

Bread

by Hannah Sexton

When COVID-19 first sent us into quarantine, I passed the time by watching various cooking shows and was soon struck by one of the worst ideas I've ever had. I was going to learn how to make bread from scratch.

Although I had thought about it for weeks, my first attempt was done on impulse one night at around 8 o'clock. I found a basic recipe online that used ingredients I already had and went to work. It called for five and a half cups of flour, and I thought, "That's an awful lot, isn't it?" But I knew nothing about bread, so I just assumed it needed that much for some arcane reason I wasn't allowed to know yet. That was not the case. It was actually a recipe for a giant, family-sized loaf.

I mixed this horrible concoction of flour, water, yeast, and a few other things for what felt like hours, using all of my strength, until I was left with an absolutely gigantic blob of bread dough. It was at this moment I started to feel like I had made a mistake. Unfortunately, I was in too deep to stop, so I continued.

I dumped the dough mountain into the biggest bowl my family owns and left it to rise for an hour and a half.

When I came back, the dough had risen to the top of the bowl, slightly over it, actually, and for something that was supposedly full of air, it was awfully heavy. But the worst was yet to come. I still had to figure out how to knead this monstrosity.

There are several different techniques for kneading bread; it's up to personal preference which one you use. However, I didn't know that at this time, so I decided to just roll it around on the table for a few minutes and call it a day. If done correctly, kneading is supposed to make the dough less sticky and give the bread its characteristic texture. I kept waiting for this to happen, but after fifteen minutes of kneading and no end in sight, I gave up.

Technically, you're supposed to let it rise again for another thirty minutes or so, but I couldn't bear the thought of this dough glob getting any bigger. It was time for the oven.

I turned the bowl upside down over a pan, and the dough clung to the bottom of it as if it knew where it was going next. I tried to scoop it out with my hands, but it stuck to them as well. I guess it was determined to take me down with it. It came out eventually with some coaxing, and I probably could have shaped it and made it look nice and pretty before it went in the oven, but I just wanted this ordeal to be over.

So in the oven it went, ugly and mushy and misshapen as it was, and I set it to bake for forty-five minutes, per the recipe's orders. I went off to do other things during that time and came back when I heard the timer beeping. Although my bread had been "baking" for almost an hour, it was still the same color and shape as it was when it was raw. I knew that something wasn't right, but not how to fix it. Eventually, I just let it bake for longer and hoped that it would itself out, but like most of my efforts, that did not work.

It spent over an hour in that oven with no change, so I decided to accept defeat and take it out. This was where denial kicked in. "Maybe it just *looks* bad," I thought. "Maybe it'll taste really good." Those thoughts gave me some hope, and I grabbed a knife to cut into my creation.

It took a monumental effort to cut that godforsaken hunk of bread open. It was hard as a rock, like cutting into cement with a butter knife. It almost broke the knife I was using. Although

I did get a piece cut off, at that point I didn't even want the bread anymore. It had put me through too much.

But that last bit of hope shone through, and I decided to try it. I took a small bite, afraid of what I was putting into my mouth. My fear was justified. I would consider that bread the single worst thing I have ever tasted in my eighteen years of life. I can only describe the flavor as a mixture of glue and mattress foam dusted with a healthy coating of table salt.

Total failure.

Surprisingly, I did try baking bread again after that, using a different recipe of course. It took me eight tries to make something edible. Obviously, I do not have the gift for baking, but I have learned a lot in my attempts.

I learned that bread is a temperamental being. It can smell fear. You can't let it know that you're afraid of it. Even if you don't know what you're doing, pretend that you do and figure it out. I learned that bread is nowhere near as easy as the TV shows make it look. Or maybe it is, and I'm just heinously bad at it. I don't know.

But most importantly, what I gained from my bread baking experiences was entertainment and distraction from the global pandemic. Even though that first loaf was a disaster, I had fun making it. It gave me a tiny bit of joy during a terrible time, and when I finally started making loaves that tasted okay, it gave me something to feel proud of during a time when there wasn't much good in the world at all.