

The Chocolate Wars

written by Catherine Jagoe | June 30, 2021



In a corner on the floor next to our dining room table stands a plastic toolbox. It's been there for years. It is kept closed, with a combination padlock securing the hasp. The box is bright red. Red for danger. Red for stop. Red the color of extremes, the color of love. The combination is known only to the other two occupants of the house, my husband and son. I often yearn to know it, but it's better that I don't. The fact that I don't affords me a measure of peace. Unfortunately, if I ask, my husband or son will open the box for me—they are both incorrigibly soft-hearted. I wish they were stricter, although when they attempt to put up a unified front, I rail against them until they give in. Sometimes I check to see if the box has accidentally been left unlocked. If it has, bad things ensue, just as when the raccoons who patrol our neighborhood every night discover we have forgotten to weight the lid of the garbage can with bricks.

Inside the box, currently, is a bag of Ghirardelli milk chocolate chips for me and a bag of Hershey's Special Dark for the guys. They don't need the box except to protect their stash from me. Before we took this rather extreme step—on the advice of a marriage therapist—I vainly tried to prohibit them from bringing chocolate into the house because of my long-standing private battle with it. When in the grip of the demon chocolate, I conducted stealth missions into their territory, scouring their private hiding places until I located and demolished any variety I laid hands on, even if—sometimes especially if—it wasn't a kind I liked. At those times I might eat more, vainly trying to reproduce the sensations I craved.

The word "chocoholic" was first used in 1968, right around the time when chocolate began to feature large in my life. Because I was living in the U.K., it was British chocolate I'm talking about, which means only one brand: Cadbury's milk chocolate. It comes in a royal purple wrapper—introduced in 1914 in honor of Queen Victoria—and three signature varieties: Dairy Milk, Fruit and Nut, and Whole Nut. A 70s TV jingle that still runs through my head:

*Nuts, whole hazelnuts! Cadbury's take 'em
and they cover them with chocolate!*

The second sentence was delivered with a calypso lilt by a staid British businessman who bursts into loud song on glimpsing a bar of the stuff. If you are assuming that Cadbury's is the British equivalent of Hershey's, think again. Hershey's is truly execrable. It does not deserve to be called chocolate. Its main ingredient is sugar, not milk. It is brittle and cloyingly sweet, with a nasty chemical aftertaste. But more on that later.

I get my sweet tooth from my mother's side of the family. My grandmother taught me how to lick sweetened condensed milk off the lid of a can without cutting my tongue when I was six. In early childhood, chocolate was a special treat, administered by adults. My mother would give us squares of Dairy Milk once a week on family hikes in the mountains. My grandmother, who visited once or twice a year, illicitly supplied her ever-willing grandchildren with Cadbury's Chocolate Buttons and Mars Bars, circumventing parental regulations about spoiling our appetite. We were given elaborate molded Cadbury's eggs filled with candy every Easter and glutted ourselves. On rare occasions, my parents bought us a "99" from an ice cream van: a scoop of vanilla soft serve with a Cadbury's Flake stuck in it. If you have never had a Flake, believe me, your life is not complete. On those days, as it crumbled and dissolved in my mouth, mine was. In my childhood, the chocolate wars between me and my siblings involved who got the most pieces, or who had stolen a chunk of someone's Easter egg or birthday treat. Many tears have been shed in my family over chocolate, and I confess to having once accidentally given my brother a bloody nose in a scuffle over Chocolate Buttons.

In 1969 I started to be entrusted with errands. One of them: walking down the hill to the village to buy the paper for my father from one of the newsagents—Ron Roberts on Watergate Street, or Scotts on the High Street. They sold newspapers, magazines and candy of all kinds: jars full of boiled sweets, licorice allsorts, mint humbugs, toffees, gobstoppers, and the full range of Cadbury products—not just Dairy Milk and its cousins, but Crunchie bars, Flakes, Curly Wurlies, Double Deckers, Wispas, Chocolate Buttons, and so forth. Both shops smelled of paper, ink and sugar, my favorite substances.

When I started secondary school in September 1972 at the age of eleven, I began buying myself chocolate. My new school boasted an outdoor vending machine selling Cadbury's Dairy Milk. Every morning at eleven o'clock recess, I would insert a 10p piece and receive my little purple package of satisfaction and soothing, which I broke open with cold fingers. How to describe the sensation as I consumed it, standing in the courtyard in the raw air, clad in my scratchy regulation school skirt, shirt and tie? Utter bliss: sweet, creamy, solid, comforting. Chocolate is known to contain psychoactive chemicals—the stimulants theobromine and caffeine; the amphetamine-like tyramine and phenylethylamine, and most of all anadamide, a neurotransmitter that acts on the brain like cannabis. Its name comes from the Sanskrit word *ananda* (joy, bliss, or delight). These chemical compounds partly explain why people have such visceral responses to chocolate. But the irresistibility of milk chocolate in particular may stem from its primitive, infantile associations: it contains the same ratio of fat to sugars—one to two—as breast milk. Perhaps that is why it is associated with comfort for so many of us; why we turn to it particularly in times of difficulty, when we're feeling

embattled and our stress levels are high.

