I have yet to explore. The next few stories I illustrated chronicle a particular family vacation to Florida we had gone on, where on day one, the plumbing in the house we were staying at backed up due to a busted septic tank causing us to not be able to flush or shower for the duration of the time we were there. Later during that same trip, my mom fished out a shrimp that had cozied up into her under-boob during a trip to the beach. Then, at the end of the week as we drove home, our car broke down and the part was not available which meant that we got to stay in scary middle-of-nowhere hotels for an extra week. The final story describes a time when my sister and I bonded over a sleepless night in a shared room until we realized it was because we were infested with bird mites that had taken to crawling all over us during the night.

Cheese is maybe my favorite thing in the world, so it was much to my delight when I came across the knowledge that “hard cheese” is slang for bad luck and then suddenly my project had a title and a tone. Each short comic is then titled after a specific cheese with a subtitle that teases the topic of the story, leaving it up to the reader to draw connections between the two. For example, chapter one is titled “Cheddar Cheese (or the time I was born)” and rather than a table of contents, a charcuterie board describes which page each story falls on. I also used my time in the creative writing concentration curating a capstone project that explores narrative forms that go hand-in-hand with each story, giving me the chance to pause and reflect on my illustration. This includes a shaped poem writing around the rhyme, “If it’s brown flush it down, if it’s yellow let it mellow” that follows the chapter, “Chocolate Cheese” and a dramatic monologue from the booby shrimp to wrap up “Swiss Cheese.”

While researching the genre of graphic memoir, I noticed that many that revolve around family are serious and introspective such as Alison Bechdel’s memoir, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic. While there are plenty of humorous examples of illustrated memoir, many of them consider more of a personal and self-deprecating tone like Sarah Andersen’s Sarah’s Scribbles series. Meanwhile, outside of the genre of graphic memoir, much of the media that revolves around family is somber or dark, or used to excuse a character’s behavior. I haven’t often come across much media where the subject of a story is just a collection of family shenanigans and when I have it’s usually in the form of sitcom. Things like The Goldbergs come to mind, but in the genre of graphic memoir I’m working on filling a funny, family sized whole hole in the market with Hard Cheese, a thirty-four page, full color young adult graphic memoir about bad luck.
HARDCHEESE
OR A GRAPHIC MEMOIR
ABOUT BAD LUCK

WITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY:
GABBY ZEMAITIS
HARD CHEESE
OR A GRAPHIC MEMOIR ABOUT BAD LUCK
A charcuterie board of hard cheese. Beautiful to look at and delicious to eat. But, how about a charcuterie board of bad luck? Not so much... Except when it is. Especially when an reflection, that bad luck is transformed. In this case, that charcuterie board is a comic, a form in which in recent years has welcomed the genre of memoir, the perfect fit for what I wanted my project to be. My family and I have a collection of shared events that have impacted our way of life and our way of thinking. While at the time many of things were believed to be negative experiences, as time went on we began to realize the humor of it all especially due to the rate at which mishaps were happening, something that not everyone has the mindset to do. So in that sense, consider me lucky. For this project, I drew from these experiences to begin developing this graphic memoir, “Hard Cheese”, that focuses on a family’s history of bad luck as a vehicle for comedy rather than the sometimes expected tragedy.

“Hard Cheese” is autobiographical and inspired by real events. I don’t think I ever considered my life to be particularly interesting or exciting. In fact, I’d say that so far, I’ve had a pretty average life, but it just so happens that occasionally little things come along to rock the boat, knock you out of it, and nearly drown you... like maybe more than the average person. And sometimes that’s the best cheese to tell. My life has been chock full of these moments that have happened at such a rate that the only explanation is just bad luck, or at least, enough that my mom began saying, “If we didn’t have bad luck, we wouldn’t have any luck at all.” Even so, my family hasn’t ever dwelled on these moments as such. Rather, an reflection, we laugh at how ridiculous an event was and how usually, given the circumstances, we make the most of it. Over the years, due to the unbelievable nature of some of these events, I would share a story with people in my life and eventually I began receiving the comment, “You could write a book about this stuff!” So, when the time came to begin brainstorming ideas for my project, everything came back to bad luck.

