

Chocolate - Puts the 'Guilty' in Guilty Pleasure

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Boisterous laughter fills the room as Mr. Montgomery proposes yet another toast. "To Owen's promotion!" he yells joyfully, "and the success of our company!". We all raised our glasses, either in drunken joy or exhaustion. Myself being a part of the latter group, I decide this will be my last drink. I have just been promoted to the plant manager of the 'Montgomery's Chocolate' chocolate company, and we are having a small celebration in the boss's office. Of course, I am overjoyed from this promotion, but getting this promotion has taken all the energy out of me.

"Owen!", a familiar voice booms behind me, "If it isn't the man of the hour." He plops down into the seat next to me. "Hello, boss.", I say through a thin accent. "I told you to call me Amell already," he says sternly - although it didn't seem too stern with his short and plump form and red face. "Anyways, how do you feel now that you've been promoted?". I suppose I thought about it for a second too long because he says, "Hope you're not regretting it now", he sighs and continues, "I'm not supposed to tell you this just yet, but we have a little something planned for you". This piqued my interest, as I thought I didn't have any projects for a while. "I can't tell you anything right now...", he says lowering his voice, "but let's just say you'll be busy starting tomorrow". He touches the side of his nose, indicating that it is a secret. He may seem carefree at times, but I have nothing but respect for Mr. Montgomery. He addresses problems involving his chocolate and company directly and is never discriminatory or rude. He is also extremely honest and friendly - the spitting image of Santa, but without the red suit. Speaking of Santa, Mr. Montgomery lets out a hearty laugh, clearly intoxicated, "You know Owen, you're not like others that are like you. You are intelligent and hard-working and have actual good manners- not

at all barbaric. I'm glad that I let you stay at my company." He pats my shoulder firmly, and I smile. I'm happy that I made it to America from Africa. *I'm glad too.*

Eventually, I'm able to get away and they pay no mind when I leave. On the drive home, I think about what Mr. Montgomery could mean about tomorrow. Montgomery's Chocolates is a huge chocolate corporation that was started by the father of my boss. After he took over, things have been going smoothly as per usual, and we are always taking on new projects in order to expand. The most recent project to be finished was a promotional event. We sponsored an event at the children's hospital in which there was entertainment and food - including our chocolate of course - for the sick children. I chuckle remembering how Mr. Montgomery - *Amell*, I correct myself - forgot to check which chocolates we would be giving the children, and almost gave them peanut chocolates, which was definitely dangerous. I fixed it, but that could have gone horribly. He showed a lot of enthusiasm when being interviewed, though. He excitedly told the reporters about all the hard work he put into this project for it to be successful. *"I have a soft spot for kids"*, he said to the press, *"I have a few of my own after all. Chocolate in this company is supposed to make people happy after all, especially children."* I can't help but wonder about what Mr. Montgomery said, and I find myself falling asleep looking forward to it.

I wake up and am already going to be late. *Great start to the day.* I rush to get ready, skipping breakfast, and only pausing to say goodbye to the picture of my mom on my desk. She had passed away when I was fairly young, and when we still lived in Ghana, in Africa. I had never known my dad, but my mom worked extremely hard to get me a good education so I could have a better life. I wish she was still here to see that I have one now. I still remember what she used to tell me: "Don't try to gather happiness. Give it to others, and you will find that it finds its

way back to you.”. *Well, that and ‘Do your homework or it will come alive and swallow you whole’*. She was an interesting woman. I remember that I’m late for work and start running.

I find myself standing in the boss’s office with two other people, one of whom is Isabis, my best friend at work. We are two of the only black people to work, so we were automatically put together, and as it would turn out, he’s a reliable and cool guy. I smile at him as well as the other person there, who I am not familiar with. He is very young - probably well into his 20’s, as I am in my early 40’s. *Probably... I’ve lost track by now*. Mr. Montgomery clears his throat. “Now that we’re all here,”, he says with a pointed look in my direction, “I would like to introduce the newest project for this company. This is a research and check-up project. It is to ensure the quality of the cocoa used in our chocolates and to check, as we usually do, that everything is in order at the cocoa farms. I am sending you three so you can get better ideas of how we make our chocolate.”, he pauses for dramatic effect, “Pack your bags, because you’ll be going to Ghana, Africa!”.

“What?!”, we all exclaim, although only two voices contain excitement. Mr. Montgomery furrows his brows. “Something wrong, Walter?”. Walter stares back at him in shock. He snaps out of his daze and starts to yell, “Why am *I* going again? Out of everyone-” “Ok, ok..”, Mr. Montgomery interrupts, “Owen, Isabis, you are dismissed. Walter, stay behind for a bit.”. We take that as our cue to get back to work, and we exit the office.

