



## ***Ginger***

by Robin Pond

In a time so long ago it stands out of time, in a windowless room, in an underground laboratory, far far away, two esteemed bakers are hard at work, both dressed in pristine white lab coats but otherwise a study in contrast. Dr. Day is tall and lean, with a professorial manner, a gaunt, hungry look, and long, bony fingers. Dr. Oos is shorter, rounder, with deliberate determination in every movement, as if he can barely overcome his own inertia, the effort of doing so portrayed through breathlessness, leaving him red-faced and sweaty.

Day adjusts the calendar, resetting it to six yet again. Oos, puffing furiously, kneads the dough, sprinkling in pinches of one ingredient and sifters of another, working them into the existing concoction, trying to achieve consistency in the mix. Day then smooths out the dough with a rolling pin, breaking up any recalcitrant lumps, carefully measuring the height and breadth of it all, ensuring the proper form.

Without having to move from the table, while nodding approvingly he reaches over and flips a dial, preheating the oven. "Make a man. Make a man. Quick as we can, with lactose and sucrose mixed up in a pan. Make a man. Make a man. Quick as we can, with precise specifications, completely to plan. We'll roll it, and roll it, and determine his fate, with yearnings, and longings, and loving, and hate."

Oos steps back, compulsively brushing the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, leaving a trail of all-purpose flour in its wake. "Clone a man. Clone a man. Nothing's to chance, not artistry, nor sophistry, nor ability to dance. Twenty-three chromosomes lined up in pairs, with gender, and diseases, and colours of hairs. We know it. We control it. It's simple to see, with each gene encoding the recipe."

Day licks the spatula. "With ginger, and currants, and whipped egg white, and a cup of molasses to make it taste right—"

Oos samples a pinch of batter from between the subject's toes. "And sugar and spice, and everything nice—"

The two bakers lift their creation up on its large baking sheet, and, pivoting, they slide it into the oven. Day declares, "And a puppy dog's tail, to make sure it's a male. We've patted it, and patted it, and declared it to be, and now it's in the oven, and we're ready to see if it's a perfect specimen."

And Oos adds admiringly, "An immaculately crafted ginger-man."

Day draws in an exaggeratedly deep breath. "Ahhh. . . Take a breath. Take a breath. This delicious scent, the sweetness, and the spices, all heaven sent. Take a breath. Take a breath. Let your nostrils explore. There's nutmeg, and ginger, and butter, and

more. There's cinnamon, and cloves, and finely ground flour, to be heated in an oven for over an hour."

Oos, mimicking Day, also inhales deeply. "Ahhh. . . Drink it in. Drink it in. Breathe it right in—"

Day nods. "The luxurious aroma of original sin."

Oos declares in a self-congratulatory manner, "It's success. It's success. A scent to invent a new society—"

"And give ourselves notoriety," Day concurs. "We'll bake it, and study it, and publish results—"

"And soon be able to fix people's faults." Oos grins, pulling himself up to his full height.

The celebratory assertions continue unabated for a very long time, for over an hour, but are finally interrupted by the bell of the timer. Day opens the oven door. "Reach in now. Reach in now. Grab a side—"

But Oos counsels caution, "Wait a bit. Wait a bit. Let's not forget. You'll need to use an oven mitt."

Day waves his hands impatiently. "Get them then. Get them then. We shouldn't delay. Fame and fortune are just moments away."

They pull on their oven mitts and nod to each other.

"Okay."

"Okay."

Reaching back into the oven, they begin to carefully maneuver out their creation. "Grab it now, grab it now, lift up an end. Keep it quite level, don't let it bend."

They extract the baking sheet and its contents from the oven and carry it over to the table with Day providing instructions as they go, "Easy now, easy now, lower with care. Wait—something's not right—look at its hair."

Oos pulls back, horrified. "It's fearful. It's frightful. How can it be? This lacks the proper symmetry. Abnormal bulges, and bumps, and curves, it has more shape than a ginger-man deserves."

Day immediately blames Oos, "I told you. I told you. But you wouldn't listen. You added more sugar, to make the glaze glisten. With a little more sugar, and a little more spice, you insisted on making everything nice."

