

Bread *and* Buttons

Dan Brooke looked around his apartment-slash-office, the shuttered blinds laying thin bars of light over rectangles of dustless tile, and thought about how it wasn't the simple things that mattered, but the quick ones. They weren't the same, after all; a Ferrari crashing through the wall of a building would occur in an instant but entail a very complex cleanup, while preparing a two-to-three person batch of pancakes would take time but nevertheless occur in basic, discrete steps. He'd heard of the “chemistry of a car crash,” but doubted anyone could quantify how many cups of scrap metal would need to be poured into a concrete wall and mixed to produce a destruction of property suit in three to ten days.

The reason Dan had car accidents on his mind was because *The Fast and the Furious* was playing on the television across the room; and yet not-playing, because it was paused, the exaggerated explosion of a supporting character's car against an office complex billowing like an exotic flower's bloom in a silent neon forest. He wasn't sure *which* movie in the series, though—Netflix had cued it up as part of a list he'd been digitally sitting on for months, and more for background noise, an old comfort, than anything. But he wanted to think for a while. Actually, maybe it was *Gone in 60 Seconds*.

The pancakes were because he'd just made breakfast, and as Dan moved into the constricted kitchen (to confirm that he had indeed placed all the plates and silverware in their boxes) he worried again about that habit of his: “just letting stuff happen,” was how he'd explained it to Allie on their third date. She'd told him that as vices went, not paying attention was pretty good—as long as he didn't forget their *fourth* date. He'd chuckled at the time, and took another sip of his hard raspberry lemonade through a yellow straw as the Mariners just *barely* lost that run all over the biggest TV Hard Rock Cafe offered. See, it wasn't a matter of memory; the past, every deadline and dentist appointment and morning cappuccino, stuck out with hard definition, like bristles on a barbeque brush. The next chance he got to mention it again, he decided he'd call it “accidental indifference,” or if not accidental than *eventual*, a choice made for him as the result of time pressing down like a spatula on a hissing burger until, sweating, he had to flip over and keep cooking. And then bring that brush down to keep things clean, because it's never good to let them see you sweat.

Those frames would have to come off the wall soon. He only had four (that *was* an “only” amount, right? For a modest one-bedroom pad?), staggered in pairs on either side of his radiator and the skinny window which rose over it. From left to right: his culinary school degree; a photograph with his parents from when they went to the Bahamas; the accompanying certificate for his “Golden Joystick” award from RobotNews (the trophy itself already carefully packaged and by the door); and a

bride and groom—Allie and him. Running a finger across the last one's top, the faux oak wobbling under his finger, he confirmed that it hadn't even gathered dust yet.

“It's the perfect picture,” Mom had gushed tearfully when she looked at it again after the ceremony, displayed on her 36-inch computer monitor (of course, he'd had to help her with where to insert the SD card). “That's the kind they should put in the frame when you buy it.”

Dan had beamed back, but what he didn't tell her was that Allie had already filled that criteria; the first time he saw her was when buying that leftmost frame, for his graduate degree. Her face was behind a pane of glass, a smile printed in a series of variously-sized empty portraits at the downtown department store. The image was tinted gray, but there was a focus in her eyes, an arresting gleam in the way that her nose united with her cheeks, the curve of her hair with that of her neck. On a sheepish whim, he asked at the nearest customer service desk if they happened to know how to find out who “the people in the sample pictures are” (he tried to be casual about it). The elderly man on duty said they were manufactured by a local company with ties to the store. “Yeah, that gal,” he said, and cleared his throat. “She works here, on... on over in the Women's Apparel, down yonder.”

He could never define why he felt the need to lie about this anecdote to people—if only by omission—when it was inevitably asked how they, the newlyweds, met. Maybe it was so there could just be this one odd little embarrassing moment between them, as he tried to honestly explain his reason for approaching her. He couldn't even recollect exactly what he'd said, he was so nervous, but there was sweating and a powerful pulse drumming through his head, and the phrase “not trying to be creepy or anything” arose once or twice. Her employee nametag was a curved white square rimmed in brown. “Allison,” it read, and when—after so many pleasantries that faded away with time—she agreed to have coffee with him, it was like the word suddenly shone out a light.

A soft *ding* sounded from back in “the office”—the “low battery” warning for his laptop. Dan's shaggy hair stood up on end as he nearly tripped over the rolled-up circular rug, darting back to attend to the matter. The PC was long since packed and waiting, but he still needed something quick and compact around to finish his work.

