SOURDOUGH

NUMBER ONE EATER

It would have been nutritive gel for dinner, same as always, if I had not discovered stuck to my apartment's front door a paper menu advertising the newly expanded delivery service of a neighborhood restaurant.

I was just home from work and my face felt brittle from stress—this wasn't unusual—and I would not normally have been interested in anything unfamiliar. My nightly ration of Slurry waited within.

But the menu intrigued me. The words were written in a dark, confident script—actually, two scripts: each dish was described once using the alphabet I recognized and again using one I didn't, vaguely Cyrillic-seeming with a profusion of dots and curling connectors. In either case, the menu was compact: available was the *Spicy Soup* or a *Spicy Sandwich* or a *Combo (double spicy)*, all of which, the menu explained, were vegetarian.

At the top, the restaurant's name was written in humongous, exuberant letters: *CLEMENT STREET SOUP AND SOURDOUGH*. At the bottom, there was a phone number and the promise of quick delivery. Clement Street was just a few

blocks away. The menu charmed me, and as a result, my night, and my life, bent off on a different track.

I dialed the number and my call was answered immediately. It was a man's voice, slightly breathless. "Clement Street Soup and Sourdough! Okay to hold?"

I said yes, and music played—a song in some other language. Clement Street was a polyglot artery that pulsed with Cantonese, Burmese, Russian, Thai, and even scraps of Gaelic. This was none of those.

The voice returned. "Okay! Hello! What can I make for you?"

I ordered the double spicy.

I CAME TO SAN FRANCISCO from Michigan, where I was raised and educated and where my body's functioning was placid and predictable, mostly.

My father was a database programmer for General Motors who liked his work and had endeavored to surround me with computers from toddlerhood onward, and whose plan succeeded because I never thought of anything except following his path, especially at a time when programming was taking on a sheen of dynamism and computer science departments were wooing young women aggressively. It's nice to be wooed.

It helped that I was good at it. I liked the rhythm of challenge and solution; it felt very satisfying to solve programming problems. For two summers during college, I interned at Crowley Control Systems, a company in Southfield that provided motor control software for one of Chevrolet's electric cars, and when I graduated, there was a job waiting for me.

The work was minutely specified and cautiously tested, and it had the feeling of laying bricks: put them down carefully, because you won't get another chance. The computer on my desk was old, used by at least two programmers before me, but the codebase was modern and interesting. I kept a picture of my parents next to my monitor, along with a tiny cactus I'd named Kubrick. I bought a house two towns over, in Ferndale.

Then I was recruited. A woman contacted me through my stubby LinkedIn profile—her own identifying her as a talent associate at a company called General Dexterity in San Francisco—with a request for an exploratory phone call, which I accepted. I could hear her bright smile through the speaker. General Dexterity, she said, designed industry-leading robot arms for laboratories and factories. The company needed programmers with a background in motor control, and in San Francisco, she said, such programmers were rare. She explained that a software sieve had flagged my résumé as promising and that she agreed with the computer's assessment.

Here's a thing I believe about people my age: we are the children of Hogwarts, and more than anything, we just want to be sorted.

Sitting there in my car in the little parking lot behind Crowley Control Systems on West 10 Mile Road in Southfield, my world cracked open a tiny bit. It was only a hairline fracture, but that was enough to see through.

On the other end of the line, the talent associate conjured difficult problems suited to only the fiercest intellects. She conjured generous benefits and free food and, oh, was I vegetarian? Not anymore, no. But maybe I could try again,

in California. She conjured sunshine. The sky above the Crowley parking lot was gray and drippy like the undercarriage of a car.

And—no conjuring here—the talent associate made an offer. It was a salary that represented more money than both of my parents currently earned, combined. I was a year out of college. I was being wooed again.

Ten months into a Michigan-sized mortgage, I sold my house in Ferndale at a very small loss. I hadn't hung a single thing on the walls. When I said goodbye to my parents, I cried. College had been less than an hour away, so this was the real departure. I set out across the country with all my belongings in the back of my car and my desk cactus strapped into the passenger seat.

I drove west through the narrow pass in the Rockies, crossed the dusty nothing of Nevada, and crashed into the verdant, vertical shock of California. I was agog. Southeastern Michigan is flat, almost concave; here was a world with a z-axis.

