

The Ginger Bread Man

The Ginger Bread Man
By Dominic R. Villari

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About the Ginger Bread Man

The Ginger Bread Man is the story of a young man named Jacob's journey of self-transformation from mediocrity to magic. After leaving an unfulfilling office job, a seemingly chance meeting with a Baker sets his life on a new course. Through the guidance and tutelage of this mysterious yet dedicated man, Jacob learns the simplicity and enchantment of baking. Along the way he finds love, meets new people and even invents a new type of gingerbread cookie. Through baking, Jacob discovers magic in his everyday life.

About the Author

Dominic R. Villari was born in Riverside, New Jersey in 1971. He studied communications and multimedia at Rider College and Boston University. In these formidable years he was heavily influenced by the writing of South American magical realists such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Borges. After earning a masters degree, Dominic spent several years as an instructional designer. He has also worked as a graphic designer and interactive developer. Throughout his eclectic career and interests he has always remained a storyteller. After specializing in non-fiction writing for several years, in 2007 Dominic returned to the magical realist genre with his new novel the Ginger Bread Man.

1.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” He would lose his job. He would have no income. He might lose his circle of friends. Most of them revolved around work. He might lose himself. He might have to admit the last ten years of his life meant little. He might realize he’d wasted the last few years of his life on insignificant goals.

He swept the question aside and went back to a report he needed to finish. Jacob read through the last few lines. He found it impossible to convert the blur of words into sentences. Jacob shook his head back and forth in an effort to rattle his attention back. He took a deep breath and began to type: What’s the worst that could happen?

Jacob looked at his surroundings and felt his heart sink, pressing on his diaphragm. He winced to avoid a scream. Everything was the same as it had been the day he started. The colors were different and the computer was newer but it was all still the same.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Jacob could find himself sitting in the same chair contemplating the same thought ten years from now. He might be making more money but would still be insignificant. That was the worst that could happen.

Jacob pushed back his chair and stood up. He picked up the green coffee mug he’d gotten three years earlier as a pollyanna gift. He put on his jacket. Jacob started for the door and was gripped by a burst of fear.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” By now the question seemed like an old friend. He set the coffee

mug back down and walked to the door. Once outside he began to run.

Jacob didn't stop running until he reached the train. Even on the train he never actually stopped moving – pacing through car after car until he reached the front of the train. When the train reached his stop Jacob stepped out into the sun and his heart immediately rose in his chest.

Jacob ran away from the train station and through the center of town. He ran past the post office and past the furniture store. He ran past the bakery, where the baker was out front sweeping. "Run, run as fast as you can," chucked the baker as he swept.

Jacob slowed to a walk and looked back. "Can't catch you," said the baker. Jacob stopped and turned completely around.

"Don't remember that old story, eh?" asked the baker. "An old woman baked a gingerbread man. But when she opened the oven, he popped out and ran away."

"Like I'm running," suggested Jacob tentatively.

"That's right," said the baker smiling and shaking his head. "You're the Gingerbread Man."

"I am the Gingerbread Man," replied Jacob. He was grinning ear to ear for the first time in many days. He turned and continued to run.

"Watch out for the fox!" called the baker after him.

Jacob ran until he reached his house. He was still smiling as he unlocked the door and stepped inside. The light beneath the phone was blinking. As a reflex he picked up the phone and dialed the number for voice mail. "Jacob...where the hell did you go this afternoon..." Jacob quickly pressed the delete key and put the phone back in its cradle.

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“What’s the worst that could happen?” The question popped back into his mind as he flopped down on the couch. Three days out with no call and they would terminate him. He would have to live off his savings for a while. He might have to borrow some money from his parents.

Jacob decided he could always take a job in a retail store. That would pay some bills and stretch his savings. He could sell off some of the items in the house he didn’t use anymore. He could trade in his car for something with a much lower payment. He didn’t need all those cable channels. Jacob paused. He wasn’t totally convinced about that one. He would have a lot of time on his hands.

Jacob was scared but still happy.