Hunched over the desk, having connected outlet to input with a serpentine AV cord atop their dented printer, he jostled the adjacent mouse and brought a text document within to light. The words shone a harsh white in the unlit alcove:

The Final Course

~ Dan “Cooke” Brooke

Five years ago, if you'd told me that I'd be one of the most acclaimed and respected

videogame journalists in the industry, I'd have called you a few eggs short of a dozen. And I'd still do it, because Dan Hsu has more awards, and I can never seem to interview Shiguru Miyamoto without getting fixed up on a date with the sidewalk by security.

In all seriousness, though, I'm here to announce—as you've no doubt heard rumors of on the forums here and there—that this post marks my official retirement as a columnist and reporter for RobotNews...

It still had a ways to go, but at least he could set his own deadline this time. He considered closing the laptop's lid but set it at half-tilt instead; the glow focused inwards, a rectangular lamp by which to organize the IRS forms, mortgage papers, and half-scrawled recipes garnishing the rest of the desk. As he did so, he remembered when he submitted his resume to become an official staff member for the site. He'd been a guest contributor for eight months, but the bulk of his time was spent trying to graduate from the New England Culinary Institute. A guy with a chef's degree in progress, set on writing for a company whose ad space featured Monster energy drinks and PlayStation? He knew his chances were bologna-slice slim when he clicked out the email, but writing about his favorite hobby had always been a lesser dream of his. As the hiring confirmation stated a few weeks later, his “unique background” and “geek insight” were apparently enough.

There was also the fact that his older sister had been RobotNews' “Arch-Manager” since the end of college, under the alias “Dawn Won.” If not for her, Dan might never have picked up a Nintendo controller before he could read (“Hey, he's *learning* something,” she defensively told Dad when the latter protested the hours he spent on the machine). But then he would've later, right? At a party in a friend's living room in middle school, or in the Electronics aisle at Wal-Mart? He suspected that was what made him “just let stuff happen”: the *possibilities*, every vague and nagging one of them, dipping into his brain and coming back out with a bit of his resolve like a fondue prong. Would he have gotten the job without Dawn? Would he have even considered picking up a measuring spoon if Dad hadn't owned a restaurant? And who would he have married if he went shopping for frames at Target instead? Ambivalence, with just a dash of willful ignorance, felt like the only way to not worry about it.

Something started beeping and ringing at the same time, a jaunty jingle layered over a shrill trill. Dan's head darted around, trying to recollect where he'd left his phone—end table by the bed, that was it. Not Allie, though—this was a different, less frequent ringtone. He stepped away from the workspace, and to the left down a slim hall scarcely as long as himself. For whatever reason, the phone would play both the standard rotary-style ring and whatever custom tune he'd selected when a contact called; he'd given up trying to figure out why, not that he'd ever put much effort into it. It wasn't *that*

big of a deal.

“Hello?” he asked, out of courtesy. Phone to ear, he drew back the bedroom's venetian blinds with a finger and peeked outside. Five floors down, traffic was evenly spaced down the avenue, a black-clad security guard shuffled his feet outside Bank of America, and a teenager was covertly carving something into a solar-powered parking meter.

“Dan the Man!” the voice on the other end loudly announced.

“Oh, *hey*, Ray! The... 'May'?”

“*May* be,” he replied. “So what's happening? Wife driving you crazy yet?”

“Only in the best way,” Dan assured. “How are things over on your end, business-wise?”

Ray sighed. “Ain't the same without you, man. We've had to fill the block with Jimmy Sync, and just between you and me, I think he should've stayed on YouTube.”

“Well, like I said...” Dan turned back and regarded the bed: a double, but only one pillow, crookedly shrugged against the wall. “It's not like I'm *never* coming back. I mean, I can't promise anything right now, but... you know, big changes around here!”

“Yeah, I hear ya. Was the same with me when Lincoln was born. In fact—” There was a faint, high-pitched wail in the background. “Oops, right on cue. So anyway, I was just—babe, could you take care of that? I'll be just a second—I was just calling because I know you're moving to Capitol Hill, and if you need any help lugging this-that-or-the-other, I can drive on over, like, whenever, give you an extra set of wheels and some trunk space.”

Dan rotated, intending to check the alarm clock, but its place on the end table was empty. He must have packed it up so fast that he forgot. He retracted the phone and read its digital readout instead—3:00 exactly. “Sure,” he said. “For some of the big furniture in here. Any time today is fine.”

