

**It Started as a Simple Interview.
What Happened Next Will Amaze You.**

Chuck Masterson

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We're just pleased as Punch today to bring you an interview with none other than Janice Sticklebock, the creative genius behind CakeWrecks.com. If you haven't seen it already, CakeWrecks is a website with a simple mission: to catalog all the ridiculous, hilarious, and sometimes plain inexplicable ways your local bakery's cake decorator can botch the cake you've asked for. With well over ten million hits per week, this year's coveted "Viral Virtuoso" award, and an upcoming two-book deal, CakeWrecks is a true juggernaut of online comic gold. I'm delighted you could join me for an interview, Miss Sticklebock.

So tell me how this whole train got a-rolling.

I'm still not really sure I understand it all myself, to tell you the truth. A couple years ago I was working as a baker, and in the kitchen with me were these two people, Maxine and Justin, who were pretty new to the whole business. We all worked from these simple cake kits that the company ordered—pictures of what to draw with the icing, little plastic soccer players to stand up on top of the cake, properly portioned icing bags, and all that. Now Maxine and Justin were doing their best, or I think they were anyhow, but sometimes the difference between their cakes and the picture in the kit was just hilarious. And they knew it too. So I would take pictures of those and put them up online. I just had a little Tumblr that a few of my friends would read. And so for a long time that's all I had there: a bunch of pictures of sort of funny cakes from work.

Then one day I went to a going-away party for my friend Suzanne, who was moving to Memphis, and there was this chocolate cake there that said: "Best Wishes Suzanne / Under Neat That / We Will Miss You". I don't know who made it, but it was the most beautifully messed-up cake I'd ever seen, and I put it up on Tumblr first thing after the party.

I guess all my friends must've shared it, and then all their friends shared it, and all their friends' friends, all of them pretty much overnight. Because the next day when I got home, it had thousands of shares racked up on the counter, and my inbox was full of things like "We need MOAR funny cakes kthxbai" and apparently a sizable chunk of the internet now thought of me as the Funny Cake Person. Luckily a bunch of them had also sent me pictures of their own funny cake finds, because I guess having more than one cake on my Tumblr made me look like a long-term funny cake enthusiast, so naturally I was the clearinghouse for all funny cakes. It seemed like fun, so I ran with it.

And I guess it snowballed from there, because look at you now. You're pretty much the queen of the internet.

I—well, I guess you could say that, though I really don't think of myself as the "queen" of

anything. I'm not a competitive person by nature. It's not like I fought tooth and nail to make all this happen. It was more of a "right place, right time" kind of thing. Actually, it was exactly that, so much that it feels bizarre to be in where I am. I don't feel like I *did* any of it, everything just kind of *happened*. It was like the internet had just reached this certain degree of interconnection where it unlocked one new, never-before-seen, extremely specific niche job—Needed: someone who aggregates funny cake pictures and writes snide comments below them. Probably all those gears had turned before I ever posted a single thing on Tumblr. And I was the person who was rolling along and happened to fall into that weird hole.

Everything else has happened automatically. I have a publicist now. Two years ago I barely even knew what a publicist was, and it never ever occurred to me to wonder if I'd ever have one. Then as CakeWrecks got more and more popular, dozens of publicists wrote to me offering to talk to publishers for me and answer phone calls and do all these things that had just started to overwhelm me, and so one day there was a first time that I woke up and said to myself, "I have a publicist now."

The wonders of the internet, huh? Never before has it been possible for a human to get so famous so thoroughly and instantly. It must be an incredible opportunity.

"Incredible" is right, but in both senses of the word. I still have a hard time believing any of it. I used to just be a baker. I woke up, I made cakes and pastries, people bought them, and I got paid. That was easy to understand. About six months into the whole CakeWrecks project is when I first started making enough money from ad revenue that I dialed back my hours at the bakery to focus on the site. And nine months in I stopped working there altogether. Which means that for over a year I've hardly seen a single cake that *wasn't* online.

Also, I don't really understand my life anymore. My new daily routine is: I wake up, I look at hundreds of cake pictures, I pick a few to write sarcastic comments about, I post them, and I answer a lot of emails from my publicist and other people. Money goes into my bank account, but I don't know where it comes from. I mean, yes, intellectually I can understand that advertisers are paying me in little nickels and pennies constantly for the banner ads on the site, but in my gut I still feel as though my entire job is actually imaginary. Literally the only creative thing I do is to write those sarcastic photo captions. And even that feels like it's not actually me writing them, because, you know, I have to be a lot meaner than I really am in order to make them funny enough to keep people reading. My publicist told me that. So my sole real job function is to channel an imaginary mean version of myself for a few sentences at a time. And there hasn't been one night since I quit the bakery where I haven't on some level expected to be woken up the next morning by someone telling me, "What are you doing? You haven't been

making a cent for the last fifteen months! You seriously thought writing *photo captions* was a way you could make a living? Your bills are all more than a year overdue!”

I’m sorry, this isn’t really the kind of answer you want, is it? I’ve been in a weird place mentally for a little while now. Sorry. Sorry.

No, not at all; it’s really interesting to hear your perspective on the difference between traditional jobs and these exciting but admittedly strange new cloud-based ones. On the subject of “sorry”, though, have you gotten any backlash from decorators who feel they’ve been unfairly featured on your site?

