

Butter Ice No Sponge.

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You can't do everything, can you? You can only guide. There's a point at which you have to say, over to you, sink or swim. I've shown you the way; if you're not going to listen don't come crying to me when it all goes banana-cake-shaped. But there you are. People. I said to the girls, I said *blueberry and lemon millefeuille* won't sell and with barely thirty minutes until Mrs Prenton's Saturday Choir comes howling at the door demanding our evacuation, the whole, un-sliced cake fills prime trestle table estate. I'm not taking that home. I don't want it sliding up and down the back seat of the Micra. John will only try feeding it to the house martins. Every year I say the same thing; keep it simple. Know your audience, manage the expectation and then deliver against that expectation. It really isn't rocket science but sometimes getting the committee to focus and see common sense is like herding skittish kittens on a greased baking tray. *Lemon drizzle, Coffee and Walnut, Victoria, Battenberg, a few butterflies, chocolate crispies* for the kiddies, that sort of thing. Nothing fancy. That's the secret to a successful charity Cake Sale. People don't want experimental or worthy. No *croquembouche* or *dacquoise*. No courgette or beetroot. No gluten-substitute, vegan-friendly, taste-free

sawdust cake. Carrot at a push. Our customer base is traditional, they can still taste rationing. They want something soft with jam in that they can sieve through their unpredictable molars.

But Martin says, Martin says, Let's ring the changes. Martin's new to the group. He doesn't understand how it works. He rubs his thighs continuously through his corduroy trousers and gives the girls a supercilious grin that someone at some point must have mistakenly told him was charming and says, Let's shake it up a bit this year. If you want a shake up Martin try *Tuesday Night Zumba*, I want to say. I don't catch his eye. Give him enough hemp rope and Martin will eventually swing from the handles of his hessian *Farmers' Market Bag-for-Life*. Three meetings in and the girls are smitten. Penny's worried he'll get bored of us, that we're not dynamic enough for him. I can't hide the sound I make as I snort from my nose. I hope he doesn't go, Penny says in a way that I know means more than she's letting on. She really is quite pathetic for men. Do you think he will? she asks. Yes, I say very deliberately, Yes I do. He's one of those, I say, who wants to look good by doing good. Mark my words I give him a year. He'll move onto mindfulness for depressed labradoodles or something, I say a little unnecessarily. Penny looks hurt, but I don't care. We've all met Martins before, haven't we? They talk a convincing game, don't they Martins? The world's full of Martins. But they're not in it for the long run. Steph offers Martin a hob nob. The hob nobs are for the AGM not just monthly meetings. I give her a look. Unsurprisingly it is Penny who is the first to volunteer for Martin's hair-brained house-to-house pamphlet drop initiative. I said at the time, I said you won't get any thanks for littering people's door-mats. It's enough just to wrestle your way past pizza leaflets and window-cleaner begging letters when you get home of an evening. Who needs more? Martin, I think rather dismissively, replies with a cheerful grin, *Still*, worth a try, his voice ascending cheerfully at the end as though that might be enough to render a ridiculous idea partially sane. It'll be fun, he adds. Glass ladders anyone? Chocolate teapots? *Still*, *worth a try*. Martin thinks flippancy and devil-may-care will win the day. He doesn't understand what it takes - what it's taken - to galvanise such a soporific huddle. I clap my clipboard against the table. Let's try to focus shall we? We've all got busy lives and homes to go to. This may or may not be true, but still the principle remains. Fundraising isn't a game. Charity is a serious business. I can help, I'm not busy, says Penny, I only have Strictly on iPlayer and an *M&S Moussaka for One* to attend to anyway. Her

