

## Art of the Jelly Belly

By Cathy Warner

Today was one of those days where the summer wind bakes your scalp while it hikes your skirt up. Patrick, who was born in Boston, always reminds me when I complain that it's a dry heat, and the locals talk about the breeze off the Carquinez Strait as if a god has been personally assigned to cooling us off. Don't ask me why we moved to Fairfield with its shriveled grass rolling hill view, something about suburbia providing the girls with a big backyard to play in, and an opportunity for their imaginations to flourish without the overstimulation of city life. God, I miss the San Francisco fog.

I bought the girls pink lemonade from a vending machine and we sat under a canopy in the parking lot with the other wilted families waiting for our tour of the Jelly Belly Factory. A voice over the loud speaker summoned the Lemon Tour ticket holders, so I re-capped our bottles, put one arm on Kimmy's shoulder, the other on Kelly's, and shepherded them into the frigidly air-conditioned gift shop.

Mr. Jelly Belly, a six-foot tall statue of a red and shapely bean with open spindly arms and gangly red legs stood inside the door. His likeness permeated the store, molded and stamped on the displays of souvenir t-shirts, key rings, erasers, and jewelry, and on each bean and package in the panoply of beans arranged on tiered display tables, grouped in single-serving solid color packs to multi-pound variety packs and factory seconds.

"Girls," I said. "We're not in Kansas anymore."

"But Mommy, we live in Fairfield," said Kimmy.

In the atrium a tall well-muscled black woman waited. She wore a white hard hat, emblazoned with Mr. Jelly Belly, black jeans, a Taste Bud Club T-shirt and a nametag. Bernetta looked like a woman used to getting her way and we stopped five feet back as though her force field extended a body length beyond herself. She was definitely not the kind of woman you could miss in a crowd. No way would her husband walk by her twice if she were at the mall waiting for him while the twins were at the skating rink.

Then I noticed the *No Food or Beverages Beyond This Point* sign. I gathered up our half-empty bottles and started for the trash when Kimmy reminded me of our need to recycle.

"Sweetie, you can't recycle unless the bottles are empty, and there's nowhere to pour out the lemonade."

"But we can't clog the landfill."

The Waste Stream had been our study last month. Patrick had worked at home every Friday in July and took the girls to the recycling center, landfill, and wastewater treatment plant while I spent quality time alone, renewing my driver's license, dying my hair red to cover the gray, and getting my tubes tied.

"Can we take these in with us?" I asked Bernetta.

She looked at me, and at the twins with their neatly braided hair, their matching Little Mermaid short sets and plastic sandals, and assessed our rule-breaking potential. I stood straighter and sucked in my mommy pouch.

"As long as you don't drink them," she said, lip liner emphasizing the edges of her mocha lips.

I slipped the bottles into the pockets of my skirt. “Jetpacks on and ready to blast off,” I said.

Bernetta turned away. She picked up a microphone and launched into her speech about California law requiring everyone who enters a food processing facility to wear a hat.

She produced a white paper hat, demonstrated how to adjust and wear it properly, and directed exactly one member of each party to obtain hats for their group.

“How many do you need?” she asked me.

“Four,” I said, then realized Patrick wasn’t with us. “I mean three.”

Her eyes narrowed and she snatched one paper hat out of my hand. I knelt by Kimmy and Kelly helping with their hats, which were, according to Kimmy, so dorky she’d rather wait in the car. She crossed her arms over the happy mermaid on her t-shirt and stuck out her lower lip. The stomp would come next. I was tempted to haul her off to the car, make her wait while Kelly and I toured. But I had two visions, one of the empty car, sliding door ripped off the hinges by a homicidal maniac with a trail of blood leading to an empty parking space, the other of a Kimmy barbecued like a poodle who’d been left to wait for its owner, being lifted onto a stretcher and into an ambulance. Either way, I’d be hauled off to jail.

“If you wear the dorky hat, I’ll buy you something at the gift shop.”

I turned my attention to my hat, thankful that Patrick hadn’t witnessed my bribery, and stepped backward.

Bernetta glared at me and picked up her microphone. “I need everyone on this side of the carpet.”

The girls, who’d stayed on the correct side of the carpet, held hands while I slunk behind them to a half-walled catwalk above the factory floor with Plexiglas viewing windows. We stood directly above the ovens where the beans dry for twenty-four hours. The air smelled sickeningly sweet and made the ninety-eight degree outdoors feel cool.