In San Francisco, a temporary apartment waited for me, and so did the talent associate, who met me on the sidewalk in front of General Dexterity's brick-faced headquarters. She was tiny, barely five feet tall, but when she took my hand, her grip was viselike. "Lois Clary! Welcome! You're going to love it here!"

The first week was amazing. Grouped with a dozen other newly Dextrous (as we were encouraged to call ourselves), I filled out health insurance forms and accepted a passel of phantasmal stock options and sat through recitations of the company's short history. I saw the founder's original prototype robot arm, a beefy three-jointed limb almost as tall as

me, set up in a little shrine in the center of the cafeteria. You could call out "Arm, change task. Say hello!" and it would wave a wide, eager greeting.

I learned the anatomy of the software I'd be working on, called ArmOS. I met my manager, Peter, who shook my hand with a grip even firmer than the talent associate's. An in-house apartment broker found me a place on Cabrillo Street in San Francisco's Richmond District for which I would pay rent fully four times larger than my mortgage in Michigan. The broker dropped the keys into my hand and said, "It's not a lot of space, but you won't be spending much time there!"

General Dexterity's founder, an astonishingly young man named Andrei, walked our group across Townsend Street to the Task Acquisition Center, a low-slung building that had once been a parking garage. The cement floor was still mottled with oil spots. Now, instead of cars in long lines, there were robot arms parked thirty to a row. Their plastic cladding was colored Dextrous blue, the contours friendly and capable with just the faintest suggestion of biceps—gentle swells marked with General Dexterity's logo, an affable lightning bolt.

The arms were all going at once, sweeping and grasping and nudging and lifting. If it was supposed to impress us: it worked.

All of these were repetitive gestures, Andrei explained, currently executed by human muscles and human minds. Repetition was the enemy of creativity, he said. Repetition belonged to robots.

We were on a quest to end work.

And it would involve: a shit ton of work.

My orientation week ended on Friday night with celebratory beers and a ping-pong tournament against one of the

robot arms, which of course emerged victorious. Then my job began. Not the following Monday. The next morning. Saturday.

I had the feeling of being sucked—*floop*—into a pneumatic tube.

The programmers at General Dexterity were utterly unlike my colleagues at Crowley, who had been middle-aged and chilled-out, and who enjoyed nothing as much as a patient explanation. The Dextrous were in no way patient. Many of them were college dropouts; they had been in a hurry to get here, and they were in a hurry now to be done, and rich. They were almost entirely young men, bony and cold-eyed, wraiths in Japanese denim and limited-edition sneakers. They started late in the morning, then worked past midnight. They slept at the office.

I hated the idea of it, but some nights I, too, succumbed to the cushy couches upholstered in Dextrous blue. Some nights, I'd lie there, staring up at the ceiling—the exposed ductwork, the rainbow braids of fiber channel ferrying data around the office—and feel a knot in my stomach that wouldn't loosen. I would think I had to poop and I would go squat on a toilet, doing nothing. The motion sensor would time out and the lights would click off, leaving me in darkness. Sometimes I would sit like that for a while. Then a line of code would occur to me, and I would limp back to my desk to tap it out.

At Crowley Control Systems in Southfield, the message we received from Clark Crowley, delivered in an amble around the office every month or so, was: Keep up the fine work, folks! At General Dexterity in San Francisco, the message we received from Andrei, delivered in a quantitative business

update every Tuesday and Thursday, was: We are on a mission to remake the conditions of human labor, so push harder, all of you.

I began to wonder if, in fact, I knew how to push hard. In Michigan, my colleagues all had families and extremely serious hobbies. Here, the wraiths were stripped bare: human-shaped generators of CAD and code. I tried to emulate them, but something hitched inside me. I couldn't get my turbine spinning.

In the months that followed, I had the sense of some vital resource dwindling, and I tried to ignore it. My colleagues had been toiling at this pace for three years without a pause, and I was already flagging after a single San Francisco summer? I was supposed to be one of the bright new additions, the fresh-faced ones.

My face was not fresh.

My hair had gone flat and thin.

My stomach hurt.

