

Brook Warner Jensen

## **Baking with Betsy**

A long marriage is a happy marriage, my grandmother used to say. It's a comforting sentiment, one I find myself coming back to each morning I wake up in this concrete bunker tucked beneath the rubble of our once beautiful suburban home. Bronze swords clatter outside the small window as an army of feral ratmen lay siege to a mire of venus flytraps the size of street lights, and I begin my morning chores.

Stretching, dressing, purifying a stored gallon of putrid water I need to get me through the day. One finds solace in these simple tasks. My father would always complain that a housewife has it easy. But try waking from cryogenic slumber every hundred years to a brand new uncaring hellscape and improvising new ways to cook, clean, and scrounge, while still making time to chat with your frozen, slowly dying husband, and tell me that's easy! Now, my father did invent the nuclear fusion generator in 1965, but I've been married to the same man for ten thousand years. Plus, given that the cities of man outside are now buried beneath the ruins of four or five fallen empires, I think it's plain to see which of our accomplishments proved to be the most enduring.

Mornings are the trickiest part of this new life. A ratman is chomped in two and tossed like a salad before being devoured in front of his fleeing comrades. I struggle to take tea without fresh milk. This sort of destitution in a home once beaming with middle-class affluence can be demoralizing. Outside, invertebrates have evolved to melt the minds of their enemies with their very thoughts, and I still have to live with the same tattered rugs! But it's only for one day in every century, and thoughts of David keep me going. We were frozen the day before the illness

would have taken him, and he hasn't left his chamber since. Although his cells still move, immeasurably, the freezing turns the seconds into decades.

Oh Dave, I know you would share in this terrible toil with me if you could. I know you would wrestle with the venomous vines in the alley behind the old bodega for sustenance if I asked. But you have to rest. Sleep, dear husband, sleep. Enjoy this hat I've woven for you from the silk of those metal-eating spiders, and sleep.

Speaking of insects, those tenacious beetles have sacked the grain stores again. On today of all days. Thankfully, I don't need much. Near the beetles I sprinkle some greywater and the last of my dehydrated flesh-eating worms. The bee who sold them to me boasted in a buzzing drawl that they would expire on their own once the unwanted pests were devoured, but I swear I saw one the other century, engaged in something licentious with the rusted remains of my lamp. The salesbee's great-great-grandson chided me, insisting it was my wild, ape-brained imagination. Apparently their language has mutated too much to read the warranty on the old package, or so this scion of a salesbee dynasty claimed.

Vermin and interlopers aren't the only things keeping me busy. Batteries need to be tested for charge, wires for gnaw marks, and all kinds of culinary experiments to be done on whatever flora now dominate the biome outside. Some centuries I wake up to are more arduous, like the one where I had to cater the armistice between the shattered fragments of a marmot hive mind. Most times, though, I do what is needed to keep this place running for the next hundred years. I eat, I think, I sleep. I fashion a chair from debris, wipe the perspiration from the glass on David's chamber, and say how I feel.

Do you want to hear my dreams, Davey? Quietly, though. A creature is laying much-needed eggs outside.

The slumber between each century is lucid. I find myself floating through a cerulean, crystalline expanse, drifting above an amber pit of glowing hot nails. Ice sheathes me like a tucked blanket, and memories real and imagined pass through me like sand sifting through a sieve. It doesn't feel like I am whipped from disparate moment to moment, sliced by an unfelt century. I am unmoored, soaring faster than the others who live only in their moment, their movement, their crisis, their war. Whatever the stakes are, whatever it is to be prevented or protected, it's nothing to me. Nothing that matters to me changes. It's like going to sleep while a friend is in crisis. For you, the night is a minute, a dream. For her, hours. Time has always been like this, I think. Only now I don't feel so guilty.

What beautiful eggs you've laid out there, strange bird. Excuse me, Dave, while I retrieve them from outside.

Was it difficult for me to wake up the first time to a vacant cul de sac, only a hundred years after we'd both entered our cozy chambers? Was it alarming to see that instead of a more advanced, more affluent society with the means and willingness to cure my husband, I had found nothing but desertion and ruin? I like to think not. I like to think I didn't crunch into a limp bundle on the street and claw at my arms till they bled. I like to think I didn't starve myself for days, believing that if I was hungry enough, desperate enough, imperilled enough, someone would have to come and save me, because someone has always come to save me. Someone has always come.

Apparently something came during the last century. Our storage closet is coated in a thick green paste with handprints as long as spatulas, but the only thing missing is the black pawns from my glass chess set. Goodness. The propane tank is still here, but will it still work? It's so heavy.

But no, as I drag the tank toward the oven, I am sure my first morning after the fall was not like that at all. No. I wasn't so weak, so feeble, so distastefully pathetic. No. I was a strong woman. A strong woman who lifted her bruised body off the pavement even though her legs were trembling too terribly to stand. A strong woman who soaked a handful of dried beans even though her arms were shaking and her sliced skin stung in the murky water. A strong woman who forced them down her throat even though they tasted like dirt, and who gorged on the tumour-lined lemons in her yard as she watered them with her broken tears. She sowed the seeds for her future, without even the faintest clue as to what would grow. Then she reset her machine, kissed the icy glass enclosure around her very slowly dying, handsome husband, and climbed into hers. The freeze took her like a swift embrace, wrapping around her belly and nuzzling against her neck. She sank into those peaceful depths. She rolled the die.

The afternoon is almost up. I grab one of the carnivorous worms, with a fear-stricken beetle half crunched in its maw. A whiff of its butt makes me wheeze. Acrid gas is better than none. They're too slimy to escape once collected in a bowl. Flour sticks to their slick bodies, and they try to wriggle away. Not yet, my friends, not yet. Enjoy some fresh water. This bake will take time.

And all I have is time. Dave's got time. I've got time. We've all got time. The cryogenic process only slows down the disease so much, but who could get anxious at the eons and eons it gave for something to come my way, some break that was more than finding food and heat and safety for a few hours. Millennia: an amount of time you can't really conceive of, can't even really imagine. You can't imagine living it. You can't imagine expending it! Can't truly internalize that fifty years from today will be how long 24 hours is for Dave, for his cells, for his

virus, and for his bristling stubble. Fifty years and there's a cure, or there's none. He'll be alive somehow, someday, or done.

But there's so much left to do. So many important things to do! I'll decorate the archway with that calico algae teeming in the pond outside. I'll smear the counters in that fluorescent ooze gurgling in our pipes and spell his name in the blood of those pantry raiders! To all these improbable marvels, my father would have said: impossible. Wouldn't believe it if he read it in his books. Wouldn't believe it if he saw it with his own eyes! Impossible. Impossible! Impossible, like the doctors said about my husband, said about a cure. As impossible as a nomadic tribe of trader bees? Ha! Insanity is the new logic now. Flour, centuries old, plus propane and water, plus eggs from a creature which feeds on light, and gas from these worms instead of yeast, and it blossoms in my oven like a velvet flower. Not sure why it's velvet, but it's festive! Impossible, they would say, but here it is! Anything can be done.

I set the chamber for fifty years instead of a hundred. These things can freeze people, why not cuisine? I climb inside and raise the match perkily above the makeshift candles. Steam erupts from the chamber's turbines and the glass sheath spins into place. Ice freezes from air on the curved window and I take my breath, my last breath for the next fifty years, and ready myself to burst into song.

Delightful, collected, committed—that's what I want his first healthy thoughts of me to be. Happy birthday, Dave. I hope you love your cake!