

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

The PARTICULAR
Sadness of
LEMON CAKE

'SUCH
BEAUTIFUL
WRITING'

JODI
PICOULT



AIMEE BENDER

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About the Book

On the eve of her ninth birthday, unassuming Rose Edelstein, a girl at the periphery of schoolyard games and her distracted parents' attention, bites into her mother's homemade lemon-chocolate cake and discovers she has a magical gift: she can taste her mother's emotions in the slice. She discovers this gift to her horror, for her mother – her cheerful, can-do mother – tastes of despair and desperation. Suddenly, and for the rest of her life, food becomes perilous. Anything can be revealed at any meal.

Rose's gift forces her to confront the secret knowledge all families keep hidden – truths about her mother's life outside the home, her father's strange detachment and her brother's clash with the world. Yet as Rose grows up, she realises there are some secrets that even her taste buds cannot discern.

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake is a luminous tale about the heartbreak of loving those whom you know too much about. It is profound and funny, wise and sad, and Aimee Bender's dazzling prose illuminates the strangeness of everyday life.

About the Author

Aimee Bender is the author of the novel *An Invisible Sign of My Own* and of the collections *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* and *Willful Creatures*. Her work has been widely anthologised and has been translated into ten languages. She lives in Los Angeles.

ALSO BY AIMEE BENDER

An Invisible Sign of My Own
The Girl in the Flammable Skirt
Willful Creatures

The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake

AIMEE BENDER

 WINDMILL BOOKS

For Mir

Food is all those substances which, submitted to the action of the stomach, can be assimilated or changed into life by digestion, and can thus repair the losses which the human body suffers through the act of living.

—The Physiology of Taste, *Brillat-Savarin*

Part one

Food

It happened for the first time on a Tuesday afternoon, a warm spring day in the flatlands near Hollywood, a light breeze moving east from the ocean and stirring the black-eyed pansy petals newly planted in our flower boxes.

My mother was home, baking me a cake. When I tripped up the walkway, she opened the front door before I could knock.

How about a practice round? she said, leaning past the door frame. She pulled me in for a hello hug, pressing me close to my favorite of her aprons, the worn cotton one trimmed in sketches of twinned red cherries.

On the kitchen counter, she'd set out the ingredients: Flour bag, sugar box, two brown eggs nestled in the grooves between tiles. A yellow block of butter blurring at the edges. A shallow glass bowl of lemon peel. I toured the row. This was the week of my ninth birthday, and it had been a long day at school of cursive lessons, which I hated, and playground yelling about point scoring, and the sunlit kitchen and my warm-eyed mother were welcome arms, open. I dipped a finger into the wax baggie of brown-sugar crystals, murmured yes, please, yes.

She said there was about an hour to go, so I pulled out my spelling booklet. Can I help? I asked, spreading out pencils and papers on the vinyl place mats.

Nah, said Mom, whisking the flour and baking soda together.

My birthday is in March, and that year it fell during an especially bright spring week, vivid and clear in the narrow residential streets where we lived just a handful of blocks south of Sunset. The night-blooming jasmine that crawled

up our neighbor's front gate released its heady scent at dusk, and to the north, the hills rolled charmingly over the horizon, houses tucked into the brown. Soon, daylight savings time would arrive, and even at nearly nine, I associated my birthday with the first hint of summer, with the feeling in classrooms of open windows and lighter clothing and in a few months no more homework. My hair got lighter in spring, from light brown to nearly blond, almost like my mother's ponytail tassel. In the neighborhood gardens, the agapanthus plants started to push out their long green robot stems to open up to soft purples and blues.

Mom was stirring eggs; she was sifting flour. She had one bowl of chocolate icing set aside, another with rainbow sprinkles.

A cake challenge like this wasn't a usual afternoon activity; my mother didn't bake all that often, but what she enjoyed most was anything tactile, and this cake was just one in a long line of recent varied hands-on experiments. In the last six months, she'd coaxed a strawberry plant into a vine, stitched doilies from vintage lace, and in a burst of motivation installed an oak side door in my brother's bedroom with the help of a hired contractor. She'd been working as an office administrator, but she didn't like copy machines, or work shoes, or computers, and when my father paid off the last of his law school debt, she asked him if she could take some time off and learn to do more with her hands. My hands, she told him, in the hallway, leaning her hips against his; my hands have had no lessons in anything.

Anything? he'd asked, holding tight to those hands. She laughed, low. Anything *practical*, she said.

