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BAKING BREAD IN LYON

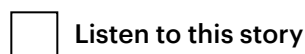
*For a newcomer to the city, a boulangerie apprenticeship
reveals a way of life.*

By Bill Buford

April 6, 2020



The bread from Bob's boulangerie united a neighborhood of food fanatics. Illustration by Leo Espinosa



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In Lyon, an ancient but benevolent law compels bakers to take one day off a week, and so most don't work Sundays. An exception was the one in the quartier where I lived with my family for five years, until 2013. On Sundays, the baker, Bob, worked without sleep. Late-night carousers started appearing at three in the morning to ask for a hot baguette, swaying on tiptoe at a high ventilation window by the oven room, a hand outstretched with a euro coin. By nine, a line extended down the street, and the shop, when you finally got inside, was loud from people and from music being played at high volume. Everyone shouted to be heard—the cacophonous hustle, oven doors banging, people waving and trying to get noticed, too-hot-to-touch baguettes arriving in baskets, money changing hands. Everyone left with an armful and with the same look, suspended between appetite and the prospect of an appetite satisfied. It was a lesson in the appeal of good bread—handmade, aromatically yeasty, with a just-out-of-the-oven texture of crunchy air. This was their breakfast. It completed the week. This was Sunday in Lyon.

For most of my adult life, I had secretly wanted to find myself in France: in a French kitchen, somehow holding my own, having been “French-trained” (the enduring magic of that phrase). I thought of Lyon, rather than Paris or Provence, because it was said to be the most Frenchly authentic and was known historically as the world's gastronomic capital. Daniel Boulud, the most successful serious French chef in the United States, was from there, as was Paul Bocuse, the most celebrated chef in the world. The restaurateur Jean-Georges Vongerichten had

trained in Bocuse's kitchen, as his sauce-maker. "Lyon is a wonderful city," he told me. "It is where it all started. You really should go."

Why not? My wife, Jessica Green, a wine educator and lecturer, lived for the next chance to pack her bags. (She also spoke fluent French, which I did not.) And our twin boys, George and Frederick, were three years old—possibly the perfect age to move to a new country. Our landing, though, was surprisingly rough. Lyon seemed unwelcoming, suspicious of outsiders, and indifferently itself. "Our town is not easy to love," a Lyonnais novelist had written in the thirties (the Fascist Henri Béraud, who was also not so easy to love). "It is an acquired taste. Almost a vice."

We got an apartment by the River Saône, situated auspiciously on the Quai Saint-Vincent. (Vincent was the patron saint of winemakers.) A gnarly first-century aqueduct column by a post office reminded us that the Romans had been here. In entryways, I found stone stairs rendered concave by boot traffic. Farther up the quai was a former monastery courtyard, overgrown but graceful. In our quartier, there were workshops, not shops: a bookbinder, a violin-repair person, a seamstress, a guitar-maker, a one-room pastry "factory." The next street over, Arabic was the principal language, and women, their heads covered, fetched water by bucket from an archaic faucet.

There was also—on the nearby Place Sathonay—a porn shop, park benches occupied by drunks, drug deals, graffiti on most surfaces, dog shit everywhere. At a playground, sparkly with bits of broken glass, we watched small children hitting one another. And yet the quartier, for all its in-your-face grittiness, also had energy and integrity and an abundance of small eateries. The food wasn't grand, but it was always honest, characterized by *bon rapport qualité-prix*—good quality for the price, an essential feature of the Lyonnais meal. Our apartment was opposite a mural called "La Fresque des Lyonnais," two millennia of the city's famous citizens painted onto a six-story windowless wall. The same building

housed Bob's boulangerie, where, friends told us, you could find the best bread in the city.

The boulangerie was where the boys discovered the word *goûter* (from *goût*, meaning "flavor," and probably the single most important word in the entire language). A *goûter* is an afternoon snack—eaten universally at 4 p.m., when children get out of school—and an exception to two of the city's implicit rules about food: you do not eat standing up, and you never eat between meals. A *goûter* is devoured instantly. The boys discovered Bob's *pain au chocolat* and didn't understand why they should eat anything else.

They also discovered Bob's baguettes, which Frederick developed a practice of assaulting each morning before eating: breaking one open with his hands, sticking his nose inside, inhaling, and then smiling. On Wednesdays, when Bob was closed and we bought baguettes elsewhere, Frederick subjected them to his test and, without fail, found them inedible. (Bob was thrilled by Frederick's findings.) Bob's bread had aromatic complexity and was long in flavor in ways that we'd never known before. We were at his boulangerie every day. Some days, we went three times, which concerned him: "You've had enough bread today. Go home!"