But Oos pushes back, "Hold it now. Hold it now. Don't hang this on me. You're the one in charge of the recipe. With the Adenine, and Guanine, and Thymine too, the responsibility totally rests with you."

"It's your fault!" insists Day.

"Is not!" counters Oos.

"Is too!" Day concludes. "But I'm not wasting my time arguing with you. Go dig over there, in all that clutter, and bring me our standard cookie-cutter."

Oos goes to the cupboard and starts pulling out utensils, frantically searching. Day leans over the table and inspects the subject. "With a nip, and a tuck, and a trim or three, we'll bring back the needed conformity."

But then, sensing Day's breath, Ginger sits up and stretches. Day jumps back, startled by the unexpected movement.

"Awww. . . " Ginger yawns. "Wake me up. Wake me up. All in a whirl. It's a strange new world for a gingerbread girl. But I'm feeling refreshed, fresh-baked, and

what's more, there's a whole wide world for me to explore." She hops down off the table, standing shakily at first, getting the feel of her arms and legs.

Day tries to arrest her movement. "Wait a bit. Wait a bit. You should lie down. Your dough's too warm to be strolling around. I insist. I insist. You've got to stay. I can't permit you to wander away."

At the same time Oos returns, carrying a very large cookie-cutter, which Ginger eyes with some trepidation. She may have been born after yesterday, but even without any reference points she instinctively senses danger. "I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I don't really know. But I think it's best for me to go. You've got plans, and purpose, and a master design. But I'd rather that my life were mine. I don't want trimming, or smoothing, or reshaping my dough, so I really think that I should go."

Day dives at her. "Seize her."

But Ginger deftly jumps to the side, and Day goes sailing past her.

Oos lunges at her. "I'll get her." But he also misses, tumbling past clumsily.

Day commands, "Don't let her escape. She's an aberrant creation—"

"And not the right shape," Oos concurs.

For the next several minutes, the bakers ineptly attempt to grab hold of Ginger, pleading with her to submit to their will. But she evades them easily, laughing, the whole process becoming a game to her. She begins to taunt them as she easily swerves and dodges around them, "Try, try, as hard as you can. You can't catch me. I'm Ginger, I am...Grab at me, clutch at me, do your best, but I won't agree to be like the rest. . . Pursue me, and chase me, and track me down too, but I'm always a step ahead of you."

While pursuing her, Day complains, "You're blurring our image. . ."

And Oos adds, "You've corrupted our mold. . ."

Concludes Day, "So you must be reshaped. . ."

And Oos adds, "And do as you're told."

But Ginger only laughs at them, "Chase me, chase me, as fast as you can. You can't catch me. I'm Ginger, I am. You can plan, and devise, with your recipe, and still not determine who I need to be. I'm Ginger. I'm free. A complete bundle of individuality."

Day declares, "You must be who you are in the master design."

Oos pleads, "So come back to the table, before it's too late."

Day explains, "Your position is plotted in space and in time."

Oos entreats her, "So come back to the table, and stop tempting fate."

But Ginger shakes her head. "There are still more mysteries in heaven and earth, than you can plan for in a preconceived birth. So chase me, pursue me, as fast as you can. You can't catch me. I'm Ginger, I am."

Day and Oos, eventually realizing their obvious failure, begin to accept defeat. Breathing heavily, Day tells Oos, "Give it up, give it up. There's really no hope. The project's ruined, derailed—"

"It's out of scope." Oos stops beside Day, bent over, gasping for breath.

Day, in utter frustration, begins to wave around his arms, as if he could wave away the entire laboratory and with it the existence of this aberrant creature. "Pack it up, pack it up. Close it all down. There goes the fame, and fortune, and renown. No praise, no applause, no Nobel prize. Nothing but disdain in our colleagues' eyes."

Oos slowly straightens up, again wiping the sweat from his eyes, leaving streaks of white down each side of his face. "Damn it all. Damn it all. Cast it all out. Our

research is faulty. Our theory's in doubt. What are our followers now to believe, having seen paradise, only to leave? What are our followers now going to say, having known success, and been driven away?"