I looked down at the hundreds of white holes in the cornstarch molds being mechanically filled with red goop, one huge sheet at a time. It reminded me of the crayon factory tour, the rhythmic filling of cylinders with vibrant liquid wax. That reminded me of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Thanks to him, I’d taken virtual field trips to the crayon factory, a saxophone factory and a mushroom factory built in an abandoned mine. He called me Television Neighbor and sang, “It’s you I like, it’s not the things you wear.”

The first time I saw him I’d finished my last college final and woke up with nowhere I had to be. I sat puffy-eyed on the living room floor in my pajamas, eating donuts and Pepsi, missing Patrick who’d gone to New York for a management internship with Arthur Anderson. Fred Rogers with his canvas tennis shoes and frowzy sweater was quiet and gentle, sincere and adventurous, and I tuned in every morning for two weeks until I got the job at Blockbuster.

I didn’t see him again until I sat the twins in front of the TV when they were fourteen months old. I needed a break from the shape sorter, plastic pizza segments and drool proof cardboard books. Mr. Rogers welcomed us to his neighborhood with open arms. He didn’t mind that I was a lonely young mother, new in my neighborhood with no one else to talk to at 4 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Bernetta interrupted my reverie. I thought she said *engrossed jellybeans*, but that couldn’t be right. Engrossed applied to a jellybean? Applied to myself, I understood it.

That golden half-hour, when after settling the girls with juice, crackers and toys, I opened a book and sunk miles deep in another world, pulled back to reality only through sheer repetition.

“Mom, Mommy, Mother, Cassie, Oh Cassie, Earth to Cassandra. It’s no use. She can’t hear us.”

I was pondering the possibilities of engrossed jellybeans when Bernetta’s oft-recited speech vanished from her lips. She looked past us into the memosphere, but couldn’t locate her next words. She shook her head, started over, stopped again and laughed. A big rumbly laugh, like Mr. Jelly Belly would have, if he were allowed a voice. The tour members stared at Bernetta. Husbands and wives exchanged shrugs.

Kelly tugged at my elbow. “What’s so funny?”

“She can’t remember what she’s supposed to say, even though she says it all the time,” I whispered. Sort of like the *I Love You* that’s supposed to end a disagreement, but doesn’t arrive.

Bernetta took a deep breath. “Oh well. Let’s sample today’s engrossed jellybean, toasted marshmallow.”

She plunked a white Tic-Tac shaped bean in my palm and said, “This has never happened before. I could lead this tour in my sleep. It’s just that I have so much on my mind, I totally lost my train of thought.”

“I understand completely.” I chewed the bean, full of flavor but lacking its candy coat.

I am always distracted, just ask my children how often they say, “Mom, you missed it,” because in my mind I’ve already dropped them off at school or dance and was sixteen blocks away heading down the aisles at Safeway buying macaroni and cheese, baby carrots and apple juice, unable to recall the last time Patrick and I ate grown up food like wilted spinach salad and curried potatoes, or had a dinner conversation that didn’t include the words, “three more bites.” When the girls said I’d missed their stops, Patrick started in on my lack of attention. He wondered if the difficult labor and the following year of no sleep caring for preemies brought on a form of postpartum ADD from which I’d never recovered.

Bernetta seemed so in control. If she could lose concentration like that, what hope did I have? If Mr. Rogers were in our group, he would’ve ushered us to the picnic area, served tea, sat next to Bernetta, patted her hand and encouraged her to talk about it.

She’d say she went to pick up DeWitt’s cleaning at Delia’s, and there taped to the bill was a little plastic bag with a gold earring in it. She wouldn’t believe for a second his lame excuse about finding it under a floor mat, sticking it in his pocket, and meaning to drop it in the lost and found box. She suspected all along he was banging that slut Stella on the mangy couch during lunch when all the mechanics were down at Carneros eating burritos todos. She’d be red-hot angry, cursing DeWitt, using strings of words I’d never thought to apply to Patrick, but which fit the situation perfectly. We parents would cover our children’s ears.

Bernetta, purged, would pick up her microphone and say, “Let’s get on with the tour.” We’d applaud. She’d smile wide then issue a warning not to walk in front of her.

But Mr. Rogers wasn’t there and Bernetta didn’t smile. This is the factory, she told us, where candy corn was invented. A red, white and green Christmas version awaited packaging on the floor below.

“Christmas candy in August. Can you believe it?” an older man asked as I leaned over the rail next to him.

