

Brownie Fix

By Ellen Cardona

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Foreword

I first met Ellen Cardona in my creative writing course at the University of Texas at Dallas, and she told me that she saved my class as her last one for her graduate studies. I was flattered because I thought that she was saving the best professor and best course for last, but I was wrong. She was terrified of taking my class because she didn't want to confirm what she already knew and denied—she was a writer and needed to accept that fact. After the very first class, I knew that I was dealing with someone who possessed a voice. In her first novel, *Brownie Fix*, she has embraced that voice full-force.

Brownie Fix is a project that she started with my encouragement. With a newborn in the house, she was suffering from postpartum depression, and she wanted to vent her frustrations, which she said not many mothers were readily willing to share. I warned her that the novel could not simply be about herself, about her own situation. She took on the challenge and turned her situation around, creating a funny, irreverent, and passionate tale.

Ellen Cardona is one of the few writers whom I have met who is able to write about emotions in a convincing way without the emotions getting the best of them and ruining the story. *Brownie Fix* is a result of that passion. She found a way to not only write an incredibly moving book, but also a way to bridge a topic that not many mothers feel free to acknowledge: postpartum depression. She once told me that she wrote *Brownie Fix* to help those mothers going through what she experienced and to tell them that they can get through it with a little humor, tears, and brownie mix.

Adding unexpected but ordinary things like brownie mixes to power the story forward is what Ellen does best: she creates painful situations and makes them hilarious against a background of dark voices that haunt *Brownie Fix*. The novel works, and the contrast between the ordinary and the absurd transforms her heroine, Persey, into a powerful, believable, passionate character. *Brownie Fix* is a comedy, a drama, and a pure pleasure to read.

I have always believed in this book, and I am so pleased to see Ellen succeed and enjoy the fruits of her hard labor.

Enjoy *Brownie Fix*.

Dr. Robert S. Nelsen
President
The University of Texas-Pan American

Denial



Chapter One: Ritual Interrupted

“Oh, my God,” Persey said with a sparkle in her brilliant eyes and flip of her auburn hair, a spicy blend of chili powder and milk chocolate. “Brownie mix tastes like the food of the gods.”

The rich and moist taste of chocolate is what attracted Persey to the art of making brownies, and the sweet flavor that entered her mouth when she sucked down the raw mix was enough to satisfy her cravings.

The conditions were indeed perfect for the beloved ritual of brownie making. Her trip to the local grocery store for the nectar was justified since she was nine months pregnant, and the chocolate called to her.

Her husband, Hayden, had left for work, and she had the house to herself with no housekeeper in sight. Plus, it was fall, her favorite season of the year, and the beautiful morning called for the ritual of brownies.

“Do you hope people won’t judge you?” the voices in Persey’s head taunted in unison. “Do you really think you’re perfect?”

Ignoring them, she pulled her steel blue Jaguar into the closest parking space at the grocery store and slammed the door. Clackity-clack went the sound of her stiletto boots hitting the pavement, and she set out on her mission: the ritual would be satisfied. She adjusted the strap of her favorite Louis Vuitton purse on her shoulder, and she was ready.

Walking into the store, she passed a tan, Nordic hunk with fresh fruit and protein bars in his little basket. He took an admiring look at Persey’s big belly protruding through a stylish, loose-fitting, tiger-print blouse.

“You’re fat,” the voices in her head sang.

“Shut up,” she whispered and waddled down one of

the narrow aisles. “Why won’t you just go away?”

“Huh?” asked the hunk, looking only at her belly.

“Go away,” Persey said more to her voices than to the hunk, and the hunk’s expression made her spontaneously burst out in a fit of giggles.

Then carefully, as Persey headed to the brownie aisle, she thought step-by-step of the precise procedure she always used. She wondered for a moment if anyone would think she was obsessed. Billy Joel’s “Just the Way You Are” was playing in the background, and Persey started singing, albeit a little off key, under her breath. Her performance stopped when she thought of her voices.

