



## Baking for Sylvia

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It was the week of my fortieth birthday, a momentous event I'd celebrated with half a leftover burrito heated in the microwave and taken up to my tiny study. Shambling in my husband's faded bathrobe, coughing, I'd shut the door to the sound of my sick family coughing around the dinner table downstairs, cat hair matted on every textured surface in our new old house, toys and sliding piles of newspapers and baskets of overflowing laundry left undisturbed wherever they'd fallen, the vanquished on a battlefield. The deadline -- extended -- to turn in the manuscript for my novel about Sylvia Plath was six weeks away, and by my birthday I still had to write a third of the outlined forty-one chapters. I'd been writing solidly, without a break, for two and a half years. As I neared the end my husband and children were getting used to my conspicuous absence and my thousand-mile stare when I was physically present. I had taken to shouting things like "Go away! I mean, go turn on the TV!" or "Can we just order Chinese food?" through the door to my study. I could sometimes hear my daughter Celeste, five years old, muttering in the hallway: "Mommy's behind *the door*."

But on the day I'm thinking of, during my fortieth birthday week, I was not writing and shouting but doing the other thing that I did every day, *every* day, feverishly and obsessively: I was in my kitchen, baking. I was in my kitchen baking my way into and out of Sylvia Plath's head, as if my life depended on it. On that day I was baking a simple hot milk sponge cake with caramel icing because I didn't have the focus to make the elaborate three-layer spiced pecan cake that I'd baked for my own birthday every year since I was twenty-two, and I was sick of the chocolate chip cookies Celeste always wanted, and I can make the caramel cake with my eyes closed. Chapter 29 was cooling on a rack, the hot milk sponge was already in the oven, and I was getting ready to muscle up to Chapter 30. That's when the mail hurtled through the slot in our front hall, and I, always eager for catalogs or some other unexpected bit of magnetically distracting ephemera, lurched down the hallway to gather the splayed bundle off the floor. There was a small envelope from Chris, who'd been in Baltimore for two years by then. I ripped it open; inside was a retro-style birthday card depicting a kewpie-like girl in a frilly apron before an old-fashioned stove, the kewpie-girl in two pieces attached at the waist with a metal brad so that she could bend back and forth, lifting a birthday cake out of the oven. Except that in the

postal trajectory between Baltimore and San Francisco, the kewpie-girl had bent so far forward that not only was the cake in the oven, but so were her head and shoulders, right up to her dimpled elbows.

Is it okay to even talk about these things? *Peel off the napkin / O my enemy. / Do I terrify?* (Plath, *Collected Poems* 244)

She died with her head in the oven, her cheek resting on a folded dishcloth. This is the shuddering, horrible truth of Sylvia Plath's self-inflicted death forty years ago on a frigid February morning, a truth of such excruciating magnitude that it has overshadowed her poetry, her astonishing virtuosity, and how we understand the relationship between her art and her life. It has permitted reductivist theorizing about her death itself – its inevitability, say – as well as about Plath's sexual politics: her violent rejection of the traditional female role, some would have it, embodied by her last, successful act in her kitchen. But the writer's death is *not* the writer's life, or her work, despite, in Plath's case, the people who would claim them one and the same.

"I would live a life of conflict," she wrote in 1956, just prior to meeting her future husband while on a Fulbright fellowship in England, "of balancing children, sonnets, love and dirty dishes" (Plath, *Unabridged Journals* 225). She was doing just that in the fall of 1962, isolated and alone in rural Devonshire, nursing her heartbreak over her failed marriage and writing what we know as the *Ariel* poems at 4 a.m. every morning before her two tiny children awoke, sending her into the daily spin of dirty dishes and dirty laundry and cat hair on the furniture. Knowing how Plath's acute sensitivities transformed the stuff of her life into art, it seems appropriate that her 1962 daily calendar tells us that she had lamb on her grocery list the day before she wrote "Mary's Song" on a Monday morning: *The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat. / ... It is a heart, / This holocaust I walk in, / O golden child the world will kill and eat.* (Plath, *Collected Poems* 257) Is it really such a surprise, then, to learn that she made custard and banana bread on the day she wrote "Medusa"; or lemon pudding cake while she was composing "Lady Lazarus"; or custard, banana bread, apple sauce *and* apple cake on the same day as "Fever 103"; or tomato soup cake, one of her specialties, on the day she wrote "Death & Co."? Maybe it's more surprising that she logged her daily baking plans while never noting what she wrote --- the poems that made her, as she well knew, a genius of a writer.

