

From Scratch

On any given day of the week, my mom is baking something. Chocolate chip cookies, vanilla cupcakes, chiffon cake, the woman does it all. And she does it from scratch. My mom scorns cake mixes. “You can always tell,” she contends, “when something’s from *out of the box*.”

Saturday mornings, I often woke up to the whirring buzz of the Kitchen Aid mixer. The warm smell of sugar and butter wafted all the way from the oven to my bedroom. There was so much baking going on, I practically breathed sugar as a kid.

“What are you making?” I asked, inhaling the buttery air.

“A new kind of chocolate chip cookie.” She was always looking for the perfect chocolate chip cookie recipe. “This one has a secret ingredient: coconut shavings. It adds a little crunchiness.”

“Who are they for?”

“For Mrs. Siu.”

“Who’s that?”

“I met her at church last week. Her family recently moved here, so I thought I’d visit her today and bring her some treats.”

My mom scooped up balls of cookie dough from a green Tupperware bowl, and plopped them onto a baking sheet. The beige and brown lumps actually looked pretty, the way she arranged them in evenly spaced rows.

“Can I eat the dough?”

“No, it has raw eggs. Salmonella can kill you.”

Besides being a great baker, my mom is a former dietician. She got a degree in nutrition from Berkeley. She didn't sugar coat it when it came to salmonella. When she went to put the tray in the oven, I suppressed the urge to taste the raw dough behind her back.

"I want you to come with me to Mrs. Siu's house. She has a daughter a couple years older than you. You should make friends with her."

The prospect of this girl intimidated me. I was twelve; she would be fourteen—a full-on teenager! "Why do *I* have to make friends with her?"

My mom wasn't going to sugar coat this either. "Michaela is legally blind. Her mother had problems giving birth to her." Looking me in the eye, she went on, "Mrs. Siu is one of nicest ladies I've ever met. Besides, you need to make more friends."

"I already have a best friend," I countered. "Jennifer and I hang out all the time."

"Jennifer left her dirty shoes on when she came in the house. She made black marks all over my carpet." Jennifer was white. So what if she didn't take off her shoes? She didn't barge into people's homes with plates of food, either.

My mom stuck a hot cookie in front of my frowning face. "Here, taste it. How's my new recipe?"

I gave her the answer she wanted. "Perfect."

I was surprised by how close the Siu's lived to us. Five minutes in the car, and then my mom was ringing their doorbell. Michaela answered the door with a big grin and a sloppy Hiiiiii. She was short for a fourteen-year-old, dwarfed by her baggy yellow t-shirt with a goofy rabbit and the words "Happy Life" across the front. Flakes of dandruff crowned the part in her shiny black hair. Behind thick glasses, her eyes were a little too

small for her face, her milky pupils rolled around struggling to focus on me. All my intimidation vanished.

“Hi Michaela, how are you today? I brought your family some cookies, hot out of the oven!” My mom babbled loudly as if Michaela were deaf as well as blind. “This is my daughter Lisa.”

“Hiiiiiii Lis!” No one called me Lis. It was weird, but I went with it, reciprocating her open friendliness. “Hi Michaela!”

Shoes removed and cookies handed over, Mrs. Siu welcomed us into her house. She was a large woman with a round face. She nodded while speaking with a slight Chinese accent, “Your mother is the best baker. You know how to bake too?”

“No.” I could barely crack an egg.

“She helps taste test,” my mom added. Her high-pitched laugh made me wince.

“What grade are you in?” Mrs. Siu’s big moonface peered at me.

“I’ll be in seventh grade.”

“Ah, so you’re a big kid now,” she prodded.

“Yup.” Big kid, whatever that meant.

“Hey, Lis, you wanna go to the park?” Michaela bounced on the balls of her feet.

“Yes, you girls should get to know each other,” Mrs. Siu smiled. “Hold onto Lisa’s elbow, okay Michaela?”

As we walked to the park, Michaela kept a firm grip on my elbow. Her whole hand was squeezing arm as if she were taking my blood pressure. When we had to step down off the curb, she would seize onto my arm for support. Michaela talked the whole way there, “What’s your favorite color? You have a dog? That’s so cool! Hey Lis, I can do a chin-up.”

She wasn't lying. When we got to the park, she demonstrated her chin-up on the blue monkey bars. She was the strongest girl I had ever seen. I tried to do a chin-up, but wasn't able to get past my elbows before my arms gave out. No other kids were at the park, so we were free to do whatever we wanted. I helped guide her across the jungle gym while she yammered on a mile a minute. Before I knew it, I was talking like her too. "Do you go to church? Do you like it? I think it's boring too!"

The next Sunday, I was half-listening to the Bible lesson, half-staring at the clock. I had no one to talk to because my best friend Jennifer didn't go to Bay Area Chinese Bible Church. Here, rows of black-haired heads surrounded me instead of the blond and brunette heads at school. I started working on putting my leg to sleep. I liked the numb-then-tingly sensation that happened when I sat with one leg crossed at a certain angle. When I looked back at the clock again, Michaela and her dad were standing in the doorway. Mr. Siu peered in, recognized me looking at them, and brought Michaela over to the empty seat next to me.

"Heeeey Lis!" she knocked into me.

Whenever I got bored, I whispered something funny to Michaela. Her eyes crinkled up even smaller as she giggled under her breath. Every Sunday after that her dad would come to drop her off, spot me, and park her at my side without a word. I began saving Michaela a seat by placing my Bible next to me, instead of under my chair.

The Sunday school teacher, Ms. Gee, was a young woman with a neat bob and gray pumps. Ms. Gee could be a lot prettier if she wore makeup, I thought. In the middle of reading verses, she stopped to ask a question from her lesson plan. "Do you think God wants you to be smart? Good? Or happy?"

