

Sustain

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LIFE FOR Michael in the bakery is simple. Life for Michael in the bakery is easy. Life for Michael in the bakery does not hurt. Nobody dies in the bakery. Nobody screams in the bakery. There is no whizzing of metal, designed to smash through a human being aerodynamically. There is no flying shrapnel burning through clothes to warp skin.

Stop.

Breathe.

Knead the dough.

Life for Michael in the bakery is fun. Life for Michael in the bakery is enjoyable. Life for Michael in the bakery is good. Life in the bakery involves old Mrs Hine with the purse her granddaughter made last month, counting out little coins with an apologetic smile. Mrs Hine is so hard to be impatient with, Michael can't stop himself from telling the old woman again and again that there's nothing to worry about. Occasionally, he shoots a withering look at a yuppie in a suit, impatiently tapping his some hundred-dollar shoe in exasperation. He likes using that look; it feels better than yelling words like 'maggot' and 'recruit'.

Jaime is Michael's boss and Michael likes working for Jaime. Working for Jaime is simpler and easier than Michael thought it would be. He gets the feeling that working at the bakery is easy because Jaime makes it that way. She doesn't talk down to him, doesn't talk slowly or softly. When she needs him to do something he's never done before, she talks him through it. She talks precisely over her shoulder as she passes slices of cake and cookies to smiling people, to impatient people, and people she can't stand; she does it all with patience and takes their money.

Jaime is tiny and wide. She pulls trays out of the oven and carts sacks of flour over her shoulder with ease, dazzling the families that walk in by

throwing the flour up in the air, bending at her knees while she shoves her arms against gravity. She lets out a girly whoop of joy for emphasis and catches it again with a giggle, as the flour puffs against her face.

After the first few times Michael sees Jamie do this, he asks if she has any older brothers. She throws her head back and lets out a long booming laugh, which bounces off the metal shelves and wooden counter. She smacks him playfully on the shoulder with the same tomboy grin she always has, and tells him she has a sister with ringlets and dimples that can kick her ass in a throw-down. Jaime apologises to the young mother holding her hands over her toddler's ears while Michael chuckles.

Sam is Jaime's husband and sometimes Sam helps out in the bakery. He holds up big lumps of dough and squishes it between his massive hands and grins to choruses of, 'Eww... gross.' Jaime can't have kids and Michael thinks it's such a shame. He can't think of any two people better suited to being parents.

Life in the bakery is not like life in the field. Life in the bakery is not like a flat desert. Life in the bakery is not like a claustrophobic jungle. The desert wasn't so bad. The desert was flat, the desert was hot, and the desert went on for as far as his eyes could see. Nobody could see where the desert ended—nobody in his squad and nobody back at command. Not even the visiting brass could ever tell when they saw the end of the desert.

Life in the desert was nothing like life in the jungle. The jungle was all you could see. Massive trees rose up and up—it hurt Michael to try and crane his neck to see the top. There was a wet dampness that suffused every single item of clothing and in the boggling dampness, they would ask themselves how anything could get so wet when it was so damned hot. The jungle rustled and creaked. There was an ever-spreading smell of rot and decay, drifting through the trees and the undergrowth. The smell got into everything, breathing life into shirts and webbed vests. The smell of rot lazily twirled through the night and day, brushing against everything. There was all the personal space of a dancefloor and yet the rot always moved with him. The smell weaved its way along the path and came from all dead things: dead plants, dead animals and dead people.

Stop.

Breathe.

Put the dough in the oven.

Michael tries not to think about the people in the jungle, in that horrible pit. Whole families left in the open earth never to move or laugh again. Those people were never going to share a meal together, never going to go

to work like he did. They were never going to feel pride in making simple things like he did, ever again. He tries not to think of his team still lying in the ferns like big cats, but they'll never get up again. He tries not to think that it isn't fair he's here and they aren't, that it's ok to be alive and happy.

Sometimes Michael doesn't always manage to think that. It's worse when he's at home alone. He curls up and remembers what Dr. Jones said. Michael remembers to just breathe and ride it out—this too shall pass. Michael remembers that he will get to a mental place where he can work through the feeling of guilt and see that it is misplaced.

When it hits him at work, Sam and Jaime are there. They never try to hide him. He's not something to be ashamed of, even when he feels like he shouldn't be allowed near the pretty cakes and fresh bread. When he feels like he'll break them into little pieces, that there's more than strawberry jelly on his hands, or that the ovens are pressing in with heat that feels so much like a Colombian jungle, Sam and Jaime are there. They take him by his shoulders and lead him into the storage room, keeping up gentle and steady chatter. They tell him not to worry, that the bread can wait, and just remember to breathe, big guy.

It's easier when Michael doesn't have to tell himself. Jaime or Sam will squeeze his shoulders and give him their biggest smiles, the ones that make their eyes crinkle and half their freckles vanish as their cheeks swell a little under their eyes. Michael eventually feels ready to go back out—Jaime and Sam won't let him go back to work until he feels ready. Sometimes it doesn't hurt Michael to have such good friends.

Sometimes life in the bakery is scary. Sometimes life in the bakery is difficult. Sometimes life in the bakery is just like life itself. Michael wouldn't ask for any other kind of life any other way.