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TEXT prose

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Vanilla

The mind has its needs, just as the body does. The latter are the foundations of society; the former make it pleasing. While government and laws take care of the security and wellbeing of men in groups, the sciences, letters, and the arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains which weigh men down, snuffing out in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they appear to have been born, and make them love their servitude by turning them into what we call civilized people.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Discourse on the Arts and Sciences (1750)

There's a famous market near where I live. My favourite time to go is early in the morning, before the crowds of overeager tourists and jaded office-workers get there, just as the stalls are being set up. The market itself has an indoor part, an outdoor part, and an indoor-outdoor part, and is housed in a tastefully decrepit old corn exchange built out of a warm, golden limestone. The site has been used as a market, I understand from the signs put up everywhere, since 1734.

In the mornings, as the sun rises, wisps of steam are caught by the glass ceiling which covers the indoor-outdoor part and are whirled about by the cool breeze

into a thousand layers of gossamer ruffles and chiffon pleats. As the marketers set up their stalls, the smell of falafel being deep-fried and spicy beans being stewed is enough to unsettle the stomach at such an unconventional hour. There are clangs and clashes as entire shopfronts are re-erected and screams and shouts as business proceedings begin, not with the public, but with one another. A representative from each stall queues up at the cafe in the indoor-outdoor part with multiple mugs in hand, waiting their turn in line for discounted traders' tea or coffee. Pigeons stalk the undergrowth confidently, searching for scraps of any kind; in the market they are top of the food chain and, unperturbed by the stomping feet of the browsers and the feigned kicks of the stallholders, they merely scurry or limp along leisurely, having lost all ability or desire to fly. The stalls in the indoor-outdoor part flank either side of the main walkway and are allowed no higher than the ground floor of the surrounding three-storey buildings. Above, the windows are boarded up out of disuse (the dilapidated structures having been abandoned long ago), yet I often experience the remarkable sensation of being watched, although, of course, there is not a soul there. It still remains, however, the undoubtable feeling of being viewed from all sides by unseen eyes; it is like standing in the middle of a panopticon.

I loved the market so much that I decided to get a job there. I found employment in the cafe which had its home in the indoor-outdoor part. I had to serve cakes, make teas and coffees and do all the washing up. I found great solace in mundanity and repetition: in slicing, scraping, boxing; pouring, spilling, sprinkling; rinsing-out, drying-up, falling over. After years of intense academic study, I had finally and rather unsurprisingly (to everyone but me) burnt out.

'Two slices of the vegan ginger, please darling,' came a voice from the window. I went to cut them their slices.

'Oh no, not that one,' they said and then pointed, 'it's this one here.'

'Sorry,' I said, blushing slightly, 'I'm new.'

I picked up the correct cake and took it back to the counter. As I destroyed it, I imagined creating it. I saw myself applying the chocolate mirror glaze to the stacked sponges in a seamless pouring motion. After doing that, I would scatter the top with a cornucopia of grapes, strawberries, blueberries and physalis, weaving a vanitas garland out of edible detritus. In my head, I pictured myself like an apprentice in a renaissance workshop. I was content to a certain extent, perfecting these arts, but I wasn't exactly sure why I was still

here. I had completed my postgraduate degree – just, by the skin of my teeth – the previous year but now all I could aspire to be in life was a master of cake-slicing. You’re figuring out what matters to you and what you want to do with yourself, I thought as I boxed up the portions, you’re working in a cake shop and writing at the same time. You’re taking care of yourself and trying not to push yourself to breaking point, like all those times before.

‘Could I have my cake please?’ the customer asked, leaning through the window.

It was mid-afternoon and I needed something to eat because my sugar levels had dropped and I was getting dehydrated. I hadn’t had a break all day, I’d been so busy. I was noticing the lithium-induced shakes in my hands, which I found doubly worrying when holding a sharpened, steam-blasted knife. I crammed a peanut-butter cookie sandwich into my mouth. It was unbearably sweet on such an empty stomach. I chomped and chomped and felt my teeth dissolve in their gums. My enamel was corroding away, as if it were an orange being peeled.

The nerve in the root of my bottom left incisor started playing up again. It presented a sour kind of impression, at once attractive, at once repulsive. To distract myself from it I started on the crumby plates and coffee-ringed cups piled high in the stainless-steel sink – it was time to start closing down. Life has the structure of a three-tiered cake, I thought profoundly, squirting in fairy liquid before turning on the hot tap. It’s made of thin layers of too-sugary icing, pasted in between massive hunks of dried-out sponge. There’s more watery white goo on the top and then there’s a dusting of crystallised ginger cubes, toasted almond flakes, dried rose petals and other overpriced crap on top of that. I’m strapped on, above it all, exhibiting myself like a lonely bride on the circular precipice of a sadomasochistic wedding cake. The bindings holding me down are out of sight, concealed by vegan vanilla buttercream and grated chocolate swirls. I reckoned I must have come to like it up there though, splishing and splashing in and amongst the glucose ejaculate. Burying my head in butter, eggs and cream, I had been able to temporarily forget my current failure at making something of myself, able to ignore the embarrassment palpable in my defensiveness when an acquaintance from a past life asked me what I am doing now and expected so much more than the answer: ‘What am I doing now? I’m a cafe assistant and I do a writing club once a week.’

I’ve put myself up there though, I admitted to no one in particular, on top of that ostentatious confectionary monstrosity. I realised suddenly that I had tied

myself up in undoable knots, out of ropes hidden underneath shiny swathes of ganache, and that I had become unable or unwilling to escape from my own captivity. Doing the drying-up, I pictured myself wrestling erotically out of my plastic wedding dress, not because I would be trying to escape, but because I would truly revel in the public humiliation of such nakedness, akin to the wicked pleasure that came from having disappointed everyone, including myself. The sheer release of being demonstrably as useless, as defeated and as unsuccessful as I had known myself to be was basically orgasmic. Wasn't this indignity what I had always fantasied about – being viewed from all sides by unseen eyes and teased, tickled, spanked; criticised, shamed, degraded; hit, bruised, bitten into? If I'm asked 'Two slices of the vegan ginger, please darling' one more time I will instead offer myself on a chintzy china plate – two chunks out of my trembling arms dripping neon-pink slime (I can almost smell its strawberry scent). I will regard the consumption of my body with a kind of cannibalistic ecstasy; at least it will give me something to write about. Am I here, in this panopticon, because I want to be punished, or because I don't know how not to want to be? I ponder, as I put everything washed and dried back in its place. Maybe I have just lost all ability or desire to fly.

The stone of the indoor-outdoor part of the market glows brighter in the evenings when the sun comes down and I'm finishing locking up. I often close my eyes and bask in the glorious light which streams through the glass roof, or at least where it can, in between the artful splattering of marbled pigeon shit.

Laura Grace Simpkins is a creative nonfiction writer whose personal essays describe her mental health using colours, shapes, and patterns. Her writing has been published by The Guardian and has been broadcast on BBC Radio Bristol. Simpkins is currently collaborating with the Wellcome Collection on a research project about medication and the environment, and is developing her first book, Lithification. Her website is at lauragsimpkins.com.