

THE PERFECT BREADBOX

A Children's Story told
in the style of Oscar Wilde

by

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ONCE THERE WAS A BREADBOX BORN in a factory.

Of course, not everyone would agree that breadboxes are actually born. Many people would say breadboxes are merely constructed of bits of metal and plastic, not at all the kind of thing that would actually be born and have feelings like you or me. Other more generous people, who give their cars names and think the world is full of lovely mysteries that no one yet understands, might say that a breadbox, like a good baseball cap or a favorite blanket, could have a personality. But, for our purposes, let's just agree that one day the breadbox wasn't there and the next day it was. That's very much like being born, and the breadbox was glad that it happened.

Next the breadbox was delivered to a department store where it sat on a shelf for ever so long. This was a discouraging time for the breadbox, not made any better knowing that there were hundreds more breadboxes still in their cartons in the back of the store, all of them looking for a good home, too. Sometimes the breadbox wondered if there were enough good homes in the whole world to take in all the breadboxes there were.

Still, as people walked by, the breadbox put on its best face, trying to look as shiny and new and roomy as possible, waiting for the right person to stop in front of it and say, "Oh, here, this is just the one we've been looking for."

Then one day, it happened. Just like that.

The breadbox was overjoyed, for the young woman who stopped in front of it was beautiful, more beautiful than any of the other people who had ever stopped in front of any of the other breadboxes and taken them home. The beautiful young woman was with her handsome husband who, frankly, was almost as young and beautiful as she was. The husband looked at the breadbox very severely. He wasn't about to commit himself before opening and closing the door a couple of times, but anyone could see these two people were in love and that he would have agreed to any breadbox she wanted.

So he said, "Yes, it's perfect."

Which is not always the best thing for one to hear, particularly one as new to the world and impressionable as the breadbox was.

"I'm perfect!" the breadbox thought as it was popped back into its old carton and, moments later, was carried out under the arm of the young man. "That's why it took so long for me to find a home. Being perfect, I had to wait for the most beautiful and perfect people of all to choose me."

Now, we've already agreed, the breadbox was very young, so it isn't fair to blame the breadbox because its logic wasn't as fully finished as, say, its brilliant enamel coating – which was very well finished indeed. As we all know, true beauty is measured by what you do, not how you look, but it takes some of us a long time to learn that, and understanding all of this is a lot to ask of a breadbox, particularly a brand new one.

So, while it is not kind to say so, the breadbox began to take on airs.

After it was tucked into the perfect spot on the kitchen counter, sliding just perfectly under the kitchen cupboard, its off-white enamel a perfect match with the off-white of the cabinets, it became a little too proud of itself.

It became proud of its sturdiness, of its brushed aluminum skin and the soft rounded curves of its corners. It was proud of its welds – how smooth they were! Not a ripple nor a bump where its sheets of metal folded and joined as one.

“Smooth as an egg shell,” it thought more than once.

It was proud of its adjustable shelf, for only among the best breadboxes is there an interior shelf that can be raised or lowered. What’s more, the shelf was of the finest stainless steel.

Of all things, however, the breadbox was particularly proud of its door. Doors, it should be known, are truly what distinguish uncommon breadboxes from common ones. Its door opened on quiet metal hinges that were not allowed to even think about squeaking. Thick and heavy, the door was constructed of a block of hardwood which was wrapped in an envelope of metal and weighed almost as much as the rest of the breadbox itself. But what made the door so rare was its precision. So perfectly was it shaped, it fit like a door to a vault.

And safe? Oh, my, it was safe inside the breadbox. The door was held firmly in place by a stainless steel latch that squeezed into a slot behind the metal frame. Closed, not the sheerest sliver of light nor the barest whisper of air could penetrate the breadbox’s spacious interior. Whatever was stored inside kept fresh in the dark for days on end.

“How perfect I am,” thought the breadbox – and, I’m obliged to say, the breadbox thought this quite repeatedly.

Not that everyone shared this opinion. The electric range with the stovetop grill and self-cleaning oven didn’t think much of the breadbox at all.

“My dear, it doesn’t have a clock, it can’t clean itself, it’s never learned to cook. It doesn’t even plug in. It’s not an appliance at all,” the range declared.

The two-door fridge hummed in agreement: “Look at it. It can’t even keep food cold. Put a quart of milk in it and you’d stink up the joint in no time.”

“But I’m self-contained,” answered the breadbox, feeling quite sure of itself. “You both need electricity to run. Unplug the two of you and what have you got? I need nothing to keep food fresh. I’m perfect exactly the way I am.”

The breadbox didn’t need to add that neither the range nor the refrigerator was as perfectly off-white as it was. The range, in fact, was dark gray and the fridge was a very old-fashioned green. The beautiful young wife often commented that she would like one day to have new appliances that matched the color of the rest of the kitchen.