In my apartment on Cabrillo Street, I existed mostly in a state of catatonic recovery, brain flaccid, cells gasping. My parents were far away, locked in the frame of a video chat window. I didn't have any friends in San Francisco aside from a handful of Dextrous, but they were just as traumatized as I was. My apartment was small and dark, and I paid too much for it, and the internet was slow.

TWELVE MINUTES after I had called it in, my order from Clement Street Soup and Sourdough arrived, carried to my door by a young man with a sweet face half hidden inside a ketchup-colored motorcycle helmet. A soft *oonce-oonce* of

music emanated from within the helmet, and he bobbed to the beat.

He boomed his greeting in a heavy, hard-to-place accent: "Good evening, my friend!"

Greatest among us are those who can deploy "my friend" to total strangers in a way that is not hollow, but somehow real and deeply felt; those who can make you, within seconds of first contact, believe it.

I dug in my pocket for cash, and then, as I paid him, I thought to ask, "What kind of food is this?"

His face lit up like a neon sign. "It is the food of the Mazg! I hope you like it. If not, call again. My brother will make it better next time." He jogged toward his motorcycle but, halfway there, turned back to say, "You will like it, though." Above the rev of the engine he waved and repeated: "You will like it!"

Inside my apartment, on my kitchen countertop—utterly bare, free from any sign of food preparation or, really, human habitation—I unwrapped the sandwich and opened the soup and consumed the first combo (double spicy) of my life.

If Vietnamese pho's healing powers, physical and psychic, make traditional chicken noodle soup seem like dishwater—and they do—then this spicy soup, in turn, dishwatered pho. It was an elixir. The sandwich was spicier still, thin-sliced vegetables slathered with a fluorescent red sauce, the burn buffered by thick slabs of bread artfully toasted.

First my stomach unclenched, and then my brain. I let loose a long sigh that transformed into a rippling burp, which made me laugh out loud, alone, in my kitchen.

I lifted the lone magnet on my refrigerator, allowed a sheet of shiny pizza coupons to fall to the floor, and stuck the new menu reverently in its place.

I CALLED CLEMENT STREET SOUP AND SOURDOUGH again the next night, and the next. Then I skipped a night, feeling self-conscious, but I ordered again the night after that. For all its spiciness, the food sat perfectly in my traumatized stomach.

In the month that followed, I learned about it bit by bit:

- The restaurant was operated by two brothers.
- Beoreg, with the sweet voice and the perfect English, answered the phone and cooked the food.
- Chaiman, with the sweet face and the earbuds never not leaking dance music, rode the motorcycle and delivered the food.
- When pressed for more information on "the food of the Mazg," Chaiman would only laugh and say, "It's famous!"
- Beoreg and Chaiman had been slinging spicy soups and/or sandwiches in San Francisco for just over a year.
- They possessed no storefront: they cooked where they lived, in an apartment whose precise location they were reluctant to disclose.
- Chaiman said, "It is okay. Just not legal. Definitely okay, though."
- With the double spicy, one bonus slab of sourdough bread was included, always, for dunking in your soup.
- That bread was the secret of the whole operation. Beoreg baked it himself every day.
- That bread was life.

Most nights, I called ahead and waited on hold (though I was recognized, and the greeting from brother Beoreg was not "Okay to hold?" but "Lois! Hi! I have to put you on hold. Just a second, I promise") with the music in another language I'd grown to appreciate—it was sad, in a nice way—and then, rescued from purgatory, I placed my order (the same order every time), and when brother Chaiman brought it on his motorcycle, I greeted him warmly and tipped him generously, then carried my double spicy inside to eat it standing, my eyes watering from the heat and the happiness.

One Friday, after a particularly shattering day at the office, in which my code reviews had all come back red with snotty comments, and my manager, Peter, had gently inquired about the pace of my refactoring ("perhaps not sufficiently turbo-charged"), I arrived home in a swirl of angst, with petulance and self-recrimination locked in ritual combat to determine which would ruin my night. On the phone with Beoreg, I ordered my food with a rattling sigh, and when his brother arrived at my door, he carried something different: a more compact tub containing a fiery red broth and not one but two slabs of bread for dipping. "Secret spicy," he whispered. The soup was so hot it burned the frustration out of me, and I went to bed feeling like a fresh plate, scalded and scraped clean.

