Up Before *the Bread*

A free story from Moira's Bookshop in Speranza



THE PURRING PAGE

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Stories and ideas by Birba Anpu

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Up Before the Bread: Baldo and the Lemon Balm

Who looks after the person who is awake before everyone else?



The Man Who Brought the Bread

There is a sound that belongs to Speranza at six o'clock on a winter morning, and it is not the church bell. It is the rattle of Baldo's van coming down Via dell'Orologio in second gear, too fast for the cobbles, with forty loaves sliding gently from one side to the other in the back.

Moira Hopes had heard it every morning for nineteen years. She heard it now, through the half-open shutters, as she lit the stove and set the kettle on the ring, and she smiled without thinking about it, the way you smile at a clock you are fond of.

The van stopped. The door slammed. Then came the knock, two short raps on the glass, and there was Baldo on the step with a paper bag in one floury hand: two rolls with sesame and a small round loaf, the same order he had been leaving at the bookshop since before Ashwaganda was born.

Except that this morning he did not hand the bag over and turn back to the van. He stood on the step and held it, and looked at it, as if he had forgotten what came next.

On the windowsill, Ashwaganda lifted his great ginger head. He looked at Baldo for a long moment with his amber eyes, the way a magistrate looks at a witness. Then he stood up, stretched until he was twice his usual length, and jumped down to the floor with a thump that rattled the poetry shelf.

And from the stairs to the poetry loft, Toe came down without a sound, one white paw at a time, and sat at the bottom step with her green eyes fixed on the door.

Toe did not come down for the postman. She did not come down for the baker. She came down only for people who needed something and had not yet decided to admit it.

"Baldo," said Moira, opening the door. "Come in. The kettle is on."

"I can't," said Baldo. "I've got the café on the square, and the hotel by the bridge, and the hospice wants the rolls by seven." He held out the bag. "I just stopped."

"So I see," said Moira. "Come in for the length of one cup. The hospice will forgive you. I'll ring them myself if they don't."

Flour on Everything

He sat in the green armchair beside the stove because Ashwaganda was already in front of it, steering him, the way a tug

steers a ship much larger than itself. Baldo was a big man, broad in the shoulders and soft in the middle, with flour in his eyebrows and flour in the creases of his knuckles and a faint smell of warm crust that went everywhere with him. He lowered himself into the chair as if it might not hold him, and the moment he was down, Ashwaganda climbed into his lap and settled there with the satisfied weight of a cat who has been eyeing this particular lap for years and has finally been granted it.

"He'll get you covered," said Baldo, but he put his hand on the cat's back all the same.

"He has been covered in worse," said Moira.

She did not ask what was wrong. In her experience, questions were like doors held open too wide: people felt they had to walk through them, and sometimes they were not ready. Better to leave the door ajar and let the warmth do the asking. She went behind the counter instead and began, unhurriedly, to choose a tea.

It was Baldo who spoke first.

"Do you know what time I got up?" he said, to the cat. "Twenty past two. Every day this month. My apprentice broke his wrist on his scooter in October, so I'm on my own in the ovens until he's back. Forty loaves before six. Then the rounds. Then the shop. Then the orders for the next day. I fall asleep in my chair at eight o'clock with the television on, and my wife puts a blanket over me, and at twenty past two the alarm goes again."

“That is a very long day,” said Moira.

“It’s not the long day.” He shook his head slowly. “I’ve always done long days. My father did long days. It’s that this morning I was standing at the oven, and I realised I couldn’t remember the last time I sat down to eat something. Not standing at the counter. Sitting down. With a plate.” He laughed, a short, rusty laugh. “A baker who doesn’t eat. Everyone in Speranza eats my bread, and I eat the burnt ends over the sink.”

Toe had crossed the floor while he was talking. Now she jumped up onto the arm of the chair, very lightly, and sat there looking at him with her serious face. After a moment she reached out and laid one white paw on his wrist, just where the flour stopped.

Baldo went quiet.

The Tea of the Quiet Hour

Moira took down two jars from the shelf that holds more jars than a chemist’s. The first held dried lemon balm, the pale, crumpled leaves that the Italians call melissa, which smell of lemons left in a warm room. The second held strips of dried orange peel, curled and amber, saved from the winter oranges that came up from the south in crates every December.

“I should say first,” she said, pouring the water, “that I sell books. I don’t know anything about bread except how to eat it, and a cup of tea is not going to put your apprentice’s wrist back together. What it can do is make you sit still for the five

minutes it takes to drink it. I think that may be the part you need."

