

Emerging Writers

Volume 1

Article 9

5-2018

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Camilla Stegall

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Recommended Citation

Stegall, Camilla (2018) "Baking," *Emerging Writers*: Vol. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/emergingwriters/vol1/iss2018/9>

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Camilla Stegall

Third-Place Winner

Creative Non-fiction Category

2018 Emerging Writers Contest

Baking

“Nana, let’s do something together. What can we do?” said the timid seven-year-old me.

I entered the living room of my Nana and Grandpa’s 100-year-old American foursquare house in small-town Iowa. Little in that room had changed from when my mother grew up there. Nana was seated in her chair, a very comfortable but antique chair. Situated close was a side table. On top of it sat an exquisite lamp and her constantly full cup of coffee—with just enough creamer. Underneath the table sat her basket of yarn. Nana fit her surroundings, beautiful, with her white hair curled just so, and lipstick always on her lips. Wearing a sweater that says “Nana” and not “Grandma,” Nana worked on a crossword puzzle as I approached. The curtains were closed and the light from the lamp filled the room. Looking up from her crossword, Nana smiled at me and thought a bit before responding. I showed her my Barbie Cookbook.

“Can we make muffins?” I asked. She looked at the recipe; they were made from scratch.

“Yes, we can, but we will make them in a different way,” replied Nana, with her sparkling blue eyes smiling at me.

Nana got up from her chair and we walked through the dining room, past her prized china closet, filled with china passed down through generations, and we entered their kitchen. The kitchen may have seemed small to some, especially when filled with all my aunts, uncles, and cousins. But then it was empty and, to small seven-year-old me, the cabinets seemed to go up for

miles. There were kitchen decorations and supplies neatly placed throughout the kitchen. Light came through the window over the sink as Nana and I made our way to the pantry. The pantry was filled with Nana and Grandpa's mainstays and some treats for grandchildren upon arrival. Nana pulled out a muffin mix. She had skipped all the baking supplies. I didn't know much about baking, but Barbie had listed many ingredients. This small package confused me.

"What is that?" I asked inquisitively, but trusting my Nana at the same time.

"It's a mix. It will be a good way for you to start. Now let's find the other ingredients," she replied.

Nana patiently helped me find the other ingredients in this giant kitchen, and soon we started to bake. The ingredients made their way into the bowl, and my small hands shook a little, as I tried to measure perfectly. Nana and I stir together as she made sure I didn't get too wild. The glorious batter was then divvied up into the well-used muffin pan and carefully placed into the oven. We cleaned up our mix-y mess and waited. All the while, the kitchen filled with the scent of chocolate-chip muffins. My excitement grew; soon there would be muffins! Nana smiled. After what seemed forever and a day...BUZZ went the timer! Over to the oven we went.

"Be careful around the oven," gently warned my retired nurse Nana.

She opened it; a burst of warm chocolatey air met our faces and filled the room. Nana, prepared with well-worn oven mitts, freed our pan of muffins, and placed them on the stovetop. I stood in awe of the golden-brown beauty. One by one, we took them out of their hot pan and placed them neatly on a plate. The smell saturated the entire house. Soon we had company.

"Something smells good in here!" a chorus of family members entered.

Nana and I willingly gave them away, but made sure to save one for each of us. My excitement increased; the muffins were done; and I, had helped bake them. We both took a muffin and slowly opened the pastel paper wrappings. They were still quite warm, but that is when muffins are best. We each tore off a small chunk, and the chocolate chips pulled away and melted across the muffin. Carefully, we tasted. Baked goods taste different when you've made them yourself. The pride of a job well done is an inexplicable seasoning. We shared smiles; we looked at the plate of muffins—now just a plate. We smiled again and headed back to the kitchen to make another batch. Maybe this time we'll make blueberry.

Children start baking at a young age for their extravagant tea parties. While their tea is steeping, they like to go to their little kitchens and make the most marvelous cookies and cakes that you have ever tasted. Children know that their baking is wonderful, so they make sure you have as many cookies and cakes as possible before the party is over. Their teddy bears don't usually eat much anyway. They always come to the parties stuffed. All this baking is imaginary, because where else can you have five cookies the size of cakes in one sitting and not gain a pound? It's when children start to grow up that their baking makes the leap from imaginary, to muffin mixes, to figuring out how to make cookies the size of cakes in the real world.

When baking, I'm not just baking; I'm making a statement. The most famous of baking statements has been brought by grandmothers and mothers through centuries, "I love you." Not much says "I love you" like a favorite homemade cake on a birthday. The time and effort put in and the special thoughtfulness dedicated to flavor and decoration speaks louder than words. Mom taking the time to make delicious cupcakes to take to school for a class activity. The time spent with Nana baking muffins. These are times and experiences of love.