They were right in the way, in the middle of the hall, as I was leaping from room to room with a plastic leopard. Excuse me, I said.

He breathed in her hair, the sweet-smelling thickness of it. My father usually agreed with her requests, because stamped in his two-footed stance and jaw was the word Provider, and he loved her the way a bird-watcher's heart leaps when he hears the call of the roseate spoonbill, a fluffy pink wader, calling its lilting coo-coo from the mangroves. Check, says the bird-watcher. Sure, said my father, tapping a handful of mail against her back.

Rah, said the leopard, heading back to its lair.

At the kitchen table, I flipped through my workbook, basking in the clicking sounds of a warming oven. If I felt a hint of anything unsettling, it was like the sun going swiftly behind a cloud only to shine straight seconds later. I knew vaguely that my parents had had an argument the night before, but parents had arguments all the time, at home and on TV. Plus, I was still busily going over the bad point scoring from lunch, called by Eddie Oakley with the freckles, who never called fairly. I read through my spelling booklet: knack, knick, knot; cartwheel, wheelbarrow, wheelie. At the counter, Mom poured thick yellow batter into a greased cake pan, and smoothed the top with the flat end of a pink plastic spatula. She checked the oven temperature, brushed a sweaty strand of hair off her forehead with the knob of her wrist.

Here we go, she said, slipping the cake pan into the oven.

When I looked up, she was rubbing her eyelids with the pads of her fingertips. She blew me a kiss and said she was going to lie down for a little bit. Okay, I nodded. Two birds bickered outside. In my booklet, I picked the person doing a cartwheel and colored her shoes with red laces, her face a light orange. I made a vow to bounce the ball harder on the playground, and to bounce it right into Eddie Oakley's corner. I added some apples to the wheelbarrow freehand.

The room filled with the smell of warming butter and sugar and lemon and eggs, and at five, the timer buzzed and I pulled out the cake and placed it on the stovetop. The house was quiet. The bowl of icing was right there on the counter, ready to go, and cakes are best when just out of the oven, and I really couldn't possibly wait, so I reached to the side of the cake pan, to the least obvious part, and pulled off a small warm spongy chunk of deep gold. Iced it all over with chocolate. Popped the whole thing into my mouth.

2 After my mother quit her job, she spent those first six months or so beautifying the house. Each week, a different project. First, she grew that strawberry plant in the backyard, fastening it on the fence until the berries popped points of red in a wavy row. When she was done with that, she curled up on the sofa in heaps of old lace, placing her best new doily beneath a bowl of fresh-picked strawberries. Then she whipped the cream to put on top of the strawberries picked from the vine and put it all in the ceramic bowl she'd made in college that rested on top of the doily. It was red and white and delicate and elegant but she was always bad at accepting compliments. After the vines slowed for fall, she wanted to do something more rugged, so she called up a friend who knew a contractor and hired him on the promise that she could assist while they installed the side door in my brother's bedroom, just in case he ever wanted to go outside.

But he hates outside! I said, following them into Joseph's room for measurements. Why can't I have a door?

You're too young for a door, Mom said. My brother held his backpack to his chest, watching, and he gave a short nod when Mom asked if the location was okay. How long will it take? he asked.

We'll only work on it while you're in school, she assured us both, pulling out a notebook list of supplies.

It took three weeks of sawing, sanding, destroying and rebuilding, my mother in jeans, her ponytail tucked under the collar of her blouse, the contractor giving long explanations on sizing. Joseph slept under an extra quilted comforter once the wall had broken open, because he preferred his own bed. They worked day after day until the

wood was finally fitted, and the window at the top installed, and the doorknob attached, and cheerful little red curtains hung partway down the frame. Mom presented it to Joseph as soon as we came home from school. Ta-da! she said, pulling him by the wrist and bowing. He put his hand on the doorknob and exited through the door and then circled back through the front door of the house and went into the kitchen to eat cereal. Looks good, he called, from the kitchen. Mom and I opened and closed the door fifty times, locking it and pulling the curtains shut; unlocking it and pulling the curtains open. When Dad got home at his usual time, six feet tall and nearly ducking under door frames, he made a few calls in the bedroom, and when Mom dragged him out to see the finished product, he said nice, nicely done, and then folded his arms.

What? Mom said.

Nothing.

It has a key lock, I said, pointing.

Just funny, said Dad, wrinkling his nose. All this work for a door in a room only one of us goes into.

You can use it, Joseph called, from the kitchen.

In case of a fire, I said.

We did so much sanding, Mom said, tracing the new calluses on her palms.

