

THERE IS NO GOD AT THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY: A NOVELLA ON MEDIOCRITY BY MADELEINE MASON

It is a truth universally acknowledged that chain restaurants exist as the heart and soul of these United States Of America.

Every child has fond, nostalgic memories of driving through McDonald's, going to Taco Bell, or indulging in some fine fare at the higher establishments (Red Lobster, Outback Steakhouse, Applebee's). I was once one of these children too, until I was the wee age of seven. An employee at KFC did not make sure the lid was snug on my father's Diet Dr. Pepper. It fell to the ground when he stood up out of the car. The drink cascaded down his shirt, landing onto the cracked pavement below. A fire lit behind his eyes. His shoulders tensed. He looked at me and my sister, and with a dangerously soft tone in his voice, he said:

"We're never fucking eating fast food again."

Because of this, I've never experienced some of the more traditional childhood experiences. Fast food and chain restaurants were never a nostalgic memory in my prefrontal cortex or parietal lobe. My father, the same man who swore nephalism on fast food, was a chef. More of my memories are associated with his ambition around the culinary arts. He taught me how to cook at a young age, and felt comfortable leaving me alone around a gas stove. There was no need for a trip to Texas Roadhouse or Red Robin for dinner.

One restaurant always seemed like a strange, forbidden fruit to me. It sat in the middle of a parking lot, next to an AT&T and a Macy's. It seemed exotic, a deep terracotta with an Italian-inspired awning. It was always busy. People were always going in and out of it. I always asked if we could go, take a peek inside, and fulfill my desires to know what secrets it contained. Until now, I've never stepped foot inside a Cheesecake Factory.

CHAPTER ONE: THE CALL

The Cheesecake Factory on Howe and Arden was my White Rabbit. I wanted to follow it, see what strange culinary adventure it would take me.

It came as a saving grace when I was told that the cheapest dish at The Rainforest Cafe was twenty-two dollars. I panicked and tried to find another restaurant that would fulfill the kitchy, quirky attitude that The Rainforest Cafe has. Yelp failed me, only showing good restaurants with atmosphere and class. In a moment of panic, I googled Touristy Restaurants In Chicago, which did not help at all. I felt betrayed by the capitalistic scheme known as The Chain Restaurants of America. I would have to turn in an intelligent, complex piece about some decent restaurant and make my mother proud.

This is not the life I want to live.

Then, it popped into my head. *Why not go to The Cheesecake Factory?*

I chuckled. The Cheesecake Factory? There's no point. I can't digest dairy. Why would anyone go to The Cheesecake Factory and not eat the cheesecake? It's a futile act, one that ultimately leads to my demise on the toilet.

But I was desperate. I was a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I refused to swallow my pride and enjoy good food at an independent business.

I texted my friend.

How about The Cheesecake Factory? I've never been. I think it would be fun to review it.

A minute passed.

Sounds good. I'll see you there at six.

CHAPTER TWO: DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

The Cheesecake Factory sits at the base of the John Hancock Tower, next to a Starbucks. It faces a Benihana, staring it down. It's as if the two chain restaurants are engaged in a war over tourism. Which one of them can draw a larger crowd from the out-of-towners? It reminded me of my divorced parents, trying to win my affection over the other.

The exterior of The Cheesecake Factory is very different than the one in my hometown. It has a strange brass wave cascading its large wall-to-wall window. In large, aluminum, ballooned letters it announces its presence.

I wonder, for a brief moment, if I've wandered back to California. The whole facade feels lifted from a lost land of Disney. As if its Walt's fizzled idea of a new-age land, complete with Mickey Mouse donning a tinfoil suit.

That is not the case. I am still in Chicago, just staring at a building most likely inspired by Caesar's Palace.

I take a breath and walk inside.

I wonder if the low light is an effort to conserve energy in these wasteful days. Everything immediately has a warmer tone to it. Little orbs bounce off metallic accents. Contrarily, the cheesecake counter is blindingly lit with fluorescent lights. The restaurant's claim to fame will not be ignored as you walk to your seat or leave the place. It demands every ounce of your attention. Giant pillars, ballooned to their fullest extent, hold the ceiling up. They are strange

shade of yellow, one only seen in cartoons. The ceiling is a strange, puffy lattice. It makes me feel like a chicken in the 2000 British stop-motion comedy, *Chicken Run*.