For Plath, cooking and baking and reading cookbooks was therapeutic and consoling, a means to reconnect to the life of the body for someone who spent so much time engaged with the



vivid anxieties of the life of the mind. In Plath's breathless letters to her mother in Boston during the early days of her enthralled courtship with Ted Hughes, she described the myriad ways in which she found in Hughes the perfect match of intellect, creativity and passionate living, how they would "romp" through the words of Shakespeare and Dylan Thomas and how she cooked salmon roes and Shrimp Newburg on her single gas ring, Hughes pulling fresh trout out of his pockets (Plath, *Letters Home* 235). Just two weeks into the relationship, Plath pleaded with her mother to mail her copy of *The Joy of Cooking*, what she referred to more than once as her "blessed Rombauer," the one book she most missed (Plath, *Unabridged Journals* 249). Later, settled permanently in England, she begged a subscription to *Ladies' Home Journal*, not just because it and *The New Yorker* were the two magazines she most wanted to be published in, but also for the *Journal's* American recipes that she was homesick for. During her pregnancies with her two children, Plath prepared for their home births by baking in volume – sand tarts, tollhouse cookies, apple pies – and stocking the goods away in her American-style icebox. By Nicholas's birth in 1962, she considered the gift of her family-recipe carrot cake her "traditional" gift for her midwives – another reason for me to like her, given my own literally belabored baking on the day Zachary was born (Plath, *Letters Home* 443).

But for Plath, there was always a tension between her kitchen consolations and her artistic ambition. She fretted in her journal in 1957, a few months after marrying Hughes, that she was becoming too stodgy and domestically practical. Rather than writing or focusing on her Fulbright studies, "I go make an apple pie, or study the *Joy of Cooking*, reading it like a rare novel. Whoa, I said to myself. You will escape into domesticity & stifle yourself by falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter. And just now I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf. . . . And she works off her depression over rejections from *Harper's* . . . by cleaning out the kitchen. And cooks haddock & sausage. Bless her" (Plath, *Unabridged Journals* 269) "I have my four-hour morning ahead, whole as a pie," she wrote in the summer of 1958, finally freed of the deadening, ivy-league teaching job that had kept her from writing for a year (288-289). It must have been especially galling, then, that after quitting her job in order to write full time, she spent much of the following year in a state of creative paralysis in Boston, noodling with various stories and counting the rejections for her first poetry collection while concocting dinners for neighbors such as Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick.

In the spring of 1959, as she and Hughes were budgeting for their permanent removal to England, Plath sold her first essay to the *Christian Science Monitor*, which "opened a vista of \$50 checks" (480). In that essay, titled "Kitchen of the Fig Tree," she recalls the trio of kitchens in which she had cooked since her marriage: the Spanish kitchen of her honeymoon, which had a fig tree studded with ripening fruit right outside; the Kitchen of Doors in Cambridge, which was dim and primitive but had a tiny back garden with an apple tree and an old rose bush; and her current Beacon Hill kitchen with a panoramic sixth-floor view and every imaginable electric convenience. What Plath inadvertently reveals in this reminiscence about her desire for "a kitchen with a view" is how that desire and those views fed her imagination (Plath, "Kitchen" 8). From her Boston kitchen, she imagines herself not "an aproned housewife at a stove" but a passenger on a plane looking down at the mysteries of familiar streets (8). In Spain, a new bride bursting with the dream of juggling "Books & Babies & Beef stews," she watched the village women shelling green almonds outside a room that was piled literally to the ceiling with the summer's harvest (Plath, *Unabridged Journals* 269). When her essay of the domestic was published and churned her fantasy of writerly success, she was openly anxious about her biological fertility as well, wanting to be a writer and a mother, a good wife and a good daughter, not knowing yet how she could accommodate all of these roles.

*. . . When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking*

*'Is this the one I am to appear for,*

*Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?*

*Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,*

*Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules. (Plath, *Collected Poems* 206)*

I too know this juggling act intimately: How *do* you pull yourself back into the world of laundry and children when the work that is your blood-jet has started? *Once one has seen god*, Plath wrote in "Mystic," *what is the remedy* (268)?

I have a niece who called me "Kake" when she was a toddler, and no one corrected her. Cake has been my remedy of choice since I was three years old: cake, cookies, pies. Its creation is mathematical and precise; it requires full conscription to rules and chemistry before one is



ready to charge off on one's own, soaking raisins in bourbon instead of orange juice or substituting honey for dark molasses. It compels its own containment even as it encourages fancy and elaboration. It is the promise not just of control and achievement, but of pleasure embodied. I baked all through my anxious childhood, notorious in adolescence for ferociously preventing my brothers from eating what I made. I baked my way through my unfortunate first marriage, though my efforts toward sweetness were futile; when the marriage had finally sizzled out I remember sitting at the table one day with a nearly-warm layer cake I'd just frosted in front of me as my lanky Scottish deerhound set his chin on the table top and began to lick the frosting off. I sat watching him, too stunned by my life to react, as he choked down the entire cake to the last crumb. And I baked my way through writing a novel about the last painful months of Sylvia Plath.

