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The Best Little Book Club in Town

Written by Various

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the Best Little Book Club in Town

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Rising

BY NAOMI ALDERMAN

I am embarking on a new venture.’
‘I am already successful and becoming more so.’

‘I am a valuable woman in my own right.’

Laura stared at the Post-it notes on her bathroom mirror and thought, Yes, but I’m also single again, fat and terrified.

She breathed in, breathed out, pulled the Post-it notes off the mirror and threw them into the bin. She looked at herself.

‘I don’t care,’ she said out loud to her reflection, ‘what kind of a woman I am or how successful. I’m doing this because I have to and because I can’t think of anything else to do.’

She pulled on her coat and left.

It wasn’t meant to be this way. The bakery was her dream with Pete. They’d planned it together, found the perfect spot, a small commuter town with easy links to London, a pretty high street, the owner of a little restaurant retiring. This was supposed to be the start of their new life, with Pete quitting his job, the

two of them starting to work together and having more time as a couple in the evening.

Except it hadn't gone that way. When it came to quitting his job, Pete had become more and more vague. This month wasn't the right time. If he just waited a bit longer there'd be a bonus. Maybe he could continue to work in town and she could start up the bakery, and he'd commute?

She had been sympathetic. Hard for a man to give up his career. Hard for someone in his forties to change tack. She'd been so stupid. It hadn't been his dedication to his career, and it hadn't been the bonus. It had been Rachel the junior executive, in the bathroom, after the Christmas party. And then again, in the New Year. And then again. And then again. And then again. Who was it who said that having sex is a relationship if you just do it enough times? Pete, possibly.

And when Laura had cried so much that she had bored herself with tears, and talked to her friends so much that she'd worn out all her words, and obsessed over everything he'd said so much that she'd become tired of thinking about him, it was then that she looked at the loan agreements and the rental contracts. And she'd seen that it was her name, not his, on everything. He'd always been too busy (doing what?) or too tired (from what?) to come to those important signing meetings. So now it was her bakery. Her new chance. Her fresh start.

I'm doing this, she said to herself, because I can't

think of anything else to do. But that's all right. Probably.

There was, she found, something soothing about the work, in any case. Up at five, just as the pre-dawn light was beginning to trickle across the ink-blue sky. Trying not to think of Pete and their early morning routine, leaving the house quickly, unlocking the bakery while the streets were still dark, turning on the back-room lights, starting the coffee machine and kneading the dough.

It was the dough in particular that she found herself longing for as if it were a lover. Perhaps it was the rhythm, knead-stretch, knead-stretch, that emptied her mind of all thoughts, that meant that when a thought of Pete arose she could pummel it into the dough until it dissipated. Perhaps it was the simplicity of it.

She had a mixing machine, with dough hooks and special bread cycles. But she found that she preferred to knead herself, elbows deep in the warm fleshiness, floury and smelling of yeast. Plunging her arms into the dough, she thought of the generations, the centuries of people who had made bread like this. Leaving it to rise and then prove, she felt a certain nurturing, a sense that everything had its time and order, that nothing needed to be rushed. Shaping soft handfuls into rolls, placing them in the oven, removing them hot and crusty and smelling of nourishment, she experienced a satisfying feeling of strength. Bread is powerful, she thought, as the first customers of the day arrived.

The days were busy. She'd been right: this was a high street without a local bakery, without somewhere for people to sit and have a coffee, some toast or a slice of cake. A few curious visitors on the first day turned into a trickle, then became a steady stream of regulars.

There were Maureen and Roger, a couple in their sixties, stopping off after walking their dogs, and Susie and Michelle, friends, each with a toddler in tow, meeting for a gossip after the school run. There was Daniel, an architect working from home who wanted to escape the same four walls, and Rosalie, a retired headmistress who sat in the corner and read, seemingly, a book a day. And it was good. None of her regulars had known Pete and she didn't tell any of them her life story. Just 'I wanted to start again': that was all. Everyone wanted that.

During the days, she worked. From the early morning, she was kneading and rolling, baking blind, filling tart cases and buttering baps. When the customers began to arrive, she was occupied with their needs, chatting to them, hearing their stories. At the end of the day there was cleaning up, sorting, entering the day's takings in the book, considering which recipes had been successful and which not.

In the evenings, though, after the bustle of the day was done, she found herself drifting into her bedroom, glass of wine in hand, and staring at her body. There it was. Muffin top and soft thighs. Portly stomach, dimpled flesh. Pete had always liked it but . . . Pete

was gone, and who would love this soft fleshy body now? She jabbed a finger into her stomach, watching the flesh crease around it. She grabbed her muffin top with one hand and squeezed. She considered diets, exercise, but knew that she was just too busy for all that weighing and measuring, and too tired to pound the treadmill after work. Her body sometimes seemed to her simply rolls upon rolls, but there it was, and perhaps no lover would ever touch it again.

