

The Baker (2010)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

There's a verse in the Hebrew scriptures that has puzzled many a scholar: "When the Lord began speaking through Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go, and marry an unfaithful woman and have unfaithful children, because the people in this country have been completely unfaithful to the Lord." That's the second verse in the book of the prophet Hosea. —Told to marry a bad woman!

Legend has him as a baker. There are some hints in the text, when he says that a baker stirs the fire to make it hotter, and calls his own country "half-baked."

He was older; she was younger. He was stout, from eating too much of his bread; she was slender. He rose at dawn; they like their bread early in the day; he went to bed early. He smelled of flour.

Yet he won her; he was smitten the moment she came into his shop for the family's daily loaf. He won her by persistence and an unwavering devotion; or perhaps she wanted to get away from home.

At first it was marvelous. Coming home to those eyes, those arms, made his day shorter or longer than he could ever have imagined. She didn't mind it, either, to have someone who would spring to respond to her every wish. There was the baby boy, then the daughter, then the second son.

Then it changed, bit by bit. A girl she knew came by; they went out walking. It was fun to be with someone her own age, to laugh, to be amused. There were other evenings, other friends, other amusements. Her baker toiled diligently to buy her more stylish clothes; he never complained, but he smelled of flour.

Then she left. Like that, she was gone. He heard of the man she was with, of his money and his power, and he knew he could do nothing, but he stopped smiling.

Later he heard more, bits and pieces, this and that — of quarrels and angry words. She was no longer at the big house, but somewhere else, where

men were different. Time passed, and she moved from house to house, from man to man; he lost her, never heard.

Then one day, on his way to the bakery, as he crossed the square, he stopped in sudden shock. The clothes were different; she stood differently, slumped in dejection, and there were chains on her ankles. This was the slave mart, and she was waiting to be sold. Only the eyes were the same.

As he moved closer to the auction-block, he calculated swiftly. What money he had, the savings, things he could sell, what money he could borrow. He took a deep breath; if it took it all, he got ready to buy her back.