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Confessions of a Part-time Baker

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Ultimate Chocolate Icing
2 lbs cocoa powder
3.14 lbs. melted butter
2.9 lbs. water
3 oz. pure vanilla (no seeds)
14 lbs. powdered sugar

It was a sad, miserable fact that these ingredients had been etched into my mind, along with a handful of other recipes from this God-forsaken grocery store.

Dump three and a half blocks of unsalted butter into a tub. Stick the tub into the microwave, on high, for three minutes.

I stood idly by Hobart 1, the name we had affectionately bestowed upon the 5,000-dollar electric mixer that was so essential to our department. His twin, Hobart 2, sat quietly beside him, waiting to start her work for the day. I rested my head against the contraption and allowed my mind to wander as I watched the cocoa and butter mix together to form a thick, dark brown goo.

Veteran bakers mix the water and pure vanilla; doing so skips a step and saves time. Alternate water/vanilla and powdered sugar. Two seconds of water/vanilla, two seconds of powdered sugar.

The clock read 8:14 a.m.—still early. In roughly an hour and a half, the silent calm of the early morning hours would erupt in a frenzy of organized chaos. Bodies and carts would weave through the aisles in tandem, picking items off the shelves and completing grocery lists. The halls of the Leesburg Wegmans Food Markets would echo with the harmonies of customer chatter, the elevator music that resounded from the ceiling's PA system, and in our particular section, the clanking of spatulas against large metal bowls.

Have a thermometer handy; if the butter's temperature exceeds 90 degrees Fahrenheit, the entire batch could be ruined. Once it has reached optimum temperature, get it in with the cocoa. Prepare the bags of sugar while the dark brown goo begins to take form.

Suddenly, Hobart 1 was angry. I had carelessly added a disproportionate amount of sugar to liquid, and he was struggling to blend the dry, heavily sugared mix. He was thrashing around and causing a raucous, so I poured in a little more water. This calmed him down, and a few seconds later he resumed his work. Eventually, the dark brown goo began to take on a lighter hue as well as a smooth, creamy texture.

Mix on speed two for two minutes after everything has been combined. Start measuring out cocoa and butter for the next batch during those two minutes.

“Chocolate?” my co-worker, Dianna, asked as she balanced a box of frozen éclairs on her right shoulder.

I nodded. “Batch number one of the day.”

“How many you aiming for?”

“Five.” It was not an unusual request.

Use a plastic spatula (plastic, not metal, or you'll ruin the bowl) to scrape the bottom of the bowl. Mix on speed two for one more minute. Remove the bowl from the mixer and carefully transfer the completed icing into a plastic bucket. Cover and label with the preparation date. Tada!

The Ultimate Chocolate Cake was one of the many staples that set our bakery apart from others. The icing, whose recipe was chosen from hundreds of others by the Wegmans family themselves, was one of the sweetest forms of chocolate ever to grace my palate. It was one of a family of five—Wegmans also featured an Ultimate White,

Ultimate Carrot, Ultimate Coconut, and Ultimate Red Velvet to accompany the Ultimate Chocolate Cake. When done correctly, the icing's creamy texture complemented the cake, whose recipe had also been chosen by the Wegmans family. Customers lauded its uniqueness, some going so far as to claim that it was the best chocolate cake they'd ever had. The employees at the Wegmans bakery, however, were not so quick to pass similar judgment. The knowledge of its calorie count and the amount of butter that went into its construction had virtually turned us all off to the locally loved dessert. For the employees of the Wegmans bakery, one small bite was enough to last us a few years.

Alas, the laws of supply and demand paid no mind to our aversion for the stuff, and every weekend was a constant race to refill the empty spaces that appeared on the case when customers picked up a cake. Every weekend one poor soul was assigned to Ultimates, and she usually spent her entire eight-hour shift producing one of the five types of cakes.

However, this weekend was different. This was the weekend before Thanksgiving, meaning the store would be packed with customers rushing to get desserts for their parties. Our sales numbers tended to skyrocket during major holidays, which for us translated into even more pressure to make the ever-popular Ultimate Cakes. Our harried managers nearly doubled the staff on the logic that more bodies meant more production; unfortunately, what it actually meant was only *slightly* more production, much less space, and more cases of claustrophobia.

On this particular morning I had been assigned to help prepare for the imminent rush by producing enough Ultimate Chocolate Icing to cover about 30-36 cakes.

Ultimate Chocolate Icing was a good project because it was relatively low maintenance (it required no refrigeration, did not have to be re-whipped like the other types of icing,

and had a long shelf life). Despite its easy storage, it was a hassle to make because of its lengthy preparation. It had taken months, but I had finally found the most efficient way to produce the icing. Under this system, I was able to complete five batches in under an hour. Once I got going on that icing, nothing could get in my way and waste my time.

“Hey,” Dianna suddenly whispered, “*cheeseburger*.”

Well, okay, maybe there *was* something that could get in my way and waste my time.

Thanksgiving was an amazing holiday because it meant that families would come together from across the country to give thanks for each other and the year’s many blessings. For the bakery department of the Leesburg store, whose staff was comprised mostly of women, Thanksgiving had the added bonus of out-of-towners coming into the store; in particular, young, attractive men.

Everyone always got a little bit cheerier on these days because the major holidays ushered in fresh faces for us to swoon and gawk at. It hardly mattered how old we were; we were females, and we would point out the cute boys if we were five-years-old or 55-years-old. In an attempt to conceal our immaturity (or perhaps more so to avoid sexual harassment charges), a fellow co-worker invented a code word that was uttered only in the presence of someone she perceived as being exceptionally attractive.

