

Sally's Cake

It isn't just about her eggs or even her cake. Sally comes back to me in other ways too. When the paper's open to a Sudoku puzzle she would have clobbered in minutes. Or when the spine of *Middlemarch* is sticking out from its shelf, beckoning me back — *Read it again*, she would say.

Mostly Sally's my food whisperer, there in the aroma of borscht bubbling in my kitchen or in the first bite of, yes, a freshly baked cake. Or even when I spot one of those especially silly cakes, shaped like a bird or baseball or Teddy bear, sitting proudly in a bakery shop window.

Sally's Giant Green Boat Cake was a lark, but a paid lark, a job I'd handed over because I was never a passionate cake maker. Hers had a fish and nautical rope, all in icing, of course. Made for a series of recipe cards, photographed with assembly instructions, they were mailed to subscribers more interested in themes and shapes than flavor. Neither of us wanted to eat the thing. So Sally, who had a frugal streak but a generous heart, stuck the cake in the tree outside her kitchen window for the birds.

Why do I daydream about a cake for the birds when Sally's real birthday cakes were glorious explorations of what flour, butter and farm fresh eggs could achieve together? Light and fluffy layered cakes with toasted coconut shavings. Sweet, lemony loaves, with a remote bitterness of zest. Who else could take on the challenge to bake mine with as much hazelnut flavor as possible? And who will come up with a smooth kind of praline to spread between each layer to

do the trick? And who will encase my celebration cake with a chocolate-hazelnut buttercream of the gods?

Yes, I tend to look back in glory, even going so far as to imagine cakes unmade. So, for balance, I have to admit that your endless talking (and lack of listening) sometimes drove me insane. But I miss it. Especially the last time we hiked, chattering about baking so long that we lost both the time and the trail, and had to find our way home in the dark. I can't think of a better person to get lost with, but I'll never have your touch for flour.

Who will hunt down the old Time-Life series cookbooks and save them for me? Who will bring a covered plate of her Thanksgiving meal, complete with chestnut puree, to my sick husband, while I eat mine far away with my family? Who will compliment my borscht though I've never been to Russia and she has?

Who can talk as endlessly as I can about food and books?

Sally always set the right context for each meal, especially those eaten outside. There, she could slow down our urgent passion for food by coaxing the flavor out of simple ingredients. Our families' last picnic was a lunch of basic foods cooked on a stone grill provided by the state park. Her brood, a husband and single female toddler, joined ours, the same. Our site was tucked among the trees next to the lake but out of view. We shelled and munched peanuts, tossing the shells into the fire, while our meal cooked: split kielbasa squeezed together onto the grate, hot dogs for the kids, spongy buns and mustard, local corn, brought already lightly cooked, that we

only had to reheat to a smoky warmth. Even the ubiquitous August zucchini, skewered and marinated in lemon and oil, tasted right.

Sally learned her outdoor craft from a kind of Mosquito Coast dad. Each summer he marched his family of five girls deep into the woods, apart from the world, for almost four months. There were quirky rules at their campsite. No cutting of the girls' long tresses was allowed, and he held other views and habits peculiar and constraining. But, who knows? Maybe those isolated summers of endless rules, reading and campfire meals taught her to look toward the light, never the gloom, and nurture us all with her endless chatter of food, books and more food. "I'm not a "Pollyanna," she used to say. But indeed, she worked hard at being one, and usually succeeded.

For our lakeside dessert Sally smuggled in a surprise for her husband's birthday: a homemade ring of her pound cake, hidden in a large Danish butter cookie tin. It appeared magically, filled with the last of her garden's raspberries, and topped with stay-alight candles. After our smoky lunch, her buttery dessert gave our meal the proper landing. And Sally knew her can of real, not fake, whipped cream would add a decadent touch.

For book group we competed. I made an understated olive oil cake with lemon and she countered with an almost-but-not-quite-too-bitter chocolate tart dotted with chocolate-covered coffee beans. I concocted effortless candies that I called Smooches, using premium bittersweet chocolate, spread ultra-thin and crowned with dried cherries. But she topped me with almond cookies, each dimpled with the raspberry jam made from her berry bushes out back. *Delicious*, everyone commented, not understanding how Sally and I played culinary catchup.

For 20 years she was the sharpest fixture in that group. I took pleasure in her advocacy for authors, especially if books were difficult or unpopular. She intuitively understood an author's voice, the book's context and, perhaps most importantly, how each book filled a need. We ate our cake, sipping our herbal tea, while Sally gave our books eight out of ten just for being books, just because the authors had the courage to write them. She took their side, identifying with whatever they needed to express: she pushed their case. That doesn't mean she liked everything indiscriminately, no, her thoughts on the remaining 8-10 spread were heavily nuanced.

Sally died after her second bout of cancer returned with a vengeance. It was just before the yellow Coltsfoot bloomed the following spring, though she insisted they were flowering outside the window from her hospital bed at home. Maybe it was the morphine, maybe just Sally's optimism. Weeks later, her husband invited me by to take what I wanted. Naturally, I headed into her kitchen, which was strangely silent. I didn't want anything, though I noticed she had a drawer of plastic tops, while at home I had all bottoms, no tops. I walked over to her fridge to open the door, though I knew its shelves well enough. They'd be jammed with her cook's tools: the chutney she'd make last fall, the orange marmalade that was never too sweet, along with fermenting and sugared five-sided glass jars, long unopened and filled with the mysteries that made for good eating.

Behind me, her two copper pots stood on the stove top, waiting. They were once filled with the borscht Sally had loved. It had been dense with vegetables and chunks of beef, Moscow borscht

I'd read that Nureyev said needed half a cow to complete. It didn't, but we'd laughed about that over that stove.

It's been years since. But just yesterday, Sally returned again, as my Great-Aunt Ida once told me the dead tend to do. Just like that, while sharing a fat slice of carrot cake in our neighborhood café, before my hub could utter something sweet, but bland, like *Pretty Good, eh?*, Sally joins us. She's chattering as my fork presses down through the cake, releasing its play of cinnamon, nutmeg with the right touch of allspice. It's a classic, we admit; and we both love the classics, both books and food. But, she isn't impressed with its crumb, nor am I. It's too dense, and we know it. Still, after a mouthful or two, we forgive the cake. Sally, because she tried to find the good, me because Sally's with me, as ever, pointing it out.
