

Rising Up: Baked with Love

Inside a writing workshop for survivors of violence, bread becomes a language of trust—and a lesson in what it means to rise again.

BY LAVONNE ROBERTS

July 16, 2018 · Hudson, New York



Two loaves rising in their pans. The original photograph from the 2018 essay.

Last week, I learned that one of the women in my writing workshop for survivors of violence had been relocated to Denver because her husband, a Lithuanian mob boss, had put a hit on her and her children.

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When I bake, I remember the smell of fresh bread in my grandmother's kitchen. Her table was polished smooth from kneading dough. There was always a jar of homemade jam and a crock of margarine to slather on pillow-soft slices beneath a crusty top. My grandmother didn't know about cholesterol back then, and I hadn't yet learned that my biological father—the man who gave me up for adoption—beat women.

The three-story Victorian house where I host my workshop is in desperate need of repair. Its paint is peeling, and it looks as though one blizzard too many caused it to lean to the right. Today I'm standing in front of the house holding a box of writing journals and donated books from my friend Maureen, who put out a call for romance novels for two women and collected used books from the Claverack Library. Perched on top is a mixing bowl filled with bread dough.

Domestic abuse is a vast problem. At the time this essay was written, an often-cited estimate held that one in four women experienced severe intimate-partner violence during her lifetime.

I speak into the buzzer. A new volunteer invites me in. Inside, the smells of dirty laundry, soiled diapers, and ammonia converge. I'm wearing my daughter's Converse sneakers, already destined for the trash, and a Bard College T-shirt. I feel awkward because no one in my group made it past high school. The women in my workshop read everything from comic books and Harlequin romances to James Baldwin.

Some women bring something they've written during the week. Others read from free-writing exercises after I give a prompt. We take turns reading, then the group offers positive feedback. What the women have in common are silenced voices and stories that need to be heard. During the workshop, I steer them away from talking directly about abuse. For these women, writing is about a different kind of truth—unencumbered, raw, and naked. Writing isn't therapy, but it can be therapeutic.

For the first time, the house has an 18-year-old college student. Unlike the typical abusive spouse, her abuser is her mother. Earlier in the week, the shelter director told me, "One minute she's explosively angry, and the next she's not present." The new girl's eyes meet mine, then she looks down at her feet. I hear the director's warning in my head: *Remember. Boundaries.*

My grandmother would have said, "There are no boundaries when it comes to loving someone who doesn't have love." I am hyperaware, treading softly across an open field of land mines where the most innocuous comment can set off someone with PTSD.

Children's drawings and framed affirmations hang on dingy white walls. The kitchen window, like all the windows, is covered in bars. The gray-and-white linoleum, meant to resemble marble, is threadbare in the places with the heaviest traffic. Work boots and children's shoes are scattered everywhere. The house is at capacity. Eleven women, most with children, make a lot of noise. I carry my dough delicately, like a sleeping baby.

"I have a surprise," I say. The smell of fresh dough precedes my words. New women are wary of an outsider, so I use food to communicate. They may not want to share their stories, but the smells, tastes, and textures of a dish act as a leveling wand between us.

Bread asks me to pay attention. If I leave the dough to rise too long, it might fall as it bakes, so I place it above the refrigerator where I can keep an eye on it and set my timer. Bread is flour, water, salt, and yeast. But yeast, even dry yeast, is a living organism. It is what makes baking bread an art. Yeast is sensitive to heat, moisture, air pressure, and elevation. My recipe allows the dough to rise twice: first in a mixing bowl, then in a bread pan after it is shaped. The first rise activates the yeast, beginning the transformation of simple ingredients into something changed by chemistry. The second gives the bread structure, allowing it to bake without collapsing.

I see a few new faces. There's no laughter, not even a smile. I recognize two regulars: Elana and Alma. Elana is wearing a Grateful Dead T-shirt that is too tight and complaining about her roommate's baby crying all night. If I touch her arm reflexively, she jerks away. Her fingers are stained yellow from nicotine.

Alma, a petite older woman, wears her platinum-streaked hair in a ponytail. Although she looks swallowed by defeat, there is a childlike innocence in her crooked smile. Her oversized denim overalls dwarf her tiny frame. She has a smoker's skin, wrinkled like an elephant, and hazel eyes that hint at a twinkle from days past. There is always a cup of coffee waiting when I arrive, which Alma anxiously carries back and forth to the kitchen to refill, like an alcoholic at an AA meeting. I never tell her I've had enough.

Elana is a gifted illustrator, but she doesn't know it. I have to be careful not to compliment her too much. If I do, she shrinks back into herself. Today she wants to read.

"Machete Man is my old man," she says. I see her children in the playroom within earshot and wince. A weekend volunteer makes eye contact and takes them outside.

"Your character's name is Machete Man," I say softly. Everything we read remains secret. "When we respond to Elana's story, we'll refer to her as the narrator."

Elana pauses frequently to hold up sketches. She has drawn Machete Man with demented eyes and saw-like teeth, holding a machete dripping blood. She shows us a woman and two children holding hands in a field of sunflowers, then a drawing of a bag of fertilizer with her soon-to-be ex on the label.

“See my new tattoo,” she boasts. Encircling her wrist like a bracelet is a stalk that leads to the top of her hand, which is covered by a giant sunflower.

“In case I forget to rise up,” she says, looking directly at me. I couldn’t have planned the timing better.

In case I forget to rise up.

“Would you help me clear the table?” I ask the group, catching myself before I touch Elana. Alma jumps up to clean it, and I drop a cup of flour in the center. I touch Alma’s shoulder when I say thank you. Then I gently place the Pyrex bowl upside down near Elana.