It felt as if the only form that the content of Hard Cheese could take was that of a comic. It’s one thing to read these stories in only words, or to hear it by word of mouth, but there’s something about seeing the moments illustrated in the ways I remember them or have imagined moments I wasn’t present for that adds to the comedy. Cheese has surprisingly played an important role in my project as well. While it started as a joke early on in the brainstorming process to try and see if there was a way to implement cheese, it had led me to the discovery that the phrase “hard cheese” is slang for bad luck. This revelation led to the introduction of cheese at the center of my project. It exists in a few ways though mostly due to the fact that I love cheese. Introducing cheese is outrageous and random, setting the tone of the whole book, as in, its sense of cheesiness. Surrounding the project in literal cheese gave me the room to play with cheese factor, whether that be in illustration or in my writing forms. I’d like to believe that you now understand me.

Introduced by cheese, five stand-alone comics depict specific moments in my life, beginning with the time I was born. Then, each story is closed by a reflection of the event in a unique form. So, I hope you, dear reader, find at least one cheese on this charcuterie board to be to your taste. And if there’s any lesson to be learned from this, remember that sometimes cheese can be moldy yet still delicious and bad luck can just sometimes be considered luck.
To Maddey.
Thank you for being my partner in crime, my best friend, and for being the funniest person I know.

To Mom.
Thank you for being my biggest fan and for making the claim that without bad luck we wouldn’t have any luck at all. I think you spoke this book into existence years ago.

To Dad.
Thank you for keeping the lights on. (And you’re welcome for keeping my promise to include this.)

To my family.
Thank you for being you.
A mild, smooth-textured white, yellow, or orange cheese. Or, the time I was born.
December 1998.

The 20th

The 21st

The 22nd

So, we gotta rip her out.

I like right now.

Oh! I love that.

The face of a woman who’s been in labor for 310 hours.

Ta-da!! One happy, healthy baby!

Rip!

Dad...

Wow. She gets it from you.

Uhh... you sure about this?

Okay! That’s enough of that.

Let’s wrap this up.

We’ve got some issues to sort out.

Huh?
Maybe you haven’t noticed, but your baby is yellow.

Just a little jaundice, no need to worry.

Here’s a quick disclaimer:

It’s never “just a little” anything with my family.

For the next 5 days I got to kick back and work on my tan. Lucky me, though, I suppose it could’ve been worse.

except this is only the Start of my medical shortcomings so, stay tuned...

Gabby
- aged: 9 months, 5 days
- region: Ohio
- family: Zemaitis
- color: Yellow
- fat content: 9lbs.5oz.
- texture: oily

Future childhood medical trauma

help!
Or, the time I should have let it mellow.

Creamy and smooth and rich in flavor with a Cheddar Cheese base.

CHOCOLATE CHEESE
twist

Please.

help me

Oh no!

poop

Let it mellow?

Some time later.
if it's brown flush it down, if it's yellow let it mellow

that would have been nice to know, before I let the toilet BLOW. "oh, how I wish I would have been told," I thought as I watched how the water flowed, like a geyser, yet I was still none the wiser. As I stood in that mess and yelled in distress, my sister walked in, perplexed. "didn't you hear?" she said, but I had been in bed. So I missed the account and now I was doused caused by the busted septic we were all now hectic, unfortunately the rest of the week was looking bleak especially when the plumber arrived and we learned the tank couldn't be revived. flushes would have to be limited and showers prohibited. the changes were not simplistic but at least my family was optimistic, if only I had some chocolate cheese, maybe this all would have been a breeze.
hours & hours later...

SPASH!!

What is that?!!

Rustle Rustle Rustle

hmm??

Uh-oh!!

Ooh! Wow!!

there you go.
it's dark.
Not that that's much different than usual.
But it feels different.
No longer was I tucked away where I belonged, rather, I feel
soft.
And suddenly I feel as if I can't breathe.
For hours and hours and hours I lay there in the dark, suffocating.
I start hearing sounds and is that... laughter?
Were they laughing at me? At my demise?
I suppose I should do something, but I feel weak and these sounds won't stop yapping
but it's too muffled and I can't make out what's going on.
I can't move and now I'm gasping for air.

Just as I start to feel that the end is near, suddenly I'm hit with a cold sprinkle, water!
That's it! I must be out of water! Explains why I can't catch my breath...
But how did this happen? Where's my shell?
My home?

All of the sudden, I'm ripped from the darkness and blinded by the sun,
I strain and try to make out my surroundings, but everything is so big
and I now I am so very small.
There's a piercing noise coming from the shape in front of me,
As I get my bearings, I notice that whatever it is it's unlike anything I've ever seen before.
And whatever it is it's screaming at me.
I'm in it's vice grip and I want to get out and oh boy, I am so very scared.