We had been in Lyon a month when the evidence was inescapable: I couldn't find a restaurant to take me on. I had cooking experience, but it was mainly Italian, and Italian, I was discovering, didn't count. I was at home pacing (panicking, frankly), when I declared to Jessica, "I'm going to work for Bob. In fact, I'm going to walk over there now and present myself."

It was eight in the evening, but I was pretty sure he'd be there. Bob was known for his extreme hours, his light on in the back when the rest of the quartier was dark. And he *was* there, but he was heading home for a nap.

Bob knew why I was in Lyon. He also knew that I hadn't found a kitchen to work in. So, when I made my proposal, straight out—"Bob, I've decided, on reflection, that I should start with you, in your boulangerie"—he knew that he was my backup: that, in effect, I was lying.

"No," he said.

"No?" I pressed. "Bob, you make the best bread in the city. I want to learn why."

His gaze drifted above my head. He seemed to be imagining what it might be like for me to work there.

Bob was forty-four. He was jowly and wide of girth and, when unshaven, looked something like a genetic intermarriage of Fred Flintstone and Jackie Gleason. His hair was brownish and shaggy and usually matted with flour. There was flour in his beard and on his clogs, his sweater, and his trousers. (He wore an apron, but it didn't help.) Bathing was not a priority. He slept when he could, and seemed to live by an internal clock set to an alarm that was always going off—yeast, dough-making, the unforgiving speed of a hot oven. He knew that his bread was exceptionally good, but he did not see himself as a genius. In a city of food fanatics, he was just a baker. He was, in fact, just Bob. And he wasn't even that. His real name was Yves. (No one knew why he went by Bob. I once asked him, and he was vague: "Somebody, a long time ago . . .")

"Yes," he said slowly: *Oui-i-i-i*. He actually seemed to be getting excited. I could see excitement in his fingers. They were drumming a counter. "Come. Work here. You will be welcome."

"I will see you tomorrow." I thanked him. We shook hands. I made to leave.

"You live across the street, right? You can stop by anytime. If you can't sleep, come over. At three in the morning, I'll be here."

I thought, If I can't sleep at three in the morning, I don't go for walks. But I understood the message. Bob was making himself available. I'll be your friend, he was saying.

At three on a weekday morning, when I set out for my first training, the city was lonely. The river was cold-making to look at and thick like motor oil when a barge appeared (suddenly, unexpectedly) a few feet away. From Thursday to Sunday, Lyon was all-night drinking, loud music, car burnings, vandalism, vomiting. Now there were no vehicles, no people, not a light on in any apartment.

Bob was clearly waiting for me. He ripped open a fifty-kilo sack of flour, lifted it without a sign of strain, and emptied it into a large steel basin. He grabbed a milk carton with the top cut off and told me to follow him to a sink—a startling sight, filled with coffee paraphernalia, grounds everywhere, a sandwich floating in something black, a wet roll of toilet paper. He negotiated the carton to a position under the faucet and ran it hot.

“You arrive at the correct temperature by a formula involving two other factors,” Bob explained. “One is the temperature of the air. This morning, it is cold—it is probably two degrees. The other is the flour—”

“How do you know that?”

“It's the temperature of the air.”

“Of course.”

“These two factors added together, plus the water, should equal fifty-four degrees Celsius.” So if the air was two degrees, and the flour was two degrees, the water would have to be fifty.

“Hot,” I said.

“Exactly.”

The water from the tap was steaming. Bob filled the carton.

I asked, “Bob, you don’t use a thermometer?”

“No.”

“Do you own a thermometer?”

“No.” He considered. “You know, I might.”

Bob poured the water into the basin and started an apparatus attached at the top, a kneader. It appeared to have originally operated by turning a crank, and at some point had been upgraded with a washing-machine motor. Two hooks, looking like prosthetic hands, scooped up the dough very slowly. “It is no faster than if you did this with your own hands,” he said.

“Then we take some of last night’s dough.” *La vieille pâte*. It was brown and cakey, wrapped in plastic film. He pinched a bit between his thumb and forefinger and tossed it into the basin. He took a second pinch, scrutinized it, thought better

of the quantity, and tossed in half. This, in effect, was his “starter,” yeasts still alive from last night that would be woken up in the new batch. It wasn’t the only source. I knew enough about yeasts to know that, here, they were everywhere. You could peel them off the walls. You could scrape all you needed from underneath Bob’s fingernails.

I looked around. On every available surface, there was an unwashed coffee mug. Fabric *couches*, used for shaping baguettes, were draped across wooden poles, like beach towels still damp from last summer. A light bulb dangled from the ceiling. There were the flickering blue lights of the ovens. The darkness put you on your guard. You could trip here and die.

He stopped the kneader and tore off a piece of dough. It was thin and elastic. “You can see through it,” he said, laughing as he stretched it across my face like a mask.

