

## The Baker's Boy

It never rains in the wee smalls. Not in the perpetual winter of the eighties, at least, not on a Saturday – definitely not in this story. I went from boy to young man in those years. Each week, a routine: to town on the Friday night to wander and look at girls, to flick through LPs and check the scene. The cash that greased these steps came from later that night, when I'd sleep two hours or three and then bike into the night to bake bread for the day. From fourteen to seventeen, I biked across town making the most of an age when weekends meant double pay. And in all that time there came no rain, so I never got wet.

I was fresh at fourteen. Grown full-size, shy and unsure, carefully hiding tears and fear, not yet missing the seventies' permanent summer. I only looked forward, to the things yet to taste. The baker I helped was a rough old Londoner; he'd learnt to make bread in the war, punched-out his brass, jumped ship and ended up here. Les was hard, but a laugh. His remnants of red hair were greased flat behind his ears. He had a proud, strong gut and naked women on his arms. It was often said he made the best buns in Crikey. They'd come from Brighton and Sockburn and the bits in-between, to get Les's buns in the days of sparse hot bread. What a mouth he had – shocked me so much it showed. I couldn't quite believe an adult knew the words only school boys shared. I was stunned that first night, wanted to tell him to be quiet, or someone would hear.

"Press the button. Stop the fucking thing." I panicked and the dough was fired on the floor; that first night; my first job.

"Sorry, sorry," I said, wiping the flecks from the dough.

"Just go make us a cuppa," Les said, pushing me away.

I fumbled about by the Zip. I'd never made a hot drink, couldn't stand them myself – could remember a smashed teapot and the mark of a wooden spoon. I couldn't bother Les, tell him I didn't like tea, was scared of the Zip, so I turned on the tap till it felt pretty hot.

"Shit me," Les spluttered. "Did you piss in this, or what?" I flushed red, near tears, so Les let it go. "Look, don't worry. We've got a lot of knots to get through. Here's the button. You feed 'em, I'll tie 'em, and for Christ's sake, switch it off before they spit on the floor."

So, the dynamic was set, of baker and boy. Making and shaping dough into bread. Seven hours each week, baking into the light, when the bun girls would come and the van boy arrive. I liked the job, liked the smell and routine. And, over the months, Les accepted me. But he never asked me to make a cuppa again.

"This dumb cunt," said Les with his arm in a hopper, "tried to oil the bloody thing while it was still going. Lost his hand in a flash."

"What, here?" I asked, imagining the scene.

"No. Up me bloody kekker. What do you think I'm telling you for?"

"Right. Would've ruined the dough?"

"That's the thing. It was so quick, it didn't even bleed."

"No way."

"Bloody oath, I was there. Put us right off the bake," Les said, turning on the machine.

I lost no body parts on the job; the worst thing I suffered was adolescent pain. Though one morning, while plugging in a roller, I heard a rising hum, felt a warm vibration inhabit me, a near pleasure I couldn't quite place. My arm started to lock and the hum became a scream. With a bang, I was shaking on the floor, perplexed and in pain. Embarrassed, I tried to stand and then wobbled back down.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I dunno," I said, looking at my hand as it began to sting. "There's a hole in my hand."

"Shit, I forgot about that," Les said, carefully pulling out the machine. "There's a break in the rubber up here near the plug, happened during the week. Would've been a bit of a belt, boy. You'd better sit down. I'll make us a cuppa."

No more was said.

There were only two bun girls, but that was enough to intimidate me. They were older and attractive; tall and short, curved and not; both with pretty eyes. But what to say and what to do kept me at bay.

My secret satisfaction was an illicit thrill, two thirds through the shift, when the fully-risen dough would wobble out the prover as I pulled out the racks. This was my domain. I filled the water, kept up the steam, made sure the yeast didn't blow the bread out of shape. The responsibility felt good; I loved the heat and smell of steam. It also meant the night was nearly done. Just the bake to come with the small kick it contained.

The unbaked bread, raised yet soft, made me think of the girls. The Viennas were the closest, with their cleaving white wobble, just like any breast I'd watched with keen interest. As I carried the trays to the oven, I let my thumb rest beside a loaf, feeling the jiggle and heft. After I placed them on Les's peel, I watched them shudder into the heat. I don't think Les knew about my small fantasy. He was too busy hiding his fag behind his back and blowing smoke up the vent.

"See that blonde one?" Les said, one morning, rasping his peel clean.

"Karen?"

"She's not blonde, what do you...? The other one."

"Carol?"

"Yeah, wouldn't hurt her face if she fell over, eh? Eh? Bit dozy, though. Came back here one day when I was unloading the oven. Just hanging around, getting in the way. Trying to catch me smoking, I reckon. So I turned me back and gave her a poke with me peel. Caught her right in the ha-ha – must've got her thrill. Hasn't been back for more. Ha."

I thought about Carol, as Les spun the peel.

Then came a particularly busy night. It was the run-up to Easter and the extra buns promised a hot night's work. We started the bake early, and the first cheese knots were flying off the peel, when the van boy stumbled in straight from the town.

"You're early, Mush," Les called out, tipping another sizzling tray into my hands.

"Yeah, I was out ... s'good. Thought I'd come in ... sort the orders. No point in bed," Mush said, sloping off to the office.

"Think he's been having a bit of fun," Les said, with a wink. "But he has to drive the van."

"He'll be right after some rest. You wanna try a drop. Got me half-gs in the fridge for when this is done. Best bit of the week."

Tray after tray went from oven to rack, with me banging any load that got stuck. Near the middle of the bake, I encountered a particularly sticky tray. The cheese was too thick and wouldn't release its grip. Bent over, I shook and jerked it, feeling the heat from the metal start to sneak through my mitts. Then, from behind, something else: urgent, clammy hands squeezed down my pants. I smelt beer, a familiar voice, obscenity licking at my ear.

"How'd you like it, eh?"

"Hamish?"

"How'd you want it? Greased ... or raw?"

The hands scratched and prodded, while mine began to burn. I was trapped, unable to move or drop the tray to bounce welts down my arms. Three dozen hissing cheese knots held me in place.

"Hoi, you havin' a wank, or what? These rolls are burning!" Les's shout retracted Mush's paws. I left the tray melting into the rack and returned to the oven, saying a load had got stuck.

"Well, get this lot out, and then I'll help you get that one off. Christ, boy, where's your priorities?"

The rest of the trays stung my hands. But I said nothing.

One week later, with my hands tough and new, I found Les laughing on the phone.

"Been a bit of an accident." He said, hanging up. "At the mill that does the flour. Decided to give some pooffer a bit of a thrill with the air-hose they use to clean up." Les stopped to suck his fag. "Shoved it up his arse and turned it on, ha."

"That doesn't sound good." I felt unsure and sick.

"Kinoath, it's no good. The fool nearly died. Caused a power of shit. Those clowns are in the crap. Couldn't have happened to nicer blokes." Les laughed till he coughed, then flicked his butt down a crack.

"Who was it?"

"They're not saying. But the little bender's lost half his guts. Be off solids the rest of his life. Not a place air's meant to be, funnily enough." Les laughed some more.

That was the most pain I would feel. Of all the burning trays and rainless nights, those hours left the deepest mark. I struggled to think if Les had seen anything. I wanted it hidden, but I wanted to know. So I kept quiet and shed no tears, anxious to see if Mush would stumble in, on that rainless night, in a winter decade.