

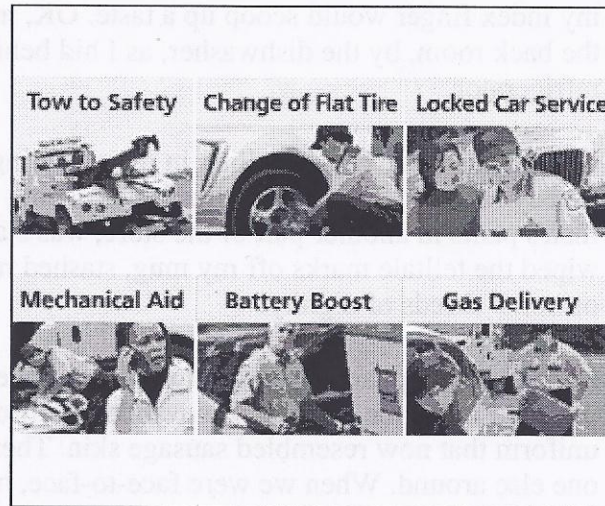
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Hot Fudge

A growing obsession

- Michele Fontaine
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I was 19 years old and 110 pounds when I began working after school at the Sears Coffee Shop. The restaurant was in the mall near my campus. My job was to manufacture sugary, buttery, artery-hardening concoctions every day like patty melts, raspberry lime rickeys and corn muffins fried in gobs of bubbling grease. The air was so steeped with airborne globules of fat from the Fryolater, my contact lenses would be coated by the end of my shift. I viewed the world through smudges and rainbows as I squinted my way to my dad's white Buick LeSabre with its marshmallow bench seats every night.

I wore white plastic nurse shoes for the job, which matched my white, polyester nurse uniform. They would skid along the gummy tiles, while I teetered and poured the 30 pounds of hot, dirty french-fry fat through a strainer into a vat for the next day. Over the four or so months that I worked there, my scratchy uniform became as tight as a wetsuit because of random nibbles from the thigh-expanding menu. My "freshman 15" (pounds) came not from beer at the university's Rathskellar but from a secret high-calorie life at the Sears Coffee Shop.

My biggest temptation was the pot of heated fudge sauce. At the start of my workday, this mass-produced ooze didn't resemble its later incarnation at all. It lay in a cold, tarlike mass in an industrial-size, anonymous tin can. I spooned gobs of it (with effort) into a floating stainless steel tub by the Fryolater. There the topping was heated and kept at its optimal temperature in a double boiler. That's where it became its seductive, velvety counterpart. Once warmed, the fudge took on honeyed hues, and gained a hot, caramel-like consistency. It tantalized me relentlessly as I stirred it like a lover who couldn't keep her hands off her partner's body. I poured longingly it over hot fudge sundaes -- releasing each treasure a little grudgingly every time to another aficionado.

Sometimes, when the crowd at the cafe tables was thin, I would take a spoon and dip it into the chocolate vat, hunker down behind the counter, and savor a blissful taste. That's how my addiction started. I thought I'd be able to control it. As my responsibilities at the coffee shop grew, however, so did my obsession. I began to close the business at night -- cashing out the register, cleaning out the old grease and packaging up the prep foods that had been out all day. I also had to dispose of the fudge sauce.

Throwing the fudge away saddened me. Occasionally, it did look like congealed chocolate tapioca pudding, but when it was still perfectly good, I'd return it to the drum in the fridge. Usually while spooning the still-warm, taffied mixture into the tub of harder, darker fudge,

my index finger would scoop up a taste. OK, my spoon. This became a regular feeding, in the back room, by the dishwasher, as I hid behind the open door of the behemoth steel gray refrigerator.

Once I was discovered. Lolling in unsuspecting erotic ecstasy, shoveling the nectar into my greedy mouth, I suddenly realized I was being watched. A tall, handsome man, who sold men's pants in another part of the store, was staring at me with a grin. Utterly mortified, I wiped the telltale marks off my mug, stashed my sin back into the deep-six, and tried to pull on some shreds of dignity.

My exposure apparently added to my mystique. One day not too soon afterward, I had just punched in for the day and was wandering through the mazelike backroom of the store, in a uniform that now resembled sausage skin. There he was, walking toward me. There was no one else around. When we were face-to-face, he wrapped me in his warm arms and bestowed upon me my first long, sweet, buttery and generous French kiss. It was better than the hot fudge. If kissing him had become a regular treat, I could have been cured of my addiction. But it didn't. While the impromptu rendezvous thrilled and flattered me, I thought he was way out of my league.

After all, he was at least 30, and I was more than a little frightened of inviting more backroom kisses into my life at that point.

As if death by chocolate weren't enough of a looming threat, another danger also lurked in the deep six -- tubs of frozen whipped cream. This was real whipped cream, frozen fluffy, with tiny, captured air bubbles, like an enormous champagne creamsicle. I discovered this dangerous delicacy soon after the kiss. The vacuum cleaner salesman found me this time -- spooning the 1,000-calories-a-cup doom into my mouth, as I hid behind deep-six's door. The vacuum man was more fatherly toward me -- he never tried to take my whipped cream fetish further. He had different interests. His hands curled around books bearing black covers and pentacles in the coffee shop every day. He had a goatee, and piercing obsidian eyes. Lucky for me, neither of my voyeurs ever told on me. My secret was safe. But were my thighs?

I was delivered from having to upgrade to a size-10 polyester uniform by the demise of the coffee shop. Sears went through a change of management, and the restaurant was ignominiously 86'd. I decided to sell men's pants myself at another retail store in the same mall. I was fired within the month, as my sales skills were dismal, and the jeans too hideous for me to pander.

Or maybe it just wasn't as much fun because there was no chocolate or whipped cream involved?

Michele Fontaine has diversified her chocolate addiction to include mousse cake, torte and truffles. She has also authored two historical novels ("Harem Sister," "Fire of Isis") that feature luscious food scenes set in Persia and Egypt. She can be contacted at MBFontaine@aol.com.

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