flirtation is agonising to watch. I really can't see the appeal. He wears strips of woven leather as bangles on his wrists. A man should wear a watch. Martin doesn't strike me as a great receptor of feminine signals anyway, so Penny, bless her, will have to try harder. Thank you Penny, Martin says, That's the spirit and Penny does that thing she does when she taps her toes together and looks at them. Well, you know my thoughts on the matter, I say. Duly noted, Martin says with a smile. His teeth are the colour of batter when it has dried to the side of a glass bowl and the light catches its thin translucency. Martin wants to put notices up on lampposts and bus shelters as well. I tell them, you'll annoy people. We're not that kind of organisation, I say. There are standards regarding how we do things. Gluing posters all around the place is one step from vandalism and we all know there's enough of that these days. What is the statutory council fine for billposting? £300? Well, let me just remind everyone of our duty of care to the poor people we are raising money to help. Last year we raised £48.25 from the cake sale. A council fine like that, by my calculations, would leave an unpalatable short-fall of £251.75. Not even the least numerate amongst us would deem a minus figure of £251.75 a successful fundraiser, I say. How's that helping anyone? Steph titters. I can always rely on Steph. But Martin, it seems, can be very cavalier in his attitude to risk. If that happens, he says, I'll make up the shortfall myself. Penny and the other girls think that's a wonderful gesture and they clap him. He hasn't actually given any money, I want to say, it's just a hypothetical donation, hardly a signature in blood. Martin rides a rusty pushbike, wears water-mottled moccasins and has spectacles held together by blue catering tape. I doubt he has £251.75 to his name. On your head, or wallet, be-it, I say. I feel a tension in the room. This is not a group that likes confrontation. I'm as open to new ideas as anyone, I say to them, but may I remind you all that we have managed dozens of Cake Sales over the last ten years with, even if I say so myself, some success. They all nod at this. They know it's true. They also know they are playing with fire trying to reinvent the successful Cake Sale process. This is not a committee buoyed with many risk-takers. Steph is looking at the plastic cup part of her thermos ponderously. So be it, I say defiantly, if that's what you want to do, then by all means give it a go. I shrug to demonstrate I really don't care that much if they want to break with the finely honed strategy we've delivered for years. If it doesn't work we can always do what we've done before next time, I say. I can tell I've made them think by the amount of shuffling of bums in seats. No harm in letting a little doubt settle. Cau-

tion has a grossly under-estimated worth. And whilst we are at it, I add, I am happy to try out the new proposed table layout, but I want it noted I still have my reservations. The linear three rows method has worked satisfactorily in the past. It has aided flow and removed lingering, resulting in an efficient *'in - buy cake - out'* system acknowledged universally as highly efficient. The proposed horseshoe layout and maligner's table and chairs in the centre of the hall is a recipe – *pun intended* – for disaster. I'm just saying now. Martin looks at me. The girls look at their hands. *Still*, Martin says after a while, *worth a try*. After a silence Penny pipes up, I like the leaflets Martin, she says, I like how you've drawn S.A.L.E. on top of the cake as though it is written in icing, she continues all doe-eyed. And then the others join in. It's a bit of Clip Art pasted into a Word document, I want to say, hardly the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But one thing I have learned during my time spent in charity committee meetings over the years is when to bite my lip. Thank you Penny, Martin says and piles wedges of leaflets into everyone's hands. He pauses when he reaches me but I reach out and take some to show that I'm not petulant. Sometimes, I think, people forget why us volunteers do what we do. It's not about us. It's not about me. It's about the valuable help our efforts can provide. I feel it is my place to remind Penny and Steph and the rest of the girls of this every now and then. I look at the pamphlets in my hand. They really are horrible. Not us at all. I suggest, Martin says, walking parties to distribute them. Let's spread the net as far as we can, he says. He starts to list routes and postcodes like he is planning the Relief of Mafeking. That's when I really had to speak out. I hope you're not suggesting we go as far as the Cheadle Estate, I say. Because that way imprudence lies. I look to Steph for support on this issue - I know she shares my views. But, I notice, she doesn't give anything away. I shouldn't be surprised, Steph is weak-willed. She can think again if she expects an invite to this year's Advent Carols. I take a deep breath and then in a calm voice remind everyone of our responsibilities as a charitable organisation. We have obligations. We don't have access ramps to the hall for all the push-chairs the teen mums from the Estate will bring with them, I tell them. We haven't the health and safety or public liability, I point out, in the event of the metal fold up chairs slicing off one of them sticky fingered little kiddie's digits. That stymies the giddiness and I finally manage to restore some sense to the proceedings. Sometimes you have to say it like it is. You have to put your foot down and be firm with people, otherwise all sorts of nonsense can ensue. You don't think these big businesses that make all this