That word, incidentally, was *cheeseburger*. Using it in any context alerted us to an attractive male, and its use became so widespread throughout the bakery that someone would have to clarify when she referred to an *actual* *cheeseburger*.

I stuck a tub of butter in the microwave and set it for three minutes. Then I turned slowly, attempting to be discrete. Dianna had, indeed, spotted a *cheeseburger* gazing at the cookie display. He was young, probably in his mid-30s, with a full head of

dark brown locks and a hint of five-o'clock shadow on his jaw. His eyes really did seem to glisten like emeralds. Yup, he was a winner, alright.

“Excuse me,” he called out, “can I get some help?” He scanned the vicinity, looking for someone to aid him in his search for the perfect dessert. I froze as his eyes settled on me. A smile crept across his lips. “Can you help me?”

“Sure,” I sputtered. Before I could take a step toward him, the microwave’s sudden *beeeeeeeep* pierced the air. I shuddered.

“I can wait,” he said. That voice did not belong to a customer. No, surely he was not even *human*. He was, without a doubt, an angel—no, a *seraph!*—sent from God Himself.

I managed to choke out a “be right there” as I turned back to the microwave, removed my tub of melted butter, and jammed the door shut.

As I walked—well, more like sauntered—toward him, I became more and more self-conscious. This uniform was incredibly unflattering; I’d had people repeatedly ask if I had just finished middle school. The stupid cap was too big for my head and probably made me look like a little boy. My apron hung loosely on my body and was stained with cocoa powder, and I probably had powdered sugar on my eyebrows. God! How could this pre-pubescent boy/girl creature even *think* about talking to this Godsend, much less *help* him?

“I’ve been instructed to bring dessert,” he complained. “Mom’s pretty big on ‘perfect’ dinners so there’s a lot of pressure to bring the ‘perfect’ dessert.” He grinned. God, what perfect teeth. I wondered if he’d ever had braces. I hoped not, because if he didn’t then our kids would have great teeth. “Show me your best.”

In all my years of slaving away at Wegmans, I learned that most customers probably don't give a rat's ass about you. Time and again I took customers' verbal abuse with a smile on my face, acted as a scapegoat for the anger that resulted from a horrible day. I had been subject to my fair share of insults, snide remarks, and halitosis.

But fate has a reward system. For all those rude customers, long hours, crappy managers, and painful feet, fate gives you something in return. It's impossible to tell when, but if you do your part, log in enough hours of misery, you eventually—inevitably?—reap the benefits. That cheeseburger was my benefit, my reward. This 165-pound lean-meat cheeseburger was *my* reward.

“Watch out!”

And, yet, I learned that fate also has a way of kicking you right in the ass when you least expect it.

In retrospect, I suppose I did see her through my peripheral vision. I suppose I did see the stack of boxes that came barreling toward me, causing me to lose my grip on the tub of butter. I heard it *thud* on the ground and heard the splash. I instinctively squeezed my eyes shut and felt the warm liquid butter blanket my face, my hair, and my arms. I heard the sound of another female voice, another co-worker (was that Kristen? It was *definitely* Kristen, that little sloop), selfishly snatch my cheeseburger and lead him away from the mess. My reward for all the customer abuse had been stolen from me while I was left dripping with butter, an idiot on display for the world to point and stare at.

What occurred next remains a blur, a sort out-of-body experience wherein my conscious mind detached itself from my physical form and floated close by. Having been practically humiliated out of my own body, my mind became a spectator to the

scene that played out before me. Dianna, ever the mother, flocked to my side with a wad of paper towels scrunched in her aged hands. I winced as she practically punched my face while attempting to clear the coagulating butter from my eyes and nose. A few other co-workers hovered close by; I could hear the muffled laughter and whispers. My hands managed to wipe enough butter from my glasses in time to watch Kristen lead the cheeseburger—*my* cheeseburger—away from me.

“Looks like she’s a little tied up at the moment,” I heard her say, “but I can help you out.” They edged away as Kristen began to name off some of our more popular desserts. She offered him the tiramisu—tiramisu? What was *wrong* with her? Why offer him the frozen tiramisu when we had the fresh Ultimate Chocolate Cake on standby?

“Will you come with me?” Dianna snapped, jolting me back into the present. She gripped my buttered arm and was trying to walk me to the back room. “People are staring.”

I turned and, to my horror, she was right. Other patrons had stopped dead in their tracks, some grinning while others attempted to stifle their laughter. I felt my cheeks burn with embarrassment as I shuffled to the back room behind Dianna. My manager, who sat buried behind a clipboard and calculator, heard us and looked up. She took in the image in front of her, the tiny, pre-pubescent boy/girl creature whose entire front side was tinted yellow with melted butter.

“What *happened* to you?” she asked incredulously. Dianna smirked. I shot her a dirty look.

“Cheeseburger,” Dianna replied. My manager snickered.

“Got to be careful with those,” she said, and returned to her paperwork.

I sighed as Dianna began to dab my face with a damp towel. One day, I thought, I would be properly rewarded for this incident. One day the higher power, the divine being, whoever the hell was sitting up there toying with my life, would decide that yes, this poor thing had had enough, and that it was time to repay her for all that misery.

Unfortunately, today was not that day.