“Cool, alright!” A woman's voice, muffled by the connection, protested at something. “His arm's stuck in *what*? Crap, this could take a while—gotta go. How does five o'clock sound?”

Dan said it sounded just fine, and then the two said their goodbyes. He hung up, and decided to leave the phone in his back pocket this time. Hopefully, Lincoln was okay; Dan had met him a few times when visiting Ray; even as a toddler, he had plenty of his father in him, that same eagerness and devil-may-care attitude. The kid would call him “Dan” when he was around, but he used to call him “Cookbrooke.”

Because that was his nickname, of course, and his gimmick. On RobotNews, his articles had a disproportionate focus on cooking-related games and game-related cooking (when photos of a Super Mario-themed cake hit the internet, he was always the first to hear), with everything judged on a scale of “raw” to “well done.” On NerdReport.net, he had a video series, too—“Take a Byte,” where he

“dished up” reviews and color commentary on a weekly basis, in a toque and random t-shirt. Allie once asked if it ever bothered him, being a “character,” or simplifying his career to a running gag. The truth was, he didn't mind. It helped him feel better about who he was, and who he wanted to be: a man who didn't have to choose. He could be both a licensed chef and a professional gamer, a loving husband and a boy at heart. Besides, if he hadn't, he would never have met Ray, Nerd Report's Editor-in-Chief, when the “crew” convened for the Electronic Entertainment Expo in 2009.

So if Ray was coming in two hours... yes, he could almost certainly finish by himself in that time. But he'd wanted to sound inviting, and while Allie had carted out so many smaller items already (the blender, the oscillating fan, the Xbox...), now only the largest ones—the most complicated ones, dense with nostalgia as much as physical weight—were left to deal with. Like the studio couch: dark blue, segmented, where Ray (along with Zach and Gary from high school) would drop by and join in for an impromptu *Street Fighter* tournament, back when having a baby or making house payments sounded more fantastical than the fireballs and stretch-punches blasting in blurred flurries across the screen. It was a strange scene now: empty couch, dim room, and a paused TV, as if the party could start up again any second.

But Dan left the lights off because it reminded him of when he was a kid back in the suburbs, during a power outage. If it was a weekend, knowing the electric company would set things right within a day, his parents would light candles throughout the house and give him a plastic click-button flashlight. He couldn't watch TV or play computer games, or even open the fridge (apparently), but he could make shadow puppets, read comic books by the fire, see darkness and half-light play off the posters in his bedroom or the bathroom mirror. Without lights above to guide the way—only a wreathlike field of yellow in his palms—everything was more difficult. He had to decide what was really important, like brushing his teeth... but then that made it feel all the more worthwhile when he accomplished it. It became hard to take anything for granted.

God, he hoped he would never take Allie for granted. Dan deliberately jotted down that mental note for his future self. She was the breadwinner, for sure: Mrs. Allison Brooke, senior executive for the store she'd just been helping customers find the restrooms in when he (slowly) walked up and said “Hi.” The bistro he cooked at, *Mariana's Corner*, was respectable—that is, it had a light-up sign swinging over a striped awning—but not well-known outside the city. Not that it mattered from inside the kitchen, a nest of gray metal boxes and bars stocked with international spices and local favorites, the whole food pyramid on ice or set to boil at any given hour. A factory of dishes just waiting to be assembled, and as long as the orders kept coming he could be serving the whole world, for all cared.

That was the question he had to pin down, though: how much did he care, and about what? He

cared about his bookshelves, marking them for disassembly as he crossed the studio again: gently bowing chunks of Ikea in opposite corners, propping up Heinlein, Gaiman, Asimov, and whole rows of cookbooks—including a tattered, flour-stained Betty Crocker from Mom's cupboard. He also cared about what the weather was going to be like when he left for work, what the patrons would think of his tomato bisque or Caesar salad, what the belated comments appearing on his old RobotNews op-ed pieces would say (even if, in the last case, he explicitly said he didn't).

And of course he cared about Allie, more than he even cared about himself; when he'd been mixing up the steps for crème brûlée for three nights in a row, it was only because he was setting aside brain space for her favorite song (“I Will Follow You Into the Dark”), her favorite color (red—bright red, specifically), the places in South America she wanted to go someday (Machu Picchu, followed by Iguazu Falls). He wished he could narrow down the space in his head for her—just like he was narrowing down the apartment, taking stock of his home-away-from-home since sophomore year—and think of nothing but her maroon evening dress, her catlike eyeshadow, her harmonious, shameless laugh when they'd watch a comedy together at the cinema. But that wasn't fair to her, or to himself. She was a person, not a living pick-me-up, and not just a pretty face behind a picture frame. He needed to act on what was best for both of them, and for their future, even if it meant giving up the little things—the red-eye flights to gaming conventions across the country, the long nights spent blogging and revising recipes both, the beer and nacho-fueled parties with “the guys”—that had buoyed him through his twenties before she arrived. He would not let himself stay in a position where his wife couldn't rely on him if she needed to—and neither could he let himself envy her.

