

The Pie Maker's Curse

The key ingredients never changed. Flour, salt, fat, water. Year round, my kitchen turned out flakey pie crust that made old ladies cry. And before me, my mother and before her, my grandmother. How many pies could a person make in a lifetime? A thousand? Two thousand? Pie crust twisted through my DNA. My confidence never wavered. I worked in the kitchen of my endless success, my mission clear. These weren't just pies I was making, these were Christmas pies.

I sprinkled ice cold liquid over the crumbly mass of flour and pea-sized butter bits in the bowl. Then I carefully brought the dough together. The expletives wouldn't come fast enough.

It failed.

There was a fist-shaped lump in the middle of the bowl surrounded by flour crumbles. This was not pie dough. It wasn't even a poor representation of something that could potentially become pie dough. It was like a bucket of

Sahara Desert had been brought in and my dough taken off somewhere to be donated to those with greater need.

Who could have greater need? I had children and elders counting on these Christmas pies. What would I tell poor Great-aunt Bobbie with her twisted arthritic fingers too weak to make her own pies? I couldn't disappoint her with a store bought pie when homemade were so easy and more delicious. And bigger. I hated the puny flat pies with the soggy crust that came from the grocery store.

I lugged my pie crust encyclopedia from the shelf, blew the dust off and re-read the recipe I'd memorized for Girl Scouts in the 5th grade. I held up my measuring cup. I understood what a cup was, right? Then I double checked the fat. I knew how to measure butter, right?

It all lined up. But the crust wasn't working. For the fifth time I scraped failed crust into the garbage. I was out of butter and down to my last two cups of flour. I couldn't bear to look at the project for another minute so I grabbed a large tumbler and poured myself a glass of wine. I switched from stemmed glasses because I liked to wave my hands around after a couple of drinks and my carpet looked like a hosting arena for knife fights.

There was no way I'd lost my pie crust making ability so something must have happened. I decided to make a grilled cheese sandwich to go with my second tumbler of wine. I'd just bought a Tillamook cheddar loaf because I like cheese, especially in ridiculously huge quantities. In my house, a cheese sandwich is two slices of cheese with a piece of cheese in the middle. Delicious.

As I pulled the loaf out of the plastic wrap, I noticed strange side-by-side indentations as if someone had pressed two warm fingers into my cheese loaf. I leaned closer and took a careful sniff.

My face stung and my eyes watered as if I'd inhaled flaming insecticide.

The contents of my cart and I had been cursed.

I threw the ruined cheese loaf across the room. Then it came back to me. At the grocery store that morning, something strange had happened. I had parked my cart in the bakery section between a tower of bright red and green Christmas cupcakes and a stack of sugar-powdered Stollen. This is one of my secrets for moving through the store quickly. Free of the cart, I could speed up and down the aisles, dodging carts and children and grabbing what I needed. When my arms were full I returned to the cart and dumped my stuff. Then I consulted my list and ran off again. I dashed through the produce picking up salad items and carrots to snack on. Not baby carrots. I hated those.

I ran to my cart with an armload of grown-up carrots, turnips and sweet onions. A kid stood there with his hand in my cart. A creepy pale-haired kid with dead eyes who looked like he was a few years away from a murderous outburst.

"Can I help you?" I said using a tone intended to convey my own brutal intentions.

The kid glared at me. He didn't remove his hand.

"It's a big giant store." I gently pulled the cart to urge him to be on his way. "Go find your own stuff."

The kid shook his head. There was something around his mouth that I guessed to be foam. Did he need a sandwich? Medication? A swift kick in the rear? I didn't know and didn't plan to stick around for it. I yanked the cart away and his arm jerked out.

"You better watch out," I said, aiming for the fruit aisle. "Santa's making a list."

As I moved away he sneered and did this little motion using two fingers of his hand like a peace sign except he stabbed them at me.

"Yes," I agreed. "I deserve the wrath of your pointed fingers."

Now my pies crusts were ruined. That was no creepy pale-haired kid. That was curse-blasting grocery-store imp. Why hadn't I recognized it sooner? Clearly I had to deal with this quickly. First, I couldn't make pie crust. Who knew what other skills would disappear? I ran to the car and headed back to the grocery store.



At this point the holiday shopping rush had hit a last minute frenzy. Also, a driving rain slid through the air sideways. There are few things I detested more than parking lots during the holidays especially with rain. As I waited to make the left turn into the parking lot I wondered whether Aunt Bobbie could be placated with those bright colored cupcakes. I tried to picture one of her trembling hands lifting a neon green cake to her mouth. She'd die first.

I pattered around the lot until I found a spot as far away from the store's front doors as could possibly exist. This was actually my favorite parking spot because I got exercise and it was easier to get out of.

Christmas music blared cheerily through the crowded store. At least fifteen mopey-faced people waited in the customer service center line, there was no way I'd wait that long. I flagged down a man in a red vest. His nametag said 'Shane.'

"Is there white-haired kid running around here?" My index finger made exaggerated circles over my face. "Dead eyes?"

Shane shook his head. "You've lost a child?"

"Good grief, not mine," I said. "He was wandering around here this morning."

"I see," Shane said. He had a sheaf of paper in his hand and looked anxious to be moving on.

"I think he took something from me," I said.

Shane uttered an expletive under his breath. "Do you want me to call the police?" he said in voice that suggested that was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I don't see how that will help," I said. "Never mind. I'm just going to take a quick lap through the store."