Tonight’s dough would be ready the next afternoon. The morning’s baguettes would be made, therefore, from last night’s.

“Let’s get breakfast,” Bob said.

An off-track-betting bar opened at six. The coffee was filthy, the bread was stale, and the clientele might be flatteringly described as “rough” (phlegmatic one-lunged hackers knocking back sunrise brandies, while studying the racing odds), but, for Bob, they represented companionship. He was at ease among them. He introduced me as the guy he was training to make bread, his way.

Bob had not set out to be a baker. In his twenties, he worked in a law library in Paris, a job that he loved. His father had been a baker. His older brother Philippe was a great one, who had already opened three bakeries, as well as doing stints at ski resorts in the winter and in the Caribbean during the spring.

It was Jacques, another brother, who discovered, by accident, the boulangerie on the Saône. He had come upon a space for rent, situated in front of a footbridge, but it was filthy and filled with trash. He investigated: two floors, thick stone walls, a worn stone staircase, and, in the back, an old wood-burning oven. He wiped off the soot. It said 1802. He became excited—the river, the history (“La Fresque des Lyonnais” was then being painted on the back wall)—and summoned his father, Philippe, and Bob. “My father looked at the property from the outside and said, ‘Yes, this is a good boulangerie,’ ” Bob told me. “ ‘Bread has been made here for a long time.’ ” The family bought the boulangerie, for what was then about eleven thousand dollars, and got it ready. (It was probably—I couldn’t keep myself from thinking—the last time the floors were cleaned.)

Bob returned to Paris, and a sign went up: “Philippe Richard Artisan Boulanger.” But it seems unlikely that Philippe intended to remain. He had a family and a business in Nantes, eight hours away. He called Bob: Quit your job, he said, and come run the boulangerie with me. In effect, he was beginning Bob’s training (what in French is called a *formation*), helping him find his calling. “Without Philippe,” Bob said, “I would be nothing.” After a time—six months? A year? Bob couldn’t remember—Philippe announced that he needed to return to Nantes. He’d be back, he said. It had been fifteen years. Bob hadn’t changed the sign. “I will never take it down,” he said.

From our balcony, with a mountain breeze coming off the Saône, the smells of the boulangerie were inescapable. When you live here, you have no choice: Bob’s bread enters your living space. The boulangerie was the village equivalent of a campfire. It held the restaurants together. It united chefs and diners. It made the quartier a gastronomic destination.

Once, I asked Bob for his secret: “Is it the yeasts? Are they what make your bread so good?”

“*Oui*,” he said very, very slowly, meaning, “Well, no.”

I pondered. “Is it the leavening?” Bob always insisted that a slow first rise—called *le pointage*—was essential to good bread. Factory bread-makers use high-speed mixers to whip a dough into readiness in minutes. Bob’s took all night.

“*Oui-i-i-i.*”

“The final resting?” Bread gets its deeper flavor in its last stages, people say.

“*Oui-i-i-i.* But no. These are the ABCs. Mainly, they are what you do *not* do to make bad bread. There is a lot of bad bread in France. Good bread comes from good flour. It’s the flour.”

“The flour?”

“*Oui,*” he said, definitively.

I thought, Flour is flour is flour. “The flour?”

“*Oui.* The flour.”

Bob bought a lot of flours, but a farm in the Auvergne provided his favorite. The Auvergne, west of Lyon, is rarely mentioned without an epithet invoking its otherness. It is *sauvage*—wild—with cliffs and forests and boar. Its mountains were formed by volcanoes, like so many chimneys. In the boulangerie, there was a picture of a goat on a steep hill. It was kept by a farmer friend, who grew the wheat that was milled locally into a flour that Bob used to make his bread. The picture was the only information that Bob’s customers required. Who needs a label when you have a goat?

For Bob, farms were the “heart of Frenchness.” His grandfather had been a farmer. Every one of the friends he would eventually introduce me to were also the grandchildren of farmers. They felt connected to the rhythm of plows and seasons, and were beneficiaries of a knowledge that had been in their families for

generations. When Bob described it, he used the word *transmettre*, with its sense of “to hand over”—something passed between eras.

George and Frederick, enrolled in a neighborhood school, were learning their new language, hesitantly at first and then with sudden fluency. Jessica, with a mimic’s gift for languages, spoke with authority and ease.

Was my French improving? No.

Did my French even exist? *Meh*.

I had a bad episode with *four*—the word in French for “oven” (pronounced as if someone has just hit you hard on the back). It sounds the same if the ovens referred to are in the plural (*fours*). And *fours* were, of course, what Bob baked his bread in, the blue-lit, glass-door contraptions on the ground floor.