She began to go to bed earlier so as not to face these late-night thoughts. She woke earlier too, and more easily. Out of bed at four-thirty without difficulty, sharing the early-morning summer sunlight with an insomniac dog walker or two, earlier, even, than the milkman and the paper-girl. Arriving early at the bakery, she had time to experiment. She rolled the corners of soft pastry triangles to make croissants: almond and chocolate, then also cinnamon, apricot, peach. She dug her hands into the yielding dough and formed the damp spheres of rolls: white, granary and wholewheat, cheese, and also caraway, red onion, mustard-seed.

Her regulars increased in number, slowly but steadily. There was Margot now, a woman in her fifties often tapping away at her laptop, and Alexander, a local estate agent but nice enough even so, always ducking out of the shop to make a phone call on the pavement. It surprised her to learn that they wanted her to succeed.

‘This town’s needed somewhere like this for ever,’

said Rosalie, collecting her slice of lemon drizzle and retiring to her corner nook.

Maureen and Roger nodded in unison.

‘We don’t know what we did before we started coming here, do we, Roger?’

‘No, weren’t we just saying that the other day, Maureen? You’ve been a godsend.’

‘It’s true,’ said Daniel. He was usually so quiet, working on his papers or staring out at the people walking past. He looked at her now, though, and she noticed that his eyes were very blue. Bright, clear blue. ‘It’s true,’ he said again, ‘we’re glad you’ve come.’

Margot, it transpired, was a local journalist. She hadn’t mentioned it, didn’t even say anything on the day that the piece she’d written about Laura’s bakery was published. She just sat at her usual table, eating her usual hot buttered roll and fruit salad, saying nothing at all until Maureen and Roger arrived, brandishing the paper, open to the review page.

‘Look!’ said Maureen. ‘New bakery wows locals with inventive recipes.’

‘Yes,’ said Roger. ‘The caraway seed buns are a particular delight.’

Margot blinked and smiled.

‘Why didn’t you say anything?’ said Maureen. ‘You could have got Laura excited about it! And, anyway, you’ve only had the caraway buns once!’

‘Once was all it took,’ said Margot.

‘You can tell just by looking that they’re delicious,’ said Daniel, softly.

Laura cut out the article, had it laminated and put it in the window. There were others soon enough. Five stars from the county paper. Recommendations from local food and tourist guides. It wasn't just regulars now; there were orders from across the county. She still rose in the early mornings to knead the dough and bake the pastry cases.

I'll have to take on an assistant soon, she thought, and realised she would miss the solitude of the dawn, her arms deep in warm, living bread dough. The texture of it was delicious beneath her fingertips, the yielding, soft, wholesome mound comforting to the touch.

In the evenings, she looked at her body. She was fat. There was no denying it. She closed her eyes and ran her fingers down her torso, feeling the ripples of flesh. She noticed that her skin was very soft, her body warm and supple. Eyes still closed, she rubbed her belly. It was round and generous. Like the dough, her body was plump, overflowing, delicious. Like the dough, it was comforting and perhaps, yes, enticing. She opened her eyes. Something had changed.

The next morning, Daniel was the first to arrive at the bakery, just as she flipped the sign from 'closed' to 'open'. He seemed nervous, jiggling slightly from foot to foot as he ordered, yes, his usual, no, how about the caramel cake, no, maybe one of the scones, no, well, perhaps some toast. She laughed.

'Don't know what you want, eh?'

And he looked at her with his very blue eyes, and the

soft curls falling across his forehead, and said, 'Maybe I do know.'

'Yes?' she said, and suddenly her heart was full of anticipation.

He gulped.

'I've always wanted,' he said, 'to learn to make pastry.'

'Well then,' said Laura, 'you should come back to the shop this evening and I'll teach you.'

He arrived, again, as soon as she flipped the sign back from 'open' to 'closed'. He'd brought a bottle of wine 'for a nervous student', and she smiled. She laid out the ingredients. He told her, in gabbles, about his work, his hopes, his plans for the future. He was younger than her but ambitious and interested in the world. Yes, she thought, I like you.

She showed him how to rub the fat into the flour. Lift, rub, drop. Aerate the mixture. Blend in the water, drop by drop. No, not like that.

She stood behind to demonstrate, felt the strength in his arms as he worked. He turned around. His hands were covered with flour, even his face was slightly dusted. He looked at her, his expression serious. And he leaned in towards her and she leaned towards him. And as they kissed, his floury hands moved across her ample hips, her round stomach, her breasts. And she found herself thinking that the top of a muffin is a generous and delicious thing. And all dough really needs to rise is time.