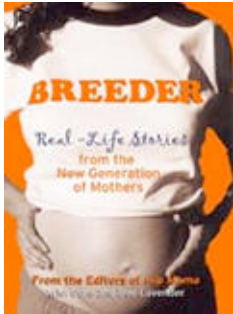


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Tossing My Cookies by Erika Schickel

Tossing My Cookies
By Erika Schickel

It was coming on Christmas and Rae and I had been mulling over the annual problem of teacher gifts. How do we thank the tireless, dedicated individuals who care for our children, and show them just how much we value them? And more importantly, how do we do it for under ten bucks? "Cookies!" Rae pronounced over the phone. "We can bake them Christmas cookies!" When Rae makes up her mind about something, it's a done deal.

"Great idea!" I enthused. "We can put them in gift boxes with tissue paper! Why we could even have the kids decorate the boxes with glitter!" I chirped into the phone. "Yes!" Rae, normally a stoic gal, squeaked back in glee. It was all coming together. The spirit of the season was upon us. We convened the next day in my kitchen and stared at the recipes she had torn from the pages of a Women's magazine. The glossy photo of brightly decorated cookies, artfully arranged on a frosted glass Christmas tray, a soft-focus hearth crackling in the background spoke of comfort and caring, simple pleasures, womanly accomplishment.

We set the kids up at the dining room table with the gift boxes and tubes of glitter glue. Then we tied on our aprons and got to work.

We began with "Dream Bars", which looked like a fairly simple recipe. The ingredients (butterscotch, chocolate chips, shredded coconut, etc.), needed only to be tossed into a pyrex baking dish, cooked, cooled and cut into squares.

In less time than it takes to run a bubble bath we had two dishes of Dream Bars assembled and baking in the oven. On a roll, we proceeded with high spirits to the sugar cookie dough, which would need some refrigeration before being rolled and cut into festive, seasonal shapes. We set happily to our task, creaming our pre-softened butter and mixing in our dry ingredients, feeling like a couple of Ms. Clauses when ... oh no, wait a minute - we have baking soda, not baking powder! We weighed the idea of just winging it with the baking soda but then thought better of it. So production ground to a halt as I grabbed my purse and headed out to the

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supermarket. The express checkout gal was friendly and asked if I was baking.

"Sure am. Christmas cookies!" I said proudly.

"Well... good luck." She replied in doubtful-sounding voice, and I wondered what luck had to do with it.

Twenty-minutes later I was back just as Rae was pulling the Dream Bars out of the oven. She wore a worried look, "I don't know, can this be right?" she asked, proffering the tray.

I looked down into the pan and was confronted by what looked like a 9"x12" slab of joke vomit. Pieces of coconut floated in a shining, flesh-colored stew. It was clearly too wet to ever be a bar. "Well, maybe we need to cook it a little more?"

"Yeah?" My friend, usually so confident, so sure of herself, was clearly at a loss.

"Sure, let's put it back in the oven and crank it." I said, faking authority.

We finished the sugar cookie batter, molded it into logs, and wrapped them in plastic. It felt good putting the wrapped dough in the fridge to harden, like putting money in the bank. "Damn, we're good!" I crowed. That's when we smelled smoke.

"The Dream Bars!" Rae yelled. We yanked them out of the oven to find they had darkened to the color of old scabs. The coconut flakes were singed and smoking.

"They're done." I declared.

"Gee, you think?" deadpanned Rae.

I think it was then we began to realize we were out of our depth. Our training was in the liberal arts, not the womanly arts. But we were in too deep to quit, so we trudged on to the grim business of mixing up the Fudgy Nutty Drop Cookies.

When a recipe says "Prep time: 20 minutes" that is assuming you know what you're doing. It also assumes you have bought sweet butter, not salted and don't have to make yet another trip to the grocery store. The checkout girl greeted me like an old friend.

"Still baking?" she asked sympathetically.

"Yep," was my terse reply.

I returned to find my home in chaos. The kids had lost interest in the gift boxes and Rae was surveying the crafting wreckage strewn out on the dining room table. Apparently, the kids hadn't exactly drawn designs with the glitter glue. Rather they had simply squeezed great glops of glue onto the tops of the boxes and smeared the puddles with their fingers. Little shining stars floated in a thick mucus of glue that dripped down the sides.

"Pretty." I said.

"Oh yeah, the teachers are gonna love these," said Rae.

"All right, let's keep moving. Maybe we can fix this later." I located my double-boiler in the way back of a high up cabinet, and washed the dust off it. Rae

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broke up up the semi-sweet chocolate chunks. Then I began the backbreaking work of creaming the butter.

As I worked the cold butter with a dinner fork, I mused on my long, expensive, progressive schooling in which I did not receive a single minute of home economics training. The result is I can write a decent haiku, but I would not be able to wind a bobbin if my life depended on it. I can lambaste the latest Oprah book, but I can baste neither seam nor turkey. It's sad, because in my adult life, I haven't ended up needing to write much haiku, but I sure wish I had enough game in the kitchen to at least pull off some Christmas cookies.

We were somewhere in hour four of our project when we finally got the Fudgy Nutty Drop Cookies into the oven. We wanted desperately to pack it in, but it was time to call the kids in to cut out the sugar cookies.

Our four children came stampeding into the kitchen, half-naked, hands grubby with garden dirt, noses running. After cleaning them up (Prep time: another ten minutes) we set them up with cookie cutters and colored sugar sprinkles.

A frenzy of activity ensued in which the children insisted on cutting the shapes without a care to economizing the dough. So we had to re-roll the dough several times, making it softer, warmer, harder to peel off the cutting board. The little men stretched out into oddly misshapen Elephant Men. Heads broke off and were then pressed back onto their bodies. Each one was then sprinkled with a liberal pox of red and green sugar.

The kitchen timer dinged - time to take the Fudgy Nutty Drop Cookies out of the oven! There was a moment of stunned silence between us as we looked at our finished product. My three-year-old, Georgia, pointing a chubby finger at the droppings, was the first to speak; "Mommy, they look like poops."

And that did it, Rae and I cracked up. We laughed until we were weeping as we looked at our barf bars and our dingleberry drops and our poor, mutant men. We laughed so hard no sound came out of us, other than gasps for air. Something so simple had gone Faustian and nightmarish. We had six batches of Christmas cookies that only Herman Munster would eat.

"We should have just bought them booze." Rae conceded. The look of disappointment on the teacher's faces when we gave them the cookie boxes the next day confirmed this, and we swore that next year the teacher gifts would be store-bought.

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