One afternoon, there were two people in the back of the boulangerie: Denis, Bob’s sole full-time employee, and me. Denis—thirty, with cropped blond hair and dressed in white, like a proper baker—was upstairs. I was below, making dough. When I bounded up to retrieve a sack of flour, Denis asked: the bread—was it still in the oven (*au four*)? At least, I think that this was what he said. He repeated the question, and this time it was more like “Don’t tell me that the fucking bread is still in the oven?” What I heard was strong emotion and “*four*.”

Four, I said to myself. *Four*. I know that word.

“*Four*?” I said, aloud this time, which was provoking, probably because it wasn’t “yes” or “no.”

“*Au four? C’est au four? Le pain!*”

Denis bolted down the stairs in what seemed to me like histrionic distress. I heard an oven door being slammed open and a bread tray yanked out on its rollers.

“*Oh, putain!*”

For me, the door was the prompt. Of course. *Four!* It’s “oven”!

The bread was ruined. (*Putain* means “whore.” *Pute* is also “whore,” but “*putain!*” is what you say when you’ve burned a full tray of baguettes.)

One evening, Bob announced, “Tomorrow, we do deliveries. It is time to meet the real Lyon.”

Bob delivered bread via an ancient dinky Citroën that he hadn’t washed—ever. On the passenger seat were plastic sandwich wrappers, a half-eaten quiche, a nearly empty family-size bottle of Coca-Cola, and editions of the local paper, *Le Progrès*, that lay open at such specific spots as to suggest that this is what Bob did while driving: he caught up on the news. He pushed it all to the floor and invited me to sit. Inside was a fine white cloud, as though the air had reached a point of molecular flour saturation and none of it would quite settle. The car explained why Bob so seldom bathed. Really, what would be the point? (In the wintertime, Bob had the appearance of an old mattress.)

Bob drove fast, he talked fast, he parked badly. The first stop was L’Harmonie des Vins, on the Presqu’île, a wine bar with food (“But good food,” Bob said). Two owners were in the back, busy preparing for the lunch service but delighted by the sight of their bread guy, even though he came by every day at exactly this time. I was introduced, Bob’s new student, quick-quick, bag drop, kisses, out. Next: La Quintessence, a new restaurant (“Really good food,” Bob said, pumping his fist), husband and wife, one prep cook, frantic, but spontaneous smiles, the introduction, the bag drop, kisses, out. We crossed the Rhône, rolled up onto a sidewalk, and rushed out, Bob with one sack of bread, me with another, trying to keep up: Les Oliviers (“Exceptional food”—a double pump—“Michelin-listed but

not pretentious”), young chef, tough-guy shoulders, an affectionate face, bag drop, high-fives, out.

One eating establishment after another: in, then out. Many seemed less like businesses than like improvisations that resulted, somehow, in dinner. Chez Albert, created on a dare by friends. Le Saint-Vincent, with a kitchen no larger than a coat closet. In the Seventh Arrondissement—industrial, two-up-two-down housing, gray stucco fronts—we arrived at Le Fleurie, a bistro named after a Beaujolais *cru*, as accessible as the wine. “I love this place,” Bob said: a daily chalkboard menu on the sidewalk, twelve euros for a three-course meal (lake fish with shellfish sauce, filet of pork with pepper sauce), polemically T-shirt-and-jeans informal, the food uncompromisingly seasonal (i.e., if it’s winter, you eat roots). Bob walked straight to the back, a sack on his shoulder, the familiar routine. Then, the day’s last delivery completed, he asked after Olivier, the chef, and was directed to the bar.

Olivier Paget, Bob’s age, was born in Beaujolais, father a plumber, grandfather a vigneron, cooking since age sixteen; normal chef stuff, including stints making fancy food with *grands chefs*, like Georges Blanc, with whom Boulud had trained. But Paget, his training complete, situated himself in a remote working-class district, made good food at a fair price, and filled every seat, every lunch and dinner: tight.

“*This*,” Bob said, “is my idea of a restaurant.”

As Paget poured glasses of Beaujolais, Bob confessed to liking the idea of *grande cuisine*—cooking of the highest order. He still hoped that one day he would experience it properly. “I tried once”—a meal at Paul Bocuse’s three-star Auberge, with Jacqueline, his wife. No one could have arrived with higher expectations. Few could have been more disappointed.

It wasn't the food, which Bob doesn't remember. "We were condescended to," he said. Waiters sneered at them for not knowing which glass was for which wine, and served them with manifest reluctance. (Jacqueline is Cuban and black. That evening, there was one other black person at the restaurant: the footman, dressed up in a costume reminiscent of Southern plantation livery.) The bill was more than Bob earned in a month. It had been a mugging.

Bob knocked back his Beaujolais, and Paget poured him another, and, as I watched the easy intimacy between them, I believed that I was starting to understand what I had been seeing all morning: a fraternity, recognized by a coat of arms visible only to other members.