Day sniffs diffidently. "The scent in the air is no longer sweet. It stinks of utter ignominious defeat."

Oos also sniffs, mimicking Day. "The warm aroma that hangs in the air now reeks of desperate despondent despair."

They drop down to their knees, hanging their heads. Ginger edges cautiously closer to them, wondering if their capitulation might be a ruse, but neither makes any attempt to jump up or grab her. She says softly, "You didn't fail. You didn't fail. Can't you see? It can't be failure if you've made me. I'm different. I'm special. I yearn to be free. I'm a successful bundle of originality."

Oos, without looking up, shakes his head. "It won't do. It won't do. Nothing personal, you know. You're a wonderful result—"

Day interjects, "As mutations go—"

And Oos continues sadly, "But it can't do. It can't do. Don't you see? Any recipe—"

"—needs to have predictability," Day concludes firmly, finishing the thought.

Ginger slides between the two bakers, putting a hand on each of their shoulders. "Accept it. Accept it. You've got to give in. Being a little bit different isn't really a sin. Accept it. Accept it. Find a new solution, a recipe enhanced by evolution. Through exploring, and adapting, and a bit of rearranging, even our very genomes keep changing."

"Let us fix you." Day clutches at Ginger's arm, but she pulls free, and he falls at her feet.

"Let us fix you," Oos pleads. "Don't be afraid." Oos also clutches at Ginger's arm, and she once again pulls free, sending him also tumbling to the ground at her feet.

Day looks up at Ginger. "Your lot can be recast."

And Oos looks up at her. "Your body remade."

But Ginger stretches out her arms, placing one hand on Day's head and the other on Oos' head. "Accept me. Accept me. I'm determined to be free. You've no choice but to fix your recipe. With nature and nurture and fortuitous evolution, we can mix up a much more desirable solution."

Day argues, "But such a scrumptious resumption—"

"—would require too great an assumption," Oos concludes.

But Ginger replies quietly, "Think of the assumption as a human exemption. Allow us to fail as a step to redemption."

Oos puzzles over the ramifications of such a drastic suggestion. "I don't know. I don't know. There won't be a script. We'll be searching for results we can't really predict."

But Ginger urges them to consider this new path. "Take my rib. Take my rib. The future will be fed from my gingerbread. Clone your creation as a ginger-man of the next generation. With the sweat of his brow, we'll commit here and now, to rely on human inspiration."

The bakers stare at each other. Day says to Oos, "Well you know. Well you know. We've got nothing to lose, if we allow our subjects the right to choose. With yearning, and some learning, and a world to explore—"

"—they might have the ability of becoming much more." Oos nods.

They hesitate for only a second before scrambling back up on to their feet. Oos rushes over to the table and starts kneading some more dough. Day returns to the oven and resets the dials.

Ginger cries out encouragement, "So make a man, make a man, quick as you can. With hopes and potential mixed up in a pan."

Day smiles, "Make a man, make a man, we'll make a new batch—"

And Oos smiles, "With a world of possibilities from which he can hatch. We'll roll it, and roll it—"

Day shudders slightly, "And then let it be."

And Ginger adds, "And then he'll be free, just like me. We'll experience and grow and slowly mature—"

"And rely on chance—" Day promises.

"Cause nothing's for sure," Oos adds.

And Ginger, smiling as she assists the bakers, suggests, "And maybe, when the time's expedient, we can add another new ingredient."

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### About the Author

Robin Pond is a Canadian writer of plays and prose fiction. His plays, mainly comedies, have received hundreds of performances and publication with YouthPLAYS and in numerous anthologies. His full-length play, *The Retirement Plan*, which won a Patron's Pick award at the Toronto Fringe Festival, has been optioned to be turned into a feature film, and he has collaborated on the screenplay. Robin's mystery novel, *Last Voyage*, was published in 2018, and his science fiction novel, *Canaan Within*, has just been published. In the last several years he has also had over a dozen speculative short stories published in various magazines and anthologies.



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