Is it an exaggeration to say Clement Street Soup and Sourdough saved me? At night, instead of fitfully reviewing the day's errors while my stomach swam and churned, I . . . fell asleep. My course steadied. I had taken on ballast in the form of spicy broth and fragrant bread and, maybe, two new friends, or sort-of-friends, or something.

Then they went away.

It was on a Wednesday in September that I dialed the number and was greeted by Beoreg, who said "Okay to hold?" as if he didn't recognize me, then abandoned me to the sad-but-nice music for a very long time, so long in fact I suspected he'd forgotten me. When he came back on the line, he accepted my order dutifully and told me his brother would bring it soon. "Goodbye," he murmured before hanging up. He'd never actually said that before.

When Chaiman knocked on my door, his sweet face was morose. He wasn't listening to any music. The night seemed suddenly oppressively quiet.

"Hello, my friend," he said limply. The bag containing my double spicy dangled limply from his fingers.

I took the bag and cradled it, felt the warmth of the soup across my chest. "What's wrong?"

"We are leaving," he said. "Visas, you know?"

This was unacceptable.

"We cannot stay. I would try, but Beoreg says . . . he does not want to be hidden forever. He wants to have a real restaurant. With tables." Chaiman rolled his eyes, as if wishing to serve customers in a physical establishment constituted Versailles-level extravagance.

"We will miss you," he said. "Me and Beoreg both."

The bag in my arms crinkled, and so did the skin around my eyes. I wanted to wail, *Don't leave me! What will I eat? Who will I call?* But all I could muster was "I'm so sorry to hear about this."

He nodded. I did, too. It was September, and the air was very cold. He said, "I should tell you . . . Beoreg and I have a joke.

When he gives me the bag"—he poked at the food in my arms—"and says, for Lois on Cabrillo Street, we always say together: the number one eater!"

I didn't know what that meant, but I knew I had never been one before.

"It's supposed to be nice. Because we like you. You know?"

I did.

Astride his motorcycle, Chaiman raised a hand and shook his index finger emphatically. Above the rev of the engine, he cried again: "Number one eater!"

THE SLURRY TABLE

Work looked like this: me, sitting for twelve hours at my desk in the basement of a converted macaroni factory near the park where the Giants play. My company-issued laptop was hulking and loud, the roaring fan necessary to cool the superfast GPU within. At my desk, I hooked it into a pair of monitors, a keyboard, a tablet with stylus. No mouse. I'd learned the tablet trick from one of the patient programmers at Crowley, who recommended it as a ward against repetitive stress injury. Here at General Dexterity, the wraiths regarded it strangely. They could not yet imagine their bodies betraying them.

ArmOS was comprised of two lobes.

First there was Control, the code that told the arms how to move. It read their super-precise sensors, flexed their motor-muscles. The code was very compact and highly optimized, because any improvement to Control—a faster sensor reading, a firmer grip—applied to everything the arms did.

Then there was Task, the code that told the arms *why* to move. Task was a thrilling jumble of heuristics and hacks.

If Control was all about one thing—moving in space—then Task was about a thousand things. The module called Stacking gave the arms a theory of gravity, balance, and layers, and right next door there was the module called Glassware, a hard-coded cheat sheet containing the dimensions, to the micrometer, of the world's ten thousand most common scientific flasks and vials.

(In addition to Task and Control there was also Interface, the code that allowed users to control their arms and apply continuous ArmOS upgrades, all with a simple web app, but the other teams pitied Interface, because its work was so easy.)

My manager, Peter, had recently been promoted to oversee all of Control. I worked on the submodule responsible for Proprioception, which is, I think, a beautiful word—*pro-prio-cep-tion!*—and also the process by which organisms judge the position of their own body parts in space. It's a crucial sense; definitely more important than a few of the Big Five. When you walk, you look forward, not down at your feet, because you are confident they are where you expect them to be, obeying your commands. That's a pretty cool feature.

It was an unanticipated consequence of working on robot proprioception that I would often sit at my desk snaking my arms around in the air, trying to pay very close attention to what was happening. I'd close my eyes, extend a hand, lift it slowly while rotating it at the same time. What was I feeling? The weight of my own limb, yes; but also . . . a tendril of strange information. Not touch, exactly. Something else. Proprioception!