Very smooth, said Dad, touching the curtains.

After dinner, while Dad finished the rest of his work in the bedroom, Mom stretched out on the living-room carpet in front of the red brick fireplace, and even though it was warm out still, almost seventy degrees, she lit a fire using an old pine log she'd found in the garage. Come sit, Rose, she called to me, and we nestled up together and stared as the flickering flames licked the log into ash. I had nightmares that night, since they say you have nightmares more easily when the house is too warm. I dreamed we were plunging down frozen rivers.

My birthday cake was her latest project because it was not from a mix but instead built from scratch—the flour, the baking soda, lemon-flavored because at eight that had been my request; I had developed a strong love for sour. We'd looked through several cookbooks together to find just the right one, and the smell in the kitchen was overpoweringly pleasant. To be clear: the bite I ate was delicious. Warm citrus-baked batter lightness enfolded by cool deep dark swirled sugar.

But the day was darkening outside, and as I finished that first bite, as that first impression faded, I felt a subtle shift inside, an unexpected reaction. As if a sensor, so far buried deep inside me, raised its scope to scan around, alerting my mouth to something new. Because the goodness of the ingredients—the fine chocolate, the freshest lemons—seemed like a cover over something larger and darker, and the taste of what was underneath was beginning to push up from the bite. I could absolutely taste the chocolate, but in drifts and traces, in an unfurling, or an opening, it seemed that my mouth was also filling with the taste of smallness, the sensation of shrinking, of upset, tasting a distance I somehow knew was connected to my mother, tasting a crowded sense of her thinking, a spiral, like I could almost even taste the grit in her jaw that had created the headache that meant she had to take as many aspirins as were necessary, a white dotted line of them in a row on the nightstand like an ellipsis to her comment: I'm just going to lie down. . . . None of it was a bad taste, so much, but there was a kind of lack of wholeness to the flavors that made it taste hollow, like the lemon and chocolate were just surrounding a hollowness. My mother's able hands had made the cake, and her mind had known how to balance the ingredients, but she was not there, in it. It so scared me that I took a knife from a drawer and cut out a big slice, ruining the circle, because I had to check again right that second, and I put it on a pink-flowered plate and grabbed a

napkin from the napkin drawer. My heart was beating fast. Eddie Oakley shrank to a pinpoint. I was hoping I'd imagined it—maybe it was a bad lemon? or old sugar?—although I knew, even as I thought it, that what I'd tasted had nothing to do with ingredients—and I flipped on the light and took the plate in the other room to my favorite chair, the one with the orange-striped pattern, and with each bite, I thought—mmm, so good, the best ever, yum—but in each bite: absence, hunger, spiraling, hollows. This cake that my mother had made just for me, her daughter, whom she loved so much I could see her clench her fists from overflow sometimes when I came home from school, and when she would hug me hello I could feel how inadequate the hug was for how much she wanted to give.

I ate the whole piece, desperate to prove myself wrong.

When Mom got up, after six, she wandered into the kitchen and saw the slice taken out of the cake and found me slumped at the foot of the orange-striped chair. She knelt down and smoothed the hot hair off my forehead.

Rosie, she said. Sweets. You all right?

I blinked open eyes, with eyelids heavier now, like tiny lead weights had been strung, fishing-line style, onto each lash.

I ate a slice of cake, I said.

She smiled at me. I could still see the headache in her, pulsing in her left eyebrow, but the smile was real.

That's okay, she said, rubbing the underside of her eye bone. How'd it turn out?

Fine, I said, but my voice wavered.

She went and got herself a piece and sat down with me on the floor, crossing her legs. Sheet lines pressed into her cheek from the nap.

Mmm, she said, taking a small bite. Do you think it's too sweet?

I could feel the mountain swelling in my throat, an ache spreading into the lining of my neck.

What is it, baby? she asked.

I don't know.

Joe home from school yet?

Not yet.

What's wrong? Are you crying? Did something happen at school?

Did you and Dad have a fight?

Not really, she said, wiping her mouth with my napkin. Just a discussion. You don't have to worry about that.

Are you okay? I said.

Me?

You? I said, sitting up more.

She shrugged. Sure, she said. I just needed a nap. Why?

I shook my head clear. I thought—

She raised her eyebrows, encouraging.

It tastes *empty*, I said.

The cake? She laughed a little, startled. Is it that bad? Did I miss an ingredient?

No, I said. Not like that. Like you were away? You feel okay?

I kept shaking my head. The words, stupid words, which made no sense.

