

Pot Roast

Before 11:24 a.m. on Thursday, January 13, 2000, I mothered a precocious five-year-old boy, and I marveled at my growing belly, the personalized warming oven for twins. Two heads, four elbows, 20 fingers pushing from the inside out.

At 1:30 p.m., the hospital room clock wailed that I mothered only one rambunctious preschooler.

Once home, passing days were marked with casserole dishes washed, dried, and stacked on our kitchen counter. Friends brought us meals, jotted down reheating instructions on curled up Post-it Notes, slapped them on the pans, and placed them on the frost-thick shelves in our basement freezer.

It no longer mattered that my husband, Lyle, didn't like the onions in the turkey tetrazzini or the green peppers in the goulash. I only needed to put a dish in the oven and remember to pull out dinner before the smoke alarm jarred me back to reality.

As friends left, they hugged me close and whispered, "Things will get better. It'll be okay."

As I pulled away, still feeling the moist heat of their words against my ear, sometimes I wanted to shout it would never be okay, but mostly I begged the words to be true.

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Weeks earlier, I had picked Russell up from preschool. My left hand circled my swollen belly, and I offered my right hand to him as he climbed in the back of the van and into his booster seat. He brushed my hand aside and flashed me a proud dimpled grin.

I climbed in the front and looked into the rear-view mirror and asked him what we should cook for dinner.

“Can we have chicken with the bone and crusty macaroni and cheese?”

“Sure.”

I always smiled at the name he gave roasted chicken. He loved holding a chicken leg and tearing into it like one of the meat-eating dinosaurs we read about at bedtime, and I thought it funny how he liked the brown bubbly cheese on top of the baked macaroni casserole, the crustier the better.

We arrived home and stripped off layers of winter coats and gloves and scarves. I pulled a chair up to the counter for Russell, my number one assistant.

He stood on the chair next to me in front of the sink as I rinsed the chicken and cut away the fat, both of us squishing up our noses at the look and feel of the raw poultry flesh. I cut up a lemon and crammed into the cavity of the chicken carcass. He sprinkled big flakes of kosher salt and woodsy-smelling rosemary over the chicken, and then we set the dish aside and assembled our macaroni and cheese.

Russell cracked the eggs and poured the milk into a bowl. I reached for a kitchen towel to catch the plops and splashes. We layered our noodles and cheese and milk mixture.

He jumped off the chair and stood close as I opened the oven. The heat rolled out and warmed our faces as I slid the dishes in and closed the door.

We passed time playing Trouble and waited for Lyle to walk in the door a couple hours later to say, “Man, something smells good. What’s for dinner?”

Lyle set his lunch box down on the counter; loosened his tie as he turned on the TV to catch the evening weather report.

“Daddy, don’t get distracted. Dinner’s ready, and I helped make it.”

I smiled at Russell’s admonishment, thinking maybe he was an old man trapped in a 5-year-old body. As we sat around the kitchen table, we chattered about what went right with our day.

“Josh and I got to play on the bikes all during recess.”

“That sounds like fun. I solved a computer problem that no one else had the answer to.”

“Yay, Daddy.”

“I had an awesome helper in the kitchen today, and he’s gonna make an even better big brother.”

But that was before.

###

Three years earlier, I had sat at the oblong Formica kitchen table next to Lyle in his boyhood home. His brother, Lonnie, had just died at the age of 31. Lyle’s sisters dished salad into bowls. Across from me was their mother, arms hanging heavy at her side, blindly looked out the window as sun cast shadows across the right side of her face. Lyle’s father perched at the head of the table with his arms folded at his chest. I scooped big spoonfuls of a mystery mixture from a Pyrex baking dish onto the Corelle dinner plates.

They sat around the table, pushed the food around their plates, and talked about what time they needed to go to the funeral home for the visitation hours.

“We’ve got to be there by one. Visitation begins at two,” my father-in-law said.

“Why so early?” Lyle said. “We don’t need to be there that early.” I slid my hand onto Lyle’s leg under the table. He pulled away.

I got up, gathered the scrunched-up paper napkins, and started picking up dishes.

I was just the daughter-in-law who organized the refrigerator, wondered where to stack all the pans, and washed them when empty, hoping the name written on the torn piece of masking tape on the bottom of the dish didn’t rinse off in the sudsy Palmolive.

The doorbell rang. I grabbed the frayed dishtowel hanging on the stove handle, wiped away the slippery wet bubbles sliding toward my elbows, and reached for the door with warm, pink hands. I traded greetings for more casseroles.

“I’m sorry, they’re resting now. Yes, I’ll be sure to tell them you stopped by to offer your sympathies. Thank you.”

At the time, I thought food offered tangible condolences beyond, *I’m sorry*. I didn’t yet know of the sustenance these meals brought the grief stricken, who can’t pull coherent thoughts from their heads to organize dinner or clean up afterward because mostly they’re thinking of ways they could permanently lie in the casket next to their loved one.

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Weeks passed after the twins died. Frozen casseroles dwindled. Isolation engulfed.

Just about the time I thought I would have to leave my cocoon to replenish kitchen staples, friends showed up at our door with a bag of groceries – milk, bread, fresh fruit, coffee, and even some kind of cheesy-noodle concoction. As they hooked their down

jackets on the coat rack and tried to push the blast of January air back out the front door, I warmed my hands on the bottom of the casserole dish.

