

The Bread Queue

'The bread's here !'

The queue which had kept some order through the long hot afternoon, suddenly became a heaving crowd converging on the tables at the side of the market square. Hands waved high, clutching their money bills like punters at a race track.

Fortunately Arni was swept forward to be among the first to watch the bread men put down their head trays. In minutes he had exchanged his note for three long sticks of bread. He clutched them to him with a sense of relief, enjoying the glorious smell of new bake. The smell, however, touched taste buds which stimulated gastric juices and awakened the hunger which was never far away. Arni persuaded himself that after such a long and faithful wait, mother would not mind him having a little of his share now. He broke off a small piece from the longest bread stick, savouring the feel of the crunchy crust and soft white inside. Before he could eat it, he caught sight of Musa again and recalled their earlier meeting.

Arni's mother had left him to keep a place in the bread queue as soon as she heard there were problems with the supply. All afternoon when not dozing in the hot sun or watching the goats, red with dust from passing lorries, Arni had listened to the debates about what may have happened. First there came a rumour that the bakers were on strike. Then someone told them about the old broken down machinery Solomon used, though someone else had said, the only machinery Solomon used was his hands. Someone else thought it was just the lazy workers and carriers, and many others agreed.

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The suggestions came to an end with a pause in which a quiet voice said, 'Perhaps it's the rebels have taken over the bakery.' The very thought sent a ripple of silent fear through the queue and was the point at which Arni's mother thought she had better get home.

Musa had drifted by mid-afternoon. Arni had met him before at the market. His family were rag collectors. Musa knew Arni and his family were Christian, and taunted him about it.

'Are you waiting for bread too,' Arni asked him.

'We don't eat bread.'

'Why not?'

'I don't like bread.'

'Have you tried it?'

'We can't afford to buy bread.' He looked hard at Arni and then said, 'My father says Christians shouldn't need to queue for bread. Your Jesus can give it to you. He feeds crowds of people by magic.'

Arni did not know what to say. He knew the story of how Jesus fed five thousand people. He remembered the pastor saying something about us having to do Jesus' work for him today, but words wouldn't come to let him explain.

Musa had laughed and walking away, muttered. 'Your Jesus isn't doing much for this bread queue.'

Now, seeing Musa again, Arni went straight across to him and held out the piece of bread he had broken. 'Jesus wants me to give you bread for him,' he said.

Musa turned away. 'I told you, we don't eat bread.'

As Musa turned, Arni saw behind him the poorest scrap of a woman, her face gaunt, her bones fleshless beneath her ragged dirt-streaked dress. He pushed the piece of bread into her hands. 'From Jesus', he muttered and broke into a run across the market square. Before he reached home, he had eaten another small piece from the loaf, but he was sure his mother would share the same warm love-glow that lingered inside him.