I turn to Isabis, both of us wearing matching grins. “We’re going to Africa”, he says in awe. I laugh. I know he has a lot of family near Ghana, so I am glad he has the chance to visit them. This all seems so surreal. I didn’t even know that our company went to check up on the cocoa farms, let alone that we were candidates to do it. “How long are we going to be there

anyway?”, I ask, wondering if we’ll even have free time. “I don’t know, ”, Isabis replies, “But the boss said that he would send us an email with all the information”. In contrast to me, Isabis speaks with a heavy accent. I reach for my phone, but it’s not there. “Shoot,” I curse, “I think I left my bag in Mr. Montgomery’s office. I’m going to go get it.” I jog towards the office. I’m ecstatic about this trip. As abrupt as it is, most projects in the company are pretty spontaneous, so this is nothing foreign to me. What was bothering me was what I was supposed to do during this project. I always do the best I can, but I have no experience in this kind of thing. What if I mess it up for everyone else? I would lose the boss’s trust and I-

Angry whispers interrupt my thoughts as I approach the room. Not wanting to interrupt Mr. Montgomery and Walter’s conversation, I sneak up to the door. “-don’t either, but people will get suspicious if we send the same people again and again!”, said the boss’s voice, “Plus, you need to go to keep those two in check to make sure-”. I lose my footing, and make the door open with a deafening creak. They look like deer caught in headlights. “Sorry, I left my bag here..”, I mumble before grabbing my bag and scurrying out of the room. *Wasn’t I just caught eavesdropping? Why do they look so frightened?* Fishing my phone out, I check for the email. The trip is in two days, so I should start packing and tying up loose ends at work.

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Apparently ‘tying up loose ends’ takes one and a half days, because before I know it, it’s the day of the trip, and I haven’t finished packing. The days passed by in a blur of stale ‘congratulations!’ due to that promotion. I get a warm feeling when I realize that this is my first project after being promoted, and it’s in my home country. I look at the photo of mom with fondness. It’s probably safe to leave it in a desk drawer. I place it in the drawer and promise to

remember her on the three-day trip. *Like I could not remember if I tried.* My mom's wise words are the driving force behind practically everything I do. Working at a chocolate company may not be the ideal way to make money, but I am making people happy. *Okay, so it's not the ideal way to make people happy either, but I'm working with what I have.* I let my thoughts wander as I pack. Is this really all there is to living? Just working in order to make money to not spend, because you're saving it for the next generation, just for them to do it all over again? There are things like religion and beliefs and other things, but rarely do people stop to find them - and neither do I. The idea of existence is so unreal to everyone that we just focus on one thing and dive into it, never stopping to check if the goal is worth anything. Money, good deeds, love - Everybody is greedy for something. Shaking the thoughts off, I remember what mom said. My goal is happiness, not for myself, but for others. Even if it is just the juvenile delight of chocolate, then so be it. I finish packing my stuff and get ready for the flight departing in a couple of hours. In only a few hours, I will be across the world, in Ghana.

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We safely land in Ghana. Isabis seems even more excited than I am. I wish I could say the same about Walter. He spent the entire plane ride grumbling. No matter; we are in Ghana, and I refuse to let sourness ruin this trip. Speaking of which, I read through the email many times, but still got almost no insight as to what I'm supposed to do on this trip. I guess this is supposed to be a learning experience? It's our first day here, and I can practically feel the jetlag sneaking up on me. We are going to the cocoa farm tomorrow to do the check-up. I guess we are only looking at one. *Wouldn't it be better to look at more than one farm, so we get a better idea of what it's like on average?* We get to the hotel - very high quality, which I felt a bit guilty

about. I decide to beat the jetlag before it consumes me, so I go to my room and fall asleep almost immediately.

Luckily, my alarm wakes me up on time today, but I wake up a bundle of nerves. I brush off my anxious thoughts about today and get dressed to accommodate the hot weather. I walk down for breakfast with Isabis and Walter. Isabis has apparently not slept as well as I had. He is currently slumped over the table with a cup of coffee next to his head. I sit down across from him, and he lifts his head, glaring. “Rough night?”, I ask sympathetically. “Shut up...”, he growls. I chuckle, knowing the oh-so-persistent annoyance that is jet lag. Walter sits down as well. We order breakfast and talk about what we’re doing today. Walter seems to be in a better mood than before. The waitress brings our food over. T. Isabis and I thank her and take our plates, and Walter takes his plate as well. Breakfast is refreshingly casual, and we soon make our way to the cocoa farm that we are visiting.

