

# Act of Creation

*by* J.A. Pak

Mary ran her cake business in a way she could never have run her marriage. It was by appointment only, full deposit, partial refund (and this purely at her own discretion). Business was terrific and she had to turn down job after job. She only made cakes, custom-ordered weeks in advance—months if you wanted a wedding cake. Mary wasn't at all temperamental—she'd make any cake you'd like, any design you wanted no matter how banal. But what she was really known for, what people sought her out to do, was her beautiful confectionery sculptures, eerily real and heartbreaking to eat. Her signature cake was an ornate arrangement of crafted flowers springing out of a cake vase, edible gladioli, roses, delphiniums, flowing ivy held by a genoise urn. Two-and-a-half feet tall, it was breathtaking to present, a thousand dollars to order because each spray of flowers took half a day of painstaking work. Mary's art lay in her absolute control of color. Never muted, never dull, the pigments in her icing vibrated in a choral mass so that flowers seemed to be ever blooming, leaves swaying and caught by even the gentlest of breezes. Most often people forgot the flowers were artificial, edible, confused that in their hands the flowers were so stiff and sticky to hold. Once near water, they'd disintegrate into a foamy mass. The actual cake was a conundrum of perception. People were either too timid—afraid of shattering the urn—or too forceful, convinced in the mind's eye that a cake knife would never cleave the urn apart. The surprise at the gently yielding cake was infinite.

Every once in a while Mary got requests just for the flowers because once eaten, they became addictive. The candy flowers were strangely chewy—almost fibrous—their taste floral with a sweet fermented quality like great Sauternes. One couple swore they were an aphrodisiac and always ordered a dozen golden lilies every wedding anniversary to Mary's great amusement. Not that she ever betrayed herself. Her professionalism was exemplary; no request, no confidence was ever brooked by her own emotions.

Because of her talent for re-creation, another of Mary's popular requests was for cakes decorated with a portrait. Often it was a wedding portrait, a couple hardly recognizable, the pose too formulaic, but sweet. She got lost in that sweetness, the bite achingly unbearable. Ten years and she hadn't thought for a moment that her marriage wouldn't last twenty, thirty—forever. She had in her optimism made her own wedding cake, four-tiered, a cascade of real, edible flowers—she hadn't yet perfected her artificial trademarks. The only time she'd ever looked truly happy was in her wedding photos.

What had gone wrong, she wondered, still baffled. For her, they had been happy. She had loved him and he had loved her, and for her, if they had only remained she and he, they would still be happy. She'd sat with a blank heart as her husband suddenly surrounded her with his carefully constructed tale. Before Mary had met her husband, he'd been madly in love with a woman named Honor, who for reasons Mary didn't understand, although her husband tried many times to explain them to her, wouldn't go out with her husband, eventually marrying someone else. Now, over a decade later, this woman was divorced and admits she had made a mistake—she should have gone out with Mary's husband. Too bad, Mary said. But now her husband realized that while he loved Mary, he wasn't in love with her. He was in love with Honor. And again Mary didn't understand. Why the hell was he making this distinction? Hadn't he been happy all these years, Mary wanted to know. He couldn't admit that he hadn't been happy—couldn't she see she was confusing things? Apples and oranges.

She'd thought all chaos would move out with him, the last of his boxes shipped to Honor's house. And for a time there was a stillness. She made her cakes and made new friends, found a smaller place where she could be content with her cat. But there was this lingering problem. She still loved her ex-husband—and what was she going to do with this love, still being produced like milk for a dead child? She had never before realized the true fabric of love.

Her next project called for something a little different. A couple wanted her to create a four-foot tall replica of an ancient palace the husband's ancestors had once called home. Having just been reacquainted with the property in Hungary, they wanted the replica to be the spectacular centerpiece for a grand, once-in-a-life-time family reunion.

Mary was meticulous in her preliminary work, drafting detailed drawings of every possible angle of the palace and creating several miniature versions to get a feel for the structure. When she felt ready, she began with gigantic cake tins, first building block by block the general contours of the castle before carving out all the architectural details. She didn't want to stop at the castle but planned to recreate the grounds immediate to the palace, manicured lawns, crisp topiaries and mazes, a marble fountain atop from which Cupid would blow champagne out of its puckered mouth. She'd created working fountains before—also an exploding three-foot volcano for a children's party. She'd rigged it so that colored sugar resembling ash first showered the dazzled children before quarts of red caramel came oozing out of the cavity.

It gave Mary great pleasure to see the reaction of the guests. At first they were simply too astonished by the sheer size and accomplishment. But then they began to scrutinize every detail, marveling at the bubbly champagne that sprouted out of Cupid. "All edible?" they would ask over and over again. Mary caught only a fleeting sensation of pain when the first pieces were cut and treasured away for eating. She even had a large piece herself—part of the manicured lawn she'd textured laboriously with finely shredded coconut flakes.

Even weeks afterwards Mary felt a tremendous letdown. Few people had the money or the occasion to order such a monstrously grand gesture. Mary looked at the gigantic cake tins she'd probably never use again, the bags and bags of flour and sugar—she'd over ordered. She thought she would never do anything quite as magnificent and toyed with the idea of retiring. Most people only

wanted round or rectangular cakes, predictably decorated, which never satisfied the sculptor's soul Mary had.

And then one night, as she was scrubbing her kitchen, she received a divine inspiration. Her hands began imperceptibly trembling. For the first time she was afraid of failure.

Mary mixed several vats of cake batter and regreased all the gigantic cake tins. She was going to sculpt her husband—life-size and real in every way. She closed her eyes, breath held, and recalled just the right shade of skin color, how it varied from face to neck, arm to hand. He had dark black-green eyes with brown flecks, black hair, long toes. There was a spot above the small of his back that was surprisingly soft and vulnerable. Should she rely on the last mental picture she had of him? She realized there was a variety of being, ten years and the infinitely many ways he had changed.

Laying the cake blocks on top of each other, Mary assembled a solid structure of almost six feet. She worked in swift strokes, drawing the general outlines with a knife, carefully carving away chunks to roughly form the head, torso. Then her true work began, chipping the contours of the face, the musculature of the body. She remembered every detail, coloring white fondant in over a thousand shades for the skin, modifying her flower recipe for the black wig that would eventually crown the head. She added body hair, even a slight five o'clock shadow on the lower half of the face. The lips were moist and relaxed, the eyes smiling. The body was strong and assured, the face handsome. She worked on the hair the longest, remembering how much she had touched her husband's hair at the beginning, enjoying so much its gentle silkiness. She almost fainted when the work was done. It had taken three nights and four days, laboring almost nonstop in a room she kept at fifty degrees to keep the cake firm and pliable. Rubbing her hands together, she stepped back to admire her work. He seemed just about to speak to her. She touched his face, caressing his jaw line. She kissed him. And then methodically she cut him up in single-sized portions, securely wrapping each piece in plastic wrap and sealing them together in

Ziplocs, all to be kept safe in the freezer until she craved a slice of him.