“Like the breadbox,” she would often add, which made the breadbox feel very proud of itself indeed.

Well, as you probably know, appliances are the aristocrats of the kitchen world. Even the good china knows that. And when it comes to who’s the most important appliance of all the appliances – from the hand-held blenders and four-speed juicers and exotic pasta-makers right up to the handy, high-speed microwave – every appliance knows that it’s the range and the refrigerator. So, as you can imagine, the

range and the old fridge did not take kindly to an upstart breadbox who thought way too much of itself.

The breadbox told itself it didn't mind, although secretly, of course, it minded very much not being accepted by the other kitchen things.

"That's the problem with perfection," the breadbox said, "others become jealous of you and there's nothing you can do about it."

NOW, IF APPLIANCES ARE CONSIDERED FIRST and foremost in the kitchen world, then food is considered definitely last. Strange as it is to us who like food and prefer to have some at least three times each day, appliances and other things in the kitchen – including the breadbox – don't really regard food very highly at all. Food is necessary, of course, because what else is a kitchen for? But, as the old fridge once told a pork chop, "Let's face it, you're just like all the rest of the food. You're more trouble than you're worth."

Well, that's an overstatement, of course, but think about it. You have to go to several places to get food. Then pay for it. You have to bring it home in bags, debag it, put it away, take it out, cut it up, stew it, bake it, broil it, boil it, serve it, eat it, and clean up after it afterwards. If television were this much trouble, no one would ever bother watching it.

Food is bothersome, and, except for some old jars of spices in the rack and tins of pickled herrings shoved way back in the cupboards that everyone has forgotten about, food is here one day, gone the next. And, if it isn't gone, then it's probably just going bad. Food isn't anything you can really ever make friends with or even get to know very well before it's gone again.

So, food is just something kitchen things put up with. They store, slice, dice, stir, whip, whirl, mix, heat, freeze and refrigerate it. They don't get to know it.

The breadbox, for example, often had the chance to chat with loaves of store-bought bread. If the breadbox had cared, it could have learned about the fields of rye and wheat and flax that waved like oceans of gold across vast prairies. The breadbox could have learned what it was like to be a seedling struggling up through the soil, squeezing out through the cold darkness of the earth and into the radiance of the sun, rising straight and tall, its stalks growing heavy with seeds of its own, being one of so many millions of shoots, part of such a magical, wondrous force of nature.

The bread could have told the breadbox all it had seen – huge skies with white clouds that changed shape as they floated by, thunderstorms that drove pellets of rain pounding into the earth, the fear of hail, the joy of wind. The bread could have told stories of field mice and foxes that scurried about in the furrows of the earth and the hawks that hunted, circling the sky overhead. It could have told the breadbox about crickets, and song birds, and the many sounds the wind makes, so many sounds, the grain itself joining in, rustling dry leaves in its own autumn symphony.

The bread could have told the breadbox what it was like to be have been part of something so magnificent and now part of something new, waiting to see what happens next. It could have said to the breadbox, "This is life and it goes on in so many new and different ways. I'm always amazed." But, no, all the breadbox cared about was that the slices of bread in the cellophane wrapper didn't leave crumbs in its insides.

"Bread was such a nuisance really, if the truth be told," the breadbox thought. "It just gets stale and attracts mold and begins to smell if it's left too long. Thank goodness for garbage day when all the old crusts are thrown into the streets."

So, as you can see – whether it was food or one of the appliances – it's clear the perfect breadbox didn't make any friends.

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NOW I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT was about the orange kiss-me cake that changed everything so drastically. It couldn't have been because the kiss-me cake was perfect, because it certainly wasn't. As you probably know, a perfect orange kiss-me cake springs back when lightly touched in the center with a fork, and this one had no spring at all. In fact, one might say its center was boggy. But what the cake did have in abundance was love.

It had been made with love. The young wife had carefully carved an orange with love and had saved the long ringlet of peel. She had put the peel and a cup of golden raisins and a third that amount of dark walnuts into the clear plastic bowl of the blender that she had never used before. The blender was a wedding gift, a noisy thing the breadbox very much disapproved of, especially because the perfect young wife seemed so proud of the way it roared and chopped and mixed everything together.

"If I had a cord, I could have done that," the breadbox thought, and then thought it might have needed some kind of blade too, but it didn't matter – the roaring and chopping had taken but a moment, then the noisy blender was washed up and put back in the bottom shelf behind the pans where it belonged.

The breadbox had watched the perfect young wife add two cups of white flour with precisely one and one-third cups of pure white sugar and one absolutely even teaspoon of salt, the mixture falling from the sifter like sweet dust into a glass bowl.

Then she had poured exactly one-half cup of liquid shortening – which she had so carefully measured, calculating the cusp of the liquid against the mark on the thick glass measuring cup.

