

Sarah Ivey

Baker's Dozen

When I'm not careful, the flour spills to the floor and makes the skin of my feet feel thirsty and too smooth. I worry I'm going to fall. I try so hard to be careful, though. This is such a delicate recipe; every grain of salt, every puff of flour, every tiny glob of lard has to be perfect or it will all go wrong again. I really can't afford for it to go wrong again.

I pace and pace while I wait for the baking to be over. It will be hours, but I can't concentrate on anything else before I know if it's worked or not. I should wash my feet before the slick flour and the wood of the floors upends me, but I can't. I just can't.

My hands are powdered, too, and probably my hair. I know your eyes are flicking behind your eyelids, following me from room to room. You would have laughed at this mess, and at how seriously I measure and mix. You would have bundled my stomach in your checker box flannel arms and tickled my neck with whispers until I giggled and squirmed. Your hair is getting long now; I might trim it soon.

Two hours and thirty-five minutes. I was looking through the attic a few days ago and found the trunk with all of your mother's old clothes. I made kitchen curtains from the dress she wore in the photo of your Kindergarten graduation. The fabric has pink and yellow flowers and tiny green hummingbirds. Remember? You're always looking away in that photo, staring at something outside of the edges.

I thought I'd redecorate the whole house, but every time I try I get so tired. I've been working so hard on getting the recipe right. I must be close now.

I need to seal the cracks around the windows; the morning breeze has turned into a sharp wind. Your skin feels warm enough, but I'll pull down a blanket for you just to be safe. This is the one we took camping with us last September. The tent didn't keep out the rain, but we were able to grab the blanket and a pillow before they got wet. In the bed of your pickup with rain turning your camper shell into drums we told ghost stories and made up each other's futures. You kissed your way down the side of my body and told me that you wanted us to make a child together, but I was afraid without being able to find a word for why.

One hour and fifty-three minutes left. The leaves are beginning to change colors. I've been searching through the low branches for unblemished reds and oranges and yellows and pressing them between the pages of your outdated medical encyclopedia, next to your letter. I've always loved winter best, when the snow and ice turns the world into frosted glass. A clean white death to make room for the wild procreation of spring. It was always fall for you, though, wasn't it?

It seems like I can't sit still lately, and if I can it's because I can't force myself to move. It's those times of anesthesia when I'm able to crawl into bed with you and forget. Curve myself into your warmth and study you the way I never thought to before. I hadn't noticed the freckles under your eyes or the way your right canine tooth folds

slightly over its neighbor. I hadn't noticed that the hair on your chest looked auburn in certain lights. I hadn't noticed the scar on the back of your ankle. I've learned how important it is to notice.

It's been hard finding all of the ingredients. I'd never even heard of some of them, before. You would have thought I was crazy, spending so much time and money on this. And my arms now, so covered in bands of scars and scrapes. I've seen the way your eyelids jitter when I get the knife, I know you don't approve. It's for us, though. It's for you.

One hour and eighteen minutes. Your dad called yesterday. I think your parents have given up hope that there will be a change with you, but they still check up on me. He told me that they were selling their house and buying a condo in a retirement community in Albuquerque so that they can be closer to Mali and her husband for when they start a family. He asked about you and for a moment I almost wanted to tell him about the recipe, but he sounded so tired. I would never want to worry him.

My brain jumps back and forth in how it remembers everything. Sometimes it seems like we were only ever sweet looks and inside jokes and everything in the world was just *so full* of our love. And then it's all the grey times and should-have-beens and could-have-beens and I was the watchkeeper who forgot the watchword. I can't ever exist in the middle anymore.

I was terrified the first time I brought you home to meet my mom. I coached her for a week not to ask you about your "customs," to keep in mind that Asia is a big, diverse continent and that you would have no interest in hearing about her Japanese friend from college. She got angry at my worrying, but I had to make sure. You know how she is. Everything went so well, though, and that night we laid together in my childhood bed and I thought of how I had spent so many nights in that room sure that I would never fall in love.

It will be another hour until the oven timer dings. I want to peek, but the recipe says that under no circumstances should the oven door be opened prematurely. It's hard not knowing, though.

The hospital sent another letter. They don't seem to accept that we can manage fine on our own; they want you to come back for more tests, more observation. They had you for long enough. At least here I can make sure you get the foods you like, and we can read together, sleep together. You belong at home.

When I found you there, crumpled and sloppy, I couldn't understand it. I saw the empty bottles, and the vomit, and the awkward loll of your neck, but I just couldn't understand. The kitchen still smelled like french toast and coffee. The radio was on your station and you had your book propped open on the nightstand, keeping your place. It didn't make sense. But then I knew and then I was running to my purse to find the phone because you had broken yourself and I needed someone to put you back together.

I never told you but my mom had started buying clothes for our maybe child. I laughed at her, but it made me nervous. I loved you and we had our house and we had enough money, but I just didn't feel capable, you know? To make a person from our bodies and then keep it safe and whole and good. I kept thinking about all of the ways it could go wrong and, even though I knew you wanted so badly to be a father, I just couldn't take the chance.

The charcoal made your insides come up black and thick, over and over again. Your lips were crusted with it, like the earth was trying to escape itself and you were the only conduit. The paramedics kept describing your body in words that I couldn't understand.

I hate doing this to you, but if it's going to work I have to. I try to be as gentle as I can, just a prick of the needle and a drop of blood, but it still hurts my heart. I wish I could give them both, the flesh and the blood, but it has to be this way.

Only half an hour now.

They call you "locked in." They say that recovery is overwhelmingly unlikely. But can't every lock be opened with the right key?

I'm afraid that I haven't had much time for the house lately. The yard is growing over and the raccoons have harvested more from the vegetable garden than I have. Even the floors are a mess, and you know how I am about them.

I didn't see your letter until I came back from the hospital for a change of clothes. Even then, I couldn't decipher it. You said that you were tired and your skin hurt and your heart hurt and that you were so, so sorry, but you had to sleep for a while. I hunted through my memories for clues that you had been breaking, but none of them seemed *big* enough. Sure, you were sad sometimes. Sure, there were days when you couldn't leave and you needed to cover the windows with thick blankets. Sure, sometimes things were bad. Was that really a warning of this, though?

Five minutes to go. I just...

The other ones came out wrong, I know, but I've been so, so careful this time. The babies' teeth were soaked in river water for exactly seven hours, the organ meat ground down to a fine paste. I made sure that the roots were fresh and that the red clay remained unmixed. I have done it all just how I was supposed to. Before, I must have made mistakes. I knew as soon as I saw our first son that I had gone wrong with the recipe. Our children have been teeth and claws and wings and fur, but I promise you your perfect child. I swear I will get it right.

It's starting to cry now, but there's still another minute to go. This never happened before, the others were always right on time. If only I could crack the oven door to be sure!

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

...One.

...We still have time. We'll try again until it's right. And I know that you'll learn to love them all, just like I do. They are still our children.