A few months after I began buying Cadbury's at school, the chocolate war began. It lasted for thirty years, and I wonder if it may lie at the origin of Brexit. Milk chocolate is, after all, a central icon of British culture. We (and the Irish and Australians and Canadians and Indians) love our Cadbury's as much or more than tea and the Union Jack. The chocolate war started the day Britain joined the European Union on January 1, 1973. Cadbury's chocolate is creamier and lighter on cocoa solids than continental brands. Chocolate makers in Belgium and France argued that Cadbury's wasn't really chocolate at all. It contained too much milk. Even worse, the cocoa butter was not pure—Cadbury substituted a small percentage for vegetable fat (palm oil and shea butter). European chocolatiers insisted that Cadbury either change its recipe to conform to continental standards, or relabel its product as something else—"vegetate," for example. When Cadbury refused this ultimatum, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands prohibited Cadbury imports until 2000. In 2001, France and Belgium reluctantly agreed to accept what they regarded as an adulterated product, providing it was labeled "family milk chocolate," but the two holdouts, Spain and Italy, "steadfastly refused to allow British chocolate to even be called chocolate" until 2003, when the European court of justice ordered them to lift their ban on its sale.

Along the way, there were other skirmishes. Cadbury's milk chocolate is twenty percent milk. Since 1928, it's borne the slogan "a glass and a half", promoting the quantity of milk in an eight-ounce bar. That slogan was dropped from the Dairy Milk brand in 2010, because it contravened European food labeling regulations, which required using metric weights and measures. It was amended to read: "The equivalent of 426ml of fresh liquid milk in every 227g of milk chocolate." Doesn't have quite the same ring. The ninety-year-old *image* of the glass and a half of milk is still prominent, however, on the front of every Dairy Milk bar.

Chocolate has been used as both weapon and reward. The Aztecs gave it to victorious warriors after battle. The Nazis planned to assassinate Winston Churchill using an exploding chocolate bar. Cadbury's Dairy Milk, launched in 1905, had become their best-selling product in the U.K. by 1914. When World War I broke out that year, Cadbury Brothers began producing chocolate for the troops. Every Cadbury employee was involved in the war effort in some way—over two thousand of them signed up as "chocolate soldiers," who served in the Armed Forces; the rest produced some 20,000 care packages containing chocolate for the troops and cared for wounded soldiers in hospitals erected on Cadbury premises. It's touching to think of men enduring the horrors of trench warfare receiving chocolate as a comforting reminder of home and childhood.

Chocolate was used as a morale-booster and energy source in World War II also. Hershey's chocolate powered U.S. troops during the vital D-Day landings in 1944 and became a potent symbol of American largesse, as U.S. forces liberating Europe distributed Hershey's candy bars to underfed, war-weary populations who had been deprived of chocolate for years. I don't think the British have ever quite recovered from the war rationing. Sugar consumption

was limited to seven ounces per person from 1942-1953, and Cadbury's had to switch to using powdered milk in their Dairy Milk bars, which were labeled "Ration Chocolate." The chocolate binge the British have been on since the end of rationing shows no signs of abating.

Every few years I attempt to give up chocolate. Sometimes, I have actually succeeded—once, even for an entire year. I have to white-knuckle and protein-load it through the first two weeks of intense cravings. If I can make it past that point, I have some hope. After six to eight weeks, I'm not so drawn to the stuff and have an easier time saying no if it's available. After a few months, I don't even want it any longer. But even after a year, if I allow myself *one morsel*, it's all over. The first time, it tastes strange, alien even—too sweet, not what I need—and I think I am so over my chocolate addiction. But the next day, I think I'll have another piece—since I am so over it—and one mouthful leads to another. No matter how much I try to set limits, the more chocolate I have, the more I want. After a recent chocolate-free interval, I happened to have some trail mix containing chocolate chunks. A month or so later, I have bags of it on hand and am supplementing each one with a handful or two of chocolate chips—and still craving more.