“Only a hundred and fifty more shopping days,” I said, not sure if I was right. Patrick talked about taking a few days off at Christmas by himself. Aspen. “Peace and quiet, for once,” he’d said. Can I help it that the twins get overwhelmed with the season, making marshmallow snow-people, handprint wreaths, handprint reindeer antlers and candy cane reindeer ornaments every time they set foot in preschool, playgroup, or a play-date?

Farther along the walkway we stopped to watch the steel polishing drum rotating like a cement mixer and sounding like a front loading washer full of dimes. Every now and then, renegade beans leapt out from the blur of color, glimpsed freedom, then dropped to the floor, and were swept into dustbins by two men in white uniforms. Fitting consequences, if you asked me. Consequences that should apply to certain people who made a commitment and pretended they had no responsibilities and could just go anywhere they wanted, like Kauai.

At the next station Bernetta gestured to a colossal padded box where jawbreakers are made. The manufacturing is so loud that they are enclosed in a padded box to tumble during their three-week journey from inception to jawbreakerhood. How wonderful it would be to put Kelly and Kimmy in a padded box when they bicker. Better yet, myself. Three glorious weeks in a sound proof box free from *Nah uh. Mom, she said...Did not. Did too. I’m hungry. Where’s my navy tie? When’s dinner? What’s for dessert?* Three weeks of silence to meditate, cogitate, to contemplate what I might do with my life if I had a life of my own.

Then came the Jelly Belly art, huge mosaics composed entirely of jellybeans, each individually placed with chopsticks and glued on painted plywood. Likenesses of Elvis, Joe Montana, Presidents Reagan and Bush, Prime Minister Thatcher and the Pope adorned the support posts of warehouse shelves. I thought of the field trip to the Palace of the Legion of Honor I’d organized in May and decided that these were examples of neo-impressionist Pointillism the children would remember. In fact, the girls and I would make our own Jelly Belly art. All we needed was Elmer’s glue, tweezers, cardboard and beans. We would sketch some simple designs, calculate the number and colors of necessary beans, then come back and buy them. The project would encompass art, math, problem solving and fine motor. Even Patrick would be proud.

Bernetta rattled off facts and I felt a need to document them to make the art lesson complete. I snagged a pen from my fanny pack and wrote on the back of my tour ticket: *14,000 beans. Queen Elizabeth has only one ever sold. Hangs in Buckingham Palace.*

As we walked to the last stop, I decided to expand the art project to include an illustrated storyboard on the lifecycle of the jellybean. Then Bernetta instructed us to exchange our tour tickets for a sample bag of Jelly Bellies. I would forgo the beans if needed to keep my notes, to which I’d added *cornstarch mold, 24 hour drying period, engrossed jellybean and polisher.*

When my turn came I looked into Bernetta’s stern face. “May I please keep my ticket? I wrote on it.”

She shoved a sample in my hand and produced a withering look.

“Thank you,” I said. “I really appreciate this.”

Now the girls are asleep, and I reach under the bed for the red, ample bottomed fourteen-inch plush Mr. Jelly Belly I bought Kimmy per her bribe, and pull him out by his twiney arm. I take him to the kitchen and set him on the table, next to the plastic tub where the *I Miss Daddy* cards are stacked underneath my cardboard sketches—a mermaid for Kimmy and a pony for Kelly—that will become our own Jelly Belly art. I pour a glass of iced tea and fan myself with a dishtowel, as the breeze god seems to have forgotten hell valley tonight.

The Weather Channel reports the temperature in Kauai at eighty-seven with ninety-three percent humidity. Patrick is no doubt lounging on the beach, drinking from a pineapple with some bimbo from accounting. I imagine the perspiration beading on his naked mole rat chest and dripping between her perky breasts that will never droop from overuse by squalling infants. They'll slide across each other and into the sand, flailing like breaded slugs. So much for his dry heat.

He'll call soon, tonight or tomorrow, expecting my *I understands* and *Please I know we can work things out for the sake of the kids*. But tonight I've been thinking about Mr. Rogers and what he'd tell me if he were more than my television neighbor. I've been thinking about Bernetta and her no-one-messes-with-me attitude. I'm rolling new words around in my mouth, slow and deliberate as if tasting jellybeans, and I like the feel of them on my tongue.

"Well, Mr. Jelly Belly," I touch my glass to the brim of his felt hardhat, "here's to the two of us."

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