I'm here, she said, brightly. I feel fine. More?

She held out a forkful, all sunshine and cocoa, but I could not possibly eat it. I swallowed and, with effort, the spit slid around the mountain in my throat.

I guess I shouldn't spoil my dinner? I said.

Only then—and only for a second—did she look at me oddly. Funny kid, she said. She patted her fingers on the napkin and stood. Well, then. Should we get started?

Dinner? I said.

Chicken, she said, checking her watch. It's late!

I followed her into the kitchen. Joseph showed up about ten minutes later, the thud of his backpack on the floor like

an anvil had dropped from the ceiling. He was flushed from the walk home, gray eyes clear, dark hair dampened with sweat, and the red in his cheeks and brightness in his eyes made it seem like he would want to tell us all about his day, with high-flying anecdotes and jokes and ribbings. Instead, he washed his hands at the kitchen sink, silent. He seemed to gather air around him in a cloak.

Mom hugged him like he'd been gone for a year, and he patted her shoulder like she was a puppy, and together the three of us chopped and cleaned while she made breaded chicken breast with green beans and rice. Joseph sprayed diluted bleach on the cutting board in the sink. Oil crackled in the fry pan. I tried to push my mind back to thinking about school, but the anxiety kicked in for me about halfway through the preparation; as I watched my mother roll raw chicken in breadcrumbs, I thought: What if I taste it in the chicken too? The rice?

At six-forty-five, my father's car drove up and parked. He pushed the door open, jovial, bellowing I'm home! as he usually did. He said it to the hallway. By the end of the day, his hair, black and thick, was matted and rumpled, having taken the hit for all the work worry in his hands.

He paused at the kitchen door, but we were all too busy to run to greet him.

Look at the team go! he said.

Hi, Dad, I said, waving a knife back. He always seemed a little like a guest to me. Welcome home, I said.

Glad to be home, he said.

Mom glanced up from her fry pan and nodded.

He looked like he might want to come in and kiss her but wasn't sure if it would work, so instead he lined up his briefcase against the closet wall, vanished down the hall to change, and joined us just as we sat down with the food surrounding steaming in bowls and platters. Joseph began serving himself, and as slowly as I could, I put everything

on my plate in even spoonfuls. Half a chicken breast. Seven green beans. Two helpings of rice.

It was dark outside by now. Streetlamps buzzed on with their vague blue fluorescence.

The dinner taste was a little better than the cake's but just barely. I sank down into my chair. I pulled at my mouth.

What is it? Mom asked. I don't know, I said, holding on to her sleeve. The chicken tastes weird, I said.

Mom chewed, thoughtfully. The breadcrumbs? she said. Is there too much rosemary?

Oh, it's fine, said Joseph, who ate with his eyes on the dish so no one could get eye contact and actually talk to him.

As we ate, my brother told a little about the after-school astronomy program and how a cosmologist from UCLA would be visiting soon to explain universe acceleration. Right this minute, said Joseph, it's just getting faster and faster. He indicated with his fork, and a fleck of rice flew across the table. Dad told a story about his secretary's dog. Mom pulled her chicken into threads.

When we were done, she brought the iced, finished, half-sliced cake out on a yellow china plate, and made a little flourish with her hands.

And for dessert! she said.

Joseph clapped, and Dad mmmmed, and because I didn't know what to do, I forced my way through another slice, wiping at the tears with my napkin. Sorry, I mumbled. Sorry. Maybe I'm sick? I watched each of their plates carefully, but Dad's piece was gone in a flash, and even Joseph, who never liked much about food in the first place and talked often about how he wished there was a Breakfast Pill, a Lunch Pill, and a Dinner Pill, said Mom should enter it in a contest or something. You're the only person I know who can build doors *and* cakes *and* organize the computer files, he said, glancing up for two seconds.

Rose thought I missed a part, Mom said.

I didn't say that, I said, clutching my plate, cake gummy and bad in my mouth.

No way, said Joe. It's complete.

Thank you, she said, blushing.

We all have different tastes, honey, she said, rubbing my hair.

It's not what I meant, I said. Mom—

Anyway, it's the last cake for a while. I'll be starting a part-time job tomorrow, Mom said. With a carpentry shop, in Silver Lake.

First I've heard of that, Dad said, wiping his mouth. What are you fixing, more doors?

I said carpenter, Mom said. Not handyman. I will be making tables and chairs.

May I be excused? I asked.

Of course, Mom said. I'll check on you in a minute.

