

Lindsay Reeve

Cake

Long ago, when I was still in my 20s, I worked in a café that served a famous cake. *The New York Times* had featured this cake, and people came from all over the city as well as from outside the city to try it. One day, a man walked into the shop and asked how many calories were in the cake. “I can’t say exactly,” I said, “But probably around six hundred and fifty per slice.” Actually I had no idea. I made that number up.

“Six hundred and fifty a slice,” he said, “That’s a lot, right?”

“Well, it’s not—”

“Good. I want to eat something indulgent. Go ahead and cut me a big piece.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “But each piece needs to be the same size, quite thin. It’s important to get the right amount of air in each bite, to balance out the richness.”

There was icing between each layer of the cake, you wouldn’t want it to be cloying.

“Air?” said the man, “I’m paying to eat air?”

That’s how stupid some people can be. But I remained patient. I explained that he was not paying for a little flour and sugar but for perfection: for my boss’s expertise, her sensibility, the development of her palate.

“Ah, cut the crap. Blah blah, I’m so important, look at me.” He interrupted himself. “That piercing.” He waved his hand in my face. “When’d you get it?”

“My piercing? My parents did it when I was little.” I thought he meant my ears. I’d forgotten my nose was pierced.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You—”

“I don’t believe they’d do that to you. You look like you have nice parents.”

I wanted to ask, what about me looked like I had nice parents? But I preferred not to get too close to his vision of things, in case it started to affect my own. That happened often. Other people had such strong and appealing points of view—sensibilities, like my boss.

The man leaned over the counter. “Look,” he said, “I didn’t mean to offend you. Actually I think you’re cute. Your eyes are like perfect little almonds. I could eat them up.” He tried to wink at me, pulling the corner of his mouth toward his cheek, revealing one gnarled rotted tooth. It twisted up into his wine-red gums, into his leering face, and after he closed his lips it was still there, I could not un-see it.

That day I decided what I was going to do with the rest of my life: I was going to be a dental hygienist. People could insult me all day long, but I’ll have seen into the secret interior of their mouths. Seen evidence of their wanting. Taken their heads in my lap.

Lindsay Reeve received a Joseph-Armand Bombardier award for her PhD in English at the University of Toronto. She now lives and writes in San Francisco, and her first short story can be found online at *The Cincinnati Review*.