

## Kickstarter

By Bronte Lemaire

Mum dipped an arm into her bag, rummaging around blindly while attempting to maintain eye contact with me. Her gaze eventually wandered, ending on some distant point near the chalkboard drink menu, clenching her tongue between her teeth, her eyes widened and she lifted her arm triumphant. She moved over the table number and put a jar between us.

“Thought you might like a hobby or something. You know, you really should get out more.”

“Thanks mum,” I said.

I stared at the jar. It was plain glass with some built-in ridges that spelt out an Italian pasta sauce brand. Covered by a struggling piece of reused cling wrap was a beige goo that reminded me of the solid-liquid experiments we were made to do in primary school. As a kid I had let my hand melt through the surface before attempting to pull it out quickly, trapping me in.

“What is it?” I asked, hands remaining on my lap.

“It’s a cut off from my sourdough starter,” she said, “I actually inherited it from your grandmother who got it from her mother. I thought you may as well start making bread at home. And, you know, every time I go into Coles,



I have to stop myself saying: ‘What! My bread costs 5 cents to make when I divide everything up!’ because they’re selling all their loaves for seven dollars. Seven dollars! Absolutely crazy, do they really think people will buy it? I guess they do, considering they don’t go down, but you have to wonder if they’re losing profit. It’s entirely unreasonable. Absolutely ripping people off, especially in this economy, inflation and all that. And to think, my 5-cent bread is better anyway! I

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mean obviously homemade is always better—and by the way I’ve been meaning to say you can always ask for the recipes I have. I know you loved my risotto growing up, I haven’t really cooked it much since you moved out but I should make it again even if your father doesn’t like it—but anyway, what was I saying . . . oh yes! My 5-cent bread ends up being better because those nasty shops cut all the good stuff out, they only take the cheap unhealthy parts of the wheat! Their flour could be replaced with sawdust, and no one would notice! Honestly, they probably are, that’s probably how they’re cutting costs.”

“That’s great, mum.”

“But yes, I’ll send you a video. There’s a nice handsome man on the internet that explains it very well. I’m sure you’d pick it up very quickly, you’ve always been bright. Also is it just me or are the summers hotter than they used to be? I swear, maybe it’s just the lack of air conditioning in this place—”

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I leant on my kitchen counter a healthy metre and a half away from the starter. My socked foot tapped on the tiles as I watched the video mum sent me; it was semi-helpful, if not a little draining watching the instructor move around his kitchen

with bicep closeups. I did not inherit my mother’s taste. I then checked the local library for any bread baking books and planned to pick them up after work tomorrow afternoon.

I needed to ‘feed’ it every day, which was an uncomfortable turn of phrase. Like an animal. Which I supposed was the entire point. Already since taking it home it had risen a few centimetres up the sides of the jar. I initially thought of finding a matching lid, or switching it into a jar of my own in order to properly contain it, but according to Mum’s handsome baker boy I would then be creating a bomb. I took off the cling wrap and peered inside. A bubble reached the surface before popping and fading away. My nose crinkled. A thin vinegar smell swam its way up.

Slowly, I lowered a spoon into the mix, hesitating above the skin before penetrating it. It swallowed the spoon immediately and I felt like the kid with my hand stuck in the goo again. I put extracted spoonfuls into a bowl, checking my notes again before putting in the replacement flour and mixing it in. The starter began to lose its elasticity, as if taking a nap after a big meal. I’d have to do this every day from now on, or twice a day ideally, unless I wanted yeast death on my hands. I set myself two alarms at times I was sure to be home.

Picking up the bowl of excess, I walked over

and stepped on the bin pedal. I began to turn my wrist, but when the starter was about to begin its fall, I stopped. I let the bin lid close and went to my cupboard, extracting another jar. I put the new starter in with some accompanying flour and covered it up with cling wrap.

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As I was typing a report I had due in a month, my coworker came up. He leant his forearm on the cubical wall, looking down as if expecting something. I waited.

“Good morning!” he said, after a beat.

I nodded.

“I was just going to grab a coffee for myself,” he continued, “I was wondering if you also wanted one. On me of course.”

“I would like that,” I replied. “I’ll have a latte with oat milk.”

“Coming right up!” he said, but he didn’t leave. My hand slowly raised to my keyboard once more.

“You settling in alright?” he asked, “New places can be pretty daunting.” He made a weird expression with his eyes as he talked.

“I’m doing fine.” I turned back to my computer and finished the report.

When I got home, I checked my phone alarm, I had half an hour before I would feed the starters. I spent my remaining time getting ready. I got out two more jars and cling wrap, measured the amount of flour I would need, noting to

purchase some in my next food order. When the alarm went off, I opened one jar and placed it on a scale. The spoon went in, gathered the starter, then put the excess in a new jar. I did this until there were four jars of starter, each fed with flour and covered back up with cling wrap. I left them on the table and went about the rest of my day.

On the weekend I did my chores. I washed and dried my clothes in my apartment building’s laundry. Someone had left a sock in the one I used. I let it fall to the floor. I dusted my shelves and swept the floor. I gently cleaned the outside of the jars with a lukewarm cloth. There were sixteen of them now, they took up half of the dining table in four rows of four.

I had just finished feeding them all when there was a knock. I went still. There was another knock. I left the table and made my way to the front door. On the other side was an older woman, and in her hands was half a glass tray of pasta bake.

“Hello!” she said, “I made too much, I was wondering if you would like it. I don’t know what to do with it otherwise! It’s more than I need, it’s just me at home anyway.”

“I’ll take it,” I said. I lifted it from her grip and shut the door.