She put the cup into his big hands. The steam rose between them, smelling of lemon and orange and something green, and Ashwaganda, approving of the arrangement, began to purr in earnest: that deep, rolling, floorboard-shaking purr which seems to come from underneath the shop rather than from the cat.

Then she cut one of his own sesame rolls in half, put it on a plate with a piece of cheese, and set it on the little table at his elbow.

"That's yours," said Baldo. "I brought that for you."

"And now I am giving it back," said Moira. "On a plate. Sitting down."

He looked at the plate for a long time. Then he ate the roll slowly, in small pieces, the way people eat when they have remembered that food has a taste. Outside, the light came up slowly over the terracotta roofs, and the first shutters began to open along the street, one after another, like a town clearing its throat. The stove ticked. Toe did not move her paw.

"It's good bread," Baldo said at last, with his mouth full, and it was the first time Moira had ever heard him sound surprised by it.

A Few Small Signals

When the plate was empty, Moira tore a page from the back of a green notebook and wrote a short list in her careful bookseller's hand, with Toe supervising from the arm of the chair.

"I am a bookseller, not a doctor," she said, "so these are not instructions. They are things that people who have sat in that chair have told me made the days a little less heavy."

- Sit down to eat once a day, even if it is only bread and cheese. A plate, a chair, five minutes. A baker of all people knows that nothing good comes out of an empty oven.
- Ask for help before you need it. A neighbour, a cousin, a teenager who wants pocket money. Most people are glad to be asked, and nobody can guess what you have not said.
- Give the end of the shift a signal. A warm drink, a wash, the same small ritual in the same order, so that the day knows it is over.
- Let one thing be good enough. Forty loaves that are very good are better than forty-five that leave you at the bottom of the stairs.
- Notice when it becomes weeks and months. If you are always exhausted, or low, or you cannot rest even when you have the chance, please talk to your doctor. That is not weakness. That is maintenance.

Baldo read the list twice, slowly, moving his lips a little on the second reading, the way he read the orders pinned above his ovens.

"Ask for help," he said. "My apprentice has a brother. The older one. He's been asking me for a job since the summer. I kept saying he was too young."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-two," said Baldo, and then he laughed properly, for the first time that morning, a big warm laugh that made Ashwaganda open one offended eye.

A Week Later

The first frost came the following Tuesday, and the fountain in the square wore a thin collar of ice, and the van came down Via dell'Orologio at six o'clock in a slightly lower gear than usual.

There were two knocks on the glass. When Moira opened the door, there were two people on the step: Baldo, with the paper bag, and beside him a tall young man with flour on his sleeves and the anxious, eager face of somebody who has been given a job and is determined not to lose it.

"This is my apprentice's brother," said Baldo. "He does the rounds now. I do the ovens. I get up at three." He said it as if he were announcing a holiday. "And I sit down at eleven. Every day. My wife has made me a chair in the back of the shop, with

a cushion. She says if she finds me eating over the sink again she will sell the ovens."

Ashwaganda made the small, pleased, chirruping noise he reserves for people he has already decided about, and jumped down from the windowsill to inspect the new arrival's shoes. Toe watched from the stairs, and then, after a careful pause, came down one step. It was, for Toe, a warm welcome.

"Sit," said Moira. "Both of you. I'll put the kettle on."

Moira's Reflection

There are people in every town who are awake before everyone else, so that the rest of us wake up to something ready: the bread on the step, the café open, the street swept, the medicine counted. We rarely see them, and they rarely ask for anything, and so it is very easy to forget that they get tired too.

Baldo did not need a cure. He needed a plate, a chair, and five minutes in which nobody needed him. Then he needed to say one sentence out loud, the one about asking for help, so that he could hear how reasonable it sounded. I think most of us are like that. We already know what would help. We are only waiting for someone to put the kettle on and let us sit down long enough to admit it.

A Cup for This Story

- 1 teaspoon dried lemon balm (melissa)
- 1 small strip of dried orange peel, or a twist of fresh peel without the white pith
- 250 ml water just off the boil, steeped covered for 5 minutes, then strained
- A little honey, if you like

Herbal teas are a comforting ritual, not medicine. If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, taking medication (including thyroid medication) or have a health condition, check with your doctor or pharmacist before trying a new herb. If you are struggling with exhaustion or low mood, please talk to your doctor.

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Welcome to Speranza. Moira, Ashwaganda and Toe will be waiting, with the kettle on. More stories, teas and quiet moments are published regularly at thepurringpage.it, and readers who would like new stories first can join the Purring Club there.

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