The following day Jacob discovered it was hard to do nothing. He thought it best to take a day to collect his thoughts. He tried to sleep later but was only able to stay in bed about an hour more than usual. Showering, shaving and eating breakfast only took another half hour.

Jacob sat back down on the couch and thought: “What’s the worse that could happen?” By now even that question failed to hold his attention for very long. He kept coming up with the same consequences from the day before. Eventually his mind would begin to plan out his next actions, an activity he was trying to avoid the first day.

Jacob thought about his encounter with the baker. Yesterday was the first time he’d ever noticed the baker. Jacob went to the kitchen and opened a drawer near the phone. It was crammed with menus from the various restaurants in town.

He quickly paged through them looking for something about the bakery. He was initially unsuccessful so Jacob went through the stack again – this time more deliberate and methodic. Still he found nothing from the baker.

Jacob repacked and closed the drawer. He took the phone book from the top of the refrigerator. The book was faded and covered in a thin film of dust. Jacob wiped the book down with a paper towel and set it on the kitchen table. He flipped the book open to the B's and began searching every ad and listing. He still found no mention of the baker he'd met yesterday.

Jacob was sure the baker's shop had been on Pavilion Avenue. He picked up the phone and dialed the number for information. He gave the operator the name of the town and asked for the number of the bakery on Pavilion Avenue. The operator informed him there was no listing for a bakery on that street or anywhere in the town. She politely suggested several other locations in the surrounding area. Jacob thanked her and hung up.

Shortly after lunch Jacob gave up trying to spend the day on his thoughts and began to make plans for his new life. He had only one rule: be significant. No doubt the manager at his previous job had already shifted his responsibilities to someone else. The quality or productivity might be slightly diminished but he hardly thought anyone would notice. Eventually he'd be replaced permanently or the position simply eliminated.

Still Jacob knew he'd have to find a source of income. There were actually several possibilities, both imaginative and practical. At first he indulged his more fanciful ideas. He could make something and sell it on the Internet. He could invest in some promising new business. He could try painting again.

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This inspired Jacob to retrieve some of his artwork from the basement. He stared at the paintings for a long time and wondered if anyone would buy the paintings. How would he sell them? There were no galleries in town. Perhaps he could sell them online. How would anyone find him? As Jacob continued to stare at the paintings he had to admit they were rather childlike and derivative.

He put the paintings aside and turned to more practical thoughts. There were several stores in the area, most of which were always hiring. This was nearly a sure bet but the income would be low and he might not be significant. Still, he was sure his work would have more of a purpose than his previous job.

2.

Jacob left the house without a destination. He took a road leading to the center of town. He wasn't sure why until he turned right on Pavilion Avenue. Jacob walked slowly down the avenue staring at each storefront. He reached the end of the business district without seeing the bakery.

Jacob began to wonder whether or not he was wrong about the street. He had been running from the train station yesterday. Or maybe he had made the whole encounter up in his head.

"Didn't expect to see you so soon," said a familiar voice. Jacob turned around. There was the baker, sweeping in front of the store. "Can you give me a hand?"

Jacob walked back to the baker. He wondered how he could have missed the bakery this time. "I don't think I've ever noticed this shop before," said Jacob.

"Not many do anymore," said the baker. "People buy most of their pies, cakes and cookies from the supermarket on the highway now. They want bread pre-wrapped in plastic that lasts a month. Over time they just forget places like this can exist."

"I saw it yesterday and I was running," replied Jacob.

"Some things you see when you're walking," said the baker. "Other things you only see when you're running." Before Jacob had a chance to reply the baker handed him the broom. "Sweep a little for me?"

Jacob took the broom and started sweeping without giving it much thought. "Broad strokes," said the baker. "A clear path is a sign of a clean shop." The baker went back inside as Jacob continued to sweep.

Jacob looked up at the shop. The windows had become milky with age but he could still make out the counters and shelves inside. The store was long and narrow, set up around a large display case at the back. Shelves flanked the store on both sides. A tall table and three chairs stood in one corner. At the very center of the store, behind the display case was a set of double doors. Jacob supposed the doors led to the kitchen.