I did this quite a bit, for reasons both technical and thera-

peutic, and once, I opened my eyes to find Peter standing there, silently watching me propriocept. I yelped.

My persistent stomachache had been diagnosed after a consultation at General Dexterity's in-house clinic (next to the dentist and the masseuse) as stress-related. The nurse plucked a brochure from a thick stack; its title, printed in Dextrous blue, was *Taking Care of Yourself While You're Changing the World*.

It was Peter who recommended switching to the liquid meal replacement that he and many of the other programmers preferred, and that seemed easier to digest under the circumstances, which were extreme and unrelenting.

"Slurry," he said. "It's outstanding."

Slurry was a nutritive gel manufactured by an eponymous company even newer than General Dexterity. Dispensed in waxy green Tetra Paks, it had the consistency of a thick milkshake. It was nutritionally complete and rich with probiotics. It was fully dystopian.

I signed up for a trial month using a coupon code obtained from Peter and had my subscription delivered directly to the office. I was not alone. On the day I picked it up in the mail room, there was an enormous ziggurat of green Tetra Paks waiting on a shipping pallet. The gel tasted like burnt almonds and it did sit better in my stomach than the regular food in the cafeteria; it also rescued me from the endless teeter-totter between salad bar and paella station.

There was another benefit, which was social. At mealtimes, I sat in the Slurry corner of the cafeteria, where a not-insignificant fraction of the Dextrous gathered to furtively slurp our gray gel. The group around my table became my

first shaky scaffolding of office friendship. Peter was our chieftain, and he was in fact sponsored by Slurry, his deluxe subscription provided free as long as he continued to place in the top five in his age group at approved athletic events (10K races, triathlons, caber tosses) and do so wearing bright green Slurry-branded spandex. His subscription was a bleeding-edge formulation with occasionally noxious side effects; he consumed it three times a day, seven days a week.

The rest of us ate Slurry only two or three days a week. The other days, we slunk into the lunch line to select our preferred fried chicken parts under Chef Kate's woeful gaze.

Besides Peter, there was Garrett, a pale and intense programmer on the internationalization team; Benjamin, a security specialist who worked to ensure that the robot arms couldn't be hacked; Anton, a sales associate burdened with a deeply unfortunate Bluetooth earpiece; and Arjun, a sprightly interface designer, also from Michigan, who became the first of the Dextrous I dared to call my friend. In addition to our interactions at the Slurry table, Arjun and I sometimes migrated to a bar farther down Townsend Street after leaving the office for ten p.m. beers and cheese fries. Peter did not approve.

During a lull in the conversation around the table—they were many; we were awkward—I told my comrades in slurpage the sad news about Clement Street Soup and Sourdough.

"I don't eat bread," Peter said preemptively.

"Didn't it hurt your stomach?" asked Garrett.

It had not. "The soup was really spicy, but it was balanced somehow. And I really liked the guys who made it." My cheeks felt tight, and I knew I was emitting a pulse of emotion that

was too much for this crowd, so I said, "Back to Slurry for dinner!" and took a gurgling slurp from the Tetra Pak.

I COULDN'T FACE Proprioception or ArmOS or any of it, so I walked across Townsend Street to the Task Acquisition Center.

All the arms faced different scenarios erected on workbenches wheeled and locked into place: one was an array of test tubes, as in a lab; another, a disassembled phone, as in a factory; another, an open cardboard box, as in a warehouse; and on and on. Arms had vacuums, arms had drills, arms had nothing but their bare six-fingered hands. The training floor clicked and whirred and whined and thwacked. Above the din, the occasional human curse.

At each bench there was an instructor, moving an arm through a sequence of motions, demonstrating how a procedure unfolded: the lift and shake of a test tube; the pick and place of a phone assembly; the pack and seal of a box, which was a job for two arms together, punctuated by the *skritchhh* of tape.

The trainers were contractors, very well compensated—but only temporarily. Each lab technician or factory worker or logistics specialist would teach one robot arm how to perform one task impeccably, under many different conditions, variously adverse. When the task had been mastered, it would be integrated into ArmOS, and in that moment, every General Dexterity arm on the planet would become that much more capable.