“You’re going to get fat,” her inner voices sang.

“No one will judge me because I’m pregnant. I can have brownie mix,” she answered, and the baby inside kicked her in total agreement.

“Si, exactamente,” said Persey, rubbing her belly. “On with the ritual.”

When she reached the brownie aisle, she surveyed the different brands of brownie mix, but she knew which one to buy. It was the appearance, the visual part of her ritual, which was important to her. She wanted to make sure that it looked like she was ignorant of the different brands, as if buying brownies was something new to her. She did not want anyone to know that she bought brownies almost daily as part of a ritual that helped to cover her pain.

Extending her arm to the red and brown box with the chocolate syrup, she flipped it over and pretended to read what ingredients she needed. Persey had the items at home, of course, and was already thinking of her next steps. She wanted the raw mix, but first she had to get out of the store.

Walking down the aisles, she held her head up high to mask the shame of buying chocolate. She did not

have the control to resist the power of the brownie mix.

“Why do I always smell fresh bread in the grocery store?” asked Persey, taking in the aroma. She became hungrier and wanted fresh bread and chocolate. She needed to get out of the store, but the lines were all too long.

“What? How long does it take to ring up a simple box of brownie mix?” she thought and looked for a short line.

“Move it,” she said and cut in front of an old lady wearing a Hawaiian muumuu.

“What?” asked the old woman, standing in the express lane with a basket full of countless items.

“You’ve got more than ten, and I only have one. I want my chocolate,” Persey said with a fierce snarl.

Persey watched in amazement as the old woman’s middle finger slowly unfurled, and she flipped Persey off. Persey responded by sticking her tongue out at the woman, and the old woman then stuck her tongue out in Persey’s face.

“Just the Way You Are” segued to “Hey, Macarena” on the store sound system, and Persey stared down the old woman. Finally, Persey turned around to pay for her brownies and winked at the young cashier, who rolled his eyes at the crazy, red-haired lady in front of him.

Walking out of the store, she glanced back at the old woman one more time.

“Hey, Macarena,” Persey sang with a smile and exited through the doors.

When she finally arrived at her estate, Persey closed the blinds in the windows of her enormous, cheery kitchen. Even though the kitchen windows looked into a huge, empty backyard, she did not want to take the chance that anyone might see her gorging on raw brownie mix. She stood for a minute in the enormity of her kitchen with its state of the art appliances, plenty of

cabinets, exaggerated counter space, and large island that stood in the middle of the kitchen.

She loved the way the kitchen opened into the sunken living room, decorated with Dalí reproductions and her own paintings. Listening to the soft babbling of the water fountain, located in the entrance hall, she was ready to focus on her ritual.

“One more step before I can open the mix,” said Persey, rubbing her hands together. “Where is it? I can never find it.”

As she looked through one of the kitchen junk drawers, chock-full of batteries, message pads, metallic screws, nails, and glue, she found what she was looking for: the black, rubber ponytail holder. Humming aloud the maddening Macarena song, she pulled her red hair in a ponytail that sat on the top of her head. It was an instant relief to get her long hair off her face.

With serious focus on the proper procedures, she took her most treasured mixing bowl from its sacred place in the pantry cabinet. Made from glass, it was still crusted with remnants of brownie mix. She remembered when that bowl was given to her as a wedding gift.

“Whoever gave me the bowl would be shocked to find that the gift has become part of my pleasure and part of my agony,” she said and laughed at the irony.

“Ah,” Persey whispered and tore open the red and brown brownie box. Onto the clear and clean kitchen island, she emptied the contents: one large package of light brown, brownie mix and one small packet of dark brown, chocolate syrup.

She ripped the brownie mix package open with a small, wood-handled knife and poured the dry mix into her wedding bowl.