We arrive at the cocoa farm, and I can’t describe the nostalgia of simply being in Ghana. The air feels so natural to breathe in. The smell of trees and dust is strangely comforting, and stepping out of the car and into the cocoa farm feels like being brought back to life. We are greeted by the owner of the farm, Keyon. He wears a stoic face, but excitement is evident in his eyes. This makes me smile. He shows us around the cocoa farm, showing us exactly how cocoa is made. Cocoa pods are picked off the trees. The beans from the pods are then fermented, dried, roasted, cracked, ground and melted into a ‘cocoa liquor’, which is what makes the cocoa powder. “Don’t be fooled by the name,”, Keyon says with amusement, “Cocoa liquor is not chocolate whiskey. In fact, it is very bitter and not good-tasting. Chocolate only begins to taste nice after you add sugar and milk.”. He then shows us where and how everything is done. Keyon

takes the time to answer any questions we have - we try to ask many since we came all this way to learn the process - and once we are all finished, he says that we are free to observe the work being done until it is time for us to leave.

We decide to split up to look around the farm more. I decide to go explore the area where they pick the pods out of the trees. I look up at the tall trees, cocoa pods peeking through the luscious green of the leaves. I never got to appreciate the beauty of nature when I lived in Ghana, as I always wanted to live in the city. Now that I do, I wish I had admired the beauty of Africa more. I'm reminded of my mom, and how hard she worked in Ghana before she died. I smile at my fond memories of her. Workers are moving all around me, paying me no mind. That's why when one stops to observe me, unsuccessfully hiding behind a particularly large tree, it catches my attention. It is a woman carrying a basket of the cocoa beans that looks too big for her to carry. When I look at her directly, I notice why. She is small. *There's no way she is over 14...* Discreetly, I pick a cocoa pod and walk over to her, casually putting it in her basket. *At least, I hope it is casual.* I pretend to look through the trees for more cocoa pods as she looks at me, perplexed. "You don't work here.", she says bluntly. *Cutting right to the chase I guess.* "Um... Yes.", I cringe at my own hesitance, "We're just visiting.". She nods and continues with her work. I know she is trying to inch away from me - I don't blame her; she is probably afraid of getting in trouble - But I ask her a question before she can leave. "Can I ask how old you are ma'am?". She looks so scared, it breaks my heart. I crouch down next to her "You're not in trouble, I just want to know..". She hesitates more but whispers something. "Sorry, could you repeat that?", I whisper as I can't hear her. She repeats herself a bit louder, "I'm 11...". I almost gasp, but I catch myself, not wanting to frighten her more. I simply nod and stand back up,

continuing to examine the cocoa pods. 11 years old. *There's no way that's legal.* Now that I take a closer look, the other workers present seem to be far too young as well. Their hustle is distracting, but once you really look, many of the workers seem to be kids. Why would children be working like this? Has it always been like this? One particularly small boy jogs past me. He couldn't have been over 9 years old. *Ok, I've seen enough. I have to ask Keyon about this.*

Without mentioning the little girl of course.

Walter watches me walk around, trying to find Keyon. After what seems like hours, I find him in the 'drying' station of the farm. He doesn't wear any distinguishing clothes, so he is hard to pinpoint. Once I find him, I call out, "Keyon! I need to speak with you for a bit." He looks at me expectantly. I take a deep breath. "Are you aware that some of your workers are underaged?" I see a flicker of the panic cross his face, before that stoic expression returns. "I have no idea what you are talking about sir," he replies, not looking directly at my eyes. *Very convincing.* I lower my voice and continue, "Look, there's no way you didn't notice how young some of those workers are. It's not permitted for them to work here." "They are completing their jobs like usual sir," he says, the word 'sir' sounding uncomfortable to me, "Why is it an issue now?". *Now?...* He looks as confused as I feel, and I wonder if he knows that child labor is illegal.

Walter abruptly struts up to us, interjecting. "How do you like the farm, Owen?", he asks, not bothering to apologize for interrupting. My eyebrows furrowed together. He continues, "Have you seen the cocoa trees yet? They're beautiful." He tries steering me away, but I brush him off. I don't bother to correct him because *he* has not seen the trees yet, but I have. He was observing the 'roasting' area, not the 'picking' area. "I was just discussing something with

Keyon.”, I try to keep a gentle tone with him. I know he didn’t want to be on this trip. “Since we’re supposed to do a checkup on the farm, I was asking him about the workers.”. Walter’s face slightly pales from his usual red state. He pulls my arm so I’m facing away from Keyon. “You know, this trip isn’t that formal.”, he says, taking me by surprise, “It’s just a routine check-up we do, so don’t take it so seriously.”. I frown, but nod, wanting him to leave. He catches the hint, *finally*, and goes back to where he was before. I can feel his eyes still on me after he leaves. I turn back to Keyon, but before any words can exit my mouth, he speaks. “Listen,”, he slightly angrily whispers, “I know this is your first time here, but do not mess with things you do not know anything about. Thank you for expressing your concerns”. I close my gaping mouth as he walks away. I am angry. I am not angry that I was talked down to. I am angry that he is ignoring the suffering of these kids. There must be something I can do about this.

