

BREAD

A taste of history.

BY ELIZA BLAIR

The phone rang, of course, as always, as forever, when her hands were full.

Marli tongued it on from her suit collar and kept kneading, answering belatedly with a distracted “Yaoh?”

It was Kert. “Marli. What is hap?” he said. “No vid?”

“Hands,” Marli said. She was trying to tell if her project looked enough like the tutorial video to finally stop squishing and go wash everything from elbows out. “New hobby. Hold.” She drifted the few feet across her hab and flipped the manual cover on the camera feed with her knee, still forearms-deep in the ball of goo, working it gently with her fingers. A careful toe-push activated the two-way video and sent her floating slowly back towards the kitchen.

“Ewwww,” said Kert, leaning back from his camera in exaggerated horror. “What is?”

“Bread,” said Marli, enjoying his discomfort.

“Noway. Bread not goo,” Kert objected. “Is flat. Is crunchy. Is from Hub.”

“No Hub monopoly on bread. Plus Hub bread also goo, before.”

“Before?” Kert raised an eyebrow. “Before cook? But why not ‘fuge, why hands?”

“Fuge not hot. Well, not right hot.” Marli decided her tired fingers had had enough and began carefully extracting herself from the blob. “This bread old kind. Yeast make bubbles. In grav, bubbles rise. No grav, I help.” If she had done it gently enough, her hands had broken the bubbles into smaller bubbles and redistributed them throughout the dough, the second such spreading she had done with this ball since she ‘fuged the ingredients together. The reasons for this were not fully explained in the tutorial, but she thought she understood. She wanted fluffy old-style bread, not a crust of Hub’s hardtack around a centre of air. Words like ‘gluten’ had not yet entered her vocabulary.

“Now what?” Kert asked, as she pushed the ball into the sterilizer and put her hands in the ultrasound.

“Now hold. Tutorial says half hour.”

“Boring,” Kert winked out. Marli laughed. They had been friends for two years, and neighbours for one, and knew each other too well. Kert was intrigued but unwilling to admit it; he would pretend he was too



busy to chat until he showed up at her hatch unannounced. She swiped a little condensation from the bulkhead next to the fridge, where the air circulation was poor, and did her twice-daily readout checklist; but there was nothing much to tidy in the little hab. She read the news on her spex while she waited the requisite half hour. At the appointed time she reached into the sterilizer again, separating the ball into two neat halves, one of which would go in the fridge for a future experiment. The remaining one she formed into a neat ball again, now about the size of the ones at Hub’s gym, and spent some time fiddling with the sterilizer controls.

By the time Kert arrived, his helmet folding neatly into his suit collar even as the airlock finished cycling, she could feel just a hint of heat through the sterilizer’s thick composite window. The dough ball floated in the exact centre, held in place by automatic jets of air.

They hugged, and she gave him a squeezer of weak tea, taking a second from the pantry and thumbing the insta-heat packet. They talked of everything and nothing —

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the pirates who had hacked a Hub near L5 and plundered it of supplies, nearly killing the family of four who had

emergency-docked just days later to an empty larder; the upcoming biannual gathering of habbers, when their modular units would come together and connect in huge chains and webs covering a hundred cubic miles of space around L2, using their combined mass to slingshot and nudge each other into new orbits in the beautiful, complicated, computer-guided dance called the Tumble. Where they might go next.

The sterilizer dinged. They were so deep in conversation that Marli had forgotten to check it. She peered at the irregular brown object, larger now, and dubiously opened the hatch as the last of the hot air was sucked away and stored.

“Looks like shit,” Kert observed.

Marli shot him a look as she nudged the crusty ball into the centre of the hab.

“Careful, hot. Hold.”

“Again? Hub bread just open packet. Your bread take long, Marli Stewart.”

“Old method. Tradition.” Marli shot him a look as her contextual software belatedly found the reference, then pushed him playfully so they both bounced against the inner hull. “We

need remember. Where we come from.”

Kert nudged the ball into the breeze from the air cyclor. Marli could feel the heat in the air that came off it, feel the faint condensation forming again by the fridge, the uncontrolled moisture put off by this anachronism of a food. Watching Kert reposition the ball and finally hold it in place with his fingertips, she felt wild, untamed, connected to the ancient past. This was how her ancestors must have felt, pulling their own creations from stone ovens heated by open flame.

“Stay with me,” she said, unthinkingly, then smiled as her brain caught up. “This cycle. Meet hatches. Double hab it.”

Kert raised an eyebrow at her and drifted forward, holding the bread in his gloved hands. “Is cool now,” he said softly, offering it to her. “Ready?”

Marli nodded and grabbed it around the middle, pushing her fingertips through the thin crust towards the still-scalding centre. Kert smiled and shifted his hands, holding half of the spheroid. Marli gripped the other half, and they braced against each other. “On three.” ■

Eliza Blair has previously appeared in A Science Fiction Omnibus. She can be found online at <http://elizablair.net/elizaeffect>.