

## “Making Bread”

She married Chet just when she started feeling old. Three weeks to the day after the morning she had her last menses. Early menopause ran in her family and her she was on the edges of her thirties and not even worth a decent fuck anymore. Jesse, her last boyfriend, had taken that from her as well, she guessed.

She made bread now. Owned the only bakery in 40 square miles. She liked to tell people that her yeast was unique to this place, that a yeast as it was reused started to take on characteristics of its surroundings. She told the random tourist that her yeast was infused with the essence of what it mean to live in this town.

She told them stories mostly, while she kneaded her dough.

She prayed sometimes to Saint Brigit to reverse menopause, to make it so that she didn't have to spend so much of her time plucking out hairs from her chin and worrying about the slow merge of her eyebrows.

She didn't want to get married again, but Chet insisted. Wouldn't come off his knee, wouldn't let her eat her chicken fried steak with the good pepper gravy. It was the one thing Chet's Diner served well. And Cindy knew if she said no, she'd have to travel two counties over to get a decent cut of meat and gravy.

Chet wanted to gamble for the honeymoon and she wanted a cheap wedding. Saint Brigit's Island was the closest.

Something changed in her when they left the pine trees behind. She first noticed it when the land changed to windswept dunes peppered by small scraggly mesquite trees. Cindy could taste the salt. Clouds lingered just off the shore, rolling in just like the

white-capped waves. The beach was littered with red seaweed and the waves shimmered with a coat of oil from the big rigs deep in the gulf.

Jesse once told her that all the rigs leaked all the time and that's why you couldn't fish for shit in the gulf. And that's why there was so much seaweed. Ocean's way of cleaning itself, he said.

"You can't even swim in it anymore," Chet said. "You come out covered in grease. I'd think I'd take some back and use it for the deep fryer."

Cindy felt like the weight of the open sky was pressing down on her, that the gray sound would lift up and press the two of them into the earth. And then the sea would come and swallow them up and drag them out to store. They would finally end up washed ashore on the island of Saint Brigit.

She thought that the yeast made in this place would taste cursed, bitter dry and salty. They took the bridge in. She wanted the ferry, but Chet was frightened of open water.

"If there isn't a shore that my fat-ass can swim to, then I ain't going," Chet said. "Plus dolphins will fuck your mother if you're not careful."

Chet's old Toyota chugged its slow way up the bridge. She remembered what her father told her as a young girl.

"Gotta lift your arms up and lean forward if we're gonna make it over." And everyone in the car would. And they would all scream when they reached the crest of the bridge.

Chet threw it in neutral and they coasted down and Saint Brigit's Island opened up before them. It was dark now. The gas fires from the rig in the distance cast a glow

over the open gulf like heat lightning. That, at least Cindy thought, was familiar. The ferry churned slowly across the open water and the dolphins just barely skimmed the water beside it. The rigs made their slow rhythmic motion into the deep sea floor beneath them and Cindy almost fell asleep.

The car skid to a stop in traffic at the end of the bridge. Chet grabbed her hand. Giant seahorses loomed over the strip. Cindy still felt sleepy and out of place. The mass of land behind them loomed in a sea of pine trees that swayed in the gulf wind. Half the reason the trees grew so tall was because of the humidity. The land never really had a chance to dry out. Sort of like an alcoholic who never had a chance to sober up.

“I grew up here,” Chet said. “Spent a summer selling snow cones at that stand.” He pointed at a shop shaped like an open shark’s mouth. It was probably the only thing that Cindy didn’t know about Chet and for a moment it made her see the Saint Brigit’s Island with new eyes. It was October, she would remember later. And she should of said something about going to the beach in October. But she didn’t think nothing about it then.

Chairs were overturned on tables were visible through the windows of the restaurant that weren’t shuttered. Sand lined the streets. They passed a shop that had a blinding white bin of sand-dollars. Ten for a dollar.

“Parade comes through here every day in the summertime,” Chet said. “Sand dollars come out of the ocean dark brown. Most people bleach them white. They rot in their natural state.” Chet promised to show her later.