There were trainers outside this building, too. In addition to all the built-in capabilities of ArmOS, there was a market-

place for skill extensions—things more niche than we could ever imagine. How to swirl a petri dish containing a particular strain of bacteria. How to insert a fuel rod safely into a nuclear reactor. How to sew the laces into a football. Whole companies had formed around some of these tasks. The fuel rod people had just three customers, and they were rich.

I paused for a moment to watch the arms at work, and in their subtlest motions I could see my contribution. When they swiveled in two dimensions at once, the motion was smoother than it had been a few months ago. I'd spent a lot of time poring over the PKD 2891 Stepper Motor data sheet to figure that out.

One arm, working under the supervision of a burly, bearded trainer, faced a mock kitchen countertop, bare except for a mixing bowl and a carton of eggs. *Oh no.* I pitied it.

The arm plucked an egg, brought it to the bowl, tapped it against the rim: once, gently (too gently); again, harder (still not enough); and a third time, too hard (much too hard), shell exploding against the bowl, yolk falling in orange ribbons through its fingers down both sides of the bowl, pooling on the countertop.

I was glad not to be working on Force Feedback. Even after years of work, ArmOS struggled with its gentlest touch. We would solve everything else before we solved the egg problem.

THAT DAY, I left General Dexterity earlier than I ever had before, with the sun still shining on the sidewalk outside. I activated the standard suite of office chaff: left a data sheet on my desk, opened to its third page, seemingly mid-consultation,

and draped my jacket artfully across the back of my chair, indicating that I hadn't left the office—never that—but was only attending a meeting or crying in a bathroom. Normal stuff.

In fact, I hopped aboard the Muni train bound for downtown. Riding across the city, I had a knotty feeling in my chest that I briefly worried might be cardiac, but by the time the 5 bus arrived in the Richmond District, I understood it was simply sorrow.

THE CLEMENT STREET STARTER

I HAD MOURNED MY LOSS and slurped my Slurry and was buffering a dark serial drama through my slow internet connection when I heard a knock on the door, light and confident. I knew that knock.

It was Chaiman, for the first time unencumbered by his motorcycle helmet. His hair was sandy brown.

"Number one eater!" he cried.

Another figure was standing behind him, farther down the steps. This man had the same sweet face and the same sandy hair, but his skin was darker and he was thicker around the middle.

Chaiman turned to him. "Beoreg, you are too shy. Come on."

The voice on the phone! Beoreg. Chef and baker, master of the double spicy, author of my comfort. I felt like I should bow.

"We are leaving now," Chaiman said. There was a brown taxi idling in the street behind them. "But Beo had the idea to give you a gift."

"That's sweet of you," I said.

Beoreg smiled, but his gaze was fixed somewhere around

my shins. He offered an object wrapped in a scratchy kitchen towel. It was a ceramic crock, about as big as a family-size jar of peanut butter, dark green with a matching lid, the glaze shimmering iridescent.

"What is it?" It looked like the kind of vessel that might contain an ancestor's ashes, which I definitely did not want.

"It's our culture," Beoreg said softly.

Nope, I definitely did not—

"I mean 'starter,'" Beoreg corrected himself. "For making sourdough bread, you know? I brought it so you could bake your own."

I had no idea what to do with a starter.

Chaiman sensed my unease. "Beo will show you," he said. He craned his neck to peer into my apartment. "If you have a kitchen?"

I had a kitchen. I led them inside.

"It's very clean," Beoreg said. His English was flawless, with a faint clip like something from a BBC show—a new one, not a historical drama.

"I never cook," I confessed.

"Because you are the number one eater!" Chaiman hooted. He pointed gleefully at their menu, still stuck to the refrigerator.

"Do you have flour?" Beoreg asked softly.

I almost laughed. "No flour," I said. "Really. I never cook."

He nodded sharply. "No problem. I'll give you everything you need." He jogged to the door.

Chaiman had opened the refrigerator without asking and was rooting around inside. He pulled out a waxy Tetra Pak of Slurry and looked at it like it was a dead mouse.

Beoreg returned a moment later dragging an enormous wooden trunk, scarred and stickered, something from another era of travel. He unhooked its clasps and threw back the lid; inside, arrayed in a jumble, were all the accoutrements of a kitchen.