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On the way home from work, I bought more jars to keep up with the doubling starter. They were all growing well, climbing the sides of the jars

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before falling down again to ferment. The dining table and half of the kitchen bench were now covered. The jars in the shopping bag rubbed awkwardly against each other, a sharp squeak at every movement. I was sure to walk carefully to not risk breaking them. As I rounded the corner, there were kids laughing and hollering at the entrance of my building. A boy and girl were kicking a soccer ball between each other, keeping another boy from getting it. He laughed and lunged for them when they managed to evade his captures of the ball. They were all too busy joking around to care about sweating under the summer sun. Soon, the chasing boy's foot dived out and kicked it away. It rolled to a stop in front of my feet.

"Hey!" one of the boys called out, "Do you want to play?"

"No thank you," I said. I stepped around the ball and went up to my home to find places for my new jars.

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One afternoon my colleague once again came up to me and said, "A bunch of us are going out for drinks after work, wanna come?" I glanced at him

for a moment before going back to my work.

"I have things to do."

"One drink won't hurt, I'm sure? It'll be good to get to know you."

"No thank you."

The jars had to be navigated around now. They took up every surface I could find; they were under tables, in cupboards, on chairs, on the floor. They continued to rise and fall each day. I'd feed them and little bubbles would burst. As they took up most of the kitchen, it was easier to eat what food my neighbour had left at my doorstep every few days. The sink was also filled so I left the dish on her doorstep.

The starter was no longer just in jars, but in drinking glasses and bowls and a bucket and broken lamp shades. The aroma of vinegar had made its way into every corner of the house, soaking bed sheets and clothes. Each makeshift container was given starter and flour, then covered with cling wrap. Condensation sometimes fogged up the sides from the heat, so I created a system where each section of starters had one day a week close to the air conditioner.

Outside the window there was movement. I peered out. Down below were the children waving up, one raised the ball above their head. I

drew the curtains closed.

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I woke up in a puddle of my own sweat. I unstuck my arms and legs from the sheets and got out of bed. I put on the lightest clothes I could find. I kept all my clothes at the end of my bed now as I installed shelves in the closet to hold more starters.

After having cereal in my bathroom, as it was the only place to store food, I did my teeth and got my things. Before leaving, I took an umbrella and hooked its handle onto the kitchen window to pull it open to let the breeze in. I was unable to reach it with my hands anymore.

Next to the coatrack was a starter, inside what was once a soap container, that had puffed up to the rims, the cling wrap barely staying on. A bubble struggled to the top, ending up right in the centre. I left before it popped.

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“I’m making you get a coffee with me whether you like it or not!” my coworker said after trapping me alone in the elevator.

I checked my watch. My train was in half an hour. I was fairly sure he knew this.

“Come on, it’ll be quick!”

I sat in the cafe as an ice coffee cooled down the tips of my fingers. The servers had been standing underneath the fans whenever things

slowed down. They had shut the windows, the breeze not worth the warm air it brought in. My coworker had large sweat patches underneath his armpits that reached all the way to his waist. He tucked his arms to his sides in an attempt to keep them from view.

“How are you settling in?” he asked, “The workload been too much?”

“It’s manageable.”

“That’s good, that’s good. I think I’m too busy talking all day and end up rushing before the deadlines! I should take a leaf out of your book and just get it done when I have it.”

I nodded. He smiled but his eyes didn’t crinkle.

“So, what does your day look like? Just you at home, right?”

“Yes, just me. I don’t do much. I come to work, do what I need to. Then go home and feed my starters and go to bed.”

His head bent to the side. “Starters?”

“Sourdough starters.”

“Oh, I love sourdough! I used to bake back when I had more time. What bread have you made with it?”

“Sorry?”

“Have you made any bread?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

He stared at me. I gathered my things and left.

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The train was packed tightly, bodies wall to wall.

Sweat ran down the back of my neck and arms, pooling in my hands. I raced from the train station to my apartment block, checking my alarm as I went. I had five minutes until they needed to be fed. Rounding corners at a quick pace, my building finally came into view.

The trio of kids were underneath the hot sun, squinting, hands to their foreheads, looking up at a thick, oblong object that was hanging out of my window. After a quick discussion, one boy clambered on the other's shoulders as the girl directed them. The one on top steadied himself against the wall before reaching an arm up and ripped a piece off the strange object. He peered at it in his hands before taking a bite.

With his mouth full, he shouted, "Bread!"

"Get down now!" I yelled as I marched up. "That's not yours to take!"

The kids shrunk away, quickly disassembling their human ladder. I rushed inside and got to my door. Fumbling my keys, they dropped on the welcome mat next to a sweaty risotto. I picked them up, ignoring the risotto, and went in.

Every starter had burst from their containers

and jars, spilling out and combining into a large heap. Some parts still bubbled while others had gone hard, half baked. I waded through, my feet stepping into the heavy mass. I lost my left shoe. The starter, the vinegar smell, made my nose sting. I got to the window where the starters on the bench had grown out the open window, jars and containers still attached but filled to the brim like a tight shoe.

My neighbour called from my open door, leaning in but not taking a step inside. She asked if I needed help, if she should get everyone in the building to take some of it off my hands. Too much to waste, she said, that we would find some way to use what parts were good. That it would all go rotten if we didn't. Stalking back, I picked up the risotto at her feet and shut the door. I ignored her faint protests.

The starter writhed. Bubbles the size of my fists still rose in the sections that weren't yet solid, but they didn't pop, just remained there before being towered on by another. I let it take my hand in, then the rest of my arm, a leg, until it swallowed me whole.

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Image: "[Sourdough explosion](#)" (CC BY-SA 2.0) by [Jim Champion](#)