“Press it down softly,” I say, but she looks scared. “It’s okay. It will rise again.”

“Push him down,” says one of the new women. *Never bring my chef’s knives*, I think. I divide the dough in two and show her how to pat it into a rectangle. Alma winks at me like we’re conspirators and says, “I’ll clean up.” After I put the loaves in the oven, Elana’s face is less taut.

We dissolve into hysterics when she shows us more drawings of Machete Man fertilizer spread over sunflowers. We laugh because it is better than the alternative.

“You’re under the cone of silence now,” I say to Elana. It’s time for the group to give her positive feedback. It is hard for these women to hear praise, but they feel less alone when the others share their stories.

“Fuck Machete Man,” the new girl barks. I see her steel-gray eyes squint. “He’s fertilizer.”

Silence sits with our group, but I wait. Bread baking is messy, but so is life. The best ingredient—the one that should be part of every dish—is free: love. My grandmother was frugal except in matters of the heart. In trauma training, we call it extreme empathy.

“What if we make a cookbook?” I ask, winging it.

“My aunt taught me to make a great corn casserole,” says Alma. “It tastes like candy corn.”

“I’ll bring the ingredients,” I say, trying not to look too excited. It is important that these women feel in control after having had none.

“My kids love my mother’s strawberry shortcake,” says another woman. “It’s man-stripping goodness,” she adds, licking her fingers for effect. I have learned not to react. *Just smile*, I tell myself.

“What if we use the kitchen as a test kitchen?” I ask. “I’ll pick up a flat of strawberries from Ironwood Farm. Three women own the farm.”

I reach into my bag and hand Maria a Jamaican cookbook. *Thank you, Bard*, I think. Maria grew up in foster care and only recently learned that her biological grandmother was Jamaican.

“Maybe one of these dishes will inspire you to write your own recipe,” I add. I make a mental note to ask Maureen to help me collect cookbook donations. I get up quickly to check the bread, almost tripping over Alma, who is worried that I am going to get coffee.

“You know, writing allows us to reframe our stories from victims to survivors,” I say softly.

“That sounds like psychobabble,” says Maria, with a look that asks how I would know.

“Pass the jam,” says Alma.

“That’s my grandmother’s apple butter,” I say, grateful for the interruption. “The apples came from Samascott Orchards.”

“Put the recipe in the cookbook,” says Elana, “and your magic bread.”

“Maybe you’d like to be the editor,” I say. We are all holding crusty pieces of bread, with butter from Ronnybrook Farm melting into their pillow-soft centers. It is fleeting, but I see her eyes light up. I try to use as many local products as I can, hoping the women might do the same one day.

“My grandmother would tell you never to cut bread before it cools, because it keeps the loaf moist—unless you have company.”

Cooking helps us slow down time, share a piece of ourselves, and engage all our senses in a safe place. My grandmother would say we are giving love without words. Food transcends race, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, age, and class. It builds community and marks the moments of our lives. It does not need to be complicated or cost a lot.

The bread melts in my mouth as tangy apple butter meets sweet cinnamon and a salty, almost caramel richness. The food we cook is flavored by our personalities and our cultures. It brings us together in good times and bad. More than that, it nurtures us.

Next week, I think I’ll write a story about a woman who used cooking to find her voice—and writing to tell her story.

Rising Up

A recipe baked with love · Makes two loaves

EQUIPMENT

- Stand mixer with dough hook or food processor with dough blade
- Spatula
- Two 9-inch loaf pans
- Large mixing bowl
- Plastic wrap

INGREDIENTS

- 4 1/2 teaspoons instant yeast (two 0.25-ounce packets)
- 3/4 cup plus 2 2/3 cups warm water, divided
- 1/4 cup (50 grams) granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 9 to 10 cups all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted, for brushing

METHOD

- 1 In the bowl of a mixer, stir the yeast into 3/4 cup of the warm water and let it sit for 5 minutes. Add the remaining 2 2/3 cups water, sugar, salt, and 5 cups of the flour. Stir to combine.
- 2 Using the dough hook, mix on low speed. Gradually add enough of the remaining flour to make a dough that is soft and tacky but not sticky; you may not need all the flour. Knead until the dough forms a soft ball and clears the sides of the bowl, 7 to 10 minutes.
- 3 Place the dough in a lightly greased bowl and turn it so the surface is coated. Cover with plastic wrap and leave in a draft-free place until doubled in size, 45 minutes to 1 hour.
- 4 Turn the dough onto a clean, lightly floured surface. Press gently to remove large air pockets. Divide it in two. Working with one piece at a time, pat the dough into a 9-by-12-inch rectangle. Starting at a short end, roll it into a tight cylinder. Pinch the seam and ends closed, tuck the ends under, and place the dough in a greased 9-inch loaf pan. Repeat with the second piece.
- 5 Cover the loaves loosely and leave them in a draft-free place until doubled in size, 30 to 45 minutes. Meanwhile, position a rack in the lower third of the oven and heat to 400°F.
- 6 Brush the loaves with melted butter. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, rotating the pans halfway through, until golden brown and 195°F at the center. Remove from the oven and brush immediately with more melted butter.
- 7 Cool in the pans for 10 minutes, then turn the loaves onto a rack and let them cool completely before slicing. Store airtight at room temperature for up to 4 days or freeze for up to 1 month. Cutting the bread while warm releases moisture and makes it stale faster—but, as my grandmother knew, company is an acceptable exception.

This edition removes the original site navigation, advertising, comments, and print headers. The prose and recipe have been lightly edited for grammar, clarity, and consistency.