

(for Allison Cohn, in her cubicle)

## **Breadcrumbs.**

by

Sidney Vollmer.

It were the crusts of the bread that were the first telltale something was wrong in the village. Though the baker had used the same flour, the same salt, the same butter for decades, the loafs were singed. Blackened. The baker had not seen that happen since he was a little kid and his mother let him bake his first raspberry pie: putting the oven on too high a temperature had not only destroyed the pie, it had sedated his ambition to bake bread until his adolescence. Eventually though, he repainted his father's bakery shop and baked breads, pastries, cakes and pies. He's been doing so well over three decades now. All was fine. And now this happened.

The baker took the singed breads to his wife. Having just woken up, she was reading her morning newspaper in the kitchen. He hadn't changed the temperature of the oven or the time, he said softly. He had done the same thing today he'd been doing since, well, forever. 'That doesn't mean it's not your fault,' his wife remarked, dressed in a white and blue cleaning uniform. A punctual and zealous cleaner of the luxurious villas in their town, the wife had a lot on her mind. She couldn't be bothered with charred bread, nor was she much interested in why it was so upsetting to her husband. She wanted him to provide money so she could buy food, cleaning supplies and the occasional magazine. And that was that.

Determined his little bakery shop wouldn't disappoint the customers of his village again- let alone his wife- he closed the bakery for the day to find out what went wrong. He checked the power supply, the pipes, the water, the air vents. He lifted the racks from his oven, wiped the bottom grid clean of its grains, its traces of flour. He brushed out sunflower seeds, sesame seeds and all the tiny breadcrumbs that had accumulated over the years. Cleaning this avidly, the baker understood the passion of his wife a little better.

With everything cleaned he took out salt, yeast and flour from the stockroom, poured lukewarm water in a measuring cup- he needed to be precise- and set everything on his cleaned sink. He took out his old, withered cookbook, divided the numbers and wrote down on an empty bag of flour exactly how much yeast he needed for just two loafs of bread and mixed the ingredients. He let the yeast bloom for precisely ten minutes. Since starting up the kneading machine would take up too much time- closing the bakery for a day was troubling enough- he kneaded by hand. He folded the dough, flattened it, folded it again, pressed, turned and folded it some more. He felt the dough push through his fingers, the slow, comforting sense of something real under the palms of his hands. He had

not felt this in a very long time. Maybe it had been the kneading machine, the man thought. He remembered it was up for revision.

After the kneading was done the man went to the kitchen with the bowl of dough under his arm, picked up a newspaper and let the dough rise on the table in front of him while he read the newspaper.

He read news he had already heard of from his television the night before. Or maybe he knew of the news, the man thought rather philosophically, through another way. Maybe news had found a way of folding days into itself, secretly repeating the same occurrences in unknown cycles for readers just like him. He'd heard of so many toppling governments, horrifying earthquakes or suspicious assassinations, they all sort of, well, blended in. Years, numbers of victims, motivations were all so similar. Maybe, the man thought while looking at the lazy dough in front of him, maybe news was not linear. Maybe time was not linear.

Flipping the pages, he checked his watch constantly. After exactly thirty minutes he took out one of his cleaned breadshapes, brushed it with a little butter, pushed half the dough in and cut the top of the dough three times to give it space to rise. He put the bread on a fresh grid in his preheated oven and sat down on a chair right in front of it, close enough to feel the slow, radiating heat slipping past the glass door. After seven minutes, the man wiped a few drops of sweat from his brow. He stood up. He watched his bread being born. It was just as he was sitting down again he realized what was going wrong. He smiled.

The man held his wristwatch to his ear. It ticked as regularly as the heartbeat of his sleeping wife. The man stood up, walked back to his industrial oven and tapped the digital clock. Sure enough, the two little dots between the digits were appearing and disappearing second after second. But the oven was three minutes ahead. It's only a small difference, the man thought, and it's far fetched, but it *has* to be the reason why this bread burning stuff happened. He reset the numbers on the oven to match the hands of his watch. Both his watch and the clock of the oven were now set to exactly a quarter past ten. If he would just keep an eye on the hands of his clock, all would be fine.

The man sat down again, rubbed some dough from his nails. Since he still had about forty-five minutes left, why not do some more cleaning, the man thought. So he grabbed a broom and cleaned the floor, cleaned under the cupboards, under the kneading machine. He found a mummified mouse behind his mother's old teller and, pinching its tail, threw it out the back door. After thirty-one minutes, his wife barged in. 'They had no right! They had no right!' she screamed.

'What's the matter,' the man asked.

'They fired me! The mister and his missus at Richwood Lane!'

It never rains but it pours, the man thought bitterly. 'Why?'

His wife brushed the short brown hair from her wrinkled face. 'They said I was late! Absolute, utter nonsense! I am never late. Never.'

Since she was the only person more punctual than him, the man was about to agree. Remembering what had happened earlier with the oven, he asked to see her watch. 'Why,' she shouted, 'don't you believe me, silly old man?' He apologized. She took off her watch and handed it over. 10.49, it said. He looked at his own watch and at the oven. He frowned. His watch said 11.05. The oven said 10.47- did that clock fall behind already? By the oven's time, the bread had been in the oven for thirty two minutes. By his own watch, the bread had been in the oven for fifty minutes. He dropped his wife's watch as he gazed through the glass door of the oven. The bread was as burned as if it'd been baking for hours on end.

Ignoring his wife, the man went to the small, barely used computer they kept on the attic and checked the time. 11:32.

Something was wrong.

'How about a shoulder to cry on? Selfish man,' the wife shouted downstairs.

The man felt sorry for her. He really did. But he needed to check the other clocks in the house. For what is a baker without his time?

He went to the bedroom. 11:41, their alarm clock said. 'I'll be damned,' the man whispered. 'I'll be damned.'

What the man doesn't know, is that in seven minutes time his wife will have a heart attack, fall down at the bottom of the stairs and die. In eight minutes, he will find her. He will become so utterly frightened by the sight of what's down the stairs that he will run back up the stairs, back to the attic, away, away, away from the terror. He will call his neighbor Phillip the retired schoolteacher and hide in a corner until Phillip will show up some fifteen minutes later. He will toss out a house key from a window so he won't have to walk down the stairs again.

It will be the sight of what used to be his wife that will frighten the man so tremendously. A pile of limbs, folded up in sickening angles. Her short brown hair will have grown past her shoulders, suddenly as white as flour. Her gazing, dried up eyes, her gaping, crusty mouth shouting in silence. The skin on face will be as wrinkled as the newspapers she read each morning. If it weren't for her blue and white cleaning uniform- now as thin as the pages of a bible- the man would have identified the heap of dried flesh as a sick joke.

But that's eight minutes in the future. Right now, the man checks the aluminum clock in their bathroom. 10.29, it says. Turning to the door, the man suddenly has an erection. That's something he has not had since, well, forever.

████████