They pulled into a row of bungalows and Cindy still felt sick. After Chet got the key, she retched in the toilet of the bungalow. The bathroom smelled like rotting

seaweed. When Cindy flushed the toilet, it filled up partly with sand. She could already feel the grit under her toes. Chet unpacked his fishing tackle in the corner. It all looked brand new.

The poles that her and Jesse used way back when were covered with a thin layer of rust. But even still, the catfish they ate that night was some of the best she ever tasted. It tasted like things she didn't think possible. She almost thought it was magical.

Chet flicked on the television and Cindy settled into the mattress. It too felt sandy and she worried that the sand would work its way into her skin. She wondered if people could form pearls in the same way that clams do.

"Always smells fishy here," Chet said. "Takes some getting used to."

Chet plopped down in the plastic covered recliner and flipped through the channels. He settled on a movie that Cindy couldn't follow. Something about giant rabbits and a small New Mexico town. Chet untangled a giant mess of fishing line. She tried to make herself excited about Chet, tried to conjure up thoughts of his naked body and a light in which it could be sexy. All she kept thinking about was a ball of wet dough and what shapes her hands could mold it into. Making love to Chet was like making love to a sack of beans. She couldn't wrap her arms around him in a way that meant anything.

At least he was happy about it. He always came inside of two minutes and then kept thrusting limply inside her until she made noises that sounded like an orgasm. His breath always smelled like sourdough. It'd been a long time since she'd been with a man who could go the distance. Who would finish after her like a man should.

She hoped they would make time for the asylum while they were on the island. The stones that it was made out of were supposedly dragged up from the ocean floor by Saint Brigit. The woman had lungs like a pair of bellows.

They got married the next day. At a drive-thru chapel on the Island. She wore her best dress and Chet crammed himself into his tuxedo. They looked like two kids going to prom. Her dress was the last thing she had of her mother's. It was so old that it had turned yellow with dust. Her father had told her that if she bleached it, the color would return. She had forgotten. Chet's tuxedo was covered in a layer of dust and Cindy could see where it had been sitting on the hanger.

Chet took her to the docks. They bought oysters fresh off the boat. It took Chet four tries to shuck the oysters with his Randall knife. The fisherman watched Chet's fat fingers work at the shell.

"You gonna chip that blade going at it like that," the fisherman said. And when Chet handed her the open shell, the blade had a deep nick in it.

"Knife that like, you just can't grind it sharp again. You gonna have to send it off."

Later they stood in knee high waves, Cindy's dress rushing and out between her legs with the tide. Chet had cast off his tux jacket and stood in the surf bare chested.

"Once a crab gets ahold of meat, he never wants to let go," Chet said and cast his line out. It was just a thin piece of rope with bacon tied to the end of it. Cindy let her line plop in the water and the waves took it back to shore. Her dress was quickly going from a pale yellow to a soggy gray in the salt-water. Jelly fish bobbed up and down on the waves further out. They clustered together amongst the sea-weed. She felt ridges under her feet and bent down. Brown sand dollars. They'd have to be bleached.

She yelped when she felt a yank on her line. The crab had already rode the waves to the beach and had the bacon in its claws. She jerked once and the crab flopped over. Cindy laughed and let go of the rope. The crab tangled itself in the line.

They ate the thing for dinner that night. Chet sliced his hands up trying to crack the rough shell. He bled into the meat when he finally got it open.

“Here, let me,” Cindy said. “She took his hands away from the crab. It gave a last flop in the pan. She bandaged Chet’s hands, kissing each cut once it stopped bleeding.

“It’ll probably make the crab taste better,” she said. That night later, after Chet gave his three thrusts and came, she pushed him off.

“It’s fine,” she said. As she pissed in the dark bathroom, his tuxedo and her dress hung on the shower rack. They looked so empty and deflated. The sea-water had stretched them out to a bloated, water-logged mess of what they once were. Cindy hoped that it didn’t do the same to her.

On the beach early the next morning, Chet dug out a surfboard buried under sand. He paddled out into the waves. Cindy sat in the cool water. Even this early in the morning with the wind coming off the waves, she felt hot. Jellyfish and seaweed washed ashore as Chet kept trying. Cindy smiled and waved each time he looked her way.

