A Party Without Cake is Really Just A Meeting

by AnnieMar

Summary

"I've walked through gates to other dimensions, I've climbed through hell-tunnels, exorcised a monster from my son, impersonated a Russian soldier in order to destroy a machine that could have torn apart our reality … I should be able to learn how to cook!"

In which Joyce is determind to learn how to cook. #jopper

Notes

So this is a continuation of Waiting on a Friend (my previous Jopper fic), but it's not imperative that you read it first, although I do highly recommend it ;-) Because I am biased.

The idea for this story came about when I realized that the fandom as a whole has decided that Joyce Byers is a terrible cook. Poor Joyce, lol. And then I got a prompt that said "you aren't allowed to use the toaster anymore" for Jopper, which will be in chapter 2.

So we're gonna make a decent cook out of her, maybe ;-) Tune in and see.

See the end of the work for more notes

"A party without cake is really just a meeting." - Julia Child

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It had all started because there was nothing good to watch on TV. The boys were gone. Hopper and El were back at their newly renovated cabin. It was just Joyce, some mushy microwaved leftovers for dinner and a glass of wine. After a few bites, she decided that the wine was the only good part of the meal and pushed her plate out of the way. She flipped the channel to PBS, and an old "French Chef" episode appeared. Julia Child began to effortlessly show her how to make a chocolate cake. By the end, she was entranced. And hungry. It looked so good. It had seemed so easy.

"Well, I can do that," she said out loud, to no one.

She would soon learn that no, in fact, she couldn't.

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Day one

She began by returning the massive stack of books she had about magnets to the library. She'd had them for too long, not wanting to look at them for several weeks, so they'd sat in the trunk of her car. Marissa, the unfriendly neighborhood librarian, raised a judgemental brow and told her how much she owed in late fees. It really wasn't much, but one would think that by the gravity of her stare, Joyce owed her over a hundred dollars.

"Sorry about that." She handed over the pocket-change. "Can you tell me where the cookbooks are?"

And yet another judgemental look washed across the lady's face. Marissa lifted her chin slightly. "Just this way."

Joyce became anxious. Did everyone in town know that she couldn't cook? Was it written across her forehead? Were librarians supposed to make you feel stupid for asking for some books? She didn't think so.

When they got to the cookbook section, Marissa turned to her. "Are you looking for something specific?"

"Yeah, um ... Julia Child, Mastering the Art of French Cooking. I need a cake recipe." Joyce had no idea why she was telling her all this, probably the anxiety.

The librarian inclined her head. "Oh how nice, one of the boy's birthdays?"

Joyce blinked. "Um, no. I just thought it would be nice to bake a cake."

"Mmmhmm." She then bent down to take a book off the shelf.

It was like the woman knew. She knew precisely why Joyce needed a cake recipe. But she couldn't, could she?

Marissa unceremoniously plopped the tome in her arms. "Anything else?"

Joyce plastered a smile on her face and shook her head. "No, that's it."

When she got to her car, she held the book and opened it like it held the secrets of the universe. It smelled divine, that old book aroma, aged like fine wine from being loved for years and years. She scanned the first few pages. This was it, she was finally going to learn how to cook. No more muffled laughing and exchanged looks from behind her back. No more Jonathan gently taking the
wooden spatula out of her hand before she burned their scrambled eggs in the morning. If Julia could do it, she could do it.

She touched her fingers to a paragraph. It said the book was for "the servantless American cook who can be unconcerned on occasion with budgets, waistlines, time schedules, children's meals, the parent-chauffeur-den-mother syndrome, or anything else which might interfere with the enjoyment of producing something wonderful to eat."

"The enjoyment of producing something wonderful to eat," she repeated out loud.

It made cooking seem almost like an act of rebellion. She smiled to herself. Joyce was undoubtedly a "servantless American," but she definitely had to concern herself with budgets, schedules, children's meals, and the parent-chauffeur-syndrome. But Julia had said "unconcerned on occasion" had she not?

And Hopper's birthday was definitely an appropriate occasion for such indulgences.

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Later that evening, a frowning Jonathan found her sitting on the kitchen floor smoking a cigarette. "Mom?" He looked around, took in the pots and pans everywhere, the flour all over the counters, the kitchen table, all over her shirt, and probably in her hair. "What are you doing?"

Joyce took a long drag. "Baking a cake."

She hadn't actually baked anything and figured out pretty early that even though she'd used most of her cooking utensils, she sorely lacked in proper appliances, so she'd had to improvise. She also couldn't get the chocolate to cooperate, it wouldn't melt but had turned into a grainy blob. It wouldn't mix with the egg yolks or flour, and she wasn't entirely sure that she'd made stiff peaks out of egg whites. She didn't see any peaks at all and was pretty sure that all she'd managed to do was make chocolatey and grainy scrambled eggs. And now her kitchen was a mess with nothing to show for it. It was a disaster.

Jonathan turned the book she was using towards him. "French cooking?"

Joyce shrugged from the floor, wiping at a chocolate smudge on her cheek. 

