

He and She

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Citation:

ROCHE-JACQUES, Shelley (2026). He and She. In: National Flash Fiction Day Anthology 2026. National Flash Fiction Day. [Book Section]

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He and She

He feeds the flour with water and stirs.

His mum looks at the jars along the kitchen counter. Stages of fermentation. One day at a time. She takes the dog out for a walk.

He must discard 1/3 of the starter mixture each day. But which third? And what gives him the right to preside over the microbiome like some absurd little dictator? His hands are small, pale and pudgy. He wonders if it's possible to lose weight from your hands. He'll ask online.

His mum refuses to ask the neighbours if they want the discarded mixture, to start their own generation. She says he mustn't ask anyone online if they'll take it.

He moves from jar to jar and thinks of his classmates in loud shopping centre restaurants; the avalanche of rattling shopping bags, their mouths closing around cheeseburgers, their disgusting wipe-clean smiles. Their ease.

His mum carries his clothes fresh-folded to the wardrobe. T-shirts, jeans, the binder vest she cannot stomach. She pulls back his curtains and opens the window. She has painted her own bedroom the colour of deep Italian olive groves and hung pictures of palazzos, bridges, purple rolling hills.

He goes down to the kitchen in the night, where the first jar sits ready. He makes fresh dough and folds in the contents of the jar. He thumps and punches until it's ready to prove. He thinks of the finished loaf—of cutting huge doorstep slices, eating them alone and without stopping.

His mum says, next morning, he should call his friends, see what they're doing. She knows she shouldn't have interfered before. She's been journalling hard and knows he can make his own decisions about who he (see, *he*) is.

He lifts the loaf from the makeshift proving drawer. He has spent hours with his little knives, mastering the art of the mandala. A thousand tiny cuts. But something different is needed. The sun is shining this morning, first time in ages. He studies the tattered postcards splayed across the sunlit fridge. All the far-off places his mum longs to get to.

His mum doesn't ask if he wants anything from town, just shouts from the door that she's going.

He sees from the window the dog bouncing joyfully around her, happy to be out in the fresh air. He looks at the jars on the counter, and back out the window where the trees have now have leaves and blossom. Something flexes. Something lifts, or is not jammed down so tight. Perhaps—he does not—maybe—hate *every* inch of his own flesh. Perhaps *he*, perhaps. Sweeps the jars forward and drops them one by one into the billowing mouth of the pedal bin.

The timer buzzes and the loaf is lifted from the oven. It is large and golden. The artwork has come out well.

Mum returns and stares at the loaf with its intricately etched design; the Rialto Bridge, water flowing beneath.

They carry it to the table. They sit down either side.