It was not a conscious decision, at first, my baking for Sylvia. Later, it wasn't so much a conscious decision as a compulsion I was conscious of: I *had* to. Like Plath, I had always baked to relax, and to win the praise of the blue ribbon judges of my life. It was a source of private delight and sometimes consolation. Sometimes I baked to avoid the things I ought to be doing, like writing. Sometimes I baked because it was orderly when the rest of my life felt like chaos. Plath knew this about baking, too; in her earnest journal notes for a misbegotten short story idea called "The Day of the Twenty-Four Cakes," Plath's heroine, a disaffected wife and mother, has "lost sense of order in universe/all meaningless/loss of hopes" after a quarrel with her husband. As antidote to "Wavering between running away and committing suicide," the heroine begins to methodically bake cakes, one an hour from midnight to midnight. It's the process of creating order that saves her, cinched in Plath's unintentionally hilarious, feeble dénouement: "Husband comes home: new understanding" (Plath, *Unabridged Journals* 288)

Order and relaxation were the reliable effects at the start of my baking between the completion of chapters for my novel, *Wintering*. Turning out a batch of cupcakes or a lemon tart was akin to a palate-cleansing sorbet between dinner courses: it didn't take much to do the job, and I emerged refreshed for the next fictional push. But I did notice a corollary spike in my baking whenever there were extenuating circumstances related to the creation of the novel: if a chapter was going badly, I baked more. If Sylvia was in a particularly terrible state in a chapter, I baked more. If I had to cope with other household issues that infringed on my writing time (the

transmission going out, head lice in the kindergarten, a homework impasse), I baked a lot more, though you wouldn't think I had the time.

I thought, at first, that the tension between my baking and my writing about Plath was a surface tension: it was no different than my baking and everything else I did. But something shifted in my awareness around the midpoint of the novel. I was euphoric that I had gotten halfway to the goal of completion, and yet I felt oddly conflicted about finishing those last twenty chapters. It wasn't simply a premature nostalgia for the experience of writing my first novel. The real tension, I had begun to sense, was between the true story of Plath's life, the end of which is all too well known, and the story I was creating for my fictional Sylvia, who in the end would be spared the final, terrible knowledge of her ultimate fate.

I had known from the start that I would not write about Plath's death. I was only interested in writing about her struggle to stay alive in those last frantic weeks. And yet her real, non-negotiable death weighed heavily upon me, immovable as a slab of lead. At some point during the final months holed up with my novel, as I inched toward the foregone, desperate conclusion from which I was sheltering my fictional Sylvia, I realized I was ending every day of writing in my kitchen. As I said, *every* day. I baked while my family was at school or at work, or while they were asleep. As I stood at the stove or at my mixer I thought about where I'd just been with my made-up Sylvia, and where I was taking her next, ever closer to an ending. Baking was our lifeline; it was a way for me to keep us, my character and me, connected to the tangible things of this world, and to stave off a truth I had no power to control. While I was baking, I was able to give us both a morning whole as a pie.

Weeks after I turned in the manuscript of *Wintering* to my publisher, I was cleaning up my study, which had become as desultory and squalid as the rest of my house in the final scramble toward deadline. In a heap of miscellaneous papers I'd had no attention for until I finished the novel, I came across a newspaper article sent to me by a friend in England. The article was by Plath's daughter, Frieda Hughes, written after Sylvia Plath was granted a commemorative blue plaque by England's Royal Society of Arts in 2000. It was Frieda Hughes who had asked that the plaque not be placed at 23 Fitzroy Road in London, where she had lived with her mother and infant brother for a few weeks, and where her mother had committed suicide; Hughes had asked that the plaque be placed on a house a couple of blocks away at Chalcot Square, where her parents had lived for two years and where Plath had written *The Bell*



*Jar* and published her first poetry collection, *The Colossus*. Frieda Hughes had been born at the house on Chalcot Square, and knew better than anyone that it had been a place of happiness and promise for her mother, a far more fitting site for honoring her achievements than the place of her final misery.

What struck me most about Hughes' story, though, was the method she'd chosen to participate in the commemorative ceremony for her mother: she baked. For the champagne reception at the neighborhood library, Hughes and her husband baked spanakopita and quiches and baklava and smoked salmon-and-gruyere pies. Frieda Hughes had been two years old when her mother died, going behind the door forever. "I got carried away," Hughes wrote about her self-catering for the reception, "because I felt I was doing this for my mother . . ."

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