money are run by committees do you? They need a strong hand on the wheel. Someone to guide. It may be unpopular at the time, and you can't expect any thanks, but in the long run it becomes apparent. But that, I'm afraid, is the curse that comes with leadership. We managed to get through the rest of the arrangements for the Sale in double quick time. I'm sure I caught Martin pulling one of his silly faces at Penny. With time he will find that a charity like this doesn't run on whim and fine words but on hard work and clear direction. Fine words butter no parsnips, as my dear sis would say. Butter no sponge. There's a reason we have structure and don't build our plans on mere good intentions and *still-worth-a-trys*.

It's typical, of course, that on the day of the Sale the sky looms dark and threatening all-day forcing wayward families into the hall and eliciting an unbearable smugness in Martin. I don't point out that he's got cream piping down the front of his thick knit Aran. The hall swells to shuffle levels. Every chair in the middle of the room is taken with people feeding sponge into their mouths. It's an accident waiting to happen and I can barely bring myself to watch. Steph's carrying a fresh urn of boiling water within inches of an old lady pushing a metal frame in front of her. Two little girls pick chocolate buttons from the top of buns and shout for more. Penny's right, Martin won't hang around long, not once the charm has begun to wear thin and he realises the hard work involved. You can see the Cake Sale is not what he expected. He's red in the face and flustered. A schoolboy error not to have change in your Tupperware box Martin, I want to say, as I watch him trot over to Steph's table again leaving frustrated customers waving notes at him. Penny, I notice, is quick to shout out the money going into her box. Two pounds going in, she cries. Steph and the others soon join in and it's like a chorus of squawking parrots. Fiver going in. Pound going in. A chubby teen in leisurewear picks up the plate containing the un-touched *blueberry and lemon millefeuille*. I can tell she's from the Estate and I wonder for a minute if she is going to try to make off with the cake without paying. I edge around a disorientated pensioner in pyjama bottoms to block the route to the exit. I prepare myself for combat. Martin looks up with delight as the chubby girl rummages amongst the contents of her purse. Tenner going in, he shouts. I see Penny giggle and I move away from the exit. I'm not convinced we should be adding to the stress on the NHS by encouraging obesity in such a gross way. A 50p slice of Victoria Sponge would have done the poor girl just fine. I look again at the hall clock. It's ten to five and the room isn't emptying. It's a bun

fight - *intended*. I'm going to have to get firm. Rules are rules. Mrs Prenton's Saturday Choir will be stampeding through the door any minute and the last thing we need is an out-of-tune acapella rendition of *Wind Beneath My Wings* next to the cream horns. This is what happens if things aren't managed properly. Martin looks bewildered by the amount of people thrusting money at him and stumbling away with paper plates piled with cup cakes. I will have to ring the brass hall bell. I've never, ever had to do that before. We need to wash up the cups and plates, pack up the left over cakes, fold and store the trestle tables under the hall stage and pile all the folded chairs against the back wall. Those are the conditions of the booking. I shout my concerns, but Martin is lost in the throes of his cake orgy. Just fifteen minutes more, he begs. I shake my head defiantly. I'm incredulous. I say we will be banned from the hall if we outstay our allotted time. And guess what he says? Guess what Martin says? He says: *Still*, worth a try. I want to scream. Penny has been collecting the money and tipping coins from each helper's pot into one big pot. I've never told her, I should have, but mauve doesn't suit her. It makes her look ghostly and washed out. Four hundred, she shouts out, we've hit four hundred. And she's still counting. Like it's all about the money. I leave them to it. I grab my bag and coat from the chair and stride out of the hall. Here comes Mrs Prenton and her warbling weirdos marching up the pathway. Let Martin and his idiotic grin charm them into waiting whilst they clear everything away. Let him learn the hard way. Let's see after it all collapses about him whether it was still, *still* worth a try.