I find my way to the table. It takes a while. There is only one entrance to the elevated dining level. The other one is hidden at the very end of the restaurant. It's as if the steely, decorative balcony is acting more like a fence to enclose its diners.

Steins filled with ice cold water are on the table. Picking up one requires all of my upper body strength. The only way to reduce the weight of the glass is to drink the water. But the ever-so-alert wait staff will refill it as soon as the water line dips below an inch. Drinking water becomes a Sisyphean task at The Cheesecake Factory.

It takes some convincing from my friends that this is not The Bad Place. I don't believe them, until I eat the bread.

CHAPTER THREE: WOMAN SHALL LIVE ON BREAD ALONE

In most chain restaurants, the freshly baked bread exists to trick you. It is frozen, put into an oven, and served hot to trick your stupid human brain into believing you are at a nice place. So, when judging the quality of chain restaurant bread, it is a dismal competition. There is no point judging bread when it's closest companion is the machine-made Wonder Bread.

And yet, the warm, brown bread brought me a glimmer of hope. Picking it up and holding its yeasty body gave me hope for the evening. I brought it to my ear and squeezed it. A strong crackle of crust responded. I'm fluent in Bread Crust, and understood entirely what the brown slice wanted me to do with it. I broke it in half. A few crumbs jumped from the loaf and landed onto the white tablecloth. I put one of the halves into my mouth.

The soft flesh of the interior is delightful, begging to have a swipe of butter on top. The brown bread is sweet, an unexpected surprise that slides in after the initial yeasty tang. The oats on top are more for decoration, they add nothing to the flavor. They are like my future Tinder dates, adding nothing of value to what already exists. Next to it is a sourdough, which isn't real sourdough, but gets the job done. It is also warm. It reminds me of my mother. But the real star here is the brown bread.

This bread is meant to have butter on it. It's sweetness and tang need salt to create a trifecta of flavor. It releases dopamine in my brain, creating the first feeling of happiness I've had all day. I remember that the bread is famous to some extent, being a staple to anyone who chooses to eat at The Cheesecake Factory. It's ranked number six on BuzzFeed's The Definitive Ranking of Free Restaurant Bread. It could lead its own cult.

But it's just bread. Anyone can receive happiness from flour, yeast, salt, and water. Right?

CHAPTER FOUR: BE OUR GUEST

Our waiter came to our table, paper in hand. We were ready. I finally made up my mind after languishing over the *Les Miserables* or restaurant menus.

The Cheesecake Factory offers a diet menu referred to as The Skinnylicious™ Menu. On it are less caloric versions of the typical menu offerings. I assume they use less fat in these dishes in an effort to reduce the amount of calorie per bite. The appetizer offerings range from salads to samosas, so there's something for every Skinny Bitch out there.

There is something inherently emasculating when you say the name Skinnylicious™ before whatever food you want. Skinny, fine. Diet, I can do that. But the name Skinnylicious™ removes all pride left upon entering The Cheesecake Factory. The worst part is when the waiter asks if you want the Skinnylicious™ version of what you ordered. Please, just say skinny and let me hold onto the remaining pride I'm barely holding onto.

This how that conversation went:

MADELEINE: Can I please have the grilled artichokes and the veggie burger?

WAITER: (*looks MADELEINE dead in the eyes*) You mean the Skinnylicious™ Veggie Burger?

MADELEINE: Yes. That. Thank you.

WAITER: Say it.

MADELEINE: No. No. I'm good.

WAITER: No. Say it. Say you're a bad bitch who wants a Skinnylicious™ Veggie Burger.

MADELEINE: (*starting to cry*) Please...don't make me. I'm begging you.

Okay, it wasn't that bad, but I did want to die inside when I said Skinnylicious™ in a non-ironic way.

Here's the thing about the Skinnylicious™ menu. The calories may be reduced, but the portions are still enough to feed a small elven family. A running joke about The Cheesecake Factory is that it has huge portions. My father told me I would have leftovers for tomorrow, and suggested splitting a meal with a friend. I rolled my eyes and told him that I would be fine. I've survived multiple Texas Thanksgivings. I can stomach large portions. I grossly underestimated what would be brought to my table.