Thank you, thank you.

I won't have to leave the house for another week.

It was safe inside my house. I didn't have to avoid the concrete pilings of the underpasses, which seemed to taunt me the few times I'd driven anywhere by myself.

How fast would I have to hit one to stop this pain?

I watched the tendrils of steam escape from underneath the tinfoil covering the dish. I inhaled the comfort of the slightly burnt mozzarella and roasted garlic in red sauce. I imagined my friend layering thick lasagna noodles, creamy ricotta, and Italian sausage before popping the dish into the oven.

Cooking had never been a chore like waking up had become.

###

I always thought of my kitchen as my studio. I'm not a professional chef, not by any stretch, but I view cooking as art or meditation or both. I can't remember a time when I did not cook. I've been told I do it well. On days I feel good about myself, I'd say the same.

As a stay-at-home mother, I tweaked hearty Midwestern recipes, evolving them into something less gut-busting than what I grew up with. Cooking and stirring gave me a place to plan, solve problems, or the space to let go of a long day.

I learned to create dishes by look and taste and smell. The pungent aroma of cumin overpowered my nose when sniffed straight from the jar, but a tablespoon or two stirred into a pot of chili complemented the smoked paprika and spicy-hot chili powder. I waved

a curling spiral of steam toward my face, pulling it in through my nose, deep into my sinuses, and pushed it out through my mouth, an act which looked more like pranayama yoga breathing than taking a whiff of something bubbling on the stove. My eyes closed. My mind quieted.

Yes. Cinnamon, it needs just a pinch.

A friend asked for this chili recipe. I rattled off the list of ingredients.

“How much cumin do you put in?” she said.

“Enough until it smells right.”

“What about chili powder?”

“Enough that you feel the heat after you swallow.”

“Look, if the recipe is a secret...”

“It’s not that. I just start tossing stuff in.”

“But how do you know *what* to toss in?”

We both looked at each other – cocked heads, squinty-unbelieving eyes.

“I just see where it takes me.”

###

Weeks after the twins died, I barely remembered to take a shower, and the only time I thought about the kitchen was when Russell said things like, “Mommy, I’m hungry. Can I have some ants on a log?”

I smeared peanut butter on celery sticks and dotted them with chewy raisins.

When was the last time we even sat at the dinner table?

I remembered the evenings of crusty macaroni and cheese and roasted chicken. Could the act of making dinner, stirring a pot, performing something that had been so intuitive, autonomic help me find the answer to what had come *after*?

Just start with something easy, Melissa. Go to the grocery, bring something home for dinner. You'll feel better.

I decided on pot roast. Simple. One chuck roast. A couple potatoes. A few carrots. Salt and pepper.

You can even throw it in the crockpot if you're afraid you won't remember to turn off the oven.

I hadn't been to the grocery store since the twins had died. Would I see someone who we'd forgotten to call? Bundled up in a winter coat, I might still look pregnant. I feared the sight of a clueless acquaintance who said, "Boy, life sure will be different for you soon."

It already is.

I chose a time when the store would be nearly empty, and Lyle was home with Russell. I didn't want to have to rush past the rows of gumball machines at Russell's eye level if someone stopped me to ask if the nursery was ready.

I didn't even cry as I drove the country roads, flying past the barren corn fields. I turned the radio to some stupid dance-pop station. Artists like Ricky Martin and Britney Spears belted out tunes I never listened to, but that was fine with me because I couldn't risk Sarah McLachlan's *Angel* stripping me of my courage.

I made it into the parking lot.

I grabbed the cart and stepped on the automatic door sensor. I charged through. The bright fluorescent lights beamed across the islands of leafy greens, imported fruits, and earthy root vegetables. My gut tightened.

You should have just ordered pizza. It's okay, you can do this. It's just a pot roast.

I wandered through the store, walked up and down the aisles. Each peek around an end-cap relieved me when I saw the aisle empty except for the stock boy, and he didn't look up from his box cutter as I passed. I started tossing stuff into the cart.

Life Cereal. Capris Sun. Pantene Shampoo.

Why didn't you bring a list? Don't worry. You're okay.

I got through the checkout line, and paid for my groceries. No one seemed to notice that I was not the same woman who had been in this store a month earlier. As I drove home, no tears slid down my cheeks. Music filled the van. I even tapped my finger to the beat on the steering wheel before I remembered I was a grieving mother.

I unloaded the groceries. Bags crinkled as I plopped them on the kitchen counter. I thought about what seasoning I would add to the roast. Should I crush a little dried rosemary with salt and pepper or spice things up with some chili powder and garlic? I pulled out the crockpot. I saw the mushrooms on the counter.

Go with the rosemary and add a little thyme. You're gonna be fine.

I pulled the rest of the groceries out of the plastic bags, and put the items away that I didn't need for dinner. I turned on the crockpot. Carrots and potatoes and Vidalia onions spread out on the counter.

I grabbed crumpled bags as my eyes darted across the counter; yanked the refrigerator door open; smacked the cabinet doors shut.

It has to be here. It was the reason for the grocery run.

I fell back against the row of cabinets opposite of me in the narrow galley kitchen. I slumped to the floor and landed with a dull thud, head slouched between my knees.

Silent tears twisted into racking sobs.

There was no roast.