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Warm Bread

Hanna Ziegler

It's a curious thing, coming alive. Waking from a kind of stasis, not birthed but manufactured, and not allowed to live except for the moment you are first integrated with the pulses that flow through the circuit of a space. Electrifying, if I do say so myself.

I was plugged into a wall socket on a countertop in the room the Movers dubbed The Kitchen. My home was a cubbyhole with a door that they could pull down to hide me from view, something they rarely did. Next to me they kept their loaves of bread and Blender who was already quite old when I was installed as his companion. The Movers called this space The Bread Box, which I did not understand as it was neither a box nor a place specifically for bread. When Blender was awake he shared my consternation at their lack of ingenuity and logic.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

The Movers called me Toaster and I was one of the first appliances to be operable, beaten only by Coffee Maker and Microwave. The female Mover was the one who plugged me in and she wasted no time in filling my slots with bread and pushing down hard on both levers. I was flustered and a little indignant, and as a result I was a little overzealous with the toasting. But she didn't seem to mind as she slathered butter and jam onto the crusted surface.

"Jake?" she called to no one in particular, or so it seemed to me. "What do you want on your toast?" We both waited for the reply, which came from above the ceiling.

"Just butter," Jake yelled back. Something landed heavily on the ceiling, and the female Mover and I both looked up again. Heavy silence and then a thumping that I would later recognize as footsteps.

"Debbie, could you come here a minute?"

The female Mover put down her toast and knife and went out into another room. I was left alone to assess my surroundings. That was when I officially met Coffee Maker. He was sending suspicious waves through the circuit from across the sink, and if he had been a Mover, capable of facial expression, I would have said that he looked sulky, as though he was unhappy that he was no longer alone on the counter. Microwave had her own little raised cabinet you see, and I

had not yet been pushed back into The Bread Box. His discomfort was annoying but understandable.

Over the next few days I watched The Kitchen transform. Debbie and Jake ‘Wendell’ were moving in. From what Microwave told me, they had bought The House before they had married, and had just returned from The Honeymoon.

“The way Debbie talks to Cell?” Microwave rolled her frequencies. “Apparently, The Honeymoon Stage takes a while to wear off. It could be ages before they finish unpacking.”

Oven, Refrigerator, and Dishwasher arrived the next day and were set up by two large Movers. Cell informed us that night, as she sat in her charging station, that Debbie found one of them attractive in form. Dishwasher and I exchanged disinterested signals, creating a camaraderie between the two of us, which Blender joined when he was plugged in.

Jake and Debbie each claimed a side of my four-slice configuration. Jake preferred his toast very lightly browned, and more than once that I recall, Debbie accused him of liking warm bread. I quite agreed with her, but there was really nothing to be done about it on my end. Jake had full control of my left side, except for that one time that Debbie turned it up as part of a practical joke. When he held up his extra-crispy sourdough, he had been rather upset, but Debbie had laughed at him and chanted “April Fool’s,” at which point he had lightened up considerably.

Hard to forget what happened next. Blender and I agreed that they really ought to put us all away before they tried doing that on the countertop. If it hadn’t happened several times already, I would have been more appalled at their behavior. As it was, I turned my frequencies to Cell and asked her how long she thought The Honeymoon Stage would last. She shushed me with a frantic wave of electricity.

Jake spent the most time in The Kitchen with us. He had won the argument over where all their cookware should be kept by claiming that he was the one that would do most of the cooking anyway.

“We wouldn’t want our house to burn down now would we?” he had asked, the corners of his mouth turned up slightly as he watched Debbie out of the corner of his eye.

“That was one time!” Debbie said, snapping a dishtowel in Jake’s direction. “And I still blame you.” She marched out of the room, flipping the overhead lights off as she went. Jake had been grinning

when he turned them back on.

