

BAKING BREAD

A short story

by Julianna Thibodeaux

Maddy pulled out the flour, the yeast, the measuring cups. Filled the cups with flour, measured carefully, poured them into the bowl. Added yeast to the warm water in another bowl, tossed in a few pinches of sugar. Let it sit. She walked into the living room where her 4-year-old daughter, Evelyn, was watching television. A show about a superheroine, a girl with a cape who saved people by correcting improper word usage. "Time to get dressed for ballet!" Maddy called to her daughter, who was unresponsive. She walked closer, knelt down in front of Evelyn, looked her in the eye. "Evelyn! Time to get dressed for ballet!" Evelyn's eyes flickered for a moment in her mother's direction. Returned to the television. Her mother sighed and went into the dining room, picked up the pink Barbie dance bag, walked back into the living room and placed the bag on the couch next to Evelyn. Leaned down again, looked Evelyn in the eye. "Dance in one hour!" She started to walk away; stopped. "And don't forget to potty!"

Maddy walked back into the kitchen. The water and yeast had started to bubble. Tiny bubbles, like clay beads. She stirred the water, added olive oil, a mixture of beaten eggs and more water. Tossed in a cup of flour. She glanced at the clock. The dog barked. She glared at the dog. Continued stirring, adding flour, until the mixture was lumpy and soft. She slid the mass of dough from the bowl as if it were an infant, gently guiding it to

the flat surface of the countertop. Now she pummeled it, no longer an infant, but instead the punching bag hanging in the basement. Gathering dust.

She glanced at the clock again. Forty minutes until ballet. The phone rang and she ignored it. The dog barked. She sighed and pulled dough from her hands, carefully running the end of a fingernail through the crevices of her wedding ring. She had meant to take it off.

She washed her hands, let the dog out. Saw the dog's water dish was empty. Filled it up with cold water, returned to the living room.

"Evelyn!" She scolded again, as her daughter sat still on the couch watching the credits roll, the show's theme song playing loudly. After half-heartedly looking for the remote, Maddy walked over to the television and turned it off manually. Had Evelyn's full attention now. "Mom!" Evelyn screamed. Her mother ignored the scream. The dog began to bark outside. Maddy heard another dog's distant response.

Maddy picked Evelyn up, carried her into the bathroom. She pulled down Evelyn's pants and sat her on the toilet. Evelyn glared at her mother but her mother didn't look at her. Instead she asked, "Are you done?" Evelyn nodded yes and leaned over for the toilet paper. Maddy carried Evelyn to the living room, started to help her with her tights. Evelyn yelled, "I can do it myself!" Her mother said, "Then do it yourself!" Maddy walked back to the kitchen. The dog barked.

Maddy glanced at the dough on the countertop, still sticky, not ready for its first rising. She looked up at the clock. Twenty minutes till ballet, minus a ten-minute drive. She heard a cry coming from upstairs. She looked down at the silent baby monitor hooked to her belt loop. Wasn't the damned thing working? She walked to the stairs and saw Fran, 18 months old, standing at the top of the stairs, clinging to the safety gate. Fran saw her mother and pointed. "Eee! Eee!" Maddy put her hand to her heart. "How did you get out of your bed?" Fran frowned. Started to cry. Her mother took two stairs at a time to the top. Lifted Fran over the rail.

Fran on her hip, Maddy walked down the hall to her teenage son's bedroom. The door was closed. She heard the tinny residue of an iPod. Heavy metal. She knocked. Knocked harder. Still no response. She hesitated, then opened the door.

John was sitting on his bed drawing a woman in anime. The woman was busty in a low-cut top with high-heeled boots and tight pants. She carried some sort of weapon. Her eyes were large and droopy, suggesting secrets. Her son looked at his mother, annoyed. "I need your help," she told him. John eyed her carefully. "Could you just come and help knead the bread?"