She then scooped up two heaping tablespoons of the mix and eagerly shoved it into her mouth. Remnants of the dried mix fell into her cleavage, which had grown

into a mountain range during the course of her pregnancy.

She sucked the delicious brownie mix off the roof of her mouth. “Mmm, so good,” she said through a mouthful of dry batter. “Oh, the taste of sweet, chocolate sugar.”

For a brief moment, she glanced over to the painting that hung over the fireplace in the living room. “Whoever thought I would give up painting to be a mom? I love that painting,” said Persey, shaking her head.

It was a scene of her mom’s garden in full bloom in spring, and it was her favorite painting in a series of paintings that she showed at the popular art gallery owned by Antonio, her agent and friend.

“He doesn’t understand why I left,” Persey said and sighed. “I don’t understand either.”

“Back to the ritual,” she whispered and ripped her eyes away from her garden. She wondered briefly if the ritual of brownie making had started because she stopped painting.

Dismissing the thought, Persey added water and oil, and the mixture turned dark, chunky, and moist. Into her mouth she sucked two more scoops of the decadently delicious mix.

She added the two eggs and watched the swirl of the yellow yolk blend into the mocha chunks of brownie mix.

“Yeah, baby,” she replied and shoved two more scoops in her mouth.

She next ripped open the chocolate syrup and swirled it into the mix. “Mmm,” said Persey, shoving two more tablespoons of the dark brown mixture into her mouth.

For the final touch, she added pomegranate seeds, which made the mixture crunchy and sweet. With zeal,

she crammed another two tablespoons of the mix into her mouth.

“Oh my God, it tastes so good,” whispered Persey, licking the brownie mix off the spoon.

She swirled the mixture around in the bowl and became lost in its texture and its darkness. It was the sound of a pop and the feeling of water running down her legs that awoke Persey from her trance.

“Oh, my God,” she cried. “My water broke.”

Onto the white tile floor, Persey’s water spilled, but she saw that the clear water was tinged with a light, brown color. “It must be from the brownie mix,” said Persey, shaking off her legs. “Gross.”

“You’re gross,” the voices sang.

“Shut up,” she replied and yanked her ponytail to quiet them.

“I must complete the ritual,” she said, as her pains became more frequent. “The mix has to be perfect.”

Persey felt as if someone had tied a rope around her waist and was pulling it tighter and tighter. Reality set in, and she hoped that the labor pains would go on for a while because she needed to finish the ritual.

Ignoring the pain, she questioned, as she did each time, if she going to bake what was left of the raw batch.

Of course, she knew the answer. She did not even bother setting the oven and dumped the mixture down the sink. Ignoring the contractions, she turned on the water, and the brownie mix swirled down the drain.

“Man, can you just hold on a little longer?” she thought, and the vise tightened around her waist.

Stepping over the puddle of what appeared to be brownie mix but what was really from her own body, she hid the empty box at the bottom of the trash. She wanted to make sure Hayden would not find the box, and her face flushed with embarrassment from her

secret.

As another labor pain strangled her waist, she gripped the island and wondered how her brownie ritual could give her instant pleasure but such insufferable guilt.

“I wonder if you’ll like chocolate?” she asked her belly and breathed through the contraction.

Persey decided that she had better call Hayden unless she wanted to deliver the baby on the floor, but all she could think about was escaping from her feelings of frustration.

“I’m tired of feeling fat. Just get this baby out of me, and life will be back to normal,” she replied and clutched her belly again.

Instead of calling Hayden, she decided that she better clean the brownie-colored water from the floor.

“If Hayden comes home and sees this mess, he might think that I was making brownies,” said Persey, trying to hide her unbearable secret.

“Ah, Hayden,” she said and grimly smiled as another labor came upon her. “Hayden, Hayden, Mi Amor.”

She desperately loved her husband and remembered the first time they met. She was fresh out of college, and he owned the hottest new hotspot in town, The Underworld. The club featured Latin food and dancers in traditional folk costumes, crazy bands, and a huge dance floor, where professional dancers and those brave enough to get on the floor with them, shook their hips all night long.