There were small long-handled cups and broad, flat pans. I saw a thick clutch of wooden spoons, their edges stained and charred, and a collection of mixing bowls nested one inside the other, padded with newspaper. There were murky glass vessels holding baby Xenomorphs (possibly they were pickles) and bright colorful boxes with labels in Arabic and Hebrew and other scripts I didn't recognize. There were tiny unmarked jars holding red and yellow powders; precursor ingredients, no doubt, to the "secret spicy." There was a cutting board upright along the back of the trunk, its surface mottled with spills and streaks and deep-notched evidence of cleaver work.

While he rummaged, Beoreg asked, "So, do you know how bread is made?"

"Sure," I said. "Basically." I knew there was flour involved. "Not really." I was an eater, not a baker.

"There's a living thing, a culture. I guess it's more American to say 'starter.' You mix the starter with the flour, along with water and salt, and it makes gas, which makes the dough rise. It gives it a certain flavor, too." Beoreg stood, holding a selection of tools. "You've had pets?"

I shook my head ruefully. The only living thing I had ever managed to support was myself, and then only barely, except for—

"Maybe a plant?"

"Yes!" I said. "I have a desk cactus."

"Okay! This culture—starter, sorry—it's like that. It's alive." He lifted the crock's lid. "See?"

The gray slime inside looked distinctly not alive. It looked like an enemy of aliveness. Like something alive things crossed the street to avoid.

"Smell," he commanded, and offered the crock, tilting it toward me. "Can you detect it?"

I took a guarded sniff, allowing no more than two or three molecules from the decrepit vessel into my nose. I equivocated. "What is it supposed to smell like?"

"Bananas, a bit. It's a very nice smell."

I sniffed again, still detected nothing, but nodded my head agreeably. "You're right. That is nice." It was the same strategy I employed at wine tastings.

Beoreg beamed. "But you have to feed it, okay? Keep it going. I'll show you how."

He plopped his selection of tools onto the countertop. First was a stout, thick-papered sack of flour, the top neatly folded and chip-clipped. "Whole flour," he said. "It has to be whole." Next came a small mixing bowl and a long-handled cup. "Measure twenty grams—just this much." He lowered the cup into the sack, leveled it with his finger. "See?" He dumped the flour into the mixing bowl, then filled the same long-handled cup with water from the tap. "The same amount." He added the water to the bowl, snatched up the last of his tools, a short wooden spoon, and started to stir.

Chaiman had been fishing around in the trunk, and he stood holding a CD jewel case. "You must play the music of the Mazg, too!" he declared.

I dug out my hulking General Dexterity laptop and felt along its edge for the CD tray I had never once used. Inside

Chaiman's jewel case there was a plain disc with its title handwritten in the mystery script of the menu. I dropped it into the tray. The laptop cleared its throat, whining and clicking, and sound began to flow from its speakers. It was the brothers' hold music, sad and inimitable, crooned in that unfamiliar language. The language of the Mazg. As it played, Beoreg and Chaiman seemed to slow down and synchronize. Chaiman's posture relaxed and Beoreg's eyes softened as he stirred.

"This is the starter's food—see?" Beoreg said, showing me how the water and flour had combined into a pale paste. "It's important to feed it every day. If you skip a day, it will be okay, but not any longer than that."

This was seeming like more and more of a commitment.

Beoreg looked me in the eye for the first time, his gaze suddenly searching. "You'll keep it alive?"

I should have backed out. I should have thanked the brothers one last time for all the combos (double spicy) and escorted them back to their taxi waiting in the street. Instead, I said: "Of course I will."

Beoreg beamed. "Good! And you can bake with it. That's great." His eyes flickered down. He handed me the mixing bowl with its pasty contents. "Here, you can feed the starter now. Your first time."

I scooped up the floury paste with the spoon, held it for a moment over the shimmering maw of the crock, then plopped it in.

"Do I stir it together?"

"Yes, until it's all mixed."

The pasty food marbled into the dark starter, and then the combined mixture faded to an even gray. I kept stirring,

and stirring, until Beoreg said gently, "That's enough." He took the spoon, washed it quickly under the tap, then laid it neatly beside the mixing bowl and the long-handled cup. "All of these, you can keep."