I can buy Cadbury's Dairy Milk at some local grocery stores—Target, for example. But the Cadbury's sold in the U.S. is manufactured and distributed under licence by Hershey's, who make it made differently. It tastes sickly-sweet and is a little softer than in the U.K.—close, but disappointing, an ersatz substitute, tantalizing because of its purple wrapper and all its associations. There are several reasons for this. For starters, milk tastes different in the U.S. and the U.K. Then there's the fact that Cadbury sources all its cocoa from West Africa—Ghana and the Ivory Coast—whereas Hershey blends cocoa from all over the world. Cadbury's recipe begins by combining milk with sugar to caramelize it, then dehydrating it and mixing it with cocoa, whereas Hershey mixes cocoa with sugar and then adds dehydrated milk. Most significantly, Hershey processes the milk first using lipolysis in a way that gives the chocolate a longer shelf-life, but creates butyric acid, a sour compound found in baby spit-up and Parmesan cheese; it imparts the chemical taste American consumers have come to expect in their chocolate. So whenever I cross the Atlantic, my first taste of Dairy Milk at Manchester Airport is always a revelation and a joy.

In 2015, the Hershey Company successfully sued to prevent the sale of British-made Cadbury chocolate into the U.S., claiming it was an infringement of trademark laws. British expats and U.S. fans were outraged, and more than 37,000 people signed a petition to boycott Hershey's as a result. But the ban stood, and since then, any Cadbury's you find in a store on this side of the Atlantic is American-made, although it is still possible to purchase the U.K. variety from online retailers and have it shipped to you by mail, as long as it is for personal consumption only.

Despite the inferior nature of the Cadbury chocolate sold here, several times

over the past year I've given in to longing, purchased several bars and concealed them back home under the plastic bags on top of the fridge. I can't bear to put them in the lock box because my American husband is almost as enthusiastic about Cadbury's as I am, and I would have to share. The first week or two, three small pieces are perfect as a secret treat once a day. But then it creeps up to six—and then maybe two helpings of six—and so it goes. Right now, my obsession is Ghirardelli's Milk Chocolate Chips. That's what is stored in the lock box. The official portion size is a mere sixteen chips—a smallish handful. I managed that just fine for three weeks. But now I'm having three large handfuls and could happily eat the whole bag—although I wouldn't feel happy if I did. Thus the lock box. When my work was at its most stressful, some years back, I had large quantities of Belgian Callebaut milk chocolate squirreled away in the box. It is sold in hefty two-inch-thick slabs that have to be attacked with a chef's knife, yielding sumptuous slivers of pleasure.

Because chocolate is linked with primitive sustenance, childhood, and home, it tends to elicit strong reactions. People often want and defend it violently. It is a strange paradox that a substance so associated with comfort should also be associated with war—with intra-psychic conflicts about appetite, as well as legal and commercial and nationalist battles. Countries and regions have their own particular tastes and traditions concerning chocolate—the Belgians, the Swiss, the French, the Spanish, the Americans, and the British would all tell you that their national chocolate is the only real one, the one they prefer, and that other types are just not as good.

I have tried, really tried, to get on the gourmet dark chocolate train, to master my craving by retraining it. I love reading connoisseur articles about single origin chocolates from choice cocoa plantations in Madagascar or Venezuela or São Tomé. But there's no getting round the fact that dark chocolate is bitter and brittle in comparison to milk chocolate. It's luxurious and adult but not comforting. Orthorexics eat only a square or two of dark chocolate—the darker the better—a day. They profess to prefer brands containing eighty-five or even ninety percent cocoa. My brother is one of them, and given our shared Cadbury childhood, I can't forgive him for it. Dark chocolate is undoubtedly better for you, good for your heart and brain and digestion. But after ten years of trying to go that route, I've given up. I just prefer milk chocolate. I have an inordinate, inveterate love of it, and will never be cured, however much I might want to. The single source, hand-crafted chocolates—I get that they are objects of beauty and artisan rigueur, but sometimes you don't want to be sophisticated and mysterious and full of antioxidants. You want what the old Christmas carol "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" calls "comfort and joy," and Dairy Milk provides it.



Catherine Jagoe is a translator, essayist and poet who has published eight books and three chapbooks. Her nonfiction appears in the 2016 *Pushcart XL* anthology and received notable mention in the 2019 *Best American Essays*. Her most recent essays feature in *Belt Magazine*, *Entropy*, *Memoir Magazine*, *The Coachella Review* and *Under the Gum Tree*. Her poetry collection *Bloodroot* won the 2016 American Poetry Prize and the Council for Wisconsin Writers 2016 book award. She is a contributor to Wisconsin Public Radio's *Wisconsin Life* series.