I took a bath by myself and went to bed. I felt her come by later, as I was dozing off. Her standing, by my bed. The depth of shadow of a person felt behind closed eyelids. Sweet dreams, sweet Rose, she whispered, and I held on to those words like they were a thread of gold I could follow into blackness. Clinging to them tightly, I fell asleep.

3 My family lived in one of the many centers of Los Angeles, fifteen minutes from a variety of crisscrossing freeways, sandwiched between Santa Monica Boulevard and Melrose. Our neighborhood, bordered by Russian delis to the north and famous thrift shops to the south, was mostly residential, combining families, Eastern European immigrants, and screenwriters who lived in big apartment complexes across the way and who were usually having a hard time selling a script. They stood out on balconies as I walked home from school, smoking afternoon cigarettes, and I knew someone had gotten work when the moving vans showed up. That, or they'd worn through their savings.

Our particular block on Willoughby was quiet at night but in the morning leaf blowers whirled and neighbors revved their engines and the thoroughfares busied. I woke to the sounds of kitchen breakfast bustle. My father got up the earliest, and by seven-fifteen he was already washing his coffee cup in the kitchen sink, splashing water around and humming. He hummed tunes I'd never heard of, exuding an early-morning pep that had drained into a pure desire for television by the time I saw him at 7 p.m.

When he drove off, heading downtown to the office, he always gave one quick blast on the horn. Honk! He never said he was going to do it, or asked anything about it, but I waited, buried deep in my bed, and when his horn sounded, I got up.

Good morning. My stomach felt fine.

After breakfast, a mild and unthreatening cereal grain bar, I poured my mother a glass of water and tiptoed into

her bedroom, placing it carefully on the nightstand.

Here you go, I whispered.

Thank you, she said, her eyes half closed, her hair spread in a thick fan over the pillow. The room smelled warm, of deep sleep and cocoons. She pulled me close and pressed a kiss into my cheek.

Your lunch is in the fridge, she murmured, turning over to the other side.

I tiptoed out of the room. Joseph and I grabbed our stuff and walked single file down Willoughby to Fairfax. The sky a strong deep blue. I kicked stones as I walked, deciding the food stuff of the day before was a one-of-a-kind bad deal, and I had a good day planned ahead, one involving the study of fireflies and maybe some pastel-crayon drawing. Eddie Oakley was regaining most of his usual proportion in the indignant section of my mind. The morning was already warming up—the news had signaled an unusually hot spring week ahead, into the nineties.

At the bus stop, we stood a few feet apart. I kept my distance because I was mostly an irritation to Joseph, a kind of sister rash, but as we were waiting, he took a few steps back until he was standing right next to me. I sucked in my breath.

Look, he said, pointing up.

Across the sky, in the far distance, the thinnest sliver of white moon hovered above a row of trees.

See next to it? he said.

I squinted. What?

That tiny dot, to the right? he said.

I could catch it if I really looked: a pinprick of light, still faintly visible in the morning sky.

Jupiter, he said.

The big guy? I asked, and for a second, his forehead cleared.

None other, he said.

What's it doing?

Just visiting, he said. For today.

I stared at the dot until the bus arrived, praying at it like it was God, and before Joseph stepped ahead, I touched his sleeve to thank him. I made sure it was the part that didn't touch his actual arm, so he would not whip around, annoyed.

Inside the bus, he sat several rows ahead of me and I settled behind a girl singing a pop ballad into her collar. Kids around snapped bubble gum and yelled out jokes, but Joseph held himself still, like everything was pelting him. My big brother. What I could see of his profile was classic: straight nose, high cheekbone, black lashes, light-brown waves of hair. Mom once called him handsome, which had startled me, because he could not be handsome, and yet when I looked at his face I could see how each feature was nicely shaped.

I sat quietly, watching out the moth-encrusted window, tracking the Jupiter dot as we drove south. Little cars below us, zipping past on Fairfax. At a red light, I gave a nod to an older woman driving in curlers. Waved at a guy in motorcycle gear who did rocker hands back. I glanced at the back of Joseph's head, wanting to show him. He read his textbook. In my mind, I told him. He laughed, and looked.

We arrived without incident, I achieved four waves, and Joseph got off and turned down the alleyway that led to the junior high. I walked across the blacktop playground into third grade.

Math problems, reading, carpet time, oil-pastel sky drawing art project. Recess. Four square. Two points. Milk carton. History, spelling. Lunch bell.

I spent lunchtime at the porcelain base of the drinking fountain, which was half stopped up with pink gum, taking sip after sip of the warm metallic water that pushed