The third day of the trip passes in a rush of packing, discussing what we learned like a 3rd-grade class after a field trip, and free time. Isabis visits his family, and I visit some old friends. I feel numb, though. Like it didn’t really happen. If you ask me, I would say I spent the day thinking about Keyon’s words from the day before. Our trip comes to an end much too soon. Soon enough, we are on the flight back to America, but I have no clue what to do next.

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After thinking about it through the entire flight, before falling asleep, and the majority of the next morning before work, I come up with one solution: To tell Mr. Montgomery. *What a revolutionary idea, really*. Walter, Isabis and I are due in the boss’s office today to discuss the trip. That will be a good time to bring up the problem. I know Mr. Montgomery will not turn his

back on the kids in Ghana. He has a soft spot for children, as he said, so as soon as I tell him what is happening, I have no doubt that there will be a change.

The four of us sit at a table in Mr. Montgomery's office. The air is stiff and I find myself already missing the air in Ghana. Mr. Montgomery soon finishes looking through the documents on the table and turns to us. "So," he started, that Santa-Claus-smile on his face, "How was the trip?" I open my mouth, but close it, thinking it wouldn't be nice to start the conversation with critiques and complaints. Walter evidently had no problem with it, as he complained, "It was so hot, and the people there barely spoke to us properly." I looked at him confused. Everyone there spoke to us very politely and were very kind. The discussion moves forward into the territory of the process of making chocolate. The boss asks Isabis and me about it, as Walter has already been on this trip before. *I figured, the way he was so familiar with how things work.* Mr. Montgomery seems happy with our monotonous responses and moves the discussion forward. "What did you think of the farm owner and workers?", he asks quietly. "Well actua-" "They were great.", Walter interrupts. *I've been getting interrupted a lot lately.* "The tour he gave us went well, and the workers do their jobs properly. It's perfect." "Great!", Mr. Montgomery says with glee, "Did you see th-". "Actually, Mr. Montgomery,", I interject, raising my voice for the first time to the boss, "I have something to ask."

The three of them look at me in anticipation. A bit dramatically if you ask me. "I noticed that some of the workers are underaged. There's child labor on the farms...", I say, "It must be a shock, but thankfully, I realized, or it would've gone unnoticed. Now that we know, we can look into records and...". I trail off, seeing that the boss is simply looking at his hands. "Owen, all the

workers as far as we know are of the legal working age. You can check the records if you don't believe me.", Walter says from next to me, "Whoever you saw was probably one of the worker's kids, or maybe just looked young." I don't look at Walter. I look at Montgomery. Walter is practically seething from being ignored but continues. "What I *did* notice though was the cocoa beans being-", "Mr. Montgomery?", I question. He looks up at me like he had just heard me. My eyebrows draw together. "I *said* I noticed that some of the workers are underaged-". "Yes, I heard you," Amell- Mr. Montgomery spoke, "And it's just like Walter said, Owen. All the records say that they're of age, so they are."

"I saw it with my own eyes. There's no way those kids are of age.", I say incredulously, "Haven't you gone to the farm too? You should know better than anybody that there are children working there, and it's not right." "Drop it, Owen.", Walter threatens. I look at Amell to see that he is no longer looking at his hand, but at me with a cold stare. "Do you not believe me?", my accent thickens with my anger, "If you don't just call Keyon and see for yourself-". Amell sighs. "I always thought you were smarter than the rest of *your kind*, Owen. Clearly I was wrong." *My kind?* "If you continue with these lies, I will have no choice but to fire you." I stand up, reading the implication. I turn my head towards Isabis, whose eyes are wide. *He was there.* "If I'm lying, then how did Isabis see the same things that I did?", I ask, gesturing towards my best friend. I know that Walter won't admit to seeing any child labour. Amell looks over at Isabis. "Are you going to agree with this buffoon's lies, Isabis?". His mouth opens, and I think he is about to be my witness, but he closes it. This repeats a few times until he ultimately closes his mouth. "Isabis...?", I say, deflating. He is staring at the apparently fascinating floor tiles. "Isabis, did you see any child workers at the cocoa farm?", Amell asks, making it sound like a statement.