My friend ordered the Fried Mac and Cheese Balls, which are about the size of a bocce ball. I was amazed as I stared at the brown balls, wondering why they needed to be that large. I understand that appetizers are meant to be shared. This was overkill.

My artichokes arrived, and I in turn arti-CHOKED at their size. The staff believed that someone ordering off the Skinnylicious™ menu needed three halves of artichokes, served with a cup of garlic aioli. And when I say cup, I mean the unit of measurement. I love artichoke, but I don't know if I love it that much.

Time to devour.

CHAPTER FIVE: WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN

Grilled artichoke is a simple dish, one underestimated by its rustic charm. It is an artichoke, sliced in half, grilled until tender, and served. The flesh needs to be soft enough to rip at with your teeth, and it needs to have a basic flavor profile that will pair with its dance partner, dip. In a classy joint, or my house, grilled artichoke is always served with a housemade aioli.

What's interesting is that the artichokes at The Cheesecake Factory were good. Like really, really good.

The exterior of the artichoke was slightly charred. It provided a bitter mingling when I slid my teeth onto its velvety flesh. The sweetness of the vegetable, combined with a slight acetous kick from the charcoal created a wonderful warmth in my body. It paired wonderfully with the aioli, regardless if it was housemade or not. The aioli's cream and tang, mixing with a slight pungent garlic afternote, turned the dish into a lush symphony dancing in my mouth.

There's something wonderfully sexual and primal when we get to eat vegetables and fruits as they are. When we get to pick at them, peel at them, rip them open, and use our fingers and mouths to get to the succulent body inside.

The Fried Mac and Cheese Balls were definitely an experience. I consider myself a health nut. I don't typically eat fried things and the last time I had real macaroni and cheese was five years ago. I decided to take it easy and only eat half of one.

Expecting the macaroni to be a congealed mess inside, I was surprised when the cheese oozed out of the ball, dripping onto the plate. I looked at my knife. It glistened with fat. I tried to scoop as much as I could onto my fork.

"Make sure to take some of the sauce as well," my friend Abby said, motioning to the bed of red sauce cradling the balls. I took my knife and used it to gently rub the sauce onto my half, watching the orange, white, and red mix together in a psychedelic cheese stew.

The Fried Mac and Cheese Balls have three things really going for them. First, they are a compilation of two comfort foods, fried things and macaroni and cheese. There's a safe bet ordering them. You know mac and cheese. You're familiar with it. Frying it sounds like a good idea. Second, they are texture porn. The crispy outer layer, creamy cheese sauce, and soft noodles work well together. It's exciting to have a little crunch as you bite into one of the balls. Third, the red sauce is bananas good. It's a standard marinara, but a little sweeter to combat the dominant flavor of salt in the macaroni and cheese. It is an exciting flavor palette because it paints with the right colors of food: salt, fat, and acid (God, IMAGINE if there was a little cayenne pepper mingled in the cheese to make it really special). It's the right flavors that massage the happy centers of your brain.

CHAPTER SIX: LONGING

Our main courses, the Skinnylicious™ Veggie Burger, the Skinnylicious™ Chicken Pasta, and the Spicy Crispy Chicken Sandwich, came out around ten minutes after we finished our appetizers. My burger was (thank fucking GOD) the typical size of a veggie burger, but the side salad that came with it was huge. It could be a dish on its own, if it truly desired. Nevertheless, I took my knife and began to cut the burger in half. There are two reasons for this: easier to eat and leftovers for tomorrow.

Veggie burgers exist on three planes of existence. One plane is where the patty itself is trying to mimic the flavor, texture, and feel of meat. Many restaurants are utilizing the Impossible Burger, a meatless patty that perfectly captures this plane. Another is where the patty is a large vegetable, typically a portobello mushroom, is grilled, seasoned, and placed between two pieces of a bun. I don't know anyone who wants to eat a whole mushroom, but it's popular enough that people keep doing it. The last plane, and the one this particular Skinnylicious Veggie Burger falls into, is the Things Smushed Together plane. A patty is made from mashed vegetables and a grain of some sort. This kind of patty is risky. It always has a good flavor profile, benefitting from the composition of multiple ingredients, but tends to fall apart when placed under pressure.

The second my knife ushered its way down the burger, pellets of farro and mushroom fell onto my plate. I sighed. This would be a burger that would need to be eaten with a fork and knife. It's poor structure, with the addition of topping overload, makes the whole thing unwieldy and tiresome. I should not have to fight my burger in order to eat it.