Slowly breathing through her contraction, she remembered how the minute she walked through the doors of his nightclub, Hayden turned around and their eyes locked. He whisked her away and married her a year later.

He was wealthy and handsome with chiseled cheekbones and dark chestnut colored hair, but it was

his eyes that sealed the deal. They were golden amber, and she felt warmth and love in those eyes and could stare into them forever. His height and beauty made him intimidating, yet Persey knew underneath the façade laid kindness.

Sometimes, he poorly hid what seemed to be a confusion that she was afraid she caused. Perhaps, it was that he simply did not understand her, but Persey knew he loved her.

She grabbed some paper towels, but then the pain gripped her yet again, and her knees buckled. She landed in the brownie-colored water. "I'm not ignoring you now, just settle down," she said to her little one.

She really did not have to call Hayden, since his footsteps were echoing throughout their house.

"Oh, great," Persey muttered. "He's going to see me on the floor and know that I've been making brownies."

Indeed, he saw quite a display. She was smiling at him with guilt and sitting in some type of brown puddle.

"What happened?" asked Hayden, smiling and forcing himself not to laugh. He knew that road only led to trouble.

"Having a baby," answered Persey, shrugging her shoulders.

With that response, the atmosphere turned thick with panic from Hayden. He picked his wife up and carried her to the car in the garage. The puddle of brownie mix remained on the floor.

"You're going to drop me because I weigh too much for you to carry," she said and felt ridiculous in his arms.

"Shh, baby," said Hayden, who was not thinking about his wife's weight.

He was too busy trying to step over all the greasy auto parts that he left in their six-car garage, which had become a storage warehouse for all that Persey called

“metallic.”

“God, I hate this garage, and I hate this car,” she said to Hayden, as he carefully placed her in one of the better classic cars. “I don’t know why you can’t take my nice Jag.”

Hayden mopped his clammy forehead with the sleeve of his teal blue Armani shirt. He knew how Persey felt about his old car and his dirty garage; she hated them.

“Vamanos,” Persey cried in pain. “I want my mom.”

“Persey, you know that if your mom cleaned my garage, she’d throw out all my tools and place plants and flowers everywhere,” said Hayden, trying to distract his wife.

He looked over and thought that she was lost in labor.

As each labor pang hit, Persey did not concentrate on the baby inside her but focused on her mother, who was an earth goddess, defined.

A storm of emotions clouded her face, and doubts about becoming a mother began to rise.

“You’re going to fail,” the voices in her head chanted. “Your mom will be disappointed.”

“I will not fail,” Persey answered through a clenched jaw.

“Huh?” asked Hayden. “You’re supposed to breathe during the contractions. You’re holding your breath and mumbling.” He was genuinely concerned that his wife was about to pass out. He reached over and held her knee.

A few moments later, he began to pant in unison with Persey. He panted over and over again in order to coach his wife to calmly breathe in the car. He stopped coaching though at a certain point. His head was getting dizzy and somebody had to drive.

Persey looked out the car window and finally started

to relax through her contractions, but the voices in her head would not quiet. “When you look in the mirror, the monster looks back. How long can you hide it?” they asked.

“I will not be a monster,” she answered them in between the pauses in her breathing.

“Persey, we’re almost here,” said Hayden, worried that his wife was now hallucinating. He sometimes wondered if madness lurked in some hidden part of her mind. After all, she was a painter, and he read that most artists have some type of madness lurking within them. He settled on providing her with love and security, and hoped that one day the darkness in his wife would turn to light.

They arrived at the hospital, and Persey feared her child would be dead when she delivered. It was the large red lettering on the white walls of stone that triggered the terror in the pit of her stomach. It was the same sign that she stared at fifteen months ago when she found out that she was carrying a dead baby.

“This child is going to live,” she whispered.



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