“No Mr. Montgomery.”, he replies. I *know* he saw them, too. “You leave me no choice, Owen.”, Amell says darkly, “You are fired for your blatant lies against this company.”.

“But it is not a lie!” I exclaim, “I know what I saw, and the cocoa farms definitely use child labor.”. As soon as the silence settled after my outburst there was a soft click from the door. We look over to see the door closed. When I turn back, Amell looks like he just saw Satan crawl up from the underworld. “Oh no..”, he whispers, “The 10:00 interview with the press...”. I look at the clock to see that it was 10:02. *How much had she heard?* Amell’s face is as white as his beard when he tells us to get out of his office. Walter and Isabis leave, Isabis avoiding eye contact with me like it was the plague. I stay behind, contradicting his orders. He is no longer my boss, after all. He returns my glare towards him with enough venom to put a cobra to shame. “I thought you had a soft spot for kids? How could you do this to them?”, I question, “You knew about the child labor this whole time, yet you didn’t know anything to stop it.”. “There is no child labor at our cocoa farms.”, he says glancing at the door, “And I *do* have a soft spot for kids. My kids, and the sweet kids here, who buy my chocolate.”. I almost laugh at this. “So rich kids in America who can make you money.”, I state. He doesn’t deny it. Rage flows through my veins. “I looked up to you, Amell...”, I regretfully say. He replies, “And I thought you were civilized. I guess we were both wrong.”. I don’t think he realized that he just insulted himself, or maybe he knows how corrupt he is. Either way, I left his office feeling nothing but resentment towards the one who I respected.

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The papers the next day have quite an interesting article. “‘Montgomery’s Chocolate’ Company involved in Child Labour?”. I chuckle and read through the article. *I guess karma*

really does exist- I freeze when something catches my attention in the interview with Amell: “We have looked into it and fired the one responsible for it. Our company aims to make people happy and would never endorse child labor”. I frown. No matter how you twist it, I am not the one responsible for the child labor, so it can’t be me that they are referring to. I pull out my phone and look through it for the number. I find it and press the call button. Someone picks up after the 3rd ring. “Keyon?”, I ask, “It’s Owen”.

“Oh, hello Owen.”, he replies, “Sorry, if it’s regarding the company, I can’t help you. I was fired today.”. I was right. “Oh, I’m sorry. Actually, I was fired too.”. “Oh? Why?”, he asks. “Well I told the boss about the child labor at the farms and he blew up.”, I say casually. “You WHAT.”, Keyon yells. I have to hold the phone slightly away from my ear. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?! I gave the kids easy jobs and good pay. Half of their families rely on the money from the cocoa farm to survive!”. My face pales. I hadn’t considered the children’s financial needs. I remember the little girl at the farm, who looked too frail to be doing that job. I never questioned why she did it regardless of the difficulties. I hear a frustrated scream from the other end of the phone. “I told you to not meddle with what you don’t know about. You didn’t listen.” *Well, I couldn’t have done nothing like Amell and Walter.* All I can hear are beeps, and I realize that Keyon hung up on me. I look at a box of ‘Montgomery’s Chocolates’ on my table. I want to throw up.

To think I could claim to be making people happy with those chocolates when in actuality, they were just to give the wealthy even more. Amell’s kindness only reached as far as the press. He had no regard for anything else other than what made him money. *It’s what he is greedy for.* I’m disgusted. People like Amell are not successful through hard work. They are

successful only by exploiting others. I remember a hadith a Muslim friend of mine once told me: “If anyone resorts to oppression against any worker, or curtailed his rights, or took from him than he bargained for, or took more work from him than he had bargained for, or took away anything without his consent, then I (S.A.S) would be the complainant on the day of judgment on his behalf”. That should be common knowledge. Companies shouldn’t be praised for reaching the bare minimum, but now I see that most companies don’t even do that. How could they take away from those who already have so little? How could they, when they already have so much? They blindly chase money, not knowing that it will bring them nothing. *At least he tried to fix it by firing Keyon.* Except that is not true. He did not fix it because *he* saw the corruption. He fixed it because *the people* saw the corruption. I was blinded by happy interviews and promises to make people happy. I failed to see what was going on behind the scenes. I failed to see it because I wanted to believe that the company was good. Just like all its customers, I remained ignorant to the company’s guilt. I bury my head in my hands and think of how the guilty pleasure, chocolate, can do so much.

References

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