Probably all three, I joked to Michaela.

“Happy,” answered Elizabeth, a prim girl in patent leather Mary Janes.

“Right, God wants you to be happy. It doesn’t matter to Him how smart you are. Likewise, good works won’t get you into heaven. Although those are good things, what’s ultimately important to God is that you are happy.”

I thought that was pretty cool of God. On the car ride home, I repeated what Ms. Gee had told us about happiness being the most important.

“That’s true,” said my dad. He was also a Sunday school teacher.

My older brother Gary, ever the know-it-all, wanted to prove the Church wrong. “Okay, but what if you were a murderer and that was really wrong, but you were happy killing people. God would definitely send you to hell for that.”

“Don’t swear,” said my mom. In our house, h-e-l-l was a swear word.

“You didn’t answer my question!” Gary pointed out.

When school started up, I was looking forward to spending every day with Jennifer again. At lunch, we always sat next to each other. Jennifer would offer me some of her Mother’s-brand cookies, which came in pretty pink-and-purple striped packets. The plain Zip-loc bags encasing my mom’s homemade cookies paled by comparison. My mom once said Mother’s cookies were fake cookies from a fake mom. I didn’t care if store-bought cookies were as hard as bricks, and had secretly grown a taste for the iced oatmeal ones.

Jennifer had gone to Hawaii all through August. She gave me a rainbow keychain when she saw me, and promised to teach me the hula. “We’re going to be in the same class!” she squealed. “It’s going to be just like always!”

The day before my mom had informed me that Michaela would be in my class. I didn't understand why Michaela would be in seventh grade when she was old enough to be in high school. My mom explained to me that Michaela used to be in Special Ed. Not being able to see well meant that it took her longer to learn things. Michaela could only see blurry shapes. I had noticed that Ms. Gee never called on Michaela to read verses from the Bible. No way could she read that tiny print. But Michaela was bright and talkative; she wasn't like those other Special Ed kids who drooled all over their chins.

So I was supposed to look out for her. The teacher noticed how Michaela would take my elbow. A couple days later, the seating chart was rearranged, but the only change was that Michaela was sitting next to me instead of a green-eyed girl named Alexis. Although a plump woman named Ms. Susan would help Michaela do her schoolwork, I had to help Michaela do everything else. When it was P.E., I had to run with Michaela latched onto my elbow. When it was lunchtime, I had to sit next to her. When she had to go to the bathroom, I had to chauffeur her. The other kids pitied me, but they weren't offering to take Michaela to the bathroom, either. Their bulging stares transformed our friendship into a charity service.

"There's a rumor about you," Jennifer pulled me aside at the water fountain. "Alexis said you change Michaela's pads for her in the bathroom."

"Alexis made that up. It's not true," I searched Jennifer's face, but it was full of disdain. "Look, I don't want to be her friend anymore. My mom is making me."

"Seems like you don't want to be *my* friend anymore." Jennifer turned her back to me. I saw the back of her Hawaii t-shirt. *Aloha!*

My stomach dropped. Where did Jennifer learn to be so dramatic? She walked toward a group of girls whose laughter was barely contained behind their cupped hands. "Hey, Lisa! You and Michaela look like twins!" yelled Alexis while pulling up her eyelids. "Are you retarded too?" My skin changed color. I felt the burn of Michaela's grip on my arm. I wanted to tear it off.

"God, why don't you use your cane?" I asked Michaela as I escorted her back to the classroom. I had seen the white-and-red banded cane neatly collapsed under her desk. She never used it.

"Because you're here, Lis," Michaela said, squeezing my arm.

This time I felt her nails, and I flinched from the imagined pain. "Jesus Christ, you scratched me!" Before she could answer, I stormed off. "Why can't you just leave me alone!"

"Hey, Lis. I'm sorry, Lis," she called as I ran, slapping my sandals down on the hot, black pavement. I ran faster, afraid the pavement was going to crack open and engulf me. I was going to H-E-L-L.

Jennifer avoided me the rest of the day, and I avoided Michaela. When I got home, I threw my backpack on the floor and slumped into a kitchen chair across from my brother. Gary was already snacking on a slice of pound cake.

"What's the matter with you?" Gary pointed his fork at me.

My mom placed a thick slice of pound cake in front of me. It's called pound cake because it has a pound of butter, a pound of flour, a pound of eggs, and a pound of sugar. She went back to the oven to check on her next batch. The oven heat poured out when she scraped open its metal door. Almost ready. "How was school?"

I grunted and sank lower in my chair.

Gary, mouth full of cake, asked, "How come you always hang out with that retard? I thought you were supposed to be smart."

"Shut up."

"Don't swear!" my mom rang out.

Ding! The oven bell went off. *Ding! Ding!*

I screamed, "Shut up is not a swear word!"

My mom's face hardened. "I don't want to hear those words coming out of your mouth."

I was ready to meet her match. "Your cake is disgusting." I stabbed my slice for emphasis. "You can't make me be friends with Michaela anymore. I'm not her human cane! I don't know why you made me be friends with her in the first place. She's not like me and Jennifer! And I'm not like her because I'm not a retard!"

Smoky vapors polluted the sweet smell in the house. The cake was burning in the oven. It would turn hard and black if my mom didn't rescue it in time. In an instant, she leapt to pull out the cake while I ran up to my room. *Slam!*

Twenty minutes later, my mom knocked on my door. "I overcooked it."

She was holding a black-crustied pound cake. She took the Bible out of my hands, where I had been tearing through the tissue-thin pages, searching for the passage on happiness.

"If we're supposed to be happy, how come we can't do whatever we want?"

My mom sighed at her less-than-perfect creation. "Because we're not all the same."

Buttery and bitter, I swallowed that cake.