"Eyes on your work," said the baker poking his head out of the shop's front door. "Concentrate on what you're doing. Each task is important." He ducked back into the store.

Jacob stared after him for a moment then continued to sweep the front walk and entrance way. As he swept his mind became less cluttered. Thoughts swirling around since he left the house were stirred up and cast off.

"Very good," said the baker. "Come on inside."

Jacob stepped through the front door and immediately felt comfortable and at home. Most of the shelves and the front display case were empty but he could smell the faint aroma of dough in the background. The floor was tiled in one foot square black and white checkers. The side shelves were polished oak carved with ivy branches. The display case seemed to be all glass, a three-dimensional window into a world of sweets and treats.

"Start with the shelves," said the baker. "They need to be cleaned first, then we'll apply a new coat of stain."

"There aren't any items on the shelves." Jacob had skipped breakfast and the dough smell made him feel hungry.

"No" replied the baker. "No baking today – just cleaning. You'll find supplies in the closet." The baker

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gestured toward a skinny door to the right and back of the store.

Jacob went to the closet. Inside he found a number of different cleaning products, most of which looked like they had been there for several years. "Just use regular soap and water," called the baker from behind him. "That's all you need."

Jacob grabbed a simple bar of soap from the top shelf and placed it in a bucket on the floor of the closet. One side of the closet featured a small but deep sink. The bucket fit perfectly and Jacob filled it with water. As the bucket filled he examined the shelves until he located a hand brush. He grabbed the brush and placed it in the bucket.

Jacob turned the water off and lifted the bucket. It was heavier than he expected and he immediately placed it back on the floor, splashing out some of the water. "Careful," came the baker's voice behind him.

"Maybe I'll just do the floor first," Jacob chuckled.

"We do the floors last," replied the baker sternly.

"Why?" asked Jacob.

"When you clean the shelves you'll push dirt onto the floor. If we did the floors first they would just get dirty again."

"I guess that makes sense," said Jacob.

"Always look for the logical order of things," said the baker. "Now get started on the shelves."

The baker disappeared into the kitchen and Jacob continued to clean the shelves. It took a long time to do it properly but Jacob was happy with the result. He went to the front of the store and tried to look outside one of the windows. It was too cloudy to see out so he pushed the door open. Looking up he could see the sun was now halfway across the horizon.

"Ready to start staining?" asked the baker from behind him.

"Yes," said Jacob closing the door and turning back to the baker. He no longer felt hungry.

"Good," said the baker. "Get a glass of water from the sink first and bring out the stain and rags."

Jacob went back to the closet. An old glass was sitting on the left corner of the sink. He rinsed the glass several times before taking three long drinks from it. He put the glass back down and looked the shelves over once again. Three un-opened cans of stain sat in a neat row on the far right side. A stack of folded rags was to the left of the cans. Jacob picked up the first can of stain and several rags.

"Better get the drop cloths too," suggested the baker. "Stain's hard to get off the floor."

Jacob retrieved the drop cloths from the closet and brought everything over to the nearest of the shelves. He opened the first can and gingerly dipped the rag into it.

"Stay with the grain and try to keep the stain even," advised the baker. "This wood has been stained many times, so it shouldn't soak up too much."

The baker was correct. The stain went on easy and the wood almost immediately looked better. He enjoyed staining much more than cleaning and finished more quickly. When he was done with all the shelves on the right side he took a step back to admire his work.

"Very good," said the baker.

"I was thinking I could just do the floor on this side," said Jacob. "I'd like to see how it all looks finished."

"No," replied the baker. "Do the rest of the staining. Always batch similar tasks."

"Right," agreed Jacob. He stained the shelves on the other side of the store. By the time he was finished the light outside the store had begun to dim.

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“That’s enough for today,” said the baker. “Go home, eat and get some rest. We’ll do the floors and the display case tomorrow.”

“Are we going to bake?” asked Jacob.

“First we clean, then we bake,” replied the baker.

3.

Jacob was tired and slept later than usual the following morning. Cleaning the store seemed like the hardest day he'd had in a long time. He looked at the clock on his nightstand and saw it was already ten o'clock. He wondered if the baker would be angry. He seemed to remember something about bakers starting very early in the morning.