He would do it eventually. She wanted to tell him that the waves weren’t big enough in the gulf to actually surf. The gulf was too cut off from the rest of the mighty ocean. Mostly, she thought about the oyster fisherman and how easy he could have shucked those oceans and how rough those hands would feel on her pale skin.

She tried climbing on top of Chet once. He kept trying to move his hands, even after she held his wrists down. When he finished against him, he was quiet for two days. And then showed up at the bakery with flowers.

He didn't want her to work. Said that the diner could give them all the money they ever needed. If times got bad, they could always sell the land it sat on. The oil company would clear the land and put up a pumpjack most likely, he said.

Jesse and her had gone deep-sea fishing the last trip they took together. She never got tired of sitting on the water, of adjusting her body and her shape to the bob and ebb of the water beneath her. She liked the idea that everything all flowed to one place. Out here to Saint Brigit's Island and the sea beyond.

One Island haunted by a Saint and the other haunted by a Goat man who lurked in the dark. One talked about in the daytime by women at the laundry mat, the other whispered about over campfires and cook-stoves. Cindy wondered if they were all part of the same whole. She had visited both with Jesse.

The whale-watching tour was anything but what the commercial said on the television. The fancy yacht was a glass-bottomed boat. The guide with his tuxedo and manicured nails was a dried up fisherman and his first mate who looked just out of his teens. The full bar was a 12 pack on ice in a Styrofoam cooler. They were both given life-jackets with stains that Cindy didn't want to think about. The first mate took her hand as she climbed into the boat. His sun-glasses covered nearly his entire face and Cindy stared back at a distorted and too fat reflection of herself. Chet nearly fell getting in the boat and chugged a beer first thing.

With Jesse, it was different. She had woken that morning to an empty sweaty bed. She smoked three cigarettes waiting for Jesse to come back. The bill had been slid under the door. Jesse called her from the docks and told her to come down.

The boat was covered with a thin layer of glitter. It sparkled. The cooler was full of two big jugs of margarita mix. They caught three fish that day. She got so drunk she puked all over the first red snapper they caught. Jesse cut it up and used it as bait. She realized later that the boat was stolen. But, for that moment, she had wanted the rest of her life to be like this.

Chet stood in the bow the entire time, his face attached to his binoculars. Cindy didn't think whales lived in this water. It was too warm and there was too much waste being spit out by the oil rigs deep offshore. It would probably clog their blowholes. She didn't really know what Chet was looking for out there among all that black water.

The first mate threw chum in the water and they left a long bloody trail for a mile behind them. Seagulls dived into the blood-water and Cindy thought she could see shark fins but didn't tell anyone. The first mate washed his hands in the sea and asked if she wanted a tour. Just before she followed the boy downstairs, the captain handed Chet a bucket of chum and told him to throw it off the starboard side.

"It'll bring the whales in," the captain said. Cindy hoped that Chet hadn't paid the man yet.

"Sun makes me hot," she told the first mate. She plopped down on the couch and patted the seat beside her. Through the window below deck, she could see Chet's fat legs. He waddled like a boy who was still learning to walk sometimes.



The first mate stroked his peach fuzz. He asked if she wanted the captain. Cindy laughed and patted the couch beside her again. "Sailors go forever, don't they?" She asked.

The first mate laughed and Cindy knew he wasn't as young as he seemed. "Depends on the tide," he said.

He let her be in control. Except for the moment when she came, he pressed his hand over her mouth. She bit into his dry and salty flesh. His skin tasted faintly of the fish blood from the chum. She stared at Chet's too fat legs.

Cindy re-arranged her dress and left the first mate down there. His pants were still around his ankles. Back topside, she kept getting sick. Chet held her hand and pulled her hair back from her face. They saw one dolphin the entire trip.

The first mate pressed her hand for too long when she climbed back onto the dock. She got another hot flash on the ride out of town.

"Those men were creepy," she said as they got on the ferry.

"I saw the way they looked at you," Chet said. "I was ready to step in if anything fishy happened."

"I'm know," she said.

And for days after, as she went into the bakery and pulled and prodded at the dough and yeast, she thought about that boy. Finally, she carved out his shape in dough, slid him in the oven and cooked him for an hour. As she ate him, she knew she would never think of him again. And back home, she gave Chet the last piece, making sure it was slathered with plenty of butter.