Just as the recipe book advised, she had blended well, thinking all the while of her perfect young husband and his birthday they would celebrate, and of the orange kiss-me cake his mother used to bake for him.

“Now,” she thought, “I will be the one to make it.”

She was not exactly aware of the extraordinary thing she was doing in that moment, blending not only sugar and shortening but the past and the future, linking what was with what would be, creating the gift that we call the present. She had blended two eggs, love and happiness and a cup of milk. And as she had folded in the mixture of orange peel, gold raisins and walnuts, she had thought of the young husband and the life she had dreamed of – so much of it coming true.

The breadbox had never seen the perfect young wife bake before, so it did not entirely know of the wonderful thing that had been created either, but as the young wife poured and scraped the mixture into a buttered and floured baking pan, the breadbox felt it. Everything in the kitchen felt it. The microwave felt it, the flatware in the drawer felt it, the kitchen sink felt it. Even the grumpy green fridge felt it. The old gray oven, pre-heated to exactly 350 degrees Fahrenheit, was overjoyed by it and swallowed the pan behind its door with entire satisfaction, so heartened to be a critical part of the moment.

Fifty minutes later, the orange kiss-me cake didn't spring back when touched by a fork and the young wife remembered she hadn't added the teaspoon of baking powder. Who would have thought one teaspoon of anything would have made such a difference, but it had.

The young wife tried to fix it. She drizzled the reserved orange juice over the warm cake and sprinkled the remaining sugar which she had combined with the rest of the walnuts and a teaspoon of cinnamon, just like it said to do in the recipe. But nothing could make the kiss-me cake not sag in the middle.

"I've ruined his birthday," the young wife said aloud as if she knew all the appliances and kitchen things could hear. Then she said a lot of things that no one should really hear, mostly about how she was not perfect at all, about how nothing worked and how she always ruined everything. And then she banged the kiss-me cake onto the counter and left crying to tell her troubles to the bedroom furniture.

"Isn't this a lovely kitchen," the kiss-me cake said, startling the nearby breadbox who was thinking of quite something else. To the surprise of the breadbox, the cake had a voice as warm and exotic as the aroma of cinnamon.

"Why was the woman crying?" the cake asked.

The breadbox didn't know exactly what to say. I mean, how do you tell someone they're ruined? That they're just not the right combination of things? That something is missing in them? That they're not perfect the way you are?

Well, of course, you don't. You try to be polite.

"Maybe you'll still rise and you won't be so bad after all...when you cool down," the breadbox said, quite sympathetically it thought, considering how imperfect the cake was.

"I'm not bad at all," the cake answered. "Not in twenty million years has there been something exactly like me."

"Twenty million...?" the breadbox started to say, then stopped. There was no point in getting into a discussion over it. This was just food, after all.

"Oh, yes, the orange I'm made of is twenty million years old, at least," said the kiss-me cake.

The breadbox knew that was ridiculous and was actually beginning to feel embarrassed for the confused cake but decided that silence was the best policy, and it just sat there not responding.

"Before there were people, there were oranges," said the cake. "Oranges were here waiting, weighing down the branches of the citrus trees before ape-men hunched along carrying their stone axes."

Well, the breadbox had heard nothing about this, and it seemed somehow insulting to the beautiful young wife to be discussed so crudely. So the breadbox said, "Well, I'm sure." Which, as everything in the kitchen knew, was the breadbox's way of ending a conversation.

Except the kiss-me cake simply went on talking: "It's believed the first orange tree blossomed in India. Isn't that a miracle? And then the birds that ate the fruit left seeds in their dung and the trees spread to China and Malay.

"Do you know about Malay?" the cake inquired.

"What?" said the breadbox, pretending not to listen.

"Malay is a peninsula. That's like an island except it's connected to the mainland by a thin stretch of mountains."

"Yes, well, I know what a peninsula is," the breadbox said, but of course it didn't. In fact, the breadbox realized just then that it didn't know very much about anything.

"Well, it's not my fault," the breadbox thought. "It's not like there were schools for breadboxes where one could learn these things. Anyway, what was the point of knowing what a peninsula is? How does that help you keep food fresh?"

But the cake kept talking in its cinnamon voice of the wondrous things this peninsula held – barking deer, wild black cattle and the flying foxes that leapt from the canopy of branches. It spoke of the *raffesia*, the huge flowers larger than any platter in the kitchen that bloomed on ropelike vines which crept up through the trees in the great mountain rain forests. And of *sumatras*, the name given the sudden downpours that rushed in from the China Sea.

How the orange kiss-me cake knew of the dark-skinned people who hunted with blowguns made from bamboo and whether any of it were true is difficult to know. Was the cake just imagining these things and trying to be important, the breadbox wondered? Or, by some miracle of the love that created it, did it actually remember all of its orangey past?