He set the crock's lid into place with the gentleness of a parent tucking a child into bed.

I wondered what else was inside that trunk. "What about the spicy soup? Can I make that, too?"

Beoreg looked sheepish. "It's more complicated. I can write it down, maybe. Here." He scrounged for a pen, crouched in front of the refrigerator, and wrote an email address along the bottom edge of their menu. It was the same dark, sure script; that was Beoreg's handwriting. "Send me a message."

The brothers shuffled out of my apartment and into the taxi, still waving as its door clomped shut. The taxi's tires squeaked as it leapt forward into the night, carrying them to the airport or the bus station or, who knows, maybe to a boat waiting at some lonely pier.

Back in the apartment, the CD was still playing, sweet and sad.

SPARTAN STIX

Let me just establish where I was at with the whole cooking situation.

When I was a child, my family had no distinguishable cuisine. I remember Happy Meal hamburgers and Hungry-Man fried chicken. I remember the Denny's menu; we knew that backward and forward. I remember tubs of popcorn at the movies. Tubs of popcorn for dinner.

We possessed no stock of recipes, no traditions, no ancestral affinities. There was a lot of migration and drama in our history; our line had been broken not once but many times, like one of those gruesome accident reports, the bone shattered in six places. When they put my family back together, they left out the food.

There was one exception. My grandma Lois, for whom I was named, did not deign to cook—she was my mother's mother in that regard—but she did, on special occasions, bake bread. Specifically, she baked Chicago Prison Loaf, a comically hard and dense but apparently nutritious substance that she had learned to produce working part-time at an industrial bakery that served the Illinois Department of Correc-

tions. In my family, Chicago Prison Loaf was a joke—a grim surprise often wrapped up for Christmas in a box chosen for its resemblance to a nice sweater or a video game console. Grandma Lois did seem to genuinely enjoy eating it, toasted and slathered. The rest of us, we buttered the bread we bought at the grocery store.

My high school cafeteria offered a rotating daily menu item, but I can assure you that I never chose it. Instead: fries, fries, two orders of fries! Fries so perfectly crisp they put fast-food fries to shame, fries crusted with salt and eaten one by one, fries not merely consumed but circulated as social currency: peace offerings, seductions. Four years in that cafeteria and I ate nothing but fries. The teenage body is a miracle. How did it scrounge from those sticks of burnt starch enough vitamins and minerals to sustain me, and not just sustain me but make me grow, and grow absurdly, grow six inches, grow boobs and hips? It was a disgusting diet. I realize that now. I bow down before that body.

In college, I did not immediately realize that it was behind me. The summer before freshman year, the One Campus, One Book selection had converted me to vegetarianism, which meant the things I ate never seemed to fill me up. Armed with a dormitory meal plan, I consumed the equivalent of nine meals a day, all of them shaded brown, textured crispy. You would expect a vegetarian, perhaps, to eat vegetables; you would be disappointed. There was never on my tray a single tuft of green.

I sat in various dorm rooms with my computer science cabal, plowing through problem sets, eating whole pizzas and so-called Spartan Sticks—named for the school's mascot, and upon reflection, it may have been spelled Stix—which

were just pizzas that omitted tomato sauce and compensated for its absence with more cheese and even more cheese and a flaky garlic powder that carried a hot chemical burn.

Four years of this. By the end, I was a puffy caricature of myself. As my senior year started, I did finally realize that something had gone wrong; that the teenage machine had broken down, and that my body—desperate, pushed beyond any reasonable nutritional tolerances—was simply building new parts out of salt. I tried to improve my diet, but only in the most marginal and clueless ways. I stopped ordering whole pizzas and bought family-size tubs of hummus. I consumed baby carrots by the pound.

Later, back in Southfield, I cleaned up my act somewhat. Before I was the number one eater at Clement Street Soup and Sourdough, I was a very familiar face at the Whole Foods salad bar on West 10 Mile. My creations tended to go heavy on croutons. One day, a single chicken tender found its way into the nest of lettuce. It was delicious. So closed a brief and disastrous era.

In San Francisco, I switched to Slurry, and my refrigerator looked like something out of a sci-fi movie, tight rows of shimmery Tetra Paks replenished every two weeks.

This is all to say: I'd never baked bread in my life.