

The Wonders of Wonder

by Traci Moore

There it was, square in the middle of someone's lawn: a slice of white bread, like a shirtless Englishman stretched out in the sun.

Hugh felt sorry for the bread— lying there, vulnerable, without even a swipe of peanut butter. With its belly of bleached flour, it looked fresh, but Hugh's phobia of spongy things barred a tactile inspection. He looked around, above. Not a single bird teetered from the telephone wire, scoping out breakfast.

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People always thought Hugh a smart man. He spent most of his life designing buildings that wouldn't fall, even worked load-bearing problems on coffee breaks. But ever since last February, when his engineering firm replaced him with a college kid, Hugh stared at mundane objects like they talked to him: cottage cheese containers, staplers, shopping cart wheels. He fell in love with the whys and how comes of simple objects, and analyzed their significance for days.

Near as Hugh could tell, his wife Janet hadn't noticed his curious behavior. By sheer concentration, he thought he passed as a normal 60-year old man. Washing dishes was easy enough, and he mowed the lawn good and straight. Some days he misplaced the car keys, but even Janet did that from time to time.

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What drew him to the bread was that it didn't belong on the grass. Bread sat high on a sandwich plate, stacked with pastrami and speared with a toothpick. Or wrapped up warm in a bread basket. Hugh wondered what kind of person left a piece of bread on the lawn like a towel tossed aside before a dip in the pool.

Then, a voice in his head: *Hugh-oooh?* It was Janet's soprano call, though he was too far from home to hear her with his ears.

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Sometimes Hugh shared a kooky intuition with his wife. He'd get sparks that she wanted something, then the phone would ring. Before she spoke, he often knew what she would say. Even the morning of her birthday, when he'd forgotten, and both of them were dead asleep, his internal voice advised, "Hugh? Put the coffee on! Slip out and find her a card. Buy her a scarf from somewhere!"

Funny thing was, that day Janet had wanted a loaf of bread from the shop, and there Hugh stood on the sidewalk, staring into the broad face of John Dough.

Hugh-oooh?

He lifted up his glasses and squinted at the bread. The slice deserved attention, but he'd been away from home for an hour. Right about then, Janet would be glancing at the clock every five minutes, worrying.

Reluctantly, Hugh turned on his heel and strode away, promising to return soon to study his latest finding in detail.

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Janet stirred a pot of oatmeal at the kitchen stove. Cinnamon scented the air.

"Guess what I found?" Hugh asked, hanging up his coat on the hook behind the kitchen door: a cast iron cat with its tail curled at the end. Thirty-eight years, and the screws Hugh drilled still held. Janet glanced at him over her shoulder.

"Must be smaller than a breadbox." She craned her neck to view his empty hands.

"I found bread," Hugh said, "but we can't make it into toast."

Janet scowled into the pot of gruel.

"It's crazy." Hugh smiled. "I'm on the way to Ratner's, to buy that raisin bread you like." He dragged out a chair and sat down at the table. "Lazy-go-dazy, strolling along..."

Janet set a bowl of oatmeal on his placemat. Hugh cupped his fingers around the warm earthenware.

"Ya know that goofy house on Birch? The one done up in that awful purple paint?"

"The eyesore," Janet said.

"Yeah. On their grass, there's a piece a bread." His eyes were open wide and lit with wonder. "Just lying there."

Janet sat down at the table. "Huh." She held a coffee mug loosely in two hands. Eyes half-open, she seemed to stare right through him.

"The bread spoke to me, Jan. Wanted me to *do* something." Grinning into his spoon, Hugh's up-side down head looked thick with ideas. He swallowed a bite of oatmeal. "Isn't that marvelous?"

Janet sighed. She opened her mouth, but no words fell out. Hugh reached for her hand across the table and gently grasped her cold fingers.

Without speaking, they scraped oatmeal from their bowls. Then Hugh began to trace the knots and rings in the maple table. He thought about the good years, the dry years, and the leaves—once so green— that used to soak up sunlight.

Janet licked her spoon and tapped it on the table. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump- thump, like a heartbeat. Hugh leaned his ear against the wood. He listened for a minute, then paused, certain. Deep within the layers of maple, he heard three faint, unmistakable cries:

Help me. Help me. Help me.

