BEANS AND FRANKS FOR A MOTHERLESS GIRL

CASSEROLES AND COMFORT

by Caroline Leland

"THERE'S BEEN A CAR WRECK, AND LISA IS IN THE HOSPITAL." The words tumbled on top of each other as my dad rushed through the room. "Candis is coming over to watch y'all." My siblings and I looked up from our card game. The screen door slammed. Dad was down the front porch steps before I processed what he was saying.

Our next-door neighbor cooked us a frozen pizza for dinner that night. The gooey cheese gave me little comfort. I was eleven, just old enough for my mind to race toward all the worst possible scenarios.

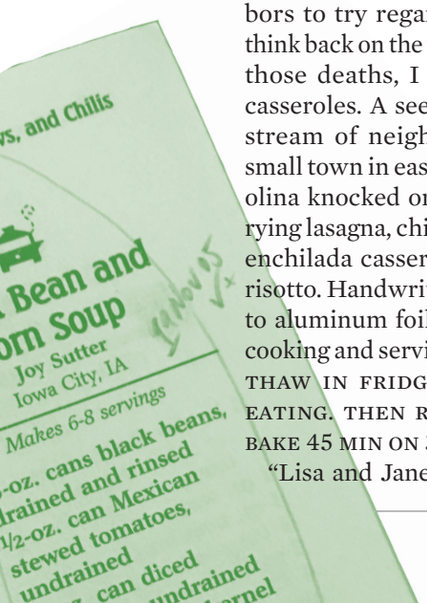
My grandmother died in that car crash. After eight days in a coma, my mom died, too. Death carved a person-shaped hole in my life.

Filling that kind of gaping gash is impossible, but the pain drives well-meaning friends and neighbors to try regardless. When I think back on the weeks following those deaths, I remember the casseroles. A seemingly endless stream of neighbors from my small town in eastern North Carolina knocked on our door, carrying lasagna, chicken tetrazzini, enchilada casserole, mushroom risotto. Handwritten notes stuck to aluminum foil covers offered cooking and serving instructions. THAW IN FRIDGE 24H BEFORE EATING. THEN REMOVE FOIL & BAKE 45 MIN ON 350.

"Lisa and Jane will always be missed," the neighbors would say as they handed over the dish, in an earnest and desperate attempt to fill the void; to sate that insatiable hunger for someone gone missing. "We are praying for you."

The instructions on the sticky note meant more than the words spoken in comfort. The well-intentioned and genuine condolences felt hollow, while the instructions provided something concrete in that free-fall of unexpected grief.

Focusing on the daily task of physical nourishment is perhaps the only possible response when the scale of emotional pain is incomprehensible. Spaghetti casserole couldn't fill the mom-hole in my heart and my life, but it could at least fill my stomach. That meant more than I could have articulated, or even realized.



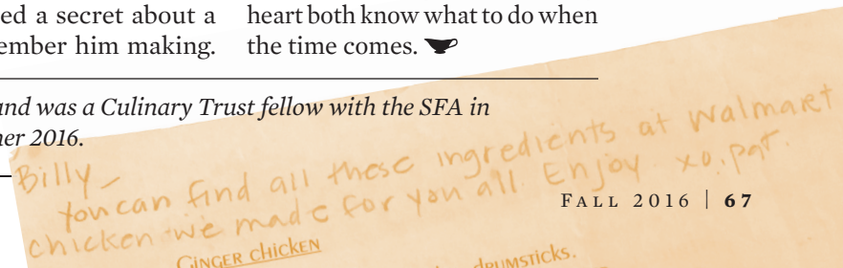
Photos courtesy of the author

The pain has dulled with time, of course, but I think I'll never stop mourning. A central part of my grief as an adult is wishing I knew more of my mom's recipes or had more memories of cooking with her. As a child, I remember the serious responsibility of layering wide strips of pasta over ricotta, mozzarella, and tomatoes for her homemade lasagna. I recently found in a scrapbook a recipe for chicken enchiladas, written in my mom's curly handwriting.

As the supply of gifted frozen casseroles slowly diminished, Dad tried simple Crockpot meals. Most of his attempts were edible, but we still joke about the massive amount of beans and franks that hogged space in our fridge and freezer for weeks despite Dad's repeated efforts to serve them in poorly masked reinventions. When I asked my siblings what they remembered eating during that time in our lives, they all mentioned the Crockpot. I remember in particular a lot of burritos and enchiladas—still among my dad's favorites.

Dad developed a system for keeping track of which recipes worked: "A check-plus usually meant that only one kid complained," he told me recently. "Just a check meant more than one did not like it." In the same conversation, I learned a secret about a pesto I remember him making. "First time I tried to do this was in the blender, and the wooden stir spoon got caught in the blades," Dad told me. "I figured the woodchips in the pesto wouldn't hurt anyone." He made a habit of paging through *Southern Living* magazine at soccer games and swim meets. He'd tear out recipes that looked easy enough to make and would appeal to five young children. The casseroles were a constant, even when the neighbors stopped bringing them; Dad liked recipes that he could double and freeze half to serve later.

I cried myself to sleep every night, but my stomach never growled. And somehow that was enough for life to slowly edge out death.

My siblings and I share a bond I have yet to witness in any other family. Only six years separate the five of us. We are bound by the grief and healing that comes from losing a mother early in life. And by those frozen casseroles and our dad's beans and franks. I taught myself to cook in the later years of college. A year and a half after graduation, I am still learning new techniques and recipes every week. I inherited a tendency to double recipes and freeze half, even when I'm cooking just for myself. I'm lucky that no close friends have faced tragedy in my adult life, but my hands and my heart both know what to do when the time comes.

Caroline Leland was a Culinary Trust fellow with the SFA in spring-summer 2016.