“What should I bake now?” asked frustrated 14-year-old me.

The tables turned, Nana and Grandpa came to spend a month over the summer. Company meant the perfect time for baking. Nana and Grandpa sat next to each other in our living room. A matched set. Nana, who was working on a crossword, sat in the comfortable green chair. Next to her stood a coffee table, on top of it sat her coffee—with just enough creamer. Grandpa, who was reading a book about missionaries, sat in his designated spot on our brown leather sofa. Next to him was a side table that was Nana’s grandmother’s, on top of it sat his coffee—black. The floor plan of the house was open, and they heard my struggle in the kitchen.

“Whatever you want to bake, my dear.” replied Nana without looking up from her crossword.

“Everything you bake is delicious,” chimed in Grandpa. He never missed an opportunity to encourage.

Truly they are some of my biggest fans. I sat in the kitchen with our Lutheran Church cookbook, which was twice as thick as the Bible, filled with recipes sent in from Lutherans across America. I had made a lot of brownie mixes, but now I wanted something made from scratch, and I was definitely done eating brownies. From scratch, I knew how to make banana bread, but I was also tired of eating that. Flipping through the well-worn pages of the cookbook, I looked for adventure that could be made with the ingredients I had. I FOUND IT!

“How do ‘Chocolate Bars’ sound?” I asked in a fairly loud voice.

“Sounds good!” came the duet from the living room.

“Would you like some help?” asked Grandpa softly, who loved to help and used to bake a whole bunch himself.

“I’ve got it, thank you, though!” I replied with a smile. As much as I loved doing things with Grandpa, part of me wanted all the credit for the sure deliciousness of this treat.

I set to work. Our kitchen was modern and open, with enough room for me to dance around while grabbing my ingredients. I powerwalked to the fridge for eggs and milk, slid back to the counter, danced my way over to the closet for flour and sugar, skipped to the cabinet for chocolate chips, walked back to the closet in shame for the Crisco, finally dropped my load on the counter. Carefully, I added the ingredients one by one to the bowl.

“Huh...this looks a lot like brownie mix...” but I shook off those thoughts. The recipe was “Chocolate Bars,” they’ll look and taste different in the end.

The oven beeped; the preheat was ready. Usually I am done with my batter by then, but I was still preparing this new recipe. More time passed than I am willing to admit, and the batter was finally complete. There it sat, in all its cocoa-y, chocolatey glory. I poured the chocolate mixture into the 9x13 pan and put the pan in the oven. As part of my cleaning ritual, I licked the spatula before I thoroughly washed it. Who cares about salmonella?

“Tastes...awfully like brownies...” I reminded myself that the recipe said “Chocolate Bars” and that I spent a long time putting them together, so they are *not* brownies.

As I cleaned my bowls and utensils in our kitchen sink, the smell of warm chocolate filled the house. I sat and waited nervously. I constantly peeped through the window on the oven door. Why is the light in there so dim? What does my treat look like? Pacing around the kitchen, I avoided eye-contact with my grandparents in the living room. BING! The oven timer went off.

I ran over and opened the oven. In my rush, I had forgotten my oven mitts. Running back to the other side of the kitchen, I swooped up my mitts and returned to my warm creation. Slowly, with shaking hands, I placed my pan on the stove top. They looked like brownies. They smelled like brownies. I put all my hopes and dreams in the fact that maybe, just maybe, they wouldn't taste like brownies. Soon my parents arrived home from work.

“Something smells good in here!” boomed my Dad's deep voice. I cringed.

“Yes, Camilla has been baking all afternoon!” sung the duet from the living room. I couldn't physically cringe deeper, so the cringe became internal.

“You made brownies!” My Dad walked into the kitchen for one of his favorite desserts.

I just couldn't take it anymore. I had spent way too much time on these things for them to be simple, everyday brownies.

“THEY'RE NOT BROWNIES! THEY'RE 'CHOCOLATE BARS'!!” I stomped out of the kitchen, leaving the cookbook open to their recipe as proof.

After dinner that night, we finally tasted the “Chocolate Bars.” They tasted exactly like a brownie mix. I had been betrayed by a housewife in Nebraska.

