

QUILTS AND CARAMEL CAKES AND OTHER JOKES

Years after her death, I try understand my mother
through the cakes she baked for us.

BY SANDRA AGRICOLA

I HAVE A FIFTY-YEAR-OLD QUILT TOP MY mother made by stitching together scraps of my childhood culottes and dresses in no discernible pattern. Wools and cottons, reds and aquamarines, 1960s flower-power prints: To me, that quilt top reads as a flag for the mental illness that plagued my mother. She never finished it, and now I know why: It's hard as fuck to finish a quilt!

Mother's first hobby was baking cakes. Unlike her haphazard quilting, she was meticulous with her cakes. She knew, without really knowing, that baking is an exact science. Whenever I asked her to make one, she always informed me that she would have to go buy new flour and baking powder. Stale flour was a sin. Once, when I was foolishly meddling in her life, I convinced her that she could charge money for her caramel cakes. My sister-in-law, LuAnn, was her first customer. Mother's obsessive tendencies kicked in when money entered the equation. She made three cakes because each one was flawed, she said. The first cake's icing was burned. The second one slid off the cake plate while she was icing it and sat unevenly on the cake stand. Deeming that one imperfect, too, she made a third. LuAnn became the beneficiary of three cakes for the price of one, and Mother's

business folded. Baking a caramel cake is a little like finishing a quilt: Everything has to be just so.

Mother never made another caramel cake. She never became a hair stylist, either, but she did learn to make a wonderful red velvet cake from the women at Shirley Little Academy of Cosmetology in Jackson, Mississippi, where she attended classes in the late 1980s. Someone must have brought a red velvet cake to school, and Mother asked for the recipe. Most of the school's staff and students were Black women. Mother, who was fifty at the time, was the only white student in her class—and, I suspect, the most difficult. She enrolled shortly after a three-week stint at a drug-and-alcohol rehab facility. Although she never graduated from Shirley Little, she told me that her teachers and fellow students were patient and supportive. They did not harbor a lifetime of resentment toward her, as I did.

A few years later, after I left Jackson and moved to Birmingham with my new husband, my good friend Garry Pound gave me a cookbook he lovingly illustrated called *A Celebration of Great Taste: A collection of recipes from the Columbus Bank and Trust Company family as part of the celebration of their 100th year in the Columbus community*. This may be the longest cookbook title ever. I gifted

Illustration by Disha Sharma



the book to my mother, who loved it because of the Columbus, Georgia, connection. We had both lived there for a very long time. After Mother died, I took the cookbook back. I could see by the food stains and grease spots and drops of red food coloring that she had used it often, particularly the chapter on cakes and pies. I remember the Million Dollar Pie from holiday dinners, though I think she liked the name more than the pie itself. My son, John, loved the Seven-Up Cake, and the Oreo Cookie Cake was my stepson, Miller's, favorite. As I flipped through *A Celebration of Great Taste*, a folded sheet of paper fell out. On one side was the red velvet cake recipe from Mother's Shirley Little days. Her notations are in the margin: 10 rather than 8 ounces of cream cheese; $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of food coloring rather than a bottle of red.

On the other side of the paper, she scribbled this recipe for Elephant Stew: *Secure 1 large elephant. Kill and cut into small cubes. This will take about 2 months. Put in a large kettle and simmer over*

kerosene heat at 465 degrees for 14 weeks. Make gravy to cover. This feeds 3,685 people. If more meat is needed, add two rabbits, but use only if necessary as few people care for hare in their stew.

Before Mother was diagnosed with alcohol-related dementia, she baked cakes and told jokes, and called me every April Fool's Day with an outlandish story I usually believed. Seven years of dementia turned her into a bedridden woman I no longer recognized and often resented. She passed away in 2016.

This year, after finishing some long-overdue Twelve Step work of my own, I took her quilt to Zig Zag Sewing Studio in Pelham, Alabama, and asked them to finish it for me. I look at her recipe for Elephant Stew and recognize her handwriting and her desire to make us laugh. Red velvet cake with a glass of cold milk was the way she said, "I love you."

Writing this story, when I failed to write even her obituary, is the way I say, "I love you, too." 🍷

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