

SARA MCKINNON

Bread Alone

My grandmother says bread cries when a lazy person eats it.

I'd never had white bread until my father took me to feed the carp at Pymatuning Lake. We bought three bagfuls at a shop that looked and smelled like 1965. The man at the counter had a Russian accent. *How many?* He asked it over and over, until the words got worn out. Until they leaned on each other for support. *Harmony?* The loaves were implied, because that's all they sold. This was the only store that kept cheap white bread behind a counter. As though seeing all that bread in one place could make anyone think, *They won't miss one loaf.*

The flour in bread is a fine white powder made from wheat.

The first time I saw a man and woman not love each other like they should, I closed my eyes. Not because I was sad, but because the woman's eye was bleeding in her hand. And because you can't waste your hands on your eyes when you don't want to hear someone screaming. *Don't touch me.* I could hear her through my hands. When I opened my eyes, she was pushing her husband into the wall. She was falling on the floor and then hitting her husband's chest when he tried to see her face. *Get away from me. Don't touch me.* Her husband put his face in his hands.

My mother told me Julie had cut herself on a newspaper. And that a cut on your cornea is like a paper cut on your eye. And then she said that Tom and Julie were getting divorced. That sometimes men and women stop loving each other. *Oh,* I said. When I was older, she told me the truth. That sometimes men love too many women. That sometimes men spend all their money on cocaine and fall asleep next to women they hardly know. And if a man like this falls asleep in the living room of his own home, and if his wife finds them together in the morning, she'll never let him touch her again.

Companion. The one you share bread with.

The first man I loved stocked bread at a supermarket. Sometimes I would sit on the cold linoleum floor and watch him work. Pushing

tray after tray of bread through shiny metal doors. Every brand had its own home, every flavor its own spot on the shelf. My mother bought Roman Meal, with the bright orange bag that looked like it might glow in the dark. He loved English muffins. If you knew this about him, you could see it in his work. Their home was the neatest spot in the entire row. Always full, always neatly stacked to the edge of the next shelf, always ready for a wife or a grandfather to put them in their carts. Sometimes I would leave him silly love notes in the pitas or sticks of gum in the sweet rolls. One time, I scribbled *You look cute today* on an old receipt. When I was almost at the end of the row, almost around the corner, I saw a woman in black pick it up. I ducked behind the salad bar and watched her turn to see if anyone was looking. When she felt alone, she smiled and put it in her pocket.

All griefs with bread are less.

The second time I saw a man and woman who didn't love each other like they should was at a funeral. Their daughter Holly was eight years old. Her mother was always telling her she was *going to get herself killed*. And one time she did. On the day Holly died, she and Jenny were taking turns tying themselves to the loft of a barn and jumping off the edge. When the rope got tangled around Holly's neck and her feet couldn't reach the floor, Jenny ran into the house screaming. A woman who wasn't Holly's mother ran down the stairs in a shirt that must have belonged to Holly's father, because he wasn't wearing one. By the time they got to the barn, she was already dead. I don't know the rest of the story, and I've never asked Jenny to tell me more. I only know that one time she said the woman's nipples were *this big* and held her fingers in a wide circle.

This, said Picasso, snatching it back with violence, this piece of bread is mine.
—Gertrude Stein, 1933

Winter lunches in Cleveland can make you forget the sun is warm. We were walking toward our hotel when the sun reminded us it was there. His university was building a new business school, and we stood on the sidewalk watching patches of light hit its metal roof. It looked like a steel glacier. Like a too sweet thing. Like a roof that doesn't know when to stop moving.

When a woman in a black jacket walked by, I didn't really notice. I didn't really see her until I saw her look at my boyfriend's face. Until I saw him look down at the pavement and back in her eyes.

Who's she? I said.

No one, he said. *Some girl from class.*

Later, we were eating ice cream in bed. Watching a pop concert on the television, because we couldn't find the remote and the buttons on the front didn't work. The singer was running her hands down her stomach and over her thighs when he said, *She gave me head.*

What? I said.

That girl you asked about, he said. *It was an accident. It never should have happened.*

I looked back at the screen. I put a carton of ice cream on the nightstand.

Get out, I said.

Sara.

Get out.

When he left the room, I thought it was over. I sat on the edge of the bed not really hearing bad pop music. Not really thinking about the woman in the black jacket. But here's the thing about fancy hotels on the bad side of Cleveland. They lock you in at night, and if you kick a man out at three in the morning, he has nowhere to go. He'll end up right outside your door saying, *Baby, please, I fucked up.*

When we were back in bed with the television off, I threw a melted carton of ice cream in his face. I thought it would make me feel better, but it only made me laugh. And then he laughed too. There's something about sleeping with a man you want to slap that makes you pull the headboard off a hotel wall and lick the warm pistachio off his neck.

The next day we bought tickets to see inside Picasso's studio. I stood in front of *La Vie* and wondered if the woman in black was angry. She was holding a baby and watching a naked woman touch an almost naked man. I thought she looked sad.

I turned to the man beside me. *So how does someone accidentally give you head?*

To toast a piece of bread is to bake it twice.

The second time a man didn't love me like he should almost happened under water. We were standing in an aquarium watching jel-

lyfish that glowed blue in the dark. The thick blue of a painting we'd stood in front of two years earlier. I put my hand on the glass and wondered what it would feel like to really touch them. Wondered if it would hurt.

I slept with another woman, he said.

I felt my hand slip on the glass. I watched crowded jellyfish push their bodies through the water. I thought they looked like wet paper.

What's her name? I said.

Sara.

What's her fucking name?

Michelle, he said.

I pressed my arm and then my face against the glass.

Sara. He tried to pull me away from the tank, but I pushed him back.

Don't touch me, I said. Don't ever touch me again.

Bread cannot rise in a cold place.

My grandmother trusted me to go shopping for her. After writing a check with FOR BOOKS in the corner, she pulled a heavy novel from the bottom of the bag.

I told you not to waste money on hardbacks, she said. And then, when I didn't smile like I should have, What now?

I sighed. *He let me down, and I know I'm going to take him back anyway.*

Mary's husband let her down, and he got poisoned by the KGB, she said. Men like that don't get away with it.

A long silence.

Uncle Gill was killed by the KGB?

On the drive home, I thought about the man I still loved. I wondered what it looked like when he made love to Michelle. I thought about Julie's new husband in North Carolina and the putt-putt golf course in their backyard. I wondered if they ever wrapped their arms around the same club and tried to make a putt. And I thought about Aunt Mary saying, *When there was a line, you got in it. It didn't matter what they were selling, because you needed it.*