Through Bob, I learned about the city's eating societies, a proliferation of them: one for the *bouchon* owners; another for the *bouchon* eaters. One for the true bistros, and another for the modern ones. There was the Gueules de Lyon, which, by the designation of its members, included the city's eight coolest, philosophically unfussy, kick-ass restaurants. At least three societies were committed to hosting a real *mâchon*. (This is the all-day Lyonnais "breakfast" practice, featuring every edible morsel of a pig, limitless-seeming quantities of Beaujolais, and loud, sloppy parades of singing men who, by then, are trying to remember how to get home. I feared it.) And there were serious grownup societies, like Les Toques Blanches, whose members were the grandest of the region's *grands chefs*.

When I crossed the city, I met people I knew through Bob. I was starting to feel at home.

And then I quit.

I stepped into the boulangerie to tell him.

"Bonjour, Bill."

“Bonjour, Bob. Bob, I have decided to go to cooking school.”

I could have hit him in the nose with my fist. He took a step back, as if he had lost his balance. “Oh,” he whispered.

What had I done? I tried to explain, how I needed to learn kitchen skills first.

“Of course.”

And that I would be back soon. If he would have me. That there was so much more to learn.

The air seemed to be leaving him. His shoulders sloped. He was just a baker, his posture said. He was Bob. Just Bob.

“You’re going to L’Institut Paul Bocuse,” he said—the most prestigious school in France. It was a statement, not a question.

“I am.”

He whistled.

“But I will be back.”

He didn’t believe me.

We stood like that. He seemed to be thinking.

“At L’Institut Bocuse, you will learn *la grande cuisine*,” he said forthrightly, with energy.

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you will.” He seemed excited. “For the first time in my life, I will eat a grand meal and enjoy it. You will make me something from the repertoire of *la grande cuisine*. It will be like Bocuse but without all the Bocuse.”

“Of course I will,” I said.

He smiled.

I tried working for Bob on Saturdays, but it was too much. Then, after L’Institut, I found work in a restaurant kitchen. (“Good food there,” Bob said, “but bad bread.”) Bob continued to be in our life. He made a bread, combining American and French flours, that expressed our friendship. We called it a Lafayette.

More than a year later, we asked if we could take him out to dinner. It was an indirect apology. I hadn’t cooked for him yet.

He picked the day: a Tuesday—i.e., not a school night. (Bob closed on Wednesdays, like the schools, so he could be with his young daughter.) He had both bathed and shaved, a radical sight. He had also determined the itinerary, which began with his friends at L’Harmonie des Vins, because they had just taken delivery of *the* new Saint-Péray, a small-production white wine made by Alain

Voge. Bob taught us that, where we lived, a wine sometimes has a release date, like a play's opening night.

Bob talked and talked and talked. He knew plenty about us. He wanted us to know about him. He talked about his father, a farmer's son ("My grandfather, my great-grandfather, my great-great-grandfather, all of them, for generations, were *paysans*"), who became the renowned town baker, a patriarch whom his many children sought advice from before making major decisions, and who, for no reason that anyone understood, no longer spoke to Bob's mother. ("It was strange. He spoke to the rest of us.")

About his mother, eighty-five, who pretended not to be distressed that her husband of fifty-nine years and the father of her seven children no longer spoke to her.

About his wife, Jacqueline, who was a single mother when he met her, on a vacation to Cuba, and who agreed to marry him only if the proposal was blessed by her priest, a disciple of Santería, the Caribbean religion.

About returning to Cuba to attend a ceremony, people dancing and chanting, until the priest stopped the proceedings: "He held my face between his hands, and looked into my eyes, and declared, 'Your family traded in the flesh of our ancestors. You cannot marry Jacqueline. Leave my sight.' "

About his returning to France, heartbroken, and being told by his mother that there was merit in the priest's declaration, that there had been a terrible rupture in the family, because one branch traded in slaves and the other found the practice unacceptable. About how Bob returned to Havana and explained his history to the priest, who then blessed his marriage.

About his six siblings (by then we were at Les Oliviers, Bob talking faster and faster to say it all): Marc, an archivist in Paris; Jacques, between Paris and Lyon, doing this and that; a couple of sisters; another brother; and *then* Philippe, dear

Philippe, four years older than Bob, and the one he talked to the least because he thought about him the most. “Philippe,” Bob said, “is my greatest friend. He is half of my soul.”

When Bob was growing up, every member of the family worked in his father’s boulangerie at Christmas and Easter. Bob had emerged with a refrain: Everyone deserves good bread. It was like a calling or a social imperative. A *boulangier* can be counted on by the people he feeds.

Once, I asked Bob, “Which of your breads makes you the proudest?”

