

Bread

by Jane Flett

I am standing in the kitchen, kneading dough, because this is one way to say sorry. This is a way to say, things will be different now, *look*. There are two types of women in this world, so I've heard: the kind who bake and the kind who allow their knees to slip and spread, always whirling like carousels, trying to evoke the excitement of the fair. All this time, I've been in the latter camp. Well, not any more. This year, things are going to be different. I drag the batter across the worktop and it studs on the oak. I gather it, fold it, and thump.

This is my plan until he comes back. While the rest of the world tos and fros, I'll be here, massaging, as the dough transforms. The alchemy and glutens will align and it'll become soft, and silken. I won't stop. Flour will settle in my hair and my knuckles will bruise, but I'll keep kneading. From my sentry at the table, the front door stares back, sullen. Come on, door. I'm ready. That handle is a seesaw in a playpark on the first day back at school. I'm staring at it, giddy. I'm waiting for it to tilt.

Any minute now, the door will open onto the jagged winter morning. Or, rather, it will open onto a yellow, floured kitchen, the smell of toasted walnuts and buttery crumbs. I once listened to a radio show on *Scent Tricks in the Property Market*. Animals and cigarettes are universal deterrents when house shopping. Rose and lavender are popular among the over fifties, not so much with the young. But everyone is drawn, unwittingly, to cinnamon and baking bread. Even if you can't cook, if you want to get a good price, you should reheat buns in the oven and waft the air around your corridors. It'll trick people into believing it's a home.

Well, I've been thinking, I can be that home. I'll be the one with grazes on the skirting boards from the bikes parked inside, where the door under the sink sags on its hinges. Sure. But ultimately, I'll be the one where you step over the threshold and feel your tensions unbutton, where the air coddles you and whispers, *it's fine*. Mine are

small imperfections, part of any natural wear and tear. They're not structural, not fundamental. Not enough to put you off the sale.

So, the door will open. Ray will step inside and it will be warm. The oven air will billow, wrap like cashmere around his broken shoulders. I'll step forward out of a haze of flour that softens me, like candlelight. There'll be a thumbed smudge on my nose and I'll kiss him dustily. This, more than any words I can muster, is an apology. A rosy-cheeked, winsome-apron-stringed, "sorry."

And it'll be ok, then. He'll understand. He'll see it was nothing to do with him, really, nothing to do with us. As a thing, it was of an entirely different type; it belongs to a whole other taxonomy. Look at it this way: if you copy the answers of the person next to you in a test, that's cheating. But if, instead, you read your answers from the turn of the tarot card, that's something else. It's not fair to judge them by the same standards. He can't hate me. It wasn't a problem of ours. In truth, I was just drawn to the hook.

Though wait, that sounds wrong. It reeks of glamour and pirates, traverses crossed on a rope — my arms around his body, him, the flying fox. It wasn't like that. The man was short. The skin on his neck blotched red when he talked, his eyes, once you got in close, kept watering. He blinked too often. But I didn't notice any of this, not at first. I looked across the room to where he was gesturing and something gleamed, like a weathervane suddenly twisting and catching the sun. I sat down the plastic cup of wine, I walked over like it was the most legitimate thing in the world, and I said, "Hello."

Normally, I can't approach people I've never met. I look at them walking around with the histories they've already gathered, and I'm paralysed. My hand refuses to reach out and take them on. It senses the heft of their reality, twitches its fingers, and shirks. These people carry on through life, come across sturdier hands and shake them. I watch from a distance, fascinated, as they slather another experience onto their bundle. I'm not complaining. It's just that some of us aren't fit for crowds.

He was different though, this man. His hook was a beckoned finger that said, *it's ok, ask me. I won't judge. It doesn't matter if you never finished your third year, it doesn't matter if every attempt at work is abandoned, dazed and wandering, in the internet's expanses.* I felt I could hand myself over, stop trying and slipping. His skin puckered where it touched the metal and became an odd, silvery pink. I looked and I waited for the salmon to leap up his streams, and then I reached out and touched him.

It was warmer than I could have hoped. And softer. I expected to find a vicious point but he tapered to a nub. My fingers wouldn't stop shaking and I tried to hurry them before someone came to their senses and asked me to leave. His curve of brass was the doorknob to a stately home I'd thought I never could enter, but I took a breath and I turned it, and I stepped inside.

"Hello."