There's nothing extraordinary about the Skinnylicious™ Veggie Burger. No standout flavors, no interesting flavors lurking in the patty. I've had better veggie burgers at pool parties, grilled by dads who have never seen the brand Morningstar or Boca before.

I wasn't the only one having issues with their main course. After her first bite, Abby looked up at us and said:

“It’s not bad. It just... the chicken tastes like smoked plastic.”

I was astounded at these claims. This flavor must be from some strange cross-contamination, we’ve all had food with a strange aftertaste of whatever container it inhabited. But, when I tried one of her noodles, I was surprised. The whole dish had a strange smokiness to it. It wasn’t bad. It was just unnecessary. No Italian dish, regardless of where it is being made, needs the flavor profile of smoke. The ingredients should be enough. The most disturbing part was that there were no visible grill marks on the chicken or pasta. Where the fuck was the taste coming from?

At least there were no qualms with the Spicy Crispy Chicken Sandwich.

CHAPTER SEVEN: RECKONING

The time had come. I forced myself to stop eating so I could indulge in The Cheesecake Factory’s magnum opus.

The Cheesecake Factory sells a total of thirty-six types of cheesecakes. The styles range from the standard cheesecake to chocolate cheesecake to mango cheesecake to peanut butter cup cheesecake. The sheer amount of cheesecake pumped out every day is the eighth wonder of the world.

It took me fifteen minutes to pick out a cheesecake. It was an experience.

ABBY: You need to pick one out, now.

MADELEINE: I don’t know.

KIKI: Oh my god.

ABBY: I’m getting a chocolate one. You can taste mine. How about you get a fruit one?

MADELEINE: But I don’t know if I want a fruit one.

Then, it caught my eye. A pink, blue, and funfetti mess from another table sparked my interest. It looked like something a unicorn would eat. So naturally, I ordered it.

The Celebration Cheesecake is a tiered cheesecake, layered with funfetti cake, strawberry mousse, cheesecake, chocolate mousse, and cream cheese frosting. It is dense. I could use it as a weapon in an act of self defense. It is difficult to cut through.

And, honestly, it isn’t good.

Maybe it was the delirium setting it. Maybe it was my stomach marinating from the previous veggie burger and artichoke. But it wasn't that good.

I expected it to be dense, sugary, fruity, with hints of vanilla and that good old cheesecake tang. But it was just overkill, like this food review. Every layer tasted the same. The only difference between the layers were their respective textures. Strawberry mousse and funfetti cake should not taste like the same food item. The mousse was overpowering, very acidic and not sweet at all. The cheesecake itself did not mellow out the taste. It was very strong, with a sourness begging to be the center of attention. And the poor funfetti cake struggled to hold them all together.

And yet, I couldn't stop eating it! What power did The Cheesecake Factory now hold over me? As I write this, I look at their menu and crave cheesecake. The ones I didn't try haunt my memory like missed connections in a John Hughes movie.

Why call yourself The Cheesecake Factory if your one claim to fame, the cheesecake, is mediocre at best? You had better appetizers. APPETIZERS! Not even the main attraction! No one wants the pre-game to be better than the party.

I left The Cheesecake Factory a broken woman. All of my hopes and dreams about what could be inside have been mugged and left to die in an alleyway.

EPILOGUE: JUDGEMENT DAY

I honestly don't know what kind of expectations I set for The Cheesecake Factory. I didn't want them to succeed, becoming a hidden gem of chain restaurants. I didn't want them to fail, thus proving some cynical part of me right. Their overall mediocrity is the real villain of the story.

I have been alive for twenty years. Within that time frame, I've eaten thousands of meals. The ones that hold a special place in my heart are the ones that left an impression on my heart. There's so much more to food than how it tastes. It's about the people who you eat with and the circumstances within you eat. There's no room for mediocrity in any of those categories.

It truly baffles me how The Cheesecake Factory exists in a totally neutral space, unable to offend anyone. The decor is mediocre. The food is mediocre. It tries to be a fine dining experience, when it's really just scraping for decency.

During dinner, one of my friends said, "You know, The Cheesecake Factory is like my purgatory. You just sit and wait. Nothing good happens. But nothing bad happens either. You just are. There is no God at The Cheesecake Factory".