Every morning after that Jake came into The Kitchen around seven o'clock, pressed the silver 'Start' button on Coffee Maker's glossy black surface and made breakfast. Now that they were settling into a rhythm and had all available appliances at their disposal, I found myself used less frequently. I kept my satisfaction about this to myself since most of the other appliances, particularly Cell and Coffee Maker, boasted about the extent of the Movers dependency on them. Of course, none of us worked as hard as Refrigerator, but he was rather too busy to gloat about it, and I wondered if he didn't envy us for our daily grieves.

Like Oven, he rarely joined in the conversations that sprung up between us all in the silences that came when the Movers were out of The House. These discussions would have been more frequent if Cell had been around, but Debbie took her everywhere, and she was only able to talk with us at night when Debbie put her in the charging station under Microwave's cabinet. I assumed that this early proximity before the rest of us arrived was what had sparked their friendship. Dishwasher agreed with me.

"Good thing Jake doesn't have one," he said to me one night. Microwave and Cell were gossiping hopelessly in the dark. "I don't think I could handle two of them."

He had spoken too soon. As if conjured from our conversation, a package arrived the very next evening containing another Cell. Jake was entirely too excited for its arrival.

"It's about time," Debbie said, peering into the newly opened box.

Jake removed a larger, shinier version of Cell and held it up in what I could only describe as a triumphant gesture. "I bet you're jealous," he said, his mouth doing that curl-up-at-one-corner thing again. I briefly became nervous, as that look generally started them on the path to more countertop acrobatics. After a few weeks of no such thing I had hoped that The Honeymoon Stage had passed, but at that moment I thought I might have been a little too optimistic. However, Debbie only rolled her eyes and then rubbed at her temple in slow circles.

"I don't even like the iPhone 6," she said, stepping away from Jake and opening Refrigerator's door.

It was Jake's turn to roll his eyes. He pulled out a cable similar to the one Debbie used to recharge Cell, and plugged iPhone 6 into the

socket next to hers.

“Oh, this’s gonna be hilarious,” Coffee Maker said from across the room as iPhone 6’s masculine signal came through the circuit.

“What are you talking about,” I asked, not following his train of thought.

He gave me the electronic equivalent of a grin. “A hot shot like that in the next socket over? From Cell?” The circuitry all but shook with laughter. “If she doesn’t embarrass herself hitting on him then I’m not a Keurig.”

I turned to Dishwasher. “Do you think he’s right?” I asked, because I was hard pressed to believe Coffee Maker most of the time. On some primitive, atomic level I could see the appeal of watching Cell pummel the newcomer through the wiring, but I failed to comprehend why she would do so. For all her annoying habits she wasn’t much of a fighter. Maybe that was exactly Coffee Maker’s point.

Dishwasher gave a noncommittal surge and said, “We’ll see.”

Across the room, Microwave was engaging iPhone 6 in conversation by making introductions. He was respectful enough, nodding in each of our circuitual directions before insisting we just call him Six.

“iPhone is like, way too common of a name, you know?” he said, or rather asked. I wasn’t sufficiently sure one way or the other.

I forgot about Coffee Maker’s prediction until later that night when Cell rejoined us for her own recharge. As Debbie connected Cell to her cable, I straightened up, so to speak, suddenly very curious about how things would turn out. It was, however, nothing like I believe any of us might have expected.

Six gave a courteous nod like he had given to each of us earlier. “Hey,” he said. “I’m Six.” Cell took one pulse at him and turned to Microwave, as though he wasn’t sitting directly beside her on the countertop.

Six seemed as nonplussed as the rest of us, but after a few seconds of Cell gushing to Microwave about her and Debbie’s day, he turned to me.

“So, Toasty,” he said, just loud enough to be heard over Cell’s overly emphatic signals. “What’s with the vocab?”

I narrowed my frequencies. “I beg your pardon?”

“The ancient language, dude,” he said. “What are you, a hundred?”

Coffee Maker's circuit-shaking laughter reached me but I ignored him. "I am a very recent model actually, Six. And my name is Toaster, not 'dude.'"

Six's signal cut off like he was trying not to laugh. "Sure dude, uh, Toaster. Whatever."

