

My Batter is Thick

Or

Cooking the Mickey Spillane Way

You check your list. You've got leads.

Eggs.

Flour.

Sugar.

Butter. And milk.

The eggs? The eggs aren't any big deal. You can find half a dozen of those boys cooling their heels inside any fridge from here to Mexico City. They might talk tough, give you some trash, but one tap on the lip of the mixing bowl and they'll crack. They'll spill. One crack and they'll spill. Flour's the same way; any kitchen, doesn't matter. Five star dining with the duck à l'orange or the dive down the street with greasy placemats and dead flies in your soup. Look in the right cabinet and you're gonna find some flour. Play it the same way you did with the eggs—hard and mean—and you won't get any trouble. Flour's smart that way. It'll go quietly. Hell-- it bought its ticket, it stood in line. It knew what was coming.

Now the sugar? You might not even have to look for the sugar. When she hears you're on the case, she just might come looking for you. Either way, she's an easy one to spot, because take note, brother: They don't build 'em like that anymore. God took some sweet time on that one. All natural, pure cane. Granulated. One-point-five kilograms and stored in a cool, dry place. A real head turner, sweet as they come, and she's used to getting things her own way. And she figures she can play you like she played the rest—another hit of the sauce and she could have—but that's when you pull her in tight and get serious. Get tough with her. Tell her you're through

making nice. Give her a good shake and she'll start singing. Oh, she'll sing, all right. Make like you're gonna rip her open across the pull-tab and she'll sing like Edith Piaf with a shot of China White in her arm. She'll cry after you're done with her; sugar always does. She'll have a sob story that'd make a prison warden go soft. But you're too sharp to fall for that scam. You look at her with ice in your eye and say, "Sugar, tell your troubles to Jesus and spare me the hard luck song. I don't dance to this tune." You take what you need—three tablespoons, half a cup—and leave a twenty on the counter when you walk out the door. Poor girl's got a monkey on her back the size of King Kong and she's gonna need it for later.

It doesn't take long to find your way to the butter. That's a smooth character, right there. The cat is slick and he's got deep pockets in that tailored suit draped over his frame. You check out the shoes—dark Italian leather shined to such a perfect black it's like he's wearing a pair of mirrors—and they're fresh out of the box. Not a single crease. Probably has a different pair for every day of the month. You wanna know what money smells like? Take a whiff.

You're in his private study. It's you and it's him and it's a mahogany desk the size of a Buick. You toss over the envelope—'Photos: Do Not Bend'— and it lands on the desk with an audible thud. The butter leans back in a cushioned chair and takes it all in. Still smooth, like he's waiting for his chauffeur to pull up in a stretch Bentley. This guy is so cool, Frank Sinatra could take notes. He glances at the envelope with a raised brow and then shoots you a look like you just dropped a fresh wad of dog crap on his plate. Dinner's ready.

"And what," he says, "am I meant to do with this?"

You don't have to say anything. You just nod and give him the eye. He opens the envelope and starts thumbing through the photos. Dirty photos. Photos of him. Photos of him on toasted bread. Photos of him with a blueberry muffin, spread on a wholegrain biscuit, dripping over a stack of pancakes. Photos of him smothered all over a day-old French croissant. All of a sudden, he doesn't seem so cool anymore. You wish you had your camera right then to capture the moment in pictures; the moment the butter melts and his whole world flips sideways.

"You want to come with me," you ask. "Or should I send copies of those to a guy I know? Nice guy. Works downtown. At the Chronicle." You put it to him like it's a question, as if he had a choice, but it's a question you don't have to ask. One look at him, chopped and quartered, cut up into cubes, and you already know the answer.

You figure the last bit of legwork might be easy, but you figured wrong. You scope for the milk in all the usual haunts—the fridge door, the second shelf behind the orange juice, even the vegetable crisper—but you come up with zilch. The trail's gone cold. The bedside clock says it's 3:30 in the morning when the phone rings. You pick it up and before you can say hello the voice on the other end says, "I hear you're in the market for some dairy products."

"Maybe I am," you say. "Who's askin'?"

"Never mind who's askin'," they say. "I'd get wasted for tellin' you this. Chucked out, pitched in the dumpster. But I'm two days past my use-by date and they're gonna bin me anyhow. Use your head, shamus. Maybe the reason you can't find the milk is cuz the milk don't wanna be found, see? So maybe you take a nice evening stroll and maybe you stop by the all-night grocery on the corner. Check out

the dairy case. And maybe you pay real close attention to the shelf above the yogurt. You didn't hear it from me. This call never happened, see?" And the line goes dead.

The tip turns out rock solid. The milk's there. And he's a big bruiser, you can see that as soon as you walk in. He's at least a gallon if he's a drop. Red cap, full fat, homogenized. The guy's built like a Sherman tank; vitamin enriched and hopped up on Omega-3. Before you can make a move, he's onto you—all four quarts of him and he's swinging like a prize fighter. You're knocked on your ass but you come up quick and dirty with the heater. A .44 Special, one hell of a gun, and you level it straight at his lid and cock back the hammer. That gets some attention. They all know that sound, every last one. The gun's heavy in your hand, solid and true. You're done playing games and you get loud: "This god-damned thing'll stop a rhino. You wanna play zoo keeper? You wanna make a move?"

He knows it's all over. End of the line. You march him out of the shop, gun stuck in his back, and then it's into the mixing bowl with the rest of the crew. Then you stir it. And you stir it hard and you stir it mean. Pour it into a greased pan and stick the whole mess right in the oven. Now you're cookin' with gas: 375 Fahrenheit/190 Celsius for twenty to twenty-five minutes, until golden brown and well-risen. You light a cigarette and you listen to the thing scream as it bakes.

Funny thing is, that's where we all wind up in the end.

Right in the oven.