No hesitation. “My baguette.”

“Really? The French eat ten billion baguettes a year. Yours are so different?”

“No. But mine, sometimes, are what a baguette should be.”

Bob took one and brought it up to the side of my head and snapped it. The crack was thunderous.

The word *baguette* means “stick,” or “baton,” the kind that an orchestra conductor keeps time with, and wasn’t used to describe bread until the Second World War, probably—and I say “probably” because there is invariably debate. (There is even more about how to define a baguette: Should it weigh two hundred and fifty grams? Two seventy-five? Do you care?) Tellingly, the word appears nowhere in my 1938 “Larousse Gastronomique,” a thousand-page codex of French cuisine. Until *baguette* became standard, there were plenty of other big-stick bakery words, like *ficelle* (string), and *flûte* (flute), and *bâtard* (the fat one, the bastard). It doesn’t matter: it is not the name that is French but the shape. A long bread has a higher proportion of crust to crumb than a round one. The shape means: crunch.

When I made baguettes, I was astonished at both the labor and the unforgiving economy—you pull off a small piece of dough and weigh it on an old metal scale, roll it out, grab one of the *couches* from a pole to let it rest, let it rise again, slash it, bake it, and then collect ninety centimes for your efforts. The slash is effected by a light slice with an angled razor blade, *une scarification*, done so weightlessly that you don't crush the loaf. But I had trouble with the slash—I couldn't do it without exerting pressure, just as I couldn't roll out the dough without squishing it. Bob had a touch that seemed to be lighter than air; he left no fingerprints.

The result was irresistible. Once, when we were having lunch at Le Fleurie, Bob directed my attention to a woman on the far side of the room: well dressed, gray hair in a bun, eating by herself. She was removing a sliced baguette from the basket and meticulously putting it, piece by piece, into her purse, where there appeared to be a napkin to fold it into. She closed her purse and put her hand up for a waiter's attention: "*Plus de pain, s'il vous plaît.*" More bread, please.

I popped into the boulangerie late one morning. Bob was in the back. No one else was there. I waited several minutes before he walked out.

"I was on the phone with my mother. My brother Philippe. He had an aneurysm this morning. He is dead."

Il est mort.

Bob was pale, flat eyes, no affect, able to relay the news but seemingly unable to understand what he was saying. "He is fifty. He *was* fifty. An aneurysm. This morning."

Bob left to attend the funeral. When he returned, he was ponderous, in manner and movement. One morning, he didn't show up at the boulangerie. Another time, I watched him standing by a street light, seeming to stare at nothing. The

light changed, then changed back. He didn't cross. His thoughts were like a black tide moving back and forth inside his head. I feared for him.

"I have to change my life," he told Jessica. "I must make Lucas a partner." Lucas was the first baker Bob employed who had his lightness of touch. "I have to share the workload."

He seemed to have instantly gained weight. He wasn't sleeping. The nights, he said, were the hardest: "That's when I think of him. I have never been closer to a human being, those nights, making bread."

One Saturday night, as Bob mourned, a kid threw a rock at the back-room window, shattering it. On Saturday nights, everyone comes into Lyon. It is noisy and drunken, and stuff happens. On this particular Saturday, Bob was in the back, thinking of his brother. The broken window was an affront. Bob, apparently, gave chase down the Quai Saint-Vincent.

Is it possible that Bob thought he could catch the vandal? By what impulsive leap of the imagination did he regard himself as a sprinter?

The quai there was badly lit, the curb stacked with boards left over from a construction project. Bob tripped and fell and broke his leg. He had to pull himself back onto the sidewalk to avoid being run over. Bob, whose work means standing on his feet, had to give up the boulangerie for an inconceivably long time.

Roberto Bonomo, the quartier's Italian chef, was in touch with Bob and provided updates. After a month, he was still supine, Roberto told us, but the break seemed to be healing. Bob had attempted walking with crutches.

I began preparing a dinner for his return, a *grande cuisine* dish that I had been practicing, *tourte de canard* (duck pie). Bob needed some love and affection. He would, I was sure, really like a piece of pie.

The boulangerie continued—Lucas's bread was flawless—with one persistent problem: the flour kept running out. Lucas didn't know how often Bob ordered it. In most bakeries, you buy flour in bulk; it is always there, you don't think about it. But Bob got his flour from small farmers who valued its freshness. It was, in effect, milled to order. He might get some at the beginning of the week. On Friday, he would ask for more. Or on Wednesday. The deliveries would be stacked by the staircase: forty big, dusty sacks, fifty. Lucas, suddenly without flour, had to close until the next delivery.

One Sunday, Roberto threw a party, only his regulars, his best food, the best wine. Bob promised to come, Roberto said: "He'll be on crutches, but he'll be there." When we turned up, Bob hadn't arrived yet. Babysitter issues, Roberto said.