Before I can begin to plead for my life, I'm soaring through the air
and before I can brace myself, I'm hitting the ground.
Everything hurt, but all I wanted was to get away and in the distance I sense water
which means I still have a chance to survive.
The land creature seems distracted, as scared of me as I was of it.
Can't it see that I'm tiny and harmless?
Whatever it had me held captive nearly killed me and I'm so very lucky I got out.

With one last look.
I stand on all twenty-six of my shaky legs
and hobble, slowly
to the water
where I belong.
- bobby shrimp.
A Semi-Soft and Strongly flavored moldy veined Cheese. 4 or, the time we slept in a Crime Scene.

GORGONZOLA CHEESE
Police Report

Case No: Gorgonzola
Prepared By: Me
Date: July 25 2012

Details of Event:
Our car stopped accelerating so we pulled off onto the shoulder of the highway. I could feel the semi's spinning by, slightly sending our car tipping. It wasn't very safe and we probably could've died. At least that's what the policeman said when he stepped to see what the problem was. 15 minutes later, the tow truck arrived and shuffled to the closest exit and then to the closest hotel. Upon entrance to our room, we decided we wouldn't be staying longer than we had to. It looked like a murder scene, the walls were yellow, which maybe could've gone unnoticed if not for the cracked, crooked picture frames. It smelled musty like the room had only been occupied by chain smokers for years and years. My parents smoked and I knew it. It had ever been cleaned. Drawers were pulled out of the dresser, a lamp knocked over, and I'd like to pretend I didn't see the bloody handprint on the curtain, that faded as it felt like the person had held on tight until they couldn't anymore and were dragged away.

Actions Taken:
My sister freaked out immediately. Throwing her head and tying the shingles as tight as they would go. She paced the room and threatened to sleep outside which was maybe a little dramatic and I probably called my eyes. Mom did what she always does, warning me to be careful. But, the situation was so heightened that I started to feel helpless and suddenly had a thought. Neither had Dad. I think he was taken aback as well. He went wrong and how he could fix it. The curtain caught in the breeze, drew my attention and there it was, the bloody handprint that my mom and my sister can't know about. If they had seen it it maybe we could've been sleeping outside instead of worrying we ordered takeout and that we're not nice to forget about that night, but the smell of smoke cling to our clothes even though they were tucked away in our suitcases and then it was like we never left.

Summary:
A rank, smelling, moldy, peculiar night.
CHEVRE CHEESE

Mild and buttery and sometimes sour in flavor, with a soft and creamy texture. Or, the time I became an exterminator.
I couldn't sleep last night.

Yeah, like... bugs?

Wait.

What's that sound?

Nothing here either.

What are we even looking for?

Bird mites.

Oh this is not good.

Howdy.

Ever heard of them?

Yeah... neither had the exterminator.
Have You Unknowingly Been Slipped Drugs?
This is really the thing that makes the most sense, huh? Rather, it's more
like I'd prefer this to be the case. But, think about this rationally... who
who would have drugged me and Madley? Our mom?

Hypnagogic Hallucinations.
This seems maybe more plausible than the last search. I mean, that in the
sense that no, mom definitely did not drug us, but also how possible is it that
Madley and I shared the same exact hallucination?

Morgellon's Disease: Joni Mitchell's Mystery Illness
Back to being unreasonable. Morgellon's disease is rare. So rare in fact, that there's
literally no scientific backing behind it to prove whether or not it's even real.
But, I think this is what we have and oh my gosh no one is going to believe us,
what are we going to do? And besides, I only heard about this because of that
random podcast episode that gave me the idea to search 'Joni Mitchell bug disease'.

Bird Mite infestation
Sometimes, when there's a vacated bird nest on top of a window air conditioner
unit that sits under an awning, the bugs that feed on left-over bird stuff, bird
mites, make their way into the house. Why was that so specific and why did it match
our circumstances exactly. Mom refused to knock the birds nest off the AC in our
bedroom just in case they came back... so, we're infested. I do not recommend it.

8 Ways to Keep Birds off Window Air Conditioner Units
Now, hanging from the awning above the air conditioner, there are three windchimes,
ensuring that no bird will ever feel safe enough to raise a family in our window
ever again.