I'm not sure what happened after that. He talked about things, though I found it hard to concentrate. They seemed beside the point, these words. I sneaked glances around the room where other people were having cheaper, less thrilling conversations. The air around our bodies was suffused with gold, which sparkled where he gestured with his arm. I saw us as if from a distance: on a podium, addressing the problems of the crowd; as carved figurines, on a mantelpiece, by a fire. I leaned forward, I tilted my chin, I agreed.

And then somehow, impossibly, we were in his bedroom. The bed was tightly made with plump, square pillows. The corners were so perfect, I tried to think of the acceptable way to ask how he made them, and then his hook slipped into my zip. "How... what happened to your hand?" I was dizzy with ideas of propriety. "What happened to your hand?" I said.

"Shh," he said, and then the zip was down.

After that, I let things happen. Sometimes, there aren't as many options as you think and then sometimes there are more than you could ever imagine, scattered like Hansel and Gretel's trail of corn, saying, *eat me, eat me, and damn the consequences.* I confess, I

wasn't thinking of the others getting lost in the woods. I was stumbling under firs and filling my belly, dazzled by the glint of light on metal, blinded by the possibilities to come.

When it was over, I expected things to be different. I thought I would lie in his bed, the metal cooling in the draught from the window, the crescent icy on the warmth of my belly. We'd tug ourselves awake and look at each other with new eyes, eyes that could see the beauty beyond things, like an oil slick marbling amber and turquoise under the sun. But it wasn't like that. I woke with a dry, cavernous mouth and my body acutely aware it was no longer unconscious. The morning jangled with the revving of his breath; every time I slipped towards sleep, he said, "Gurrghh." I lay beside him and thought about beatific patience, about innocence, about the similarity of his sheets to ours. Then he snorted in, gasped, and woke himself with the effort. "Whoops," he said, and blinked.

I closed my eyes again, and kept them that way. I tried to wait things out. I tossed thoughts from my mind one by one, pretending I was throwing script pages from a convertible pummeling across the Nevada desert. You cannot blame a mannequin for where it is propped. I counted to thirty, as if I could trick time with numbers. I wondered if I could use the power of telekinesis to gather my phone and wallet and biros, and buckle them back in my purse. Maybe if I concentrated hard enough, my clothes would move across the room. They'd rise up like old dogs, slow and weary, and pad back to my body. Then I could leap up, fully clad, and walk to the door, walk along the corridor, walk down the staircase, out to the pavement, foot after foot, back this way, back to the kitchen, home.

I am standing in the kitchen and outside is slate grey, without any of the usual Tippex flurries January offers for starting afresh. The gutters are reclaiming the dirt and it's too late to pretend we're angels with cumuli underfoot. I bet Ray's out there, cursing, booting the mountains of ice that line the roads. He'll expect them to poof but they'll just bruise his toes. Perhaps he's walked so far in that cold that he's frostbitten, his toes turning black and crumbly. When

he comes home, he'll want to warm them straight up by the heat, but I'll stop him, immerse them in warm water, tell him to slow down. He'll listen, because I could be right, or at least because he believes I could. Later, when we google what could have happened, he'll feel a surge of love. And forgiveness. Perhaps.

There's a kernel in my stomach that believes in this ending but I can feel it sinking. Things are bubbling and acidic down there, things are fizzing like an old penny in a glass of Coke. I need to sift the flour inside my gut and let it absorb these puddles of bile. I'm tired of the rising in my throat.

I catch an acrid smell wisping through the kitchen, which suggests that, in the oven, my fourteenth attempt is beginning to char. Beige to gold to brown to black, shifting colours like a nutritional sunset. I'll ignore it, there's no time for that now. It had its chance to rise and it failed.

I cradle the fifteenth and try to talk to the dough. I want it to tell us we are in this together and everything will be fine. I'm supposed to stretch it between my fingers until it's almost as thin as winter tights, fold it over, turn it ninety degrees, whack it again. Right. But beneath my hands, it is slack and wet. It's a clag of flour and water, clumping in pieces, glued to the counter. I'm not sure this is working. There's no transformation. It feels like a sack of kittens I've been ordered to drown.

Outside the kitchen, it's getting dark; surely a moon the size of a watermelon is offering council from the sky. I could use some help, but I know if I ever leave this spot, he'll come back, I won't be here, and it'll be over. I need to have this bread ready by the time he gets home. I need to leave it to rise, I need to knock it back with fists, I need to leave it to prove a final time. 'Prove' because it proves the yeast still has some life left in it, 'prove' because it shows it's still trying, whatever you might think to the contrary.