Allie had tacked a picture of their new home to the entryway's corkboard, and Dan straightened its askew stance as he passed back into the kitchen. It was two stories, white with mahogany borders, a chateau-like roof, a square with a veranda and patio plus plenty of sloping yardage. So their possessions were bound there, but would all of himself follow? Because those possibilities would be along for the ride, too. In Dan's mind, it was like an old-fashioned switchboard full of buttons, stretching into darkness in every direction, with sectors assigned to every person and place and *thing* in his life; past, present, and future. There were buttons for love, buying, selling, moving, eating, waiting, protesting, letting go... and he had to decide which ones to press, at which times.

It was because of that desire for clarity that he cooked. Family lineage was a factor, but there was more to it, he told himself as he cleaned and packaged what dishes remained in the sink, baptizing the mixing bowl and forks in hot water and orange Ajax. It was because it gave him the opportunity to take those little things and make them into quick ones; whether it took basil and bread, parsnips and potatoes, or vinegar and vodka, he had a creative arsenal at his disposal to combine them all, and turn a

rainbow mess of ingredients into something coherently delicious. If games were the practice, cooking was the execution. If the food was good enough, the only possibility was whether someone would eat it there or take it home.

But you could never really be done with practice, could you? At 29, maybe so. Or maybe he was only beginning to learn.

“Don't ever be afraid to give me a call if you need some help,” Dad said plainly, but proudly, as he finished helping unload the back of the family sedan the day Dan moved into the apartment. The place had seemed so alien then, lifeless and shady, a cube with creaky wooden floorboards and a harsh, medieval-looking radiator beneath dual windows. Dan said “Okay,” but there were times when he *was* afraid to call, from when he was unsure how to operate the old convection oven to when he and Allie got into a minor fight over Dan kicking in his sleep after they brought in the double bed (he said it was genetics, she said he could take something for it). There were times he wanted a flashlight, and there were times he wanted to feel his way through the dark.

And then there were times he wanted to hit “Pause” and put down the remote instead (or “hit 'simmer' and put down the spatula,” as CookBrooke would say), but those times had passed—at least for today. There were boxes to move and papers to sign, and there would still be moments of indecision and anxiety no matter where he went in life, but as long as he kept close the things that really mattered—his wife, his “mad chef skills” (as Ray put it), and his leisure. As faults went, worrying too much was pretty good. After all, if Dawn and Ray could balance work and play...

The explosion was still in progress on TV. Dan picked up the remote, a slender black bar, from the couch's sagging armrest and stretched out his arm towards the screen. As his thumb lowered towards the “Play” button, the doorbell rang, a quick and crackly buzz. He spun around; boxes surrounded the door in stacks like ramparts. He stepped over the rolled-up rug and undid the lock.

There at the threshold, between boxes stacked like ramparts, was Allie. Her amber hair was pulled back in a fountain of a ponytail, dipping down to the ebony blazer she wore over a bright red blouse. And for all the fashion sales she managed, she still preferred jeans.

“Hi, honey,” he grinned.

Her handbag slapped his back as she threw her arms over his shoulders and gave him a peck on the lips. “Kiss the cook!” she exclaimed. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of hearing that.

“Hey, Ray's going to be over in an hour-and-a-half help with the rest of this,” Dan informed her as she moved past him into the studio. “You mind?”

“Oh, that's totally fine!” she replied. “That should give us just enough time to take another load over.” Her eyes ran over the boxes that surrounded them. “Wow, you got a lot more done while I was

gone.” Then she saw the screen. “Oh hey, *The Fast and the Furious 3!* Did you want to finish?”

Dan shrugged. “It can wait. Might watch it with Ray.”

“Well, don't start without me,” she laughed, and grabbed the nearest box. “*Oof!*” she grunted. “Must be your utensils. Are you ready?”

Dan looked back around the apartment—not for the last time, but what felt like the first. The light from the hall had brought it all into clarity, but he could still tell what he wanted, and it was all by the door right now. “Let's find out,” he smiled.