"You do that." Shane sounded relieved. "Flag someone down if you have a problem." He hurried to the administrative office and shut the door behind him.

A small mob crowded the deli counter and carts cluttered the produce aisles. I went around to the meats section because that's where I'd hang out if I was an imp. Nothing. I headed for the bakery section but paused in the wine aisle to check the Syrahs. There was a sale bottle that looked interesting and I was so busy studying the label I didn't notice the baguette flying through the air over the shelves until it hit me between the eyes.

"Huh?" It shocked more than it hurt. The bread flopped to the floor. I put the wine down and left the aisle, searching the baked goods for that children-of-the-corn imp.

"Ha ha!" He stood next to a rack of hot dog buns. His eyes looked like they were floating in gasoline. He pointed two fingers at me. I ducked. Too late. Air whirled around then my knees went to rubber and I stumbled. I rose carefully to my feet, my legs like a newborn foal. The imp messed up my motor skills.

I launched myself toward the potatoes and fell into them face first. I propped myself up with one hand and used the other to pick up a potato and hurl it with mind-bending accuracy right between the imp's eyes.

He grunted and then hid his smile with his hands. He whimpered pitifully.

"Did you see that?" A lady wearing a sweatshirt covered with glittery kittens playing with Christmas ribbon looked back and forth from me to the imp, not sure what to do.

"You have no idea what you're dealing with," I said. The potato bomb had shocked the imp into losing the thread of the motor-functions curse. I was mobile again.

I sprinted to the front of the store. Someone, maybe Shane, shouted as I ran by but my mission was too important. I grabbed a cart and winced, wiping off the wet handle. It was still pouring outside. They pay a kid to go to the parking lot and round up the carts. Why not pay him to wipe the handles dry, too? I stuffed a suggestion card into my pocket before I went back into the store.

I pushed the cart through the Christmas display and grabbed Burn-Quik™ yule logs and matches. Then I ran through the store and filled the cart with candy bars and canned sodas, shaking the cans as I lobbed them in. I rejected dairy products and anything that came in a bottle. I had no idea how violent this might get. I didn't want holiday shoppers to be injured just because they'd procrastinated.

The imp watched. The second I was in range he lobbed a half dozen sourdough loaves at me, one after the other. I easily dodged them and parked my cart next to the oranges.

A sourdough loaf bounced off a big guy's shoulder. "Hey! Knock it off." He glanced at the imp and then shook his fist at me.

"He started it," I said. I threw an orange across the store and it bounced at the imp's feet.

"What's happening?" A lady asked, pulling her cellphone away from her ear. A bright red frosted cupcake landed on the top of her head.

I laughed but didn't stop moving. I took a handful of KitKat bars and spun them like ninja weapons. They flew across the store. One hit the imp in the face and his head snapped back. He spun his arms around and an entire bread roll dispenser floated into the air. The bin doors opened and rolls rained all over the produce section.

By now customers who'd been tempted to complain were hurrying to get out of the way. The deli counter cleared and I wished I could spare a few minutes to get the sliced Black Forest ham and Havarti that I couldn't be bothered with when the line was so long in the morning. Shane and another man in a red vest attempted to evacuate. They held walkie-talkies but ignored me when I pointed at the imp.

A sack of potatoes moving at blur came from the right. It hit me on the side of the head. For a moment I saw stars.

"*I'm using produce,*" I said. To confuse him, I shook a can of soda and heaved it at him. It hit the floor and the can burst and a fountain of soda spurted up from it.

"Ha!" the imp snickered. He stood transfixed by the foaming spray. I repeated the move, throwing one can after the other and used the opportunity to move closer. I was about ten feet away when his attention swept back to me and with one smooth gesture he sent an entire grocery shelf row skidding toward me. Boxes of cereal, crackers and tea scattered. I leapt out of the way

but the end cap stocked with bottled water tilted into me and I fell down hard, heavy plastic bottles thumping around me.

After a few fuzzy-headed moments I got to my feet.

"It's come to this," I said. I picked up a Burn-Quik™ yule log from my cart, lit it and launched it across the store. It tumbled into the olive bar sending up a spray of oily olives. A burst of flames shot up.

I lit another one and flung it with all my might. A mist of olive oil still floated in the air. The fire log sailed through the mist and grazed the imp on the shoulder. A tiny candle-sized flame erupted on his sleeve.

"Ah!" The child-like façade disappeared. His true form emerged, bulging eyes and hairless, with long skinny limbs and patches of bristly hair. His mouth opened in a perfect "o" rimmed with tiny teeth as he wailed. His exhaled breath smelled like baking fertilizer.

He wiggled out of the burning t-shirt, his shrill cries curling the hair along my spine. He was distracted so he didn't see the third burning yule log and it whacked him in the back of the head and he went down and twitched a few times and then stopped moving.

I strode towards the stinky bag of bones picking up a pecan pie on my way. I pulled it out of the box shaking my head in disgust at its small size. I used my foot to roll the imp onto its back and I slammed the pie in his face.

"And *that's* for ruining a perfectly good cheddar loaf."

I waited until the imp had shriveled and shrunk, like they do when they're knocked out. It formed a tiny gray lump. This I would hide in my house.

It couldn't return to imp form unless another imp found it and that wouldn't happen on my watch.

Then I bought two pounds of butter and a five pound bag of flour. I had pies to make. Aunt Bobbie was expecting them.