

Fledgling Empathy and the Things We Waste
Excerpt from "The Grande Life"

By Shannon O'Connor

Since Baha's is big business, there is a lot of waste that occurs in every store. Milk is supposed to be thrown out if it's in a pitcher and the temperature drops below 140 degrees. After a barista steams milk again, it cannot be steamed any more, and it has to be tossed. And a ton of food is thrown out every night.

In the beginning, when people start working at Baha's, the newcomers feel badly about all the cookies and sandwiches that are discarded. A lot of people take things home, but after a while, the sweet things take a toll on the weight. The guys don't mind, but the girls do. There is an expression when young women go to college, "the freshman fifteen." Well at Baha's it's the same thing, "The Baha's fifteen."

Maureen started working at Baha's because she moved to the city to go to graduate school to study mental health counseling. Her boyfriend went to post graduate school and was friends with Alex's boyfriend, so she applied at our store, and since Alex knew her, he hired her. It wasn't really her field, since her last job was working at a group home for psychiatric patients and supervising their medications, but she needed a job, so at Baha's she arrived.

"When I interviewed this girl she told me her last job was working with mental patients in an outpatient facility," Tim said. "That's a really good background for working at Baha's. We deal with a lot of crazies here."

When Maureen worked at night and closed the store, she felt horribly guilty about the food that we threw away. “I can’t believe all this goes in the trash. These are perfectly good sandwiches,” she said.

“We’re not really supposed to donate sandwiches,” Julia told her. “We’re not even supposed to give them to homeless people that come in. There was a guy who used to work here, Jim, and he gave bags of food to a homeless man every night. The old manager Nick put a stop to that. He said that the reason we’re not supposed to give them away is if someone eats a sandwich that’s been in his bag all day, and it goes bad, and he dies, then Baha’s could get in trouble. It makes sense. I don’t like it either, but those are the rules.”

“But we throw out so much,” Maureen said. “And I can’t take everything home and eat it. Do you think we could donate it?”

“We’ve tried to donate things before, but it never works out,” Julia said. “The people from the charities want someone to go deliver the food, and Alex doesn’t want someone to walk or drive somewhere while on the clock. I know some stores donate their pastries, but we’ve never been able to organize the right way.”

“Julia never takes sandwiches home,” I said. “There was a guy who got sick from one, and ever since then, she’s been afraid to eat them.”

“And once you’ve had one, they all taste the same,” Julia said.

“I think I’m gonna take a bag and give it to the homeless people near where I live,” Maureen said. “That way, if they get sick, nobody will ever know where the food came from, since our store is so far away.”

“You’re taking your life in your hands,” Julia joked.

“I feel sorry for them,” Maureen said. “We’re all

human beings and we should help each other out.”

Maureen continued to give food to the homeless people that hung around the train station near where she lived through the summer.

“Oh, it was horrible,” she told me. “I gave a bag to these people and a guy said to me, ‘Will you take me home with you, sweetie?’ I almost died. I’ll walk a different way from the station now. I’m gonna have my boyfriend pick me up. I was freaked.”

“You give them a sandwich, and they want it all,” I said. “But it was nice of you to care about them. I’m afraid of homeless people. You never know if they’re on drugs or looking for drugs or in withdrawal. I know that some people have bad luck, and just happen to become homeless, but I have a natural fear of people, and I think everyone’s out to get me. So that’s why I could never hand them a bag of food.”

When Tom was new, he was shocked at the amount of food that was thrown away as well. “I can’t believe that we throw all this in the garbage. It’s such a waste.”

Julia and I explained why we had to do this. “It’s so depressing,” he said. “Instead of throwing it away, you could put it all in a big shopping bag, and I’ll leave it somewhere near my apartment building. That way if any of the people on the street near where I live find it, they can just take it. And there are tons of Baha’s between here and where I live, so nobody will suspect our store.”

“If the homeless people don’t find it, maybe the rats will,” Julia said. “And they could have a huge party. And they’ll call their rat friends from all around the city and eat lots of molasses cookies. Yum.”

I started wrapping the pastries in plastic wrap, but that took too long, so I put them in little bags, a much quicker process. At the end there was a giant bag of pastries.

Ten pieces of banana loaf, six pieces of pumpkin loaf, six pieces of cinnamon swirl coffee cake, four pieces of blueberry coffee cake, one piece of apple coffee cake, two toffee almond bars (I took three), two mint brownies (Julia took one, I took two), one unopened marble loaf (six pieces), one unopened lemon loaf (six pieces), seven molasses cookies, two M&M cookies, five oatmeal cookies, two chocolate chip cookies, one tuna fish sandwich, two mozzarella and tomato sandwiches, two turkey and swiss sandwiches, and one fruit and yoghurt parfait.

‘If one homeless person finds this and eats it all, that person could go into sugar shock,’ I told Tom. ‘Even if the person isn’t diabetic.’

‘Hopefully, whoever finds it will share it,’ he shrugged.

When Julia and I walked through the park, Tom walked on the upper path and we watched him, walking below.

‘Those newbies,’ I said to her. ‘They’re so soft-hearted. I remember when I first started, I felt awful about all the food we throw out. But now it’s old hat.’

‘I felt the same way. But if you’ve been there for years, you get used to it. They’ll learn.’

‘I don’t know. It’s not right. But what can we do? It’s big business. Someday, when the world is ending because of nuclear holocaust, we’ll be digging through the trash to find the pieces of pumpkin loaf under the rubble we threw away when we worked here. But until that day comes, we just follow the orders of the upper management. And we’ll keep throwing things away.’

- Shannon O’Connor