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That afternoon John Dough spoke to Hugh through the newspaper: nine-grain bread on sale for two dollars a loaf; *Bread Factory Closed for Health Code Violations*; *The Best of Bread* just released at Rocky's Records...

Hugh leaned back in his kitchen chair and scratched his head.

He had to visit the bread again. He must interview the homeowners, measure the site, analyze a specimen. Possibilities that spilled from Hugh's mind made him euphoric.

For a time, he sat at the table and sketched out his plans in a notebook. Then he wandered to the bedroom for a nap.

In his dream he walked down a long dirt road. The air was hot and dry, with the sun blazing overhead. Hugh stopped for a moment to mop his brow. He glanced at his tired feet. Then gasped.

Twelve slices of white bread surrounded him in a circle.

"Holy Moses," Hugh said in the dream.

He sunk to his feet and flopped on his back in the dirt. Sun bounced off his forehead. Hugh bawled just like a baby. Then he woke up.

Janet's round face was six inches from his head.

"Sleep much longer, you'll be awake 'til midnight," she said.

"Gotta strip the sheets."

Hugh sat up and sniffed the air: the aroma of baking bread. He reached for his glasses on the nightstand. Blinking for a few moments, he noticed Janet's white hair looked puffy, like bread rolls. The comforter floated in folds and valleys.

"Whatcha baking, Jan?" Still dizzy from the dream, Hugh pushed the covers aside and stood up slowly.

Janet moved in and yanked the sheets off the mattress. "I don't bake anymore. Remember?" The kitchen cupboards caught fire once when she broiled a rum cake for two hours. She hadn't opened the oven since.

Hugh stood and watched her, his shoulders hunched forward and arms dangling like a Neanderthal man. He surveyed the room. Then he yanked off his glasses and wiped them with his shirt tail. Replacing the lenses, he gawked at what he saw.

The mattress had transformed into a giant piece of bread.

"Janet," he whispered, standing rigid, like sighting a rare animal. "See that?"

"A spider?" She jumped.

Hugh's mouth popped open. "Bread," he said quietly. "Fantastic!" He poked the bread lightly with a finger. It bounced back.

Janet waited. She pressed her pinkie to the corner of her eye and pulled it away. Dropping her loose fists into the pockets of her apron, she watched the afternoon shadows flicker against the wall.

"Hugh, stop it. Please." Her voice cracked.

"But honey. This is AMAZING. It'll make the HISTORY BOOKS."

Janet began to cry. "For heaven's sake, it's a mattress!"

Hugh's tight grin went slack. He felt like an inadequate husband whenever Janet wept. Though he always hugged her and listened, she could never articulate the reasons for her episodes. He hoped her frequent tears were just the results of menopause.

But seeing her in the bedroom then, he feared the worst. And Hugh knew he wasn't good at worsts.

She wants me to see a doctor, he thought.

"You need a doctor, Hugh. Talk to somebody," Janet said.

"No," Hugh said, defiantly.

The room had begun to feel warm. Hugh stared at his feet. The scent of bread intensified.

"I'm just a guy...," Hugh relaxed his shoulders, "...who's starting to *feel*." He drew in a long, slow breath. "It's like some... renaissance for me."

She blotted her nose with a tissue and sat on the bed. When he sat next to her, the bread sighed. Hugh wrapped his arm around Janet's shoulders.

A strand of light illuminated her amber eyes. He could tell by the sparkle that flashed, then faded, that she'd almost smiled.

"It's not me," she muttered. A tear fell down her cheek and dripped on his knee. "It's you."

"Like I said, Janet, I'm fine. Fine!" He patted her hand.

For several moments, he studied her eyes. Through her pupil he saw a narrow night road, one that ran for miles in one direction—absent of signage, landmarks and street lamps.

He exhaled slowly and looked away.

Side by side, they watched the light fade from the room. For another hour it felt comfortably warm—like the inside of a bakery: thick bread scents, the oven set at 350, and every surface dusted in a delicate sheet of white flour.