He put his hands on his hips. "They make cake mixes, mom. You can just buy a box at the store?"

Her brows raised. "I realize that Jonathan, but cake mixes, they're so … impersonal. And generic. Hopper, and all of us, we just escaped death in the form of a gigantic flesh-monster. We deserve a homemade cake!"

Her son sighed, perhaps worried that she was beginning to sound a little hysterical. "Maybe start out with something a little easier? I'm sure there's like a … a Betty Crocker cookbook?"

She laughed. "You want me to start out with a remedial cookbook?"

"This one just looks kind of … advanced."

Joyce sighed. "I have a week until Hopper's' birthday. I'm going to learn how to make this cake." She stood up and stabbed her cigarette in the ashtray. "I've walked through gates to other dimensions, I've climbed through hell-tunnels, exorcised a monster from Will, impersonated a Russian soldier in order to destroy a machine that could have torn apart our reality … I should be
able to learn how to cook!"

Johnathan raised his hands in front of him. He knew that particular look of determination on her face. "Okay, Mom, okay. Just … let us know if you need some help, alright?"

She gave him a smile. She really had no idea how she raised such a kind soul. "I will. Thank you."

The two of them cleaned the kitchen up, but not before he shot a few photos of her and the aftermath while she attempted to hide her face with her hands.

That night she caught Julia's show again, and this time she was making tarts. Joyce was pretty sure that Hopper would prefer a chocolate cake to a tart, but she watched anyway, ready for any useful tips or kitchen wisdom.

Julia, in her crisp button-down shirt and apron, locked eyes with Joyce from the television screen and told her that she had to have a "what-the-hell" attitude about cooking to be successful. She said one had to say "I don't care what happens, the sky can fall, omelets can go all over the stove. I'm gonna learn! I shall overcome! That sort of women's liberation. If you're not gonna be ready to fail, you're not gonna learn how to cook!"

"Yes, Julia!" Joyce tipped her glass of wine towards the television. "I have already failed! I shall overcome!"

As it turned out, she would undoubtedly know the taste of failure again.

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**Day two**

Will watched as she tried to cut up chunks of meat on a rickety plastic cutting board. She was excited to start cooking after spending way too long at the grocery store searching for all the ingredients she needed. It had taken her a half-hour just to locate the bay leaves.

"So you're making Buff Borgen …"

Joyce took a breath, frowning at her old steak knife. It wasn't cooperating with her, as it wasn't very good at cutting steak at all. "Yeah, I can't pronounce it either. But it's beef. 'Boeuf' is French for 'beef,' that much I know."

He ran his finger down the page she had open of the cookbook. *Boeuf Bourguignon*. She thought it looked relatively easy and something that everyone would like. Julia said it was a peasant dish, after all. How hard could that be?

Will gave her a grin. "We'll just call it 'beef borg' then."

Joyce laughed. "Beef borg it is."

He watched as she began to hack and saw at the meat. "I think you need a sharper knife."

She blew her bangs out of her eyes. "I think you're right."

In the end, it had taken her hours to make. It was midnight before she took it out of the oven, with several more steps to go. Will had already gone to bed having gotten his dinner out of a microwavable box from the freezer. She pushed her beef borg into the fridge and admitted defeat for the day.
She had planned it all wrong, not taking into account that just preparing to cook took a significant amount of time. Chopping all the vegetables with her shitty knife had practically eaten up the whole evening.

She needed help.

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Day 3

Joyce emerged from her bedroom that morning, not ready to throw in the towel just yet, but also not feeling quite as confident about her little mission.

She sat down at the kitchen table and reached for her cigarettes, but not before she noticed how amazing the house smelled. She looked up at Jonathan, making breakfast as usual. "What are you making?"

He set a plate of food in front of her. "I used your leftovers ... hope you don't mind."

She pushed her cigarettes out of the way and inhaled. He'd cut up her "beef borg" and potatoes into little pieces and had put together a breakfast hash with some scrambled eggs.

Joyce hardly ever ate breakfast, preferring coffee and cigarettes, but the aroma was making her mouth water. She picked up her fork and took a bite. As she chewed, she closed her eyes. It was better than anything she'd ever had at Benny's. The meat was tender and flavorful, the potatoes were perfection, the carrots and onions sweet and savory, and all together they had the most amazing caramelized texture on the outside.

"Jonathan," she said, a slow grin forming on her face. "This might be the best breakfast ever cooked in this house."

Her son smiled from ear to ear, his chest swelling with pride. "Well, I started out with your ingredients," he reminded her.

Joyce shook her head, a bit amazed. She thought that her dinner had turned out to be a complete disaster. As it happened, all it took was a bit of reimagining. "It was a joint effort then."

After Will joined in, the three of them ate breakfast in a bit of a daze, smiling like a bunch of idiots. They had all dubbed the meal "beef borg hash." She couldn't remember the last time they sat down together in the morning and ate so much. And were quite happy to do so. It left her with the best warm and fuzzy feeling for the rest of the day and a renewed sense of determination. She was going to make that damn cake.

End Notes

Next up: With a little help from Steve Harrington.

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