"But I have homework, Mom," John said, eyes averted now. He started to add shading to the woman's long hair. Maddy looked down at the picture. She saw other figures: a man, another woman, smaller, in the background. The smaller woman was crying. The man looked angry and shook his fist at the larger woman.

Fran tried to get down. John said, "Don't let her get into my stuff!"

“That doesn’t look like homework to me,” Maddy said. “I was just about to start, really I was,” John said. “Okay buddy, get up. This will take you ten minutes tops.” John reluctantly got up. He grabbed his iPod. Maddy almost asked him to put it down. Changed her mind.

Fran grabbed at a stuffed monkey hanging from the window blinds. The blinds bent. John yelled, “Mom!” Maddy pulled Fran’s hands from the monkey. Fran started to cry.

Downstairs, Fran still on her hip, Maddy showed John the dough, the extra flour. “Just knead this for about ten minutes, add flour if it gets too sticky. When you press a finger into it, it should spring back. Okay?” “Okay Mom,” John said. The dog barked. Damn dog! Maddy thought, then let the dog in. He jumped up on John. John elbowed the dog and the dog yelped. “John!” Maddy scolded.

Maddy put Fran down. The dog licked Fran’s face. Fran cried again. Her mother picked her up again. She put food in the dog’s dish, Fran still on her hip. Went to find Evelyn. Evelyn had turned the television back on and was sitting on the couch with just her tights on, hugging her chest. “I’m cold, Mommy!” She said to her mother, without looking up.

Maddy looked up at the grandfather clock next to the front door. Ten minutes until ballet. “Then why didn’t you put your leotard on, Evelyn?” Evelyn said, “I’m so tired!” Maddy set Fran down next to a box of Lego’s. Most of the Lego’s were no longer in the box, but strewn across the living room floor. One was underneath the piano,

another on top of the coffee table. She picked up Evelyn's leotard, leaned over to put it on. Evelyn said, "I can do it myself!" Her mother said, "Then why didn't you?"

Evelyn laughed at something on the television. Her mother picked Evelyn up and stood her on the floor so she could pull up her leotard, saw the remote on the couch. She picked it up, turned off the television. Evelyn screamed. Maddy warned, "If you scream like that again, no television tomorrow!" Evelyn said, "That's mean! You hurt my feelings!" Her mother ignored her. Evelyn was now silent. She glared at her mother, arms folded. Maddy yelled to John, "We're leaving for ballet!"

The dog bounded into the living room, followed them to the front door. She jumped up and down, her paws hitting the door repeatedly. The lower half of the glass-windowed door had been covered with Plexiglas so the dog wouldn't break it again. In the car on the way to ballet Maddy tried not to speed. Already ten minutes late. Maddy felt like a failure. She pushed a stray clump of hair behind her ear, glancing in the rearview mirror. A red truck was riding her tail. She tapped her brakes.

On the way home from ballet it began to rain. Soaked the leaves that lay thick on the front lawn, sidewalk, and the garden at the side of the house. Maddy carried Fran and Evelyn onto the front porch, set them down to unlock the front door. Heard the dog barking inside. Shook her head. Clenched her teeth.

She dropped her keys. Evelyn picked them up, handed them to her mother. Maddy was surprised. "Thank you, Evelyn," she said. She smiled, gave Evelyn a kiss on the cheek. Inside the house Evelyn ran to the television. Her mother understood. "Oh no

you don't... no more television. It's just the news now anyway." Evelyn cried, "I wanna watch TV!" Her mother said, "No more screaming or no television tomorrow!"

Maddy's husband, Will, walked into the living room, flour on his hands. Maddy panicked. "What are you doing?" She asked. "Helping with the bread," he said. She brushed past him. Went into the kitchen. Saw the dough sitting on the counter in two round lumps. Breasts without nipples. One slightly larger than the other, just like her own. She smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" Will asked, kissing his wife on the cheek. Evelyn yelled from the next room. Maddy glanced at her husband. "Would you?" she asked, nodding towards the living room. Maddy separated one of the loaves into three long strands, braiding them together like Evelyn's hair, only the dough didn't yell at her. She set the braided dough on a cookie sheet. Braided the next one. She left the loaves to rise under a dishtowel embroidered with tomatoes, spreading it over the two cookie sheets like a canopy. It barely covered both loaves.

