

LIKE ORANGE ESSENCE AND VANILLA

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Old Man Meacham seems more like a prison guard than a baker. The folks who line up at his shop every morning wonder how his boy Peter can stand working under his eye. It's Peter who makes the cinnamon buns that taste like that one perfect Christmas morning, and the meringues that laugh on the tongue. Even his "ordinary" breads aren't. While they fill the stomach, they wrap the heart around with strength and courage.

The lines of bakery customers stretch all the way down the street. None of those people knows that Peter's mom Lena taught him a potent secret: how to make joy, love, and memory into flavorings, just like orange essence and vanilla. They also don't know that Lena's magic holds her family together.

When she dies, too young, Meacham and Peter bury her and go back to work the next day. Meacham sits at the counter, his face like freezer-burn, while Peter works the ovens. Today, bread is just bread. The meringues are soft with loss. Everybody hears old Meacham scold Peter, but they don't hear what happens that night, after the bakery closes.

Hands with know-how can roll memory into pie crust. They can dust apples with cinnamon, sugar, and vanished joy. When Peter takes this pie out of the oven, the scent warms the air like a loved voice.

Old Meacham accepts a slice from his son and closes his eyes to take a bite. When he opens them again, he's a boy, in love with a magical girl.