Jacob dressed hurriedly and quickly walked to Pavilion Street. This time he wasn't careful about looking at each shop for the bakery. He reached the end of the block without finding it. Jacob turned back and went up the street more slowly but he still couldn't find the bakery.

Jacob wandered aimlessly up and down the block until a policeman began eyeing him from across the street. He turned and walked back towards his house. The policeman followed for a few blocks before some high school students attracted his attention. Back at his house Jacob sat down on the faded park bench he kept on the porch.

The postman arrived while he was sitting there. "Morning," said the postman.

"Good morning," returned Jacob. The postman handed him the mail. "Thanks," said Jacob.

"Your welcome," said the postman. "Have a good day."

The postman started to walk away. Jacob jumped up and called after him. "Excuse me," he said.

"Yes?" said the postman turning to face Jacob.

"Do you know the name of the bakery down town?" asked Jacob.

The postman looked up and rested his chin on his hand. He pondered the question for a moment before putting his hand down with a puzzled look on his face. "I didn't know there was a bakery down town," he said.

"It's on Pavilion," said Jacob.

"I don't remember a bakery on Pavilion," said the postman. "But that's not really my route. Did you try calling information?"

"Yes," said Jacob. "They didn't have a number listed. Neither did the phone book."

"Sorry," said the postman. He seemed eager to get on his way. "Lot of deliveries today," he called back over his shoulder as he moved on to the next house.

Jacob settled back down on the bench and glanced at the mail. The first couple of envelopes were clearly solicitations. He threw them aside. Next in the stack was an official looking envelope bearing the return address of his company. Jacob opened up the letter. As he expected, a form letter announced he would be terminated if he did not contact his manager within the next forty-eight hours.

Jacob ripped the letter in half and placed it with the other junk mail. He looked through the rest of the mail, which consisted of two bills and a catalog. He set the catalog aside – he wouldn't be ordering anything for a while. The bills raised the question once again: "What's the worst that could happen?"

He wouldn't be able to pay these bills. They would turn off the electric and the water. However, Jacob knew people who were three months behind on electric and water bills. They hadn't even received collection notices. He wouldn't be able to pay the mortgage when it arrived. Actually, he had just paid the mortgage so it would be almost a month before another bill was even due.

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Jacob stuffed the two bills in his pocket and placed the rest of the mail in the garbage can. He left the house and started to walk towards the highway to get something to eat.

Jacob got as far as the bookstore and decided to stop. Once inside he spent a few moments looking over the new releases and flipped through the pages of a new book on art.

It was a book of still life, primarily fruit and other foods. The perspective on each painting was extremely close up. The paintings featured just the outside curve of an apple or the point where two grapes met. They were the kind of paintings Jacob wished he could create. The artwork took a subject captured thousands of times and presented it in a totally new light.

Jacob carried the book with him as he moved deeper into the store's interior. He continued to flip through the pages as he walked. "Watch out," called out a young woman's voice.

Jacob looked up just as he walked into a display near the front of an aisle. Several of the books toppled over and he heard a large sigh from one of the bookstore employees. "Are you okay?" asked the same young woman.

"Yes. Thanks," replied Jacob. "I guess I wasn't watching where I was going." He started to pick up the books and place them back on the display.

"I guess not," replied the woman. "A good book can have that effect on you."

"Yes," replied Jacob. He tried to think of a clever return. Jacob gestured to the book and said, "I like art."

"Good for you," said the young woman. She giggled as she walked away.

He shook his head and put the last book back on the display. As he set it down he saw it was a book on

soups. Jacob looked at the isle in front of him and discovered he had wandered into the cooking section. Near the center of the isle was an area of books on baking.

Jacob spent the next hour looking through books on breads, pies, cookies and cakes. He read about the chemistry of bread rising. He learned the difference between a morning and an evening pastry. He found the definition for marzipan. He saw the many ways that flour, butter and eggs could be combined and reconstituted. Jacob saw art.

To purchase the Ginger Bread Man, visit:

<http://www.catchthegingerbreadman.com/buy>