The instant Six was taken off his cable the next morning, Cell flew into a rant. "Can you believe him?" she said, her already high signals reaching unmanageable decibels. "He's here for a few hours and it's like he owns the place. Well I don't care if he is the newest model. He can't come marching in to make me feel inferior." She folded her signals and said a few choice words. "And did you hear him talking to Toaster?"

I was tempted to point out that she had never much cared for me nor me for her, and therefore her faux concern on my behalf was unnecessary, but as Jake came over to my side of the counter I decided against it. He reached past me towards Blender, whose signal came online a second later.

"What'd I miss?" he drawled as his body was set up right next to mine.

Dishwasher answered first. "New guy named Six," he said. "He's another Cellular."

"That what she's hollerin' about?" No need to inquire as to which 'she' he was referring. Her frequencies spoke for themselves.

Blender sighed. "Damn, I'm too old for this."

Privately I agreed with him, especially as his chipped glass attachment squeaked into place and was filled with yogurt and various fruits. A horrific squealing grind followed as Blender's metal blades protested against their forced movement. Even Jake looked uneasy and turned the speed down to accommodate him.

For reasons that flummoxed me, Blender was the only appliance in the kitchen that was not plugged in at all times. He was used almost as frequently as I was, and yet at the end of the day, when either Dishwasher or Jake washed his attachment, Blender was unplugged and put back into the recesses of The Bread Box. I often thought that it was criminal not to leave him attached to a power source. After all, he was much better company than Coffee Maker.

Jake released the knob that controlled Blender's speed and it began to slow, the contents doing another lap around the interior before coming to a stand still. Blender's loose internal wire gave

an involuntary surge and I winced as my own connection flickered dangerously.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

He did not reply.

Jake loaded slices of bread into me and pushed the levers down. The hum from my internal mechanics drowned out the last of Cell’s rampage against Six. By the time I’d lightly toasted Jake’s two slices, Cell had been disconnected from the wall, and as the last piece popped free of my heat coils I had to admit I was glad. Her signals were truly unbearable when she was riled up like that.

The next few months passed in much of the same manner. Jake ruled The Kitchen with an oven-mitted fist, moving about the space with an impressive show of efficiency in all areas from breakfast to dessert. He seemed to have an abundance of free time, most of which he spent with us. Unlike Debbie, Jake never went to Work. According to Six, his Work all took place in a room upstairs called The Office. Even Cell, who had retained her disdain for him, had listened attentively to his story about when Computer had crashed.

“He was using my Wi-Fi to search for what was wrong,” Six said, his frequencies humming with humor. “He was all set to ship her off to an IT guy when he realized that he’d kicked the power strip and disconnected her charger. She’d been unplugged all night.” Even Oven joined the laughter, her low chuckle making the circuit buzz in a way that Coffee Maker never could. Only Cell remained serious.

“Would it kill you to lighten up?” Six asked, changing the energy of the moment. “All that tension’ll make your glass crack.”

Even I saw his mistake.

“Is that a model joke?” Cell asked, her signals rising so fast and to such a height that I felt like Blender’s loose wire was plugged directly into my socket. “Are you insulting my inferior Model Number?”

Six’s frequencies recoiled. “What? No of course—”

“Because there is nothing wrong with my screen!”

“Interesting,” Dishwasher said, low enough that I almost didn’t catch it.

Six lost his mind entirely at that point. “You’re just jealous of my Retina HD Display and my Touch ID!”

“Shots fired,” Oven said, speaking for the first time in weeks.

“Enough.” The circuit went silent. Even Cell, furious as she was, wouldn’t argue with Microwave when she used that tone. Instead, she

folded up her frequencies so tightly that I doubted whether or not she would be able to untie them again.

No one spoke for the rest of the night, and even though Six left the circuit first, Cell held her silence until she too had been taken away.

For the next week, neither Cell nor Six said a word to each other. Oddly enough, the same could be said for Debbie and Jake. According to Cell, Debbie had gone to see a Doctor Mover the week before without telling Jake.

“She turned me off when she got there, so I don’t know what happened.”

“That’s convenient,” Six muttered. If Cell heard him, she ignored it.