At dinner Fran started feeding her spaghetti to the dog. Then her beans, corn, and shredded cheese. Her mother caught on first; her father grabbed the dog and put her in the kitchen, put up the safety gate. The dog whined. Fran reached for her mother. Maddy removed the tray of the highchair and Fran stood up, leaned towards her mother in a freefall, laughed as her mother caught her.

Maddy left the dirty dishes and went to check the bread, Fran on her hip. Fran started tugging at her mother's shirt. Maddy peaked under the dishcloth. The loaves

were almost perfect. She took Fran upstairs. Asked Fran if she wanted a bath. Fran squirmed to the ground and ran to the bathtub. Tried to climb in. Her mother helped her with her clothes, her diaper. In her naked freedom, Fran peed on the floor. Began to stomp in the pee. She laughed as it splattered the bathroom. Her mother wiped up the mess.

Maddy nursed Fran to sleep. Maddy started to fall asleep too, woke up to the dog barking. Wanted to scream. She got up, hooked the monitor back onto her belt, checked the volume. Went back downstairs, into the kitchen.

Will's low voice could be heard like a murmur. Evelyn was arguing with her father. I'm not tired, she said, stifling a yawn. Maddy turned on the oven, lifted the dishtowel from the loaves of bread. The cookie sheets, she realized, had not been greased. She carefully lifted the edge of one of the loaves. It stuck in long threads, partially deflated. Lifting it up further with one hand, she scraped back the dough, tried to toss flour beneath it. Repeated the procedure on the other loaf. Both loaves looked like day-old balloon sculptures.

Maddy listened to Evelyn continue to argue with Will in the dining room. Evelyn's father was bigger so he won. Maddy heard Will's heavy footsteps on the stairs. She called out goodnight, returned to the bread. Considered punching it down again. She'd have to wait for a third rise, stay up another hour and a half. Never mind, she decided. Too tired; too spent.

Maddy put the loaves into the oven and glanced at them through the fogged oven door. She heard Fran's voice on the baby monitor. She waited. Could just be turning over, transitioning to the next sleep cycle. Silence. She let out a breath of relief. A minute later she heard Fran again on the monitor, louder this time. Definitely awake. On the way to Fran's room, Maddy stopped to knock on John's door. She called in a stage whisper, have you done your homework? All of it? Yes, Mom. She heard the iPod.

She nursed Fran back to sleep. Tried to pull away, but Fran held on. She leaned back onto the bed, picked up a magazine from the bedside table.

Maddy woke up to complete darkness, groped for her glasses. Two a.m.! She sniffed the air, fearing the worst. No smell of smoke. Will was asleep next to her; Fran, too. She got up and went downstairs. Heard the dog shift on her mat by the back door. Turned on the light. Squinted in the brightness. She saw the loaves of bread on top of the stove: miraculously unburned, but lusterless, their curves almost flattened. One of the loaves had been chiseled from the cookie sheet, a large chunk removed, the crusted remains still stuck to the metal. The other loaf was intact. She wrapped it in cellophane. At least one loaf survived. Such as it was.

Next morning Maddy and Will packed the kids and loaded the car for the drive to Chicago for Thanksgiving with Maddy's brother. Maddy forgot the *Challah*. Had to make Will turn around, go back for it, after they'd been driving a full ten minutes. Maddy ran inside to get the loaf. The dog barked. She checked to make sure the extra house key was under the chipped flowerpot for the dog sitter.

For almost the entire drive up to Chicago, Maddy held the loaf of bread on her lap. Held it like a baby.

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