Bob died while we were drinking wine and eating bruschetta. A clot developed in the leg, came loose, rushed up an artery, and lodged in his lungs. He knew at once that he was in fatal trouble. Jacqueline called an ambulance. He was unconscious before it arrived.

I learned this in the morning. I rushed down to the boulangerie. I didn't know what else to do. I opened the door, and the bell jingled, and Ailene, one of Bob's helpers, came out from the back, because it was the routine to come out at the sound of the bell. She saw me and stopped, lower lip trembling, holding herself still. I thought, If she carries on as though nothing has changed, if Lucas makes the bread at 3 A.M. and she sells it, can we all pretend that Bob is still at home recuperating?

The bell jingled, and one of the quartier's restaurant people appeared, a waiter. He was bald, quiet, thin, one of the five people who ran Chez Albert, a purple-painted place, decorated with chicken images, that served good, unradical food. The waiter was bearing a large bread sack that needed filling. He handed it to Ailene and said he'd pick it up later.

“Bisous à Bob.” Kisses to Bob.

“Bob is dead.” *Bob est mort.* The waiter stood, unmoving, taking in the simple, declarative piece of news. *Bob est mort.* He didn’t ask Ailene to repeat herself. He didn’t ask how or when or where. The questions would have been an evasion, an effort to fill this sudden void with noise.

“Putain de merde,” he said finally. A nonsense phrase. Two bad words in one, as though it were the worst thing you could say. Or it was just what you say when you don’t have the words.

When you live on a river, you are never not thinking about it. You see it on waking, hear it in nighttime barges that slice through it, feel it in the dampness of the air. It’s never the same—rising, rushing, sinking, slow in fog, thick in the summer—and is also always the same. Bob used to throw his unsold baguettes into it. Only now does it occur to me that, with bread that he had made single-handedly, he couldn’t do the obvious and put it out with the trash. He seemed to need to replicate the making of it in its unmaking, tossing the baguettes, one by one, as if returning them to nature for the birds and the fish.

Bob had held the quartier together, a community of like-minded food fanatics, and when he died we briefly considered returning to the United States. We didn’t, we couldn’t, until finally, after five years in Lyon, we went back for many reasons, including the fact that our children, who could read and write in French, were having trouble speaking English.

I returned the following year on my own, to visit Lac du Bourget, the largest lake in France, a piece of unfinished business. I spent the night at La Source, a farmhouse turned into a restaurant with rooms, which was run by a husband-and-wife team, members of the *Maîtres Restaurateurs*, a chefs’ collective committed to

making as much as possible from scratch: butter churned by hand, fresh ice cream daily.

At breakfast, I scooped up butter on the tip of my knife and tasted it. It was fatty and beautifully bovine. The bread was curious. It had been sliced from a rectangular loaf and, to my prejudiced eye, looked store-bought and industrial. I had a bite. It wasn't store-bought. Wow, I thought. This is good bread.

The flour, the owner told me, was from Le Bourget-du-Lac, on the other side of the lake. The name of the miller was Philippe Degrange. I wrote it down. It didn't seem right. A grange is where you store your grains. Degrange? It would be akin to buying milk from a guy named Dairy.

I drove to the town and got a coffee. At the bar, I Googled "Degrange"—and there he was. Minoterie Degrange. What was a *minoterie*? I looked it up. "Flour mill." It appeared to be within walking distance. I set off.

After half an hour, my doubts returned. The addresses were erratic, and the street—flower beds, trimmed hedges, garages for the family car—was unequivocally suburban. Was there really an operation here, milling only local grains? But then, just when I decided to turn back, voilà! In the shade of tall trees, half obscured by thick foliage, was a small letter-slot mailbox, no street number but a name, Minoterie Degrange.

The trees and a high metal gate, covered with graffiti, hid whatever was behind. Next to the mail slot was a speaker box. I pressed a button.

"*Oui?*" the speaker box said, a woman's voice.

"Bonjour," I told the box. "I have eaten a bread made from your flour, and I would like to meet the owner, Monsieur Degrange?"

Nothing.

“But it’s lunchtime,” the box said finally.

“Of course. I’m sorry. I’ll wait.”

Another protracted silence. Then the gate opened and revealed an industrial yard, completely out of keeping with its neighbors. A man emerged, round and robust, with a factory foreman’s forthrightness, wiping his mouth with a napkin. He looked at me hard.

“Monsieur Degrange?” I confirmed. “Please excuse me. I ate a slice of bread that was made, I believe, with your flour, and it reminds me of the bread that my friend Bob used to make.”

He pointed to a car: “Get in.”

I got in.