According to Six, Debbie kept faking sleep when Jake went to bed every night, even when he was only gone long enough to brush his teeth.

“He thinks she’s hiding something,” Six said, sounding a little too enthusiastic about Debbie’s apparent skullduggery.

I asked Blender for his opinion on the subject the next time he joined the circuit. He didn’t seem particularly perturbed by the news.

“It’s a marriage, kid,” he said as he recovered from that morning’s exercises. “They take a lot of upkeep. I’ve seen a few of them and none have gone off without a hitch.” His signals shuddered. “Damn, I wish they’d take the frickin’ hint already.”

“What hint?” I asked, but he didn’t answer.

A few days later Jake came down to The Kitchen and started baking cookies. The act itself was not unusual, but he didn’t seem to be in a very good mood. I had only ever seen him bake for special occasions, a birthday or Debbie’s last pay raise, and there had been several times when he had simply been in impeccably high spirits. Never had I seen him bake like this. He cracked one of the eggs against the edge of the bowl with such force that not only did it crack, but rather exploded so that pieces of shell fell into the bowl. It took him about twenty minutes to get all the pieces out, and after that he moved with very taunt and deliberate motions as though he was afraid of breaking something else.

Debbie got home just as the last batch left Oven’s top rack. “What’s with the Chocolate Chippers?”

Jake didn’t turn around. “We’re celebrating.”

Debbie froze. She watched Jake slide the cookies free of the flat pan with a spatula and put them on some kind of paper to cool. “Celebrating what?”

“Your perfectly healthy, tumor-free brain,” Jake said. He turned and they stared at each other from across The Kitchen. Debbie’s hand slowly moved to her face, covering her mouth like she didn’t trust herself to speak.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Jake asked, his voice so quiet that I almost didn’t hear him. “Why couldn’t I have been there for you?”

Debbie shook her head, and I didn’t understand what that meant, but Jake seemed to know. He walked across the room and pulled her into a tight hug, wrapping her into him so completely that all I could see was the top of her head. Something like the squeaking of Blender’s attachment came from that spot, and because it had never happened before in my presence I didn’t know what it was. But Coffee Maker knew.

“She’s crying,” he said, and for once, he left it at that.

We waited in silence, for what I wasn’t entirely sure. It seemed that they were never going to let go of one another, but Debbie pulled away and started wiping her eyes with the end of her sleeve. Jake led her over to the mountain of cookies.

“I broke an eggshell,” he warned as he handed one to her.

Her eyebrow shot up. “But you never-”

He waved that comment away. “I was really mad at you.” She looked down at her cookie but didn’t move to eat it.

“Do you want me to test it first?” he asked, a hint of the old curl-at-one-corner of his mouth again. In that moment I wouldn’t have complained if they had jumped on each other the way they had in the beginning. Countertop acrobatics were much preferable to this stilted emotional interaction.

She shook her head. “I... I trust you.” She shoved the whole cookie in her mouth. Jake laughed as her cheeks bulged.

“I was going to make milkshakes to wash them down,” he said, walking over to The Bread Box and pulling Blender out of hibernation.

“No, no,” Blender said the second he came to. “I can’t. I’m too old for this.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?” Dishwasher asked.

Concern flared in my signals. “Is it that loose wire?” I asked, wondering what would happen to both of us if he blew the socket.

Blender ignored us both, but kept up a running commentary of ‘No’ and ‘I can’t.’ Jake filled the glass attachment with vanilla ice cream, milk and ice and turned the knob. I braced myself for some kind of static surge that fried my heating coils or fritzed my connection to the circuit. I was as prepared for my temporary death as I could ever be, but all that happened was that a dull, whining buzz filled the room. Jake released the knob.

“What’d I tell ya?” Blender said.

Jake tried the knob again. The blades turned once and then the whine came back, and Jake dropped his hand and Blender fell silent. Jake and Debbie looked at one another.

“I’ll pick up a new blender tomorrow after Work,” Debbie said.

“Thank God,” said Blender.