

Apprenticeship by Russell Sacks

Apprenticeship part I

I often relive my first shift as a young apprentice at the Red Chimney Bakery in Hove on the southeast coast of England. I recall the cold, dark, tranquil night. I smell the burning wood which kept us warm. I feel again my intense, nervous anticipation. My long-time girlfriend, Anouk and I had rented a beach cottage. That day, we had a late, light lunch, and I was in bed by six, hoping for untroubled sleep before my first shift. Anouk had changed the bed linen while I washed the dishes and showered. I knew she could sense my anxiety and had encouraged me to soothe it with a decent sleep. Her gentle words of encouragement and loving tenderness indeed lulled me into a dreamless slumber.

I awoke feeling calm and rested. I kissed her goodbye. She hugged me with all the strength she could muster.

I cycled to the bakery which lay in the centre of the old part of town. A few minutes before midnight I stood at the tradesmen's entrance. The street lamps revealed a battered wooden door painted post-box red. In its centre, the blue of an eye bead warded off evil. Two elegant, long-haired cats lay curled against the door. They regarded me disdainfully and did not budge. Both had eyes as blue as the bead on the door and fur in nuances of snow white and slate grey.

I rang the doorbell. A voice shouted, "Enter!"

I pushed the door open and manoeuvred myself and my bicycle over the cats. I entered a small hallway. At the opposite end was a second wooden door with a glass window.

The door opened and Alessia, the baker, approached from the far end. She was expecting me. She looked me over from top to toe, only slightly less disdainfully than the cats. She motioned me through the door and pointed to a wooden bench against the wall. On it was a neatly piled baker's uniform. I placed my bag next to it. Against the opposite wall was a sturdy rack holding an enamel basin filled with water, a fresh bar of soap and a spotless towel.

Alessia turned and went through a third door into the bakery. The Who, playing their famous song, Pinball Wizard, emerged from within.

I was left alone. My heart was thumping. I undressed. I washed my arms and hands. I donned the uniform: A long-sleeved cotton T-shirt with a red chimney graphic printed on the left breast, a pair of blue denim draw-string trousers and baker's soft white cap. I stood transformed into a baker like a butterfly emerged from a cocoon.

I could barely believe that my career was finally materialising.

A week earlier I had completed my Level 3 Diploma in Professional Bakery. I was fed up with the endless theory classes and could not wait to dive in and enjoy the practical application of all I had learned. I was fortunate enough to land this apprenticeship. I knew that the intense work of the baker would purge me of my demons and doubts, much like swimming in the English Channel did for me.

Apprenticeship part II

I entered the bakery feeling like a crusader knight entering Jerusalem.

Alessia stared quizzically at me. She did not utter a word but clearly, she had picked up my ardour that glowed from every pore.

She was standing over the huge dough mixer, watching it as it slowly kneaded the dough. She carefully drizzled water from a beaker onto the dough. She replaced the beaker on the top of the mixer and approached me.

"Tonight you only observe. In silence. You sit on that chair. Or you stand here. The toilet is through that door, behind the storeroom."

She didn't wait for an answer. She returned to the dough mixer.

I had not expected to be so perfunctorily sidelined. She was treating me like a pawn, a vassal. My excitement, my enthusiasm deflated with an inaudible hiss. The crusader knight lay grovelling on the holy earth.

I sat for a moment, trying to gather myself. A poster caught my eye. It was a Henri Matisse from the Blue Nude series. On it, handwritten, was inscribed, "To be accepted and respected by the brotherhood of bakers, you must place strict demands on yourself, show commitment, courage and discipline, and must, at all times, be a team player." The Baker's Wife.

I sat back in the chair and stared at Alessia as she removed huge chunks of dough from the mixer. She placed them on a wooden table with grace and economy of movement. I stopped breathing as conflicting emotions overcame me - chagrin at being deflated, awe at the elegance and fluency of Alessia's work.

I placed my palms together, shut my eyes and focused on steady inhalations through my nostrils and slow exhalations through my mouth. I visualised myself swimming in the Channel. Anouka had taught me this ritual years ago. Whenever she discerned signs of impending distress in me, she signalled me to start the exercise either by pursing her lips or putting her palms together.

When I opened my eyes, Alessia was towering above me.

Apprenticeship written by Russell Sacks in

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