“It’s all about the flour,” he said. “I’ll take you to Boulangerie Vincent. ”

The boulangerie, a few miles down the road, was also a bar and a pub and a restaurant with tablecloths. The door opened directly onto the *four* and a cooling rack built against a wall. The top rows were for *boules* (“balls,” the ancient way of

bread baking), about thirty of them. On the bottom were *couronnes*, massive, each fashioned into a ring like a crown. A woman, carefully dressed, affluent in manner, was negotiating with the bread guy.

“*Mais, Pierre, s’il vous plaît.* Just one *boule*, please. I have guests tonight.”

“I am very sorry, madame, but every loaf has a name attached to it. You know that. If you haven’t reserved, I can’t give you one.”

“He does two ferments,” Degrange whispered, “and starts at seven in the evening. The bread needs ten hours. Or twelve. Sometimes fourteen.”

Inside, men were gathered around a bar—electricians, cable people, metalworkers, painters, *mecs*. The room roared with conviviality. Degrange ordered us *diots*, a Savoyard sausage, and a glass of wine, a local Mondeuse. Through the door to a kitchen, I saw hundreds of *diots*, drying in the air, looped by a string. They were cooked in a deep sauté pan with onions, red wine, and two bay leaves, and served in a roll made with Degrange’s flour.

It had the flavors that I had tasted at breakfast. I asked for another roll, broke it open, and stuck my nose into *la mie*, the crumb—Frederick’s routine. It smelled of yeast and oven-caramelized aromas, and of something else, an evocative fruitiness. I closed my eyes. Bob.

“You recognize it,” Degrange said. “It comes from wheat that grew in good soil.”

“Where do you get it?”

“Small farms. Nothing more than forty hectares.”

Small farms, he explained, are often the only ones in France with soil that hasn’t been ruined.

“Where are they?”

“Here in Savoie. And the Rhône Valley. They grow an old wheat, a quality wheat. And the Auvergne. I love the wheat from the Auvergne. Everyone does. The volcanic soil, the iron-rich dirt. You can taste it in the bread.”

We drank another glass of Mondeuse. Degrange proposed that we go back: “I want to show you the factory.”

A Degrange has been milling flour here, or on a site closer to the river, since 1704. Until modern times, the operation was powered by water; on a wall was an old photo of Degrange’s father and grandfather, seated before a mill paddle wheel three times their height. There are no mill paddles today. The process is whirringly hidden in pipes and generators and computer screens—except for the source material, freshly picked wheat that is tipped out from hydraulically raised trailers. I followed Degrange up ladderlike stairs to the third floor, where he opened the cap of a pipe and retrieved a cupful of a bright-golden grain.

“Taste.”

It seemed to dissolve in my mouth, creamy and sweet and long in flavor. “What is it?”

“Wheat germ.”

I wanted to take some home. “You’ll have to refrigerate it,” he said. “It is like flour but more extreme. It has fat, which spoils rapidly.”

He described conventional flour production—the sprawling farms in the French breadbasket or the American Midwest, their accelerated-growth tricks, their soils so manipulated that they could have been created in a chemistry lab. “The bread that you make from it has the right texture. But it doesn’t have the taste, the *goût*.” He asked an assistant to bring him a baguette, then tore off a piece, smelled it, and looked at it approvingly.

“In the country, we don’t change as fast as people in the city,” Degrange said. “For us, the meal is still important. We don’t ‘snack,’ ” he said, using the English word. “What I learned from my father and grandfather is what they learned from their fathers and grandfathers. There is a handing off between generations.” The word he used was *transmettre*. *Le goût et les valeurs sont transmis*. Flavor and value: those are the qualities that are transmitted. Only in France would “flavor” and “value” have the same moral weight.

Degrance gave me a ten-kilo bag of his flour. A gift. I said goodbye, an affectionate embrace, feeling an unexpected closeness to this man I had reached by intercom only a few hours ago, and who instantly knew what I was talking about: *goût*.

I was flying home in the morning and reserved a *boule* at the Boulangerie Vincent. I contemplated the prospect of arriving in New York bearing bread for my children which had been made near Le Lac du Bourget earlier that very day. On the way to the airport, I stopped to pick it up. It was dawn, and there were no lights on inside, just the red glow from the oven. My *boule* was hot and irresistibly fragrant.

In New York, I cut a few thick slices and put out some butter. “I think you’ll like this,” I said.

Frederick took a slice and sniffed it and then slammed it into his face, inhaling deeply: “It’s like Bob’s.”

George ate a slice, then asked for another and spread butter on it.

When the loaf was done, I made more from the ten-kilo bag. It was good—not as good as the *boule* from the Boulangerie Vincent, but still good. It had fruit and complexity and a feeling of nutritiousness. A month later, it was gone, and I stopped making bread. ♦