

The Pancake Man

A few months ago my friend Michael got me a job. He recommended me to his supervisor, who spoke with the manager and called me in. The interview was to the point and I was hired a few days later. Michael never doubted it would happen. They loved Michael.

The place was called The Breakfast Bar; it was one of those places that offered eggs and toast all day. Our only competition was Coffee Club just a few blocks down, but our patio had a nicer view of the ocean. We weren't afraid of losing customers. Michael and I worked in the kitchen, anyway.

Michael had been working there for two years and was considered one of the top cooks; the three waitresses all swooned over his tall stature and thin hips. He was the kind of guy who could work with his hands. He always came in later than the rest of us, after prep, and began his work with the first orders of the day, smiling. Michael was one of those cooks you could see through a rectangular hole in the wall facing the dining area of the restaurant. Everyone loved Michael.

When I first got the job I was nervous at the prospect of working in a kitchen; I had never had any formal training in one before and sometimes found myself caught up in the motions of the other workers. Sometimes I'd end up doing a job I wasn't meant to do. The worst was when everyone swerved me towards the sinks to finish washing. Finally, though, I found my place as a mixer. The people who came early to prep for the cooks started giving me all the mixing jobs; mix the eggs, mix the salad, mix the dough, mix the cream.

And in that dull and boring blend of powder and milk I found my passion: pancakes.

A pancake is a curious food. It's a thin, round patty of delicious, feathery dough usually topped with whipped cream, icing sugar, maple syrup and fruit. Its smell would fill the kitchen with a sweet scent of milk and the sticky smell of cake. It became the reason I went to work. I became the pancake man.

About a week ago, after Michael and I finished our shifts and were hanging around the beach watching tourists, he asked me about it.

“It's weird, man,” Michael said. He was breaking a stick into pieces and throwing them into the water.

“Not that weird.” I was embarrassed. Since the day the first glorious batch of pancakes were made out of my mix, it was all I could talk about. I wanted a chance to make them. I asked Michael for a spot as a cook, just for a few hours, just to make the pancakes. He shook his head.

“You've never even used the stove top before. It takes practice to make a good pancake. And anyway,” he said, throwing the last piece of stick at me. “It's just weird, man.”

For the next few days I went to every cook and asked the same question. Eventually they would just turn me back to Michael and I had to give up. I would come in and mix and mix and blend and stir and sit and wait. The rest of the crew would come in and the kitchen would fill with the odours of breakfast. Coffee would be served, and Michael would make my pancakes.

I began to notice that with all my hard work, the sweat and shoulder I put into mixing the giant pots of pancake mix for our customers, all they would ever see was Michael, smiling. The waitresses would come back with compliments to the chef. He who made the pancakes with a holier than thou attitude. He'd give me a pat on the back during break.

“You're up for a raise,” he'd say.

“We should go out tonight,” he'd say.

“Are you okay, man?” He said, pulling me out of the kitchen. “What's wrong with you?”

I kicked the wall, pulled off my hairnet and said, “It's nothing.”

“Sure?”

“No.”

“Well.” He shifted uncomfortably.

“I don't know. I think I'm jealous.”

“Because of the pancakes?”

“Oh, not with that again.”

“Well—”

“Okay, it's because of the pancakes. I just don't know why you're not giving me a chance. I've made pancakes before.”

“Do you think you're ready?” He said after a moment.

“I don't know. Yes.”

“Fine. Tomorrow morning, you can make the pancakes. I'll come in early so we can both be on the stovetop at once. You're not making anything else.”

“Really?”

“Would I say that just to make you feel better?”

I shook my head in thanks and anxiety. He went swiftly inside and left me to wait for tomorrow morning.

When I got there all I could feel was the nervous rumbling in my stomach. I'd eaten a bowl of cereal, hours before, and everything else centred and revolved around the joy of making today's pancakes. When I got there I was smiling, just like Michael did when he first got to work. I saw him, sitting beside the stove top in his apron, carrying around a bowl of eggs and flour, mixing. I gave him a grateful smile and he nodded seriously at me, concentrating on his bowl. Michael always smiled. I felt a brief moment of loss, like I'd stolen something precious from him, but it went away once he put down the bowl.

“Are you sure you're up for this?”

“I'm ready.”

“I'll be right here to take over if you need any help.”

“Bring it on.”

He laughed, handed me the spatula and stepped out of the way. I took his place, expecting a feeling of authority or power to rush over me, and got nothing. He patted me on the shoulder while I, in my disappointment, fiddled with the knobs of the stove top. The first order came in: Eggs. I

continued my fiddling, feeling nerves and hunger sweep through me in alternating waves. I felt sick.

“Pancakes and a hot chocolate!” Announced the waitress.

It was my moment to shine. I poured the perfect pancake mix onto the stove top into nice, round patties then waited for a few minutes before flipping each with my spatula. The first one turned out okay, though a little undercooked. A piece of it came off in the flipping process and I lost it under the stove. The second one was burnt on one side and gooey on the other. The third one got stuck to the stove top.

After a few tries, being rushed by all the kitchen noises around me, I managed to create a pancake; it was a little misshapen and a bit too thick, but I delicately removed and placed it onto a plate. Michael was frying eggs; when it went by he grinned at it and then at me, but didn't say a thing. Four more pancakes had been ordered already.

An hour later I was feeling weak with hunger. Every other pancake I made was somehow deformed, burned or undercooked and someone had put a garbage bin beside me for their remains. It was filling quickly; Michael even had to take a break and make more mix. I hadn't realized before how many people ordered pancakes. The smell of them filled my head with sour cream and burning butter; I could practically taste the ones I had to give away. They were covering my tongue with a layer of pancake. No, my tongue was becoming a pancake. I was becoming a pancake. The literal pancake man.

I took my break three hours in and left the kitchen without a word to anyone. When I got outside, in my panic, the world looked like whipped cream and giant fruit. I shook my head and sat down on the side of the road. The air gradually lost its burnt smell – salty ocean air had never smelled so good – and I opened my eyes to a normal view of the street. Tourists were lining up to get into our restaurant. It was only nine o' clock, but I couldn't bring myself to go back inside. Michael came out a few minutes later.

“So, how was that? Do you feel better now?”

“I'm hungry,” I said. We both laughed.

“Want to try again?”

“Not really.”

“Okay.”

The two of us sat there for a while and then Michael went back in. I had to stay away from the kitchen. The smell of burning pancakes was going to haunt me until the day I died.

A few days later I quit the job. Everyone was disappointed, especially Michael, but I couldn't work there anymore. No one said a word about the day I made the pancakes, but I was humiliated. I realized too late that it takes more than just passion to make something good. But even after I quit, after Michael got a better job at another restaurant; even after I stopped making the pancake mix, people who knew me during those few months in my life when my obsession was a little patty made of flour and eggs would call me the pancake man, and smile.