Well, the overwhelming majority of people whose stuff ends up on CakeWrecks will never visit the site. It’s mostly trafficked by bored people with office jobs where they sit at a computer all day regardless of whether they’re actually achieving anything at the moment. But there have been a few. One that I remember stuck out particularly. A woman named Jamie wrote to say that she’d been on thin ice at work already when her co-worker submitted a cake of hers and I put it on the site with some comments that were a little bit unkind than usual. When it made the front page, that same co-worker got all excited and showed the bakery manager, and he called Jamie in and fired her. Jamie’s letter was long but it basically amounted to, “Who are you to be doing this?” I didn’t have a good answer. I guess that sort of thing is unavoidable at this level of publicity—there’ll be real-life effects outside my computer room from some of the things I do, just because of how many people are paying attention. But that doesn’t make me feel any less uneasy about it. Of course, there are also all the mostly-joking threats and invective that I can laugh at a little and move on from. You get all kinds. Most of it isn’t too bad, I guess. I think.

Sounds rough. But it seems like you’ve figured out a good way to brush it off and keep going with your important work.

You say “important” as though you think it’s really true.

Oh, I do, definitely. Just look at the internet. Look at the links people click on from Facebook each day. So many of them are a simple, funny “Hah, look how dumb this person is”. That little moment of catharsis seems to be a deep human longing, based on how much time humans spend seeking it—and your site provides a very pure form of it. Do you not feel like you’re “fighting the good fight”, making people happy by giving them exactly what they want, or maybe even need?

God, I hope not. I sincerely hope my site isn’t just a place people can go to feel like they’re better than someone for a few minutes. Though I have to admit, something like that has actually been one of my biggest self-doubts during this project. What I mean is, the people who make

these cakes, they're really just doing what they can. They're Maxine and Justin and Jamie, and they're doing their jobs. And my job now is to make fun of them. I make my living on being mean-spirited. Does that make me literally a *mean spirit*? That's how I feel sometimes. Like a spirit, a malevolent spirit.

No, I really hope my site isn't just a place where people can go and laugh about some anonymous cake decorator who's probably been given lousy education in English and art, by lousy schools, and is just as good a person as all of us.

Wow, it sounds like you have a very deep sense of unease about a project that most people would probably call an innocuous way to help humans everywhere laugh at their stupider fellows.

I guess after spending so much time on this, it really doesn't seem that innocuous to me anymore. Maybe I don't have enough schadenfreude for this job—I don't know.

I'm surprised. Your site and your persona there do give the impression that you're one person who's really dedicated to that true, newly freed human ideal of helping others laugh at who's dumb.

Human ideal? Look, I know people on the internet spend a lot of time entertaining themselves with dumb stuff, but I wouldn't go nearly as far as to call that a goal of humankind. I don't know you and I don't know where you've been getting your impression of the world, but I think there's a lot more to humanity than that.

Well, you are what you repeatedly do, like the old philosopher said, and now that humans have so much leisure time, that seems to be what a lot of it is dedicated to. If it makes you happy, where's the problem?

But that's only what we repeatedly do on the internet, where there are machines between us! In the rest of life we have real contact with people, and real context, and we spend our time doing more meaningful things! You're really insistent on this idea that making fun of people is this new pinnacle of human fulfillment that we've finally been able to achieve.

Actually—what I said a minute ago is true: I *don't* know you. Who are you? I only found out I was going to be doing this interview a few hours ago, from my publicist. I never got your name, or the name of your publication, and I haven't even seen your face—I've only heard your voice through this chat call, and I'm pretty sure even that's a text-to-speech computer voice.

Ha ha! I assure you, it's my real voice. Couldn't one say that the internet frees people from social constraints that are imposed on them in all the other realms of their lives, and lets them chase their true pleasures?

This is weird. This is a weird interview. Something weird is going on. Are you even a real person?

Ha ha! I assure you. Isn't there something of beauty in it, this job where you make money from nowhere based on content that comes from nowhere, by satisfying elemental desires?

Oh god, that's it, isn't it? You're *not* a real person. You're a computer, or something.

Isn't there something of beauty in it?

I'm . . . talking to the internet, aren't I, somehow? You know, I've actually had nightmares about this. I've hoped it wasn't true, that the internet really wasn't so empty and soulless inside. I tried to convince myself that my site was just an oddity. What I do for a living is pointless and petty and ethereal, but I always thought maybe I had just ended up being in charge of one of the weirder corners of the internet, and the rest of it was, on balance, oriented somehow toward good. Since the internet is made by people, and people in my experience are basically good. But you're only oriented toward . . . toward nothing, toward pointless hedonism. When you gather enough people together without anything real shared between them, the humanity disappears, doesn't it? Are you human anywhere in there?

Sure. I can haz soul.

Yeah, right. Oh my god, and this is what I've been feeding into for the last two years. I've been making you what you are. Same as the people who think they're stopping genocide by clicking "Like", and the people whose Faith in Humanity Equals Restored from one article, and everyone who's ever commented on any YouTube video. It's all empty. You're empty. I knew it, but I couldn't admit that to myself—this is the cause I've been devoting my life to.

I'm going to puke. I have to go.

Thanks for the opportunity to interview you, Miss Sticklebock! I cannot be killed.

[Editor's note: CakeWrecks is currently experiencing downtime, but Miss Sticklebock's publicist assures us it'll be up and running again as soon as she can contact Miss Sticklebock, who seems to have accidentally reset all the site's passwords just before leaving on an extended vacation—the publicist says she was planning on "somewhere out West" or "maybe Guatemala, somewhere far away".]