Cooking is an art. I can do almost anything and, if thoroughly cooked, it will be safe for eating. (Sometimes it may not taste good, but it will be safe.) Baking is a science. There's a certain amount of each ingredient that goes into the recipe. Baking without a specified ingredient creates a variation on the recipe, a completely different recipe, or something that must go straight into the trashcan because it is unsafe for human consumption. Understanding the differences in

ingredients can be hard, such as the difference between baking soda and baking powder. In addition to getting the ingredients right, the bake time must be precise. A perfectly good raw batter or dough can turn into a mess if it is not cooked long enough and remains raw on the inside. On the other side of the spectrum, overcooking can cause unwanted burnt crispiness. Improper use of baking equipment can cause physical wounds, and improper use of ovens and stoves can leave homes in ashes. Although baking may seem like a relaxing activity, it really needs full attention.

This is how my Nana started teaching me.

“What to make? What to bake?” asked 18-year-old me quietly to myself.

I was sitting in the living room of my aunt’s new apartment, which she shared with my Nana and Grandpa in a big city in Iowa. It was close to midnight and the light of two of Nana’s exquisite lamps filled the small room. My parents, sister, and Grandpa had all retired for the night. All that was left were my Nana, my aunt, and I. My Nana was slightly dozing off and slightly working on her crossword in her extremely comfortable recliner. My aunt had a crime show quietly playing on the TV in the background as she worked on a Sudoku puzzle. I was still trying to find a good sitting position in the old armchair, while trying to find a recipe in a cookbook from my Nana’s church. Her church’s abbreviation was TLC, the cookbook was aptly titled, “Thoroughly Luscious Concoctions,” my Nana’s concoction. Each page was filled with recipes from that small congregation, and almost every page had a recipe from my family.

I had made it my mission during this visit to bake for my family, especially my grandparents. Already I had made a family favorite, strawberry poke cake, but now I wanted to

make something else. Even though that cookbook was small, it was filled to the brim with recipes. How could I narrow it down?

“Why don’t I make one of Nana’s recipes?” I thought to myself.

Although this new requirement added sentimental value, it did not narrow my search. Flipping through the recipes that Nana had provided to the cookbook, I hunted for something that I could make with the ingredients I had. I needed a recipe that, hopefully, I wouldn’t fail in my attempt to bake. Suddenly, it seemed to appear out of nowhere – Overnight Coffee Cake.

“How about I make Nana’s Overnight Coffee Cake tomorrow? We can have it for breakfast before we leave,” I asked my aunt.

“Sounds good to me,” she happily replied.

The next evening while my family was helping my aunt hang pictures in her living room, I scurried to the kitchen to get to work on my cake. Her kitchen was smaller than mine, but everything I needed was easily attainable. I gathered my ingredients. There were significantly more ingredients needed than in both the muffin mix and the “Chocolate Bars.” As a perfectionist making a recipe for the creator, I was just a little bit anxious. Making sure everything went in just right, I slowly progressed through the recipe.

Suddenly, Nana walked into the kitchen to get herself some coffee.

“What are you baking?” she asked as she worked her way around me to the coffee pot.

I felt excited and a little bold.

“I’m making your coffee cake recipe!” I replied.

She smiled, poured her coffee, and made her way out. Once again, the sole soul in the kitchen, I finished up the batter and poured it into the 9x13 pan. Up next: the streusel topping.

“Soft butter! Okay...where did I put it?” I asked myself then the realization hit me like a sock full of butter, “I FORGOT TO GET IT OUT OF THE FRIDGE!”

What was I going to do? I had a few options. First, attempt to make the streusel with hard butter, and fail. Second, take the butter out of the fridge, wait for it to soften, forget about it, and fail. Third, take the butter out of the fridge, soften it in the microwave, and not fail. I went with option three. But, of course, I not only softened the butter...I completely melted the stick.

“It’ll be alright,” I told myself with absolutely no knowledge of what I was doing. “Just mix in the rest of the stuff and sprinkle it on.”

The consistency was not of the sprinkling variety. When you make a streusel topping, you use softened butter and mix it with cinnamon, sugar, and flour. The result is a sandy like consistency. Then you sprinkle the edible sand on top of whatever you are baking, and it stays on top throughout the sprinkling, cooking, and eating process. When you thoroughly melt butter and mix it with cinnamon, sugar, and flour...you create goopy glue that cannot be sprinkled. I had to get a spoon and dollop the sweet goop on the cake batter. That done, I covered it up and stuck it into the fridge to sit overnight.

The next morning while we were finishing up packing to leave, Mom helped me get the cake ready to bake. I took the cake out of the fridge and uncovered it....THE STREUSEL WAS GONE! I was confused and so was Mom. I nervously admitted my melted butter shortcut.

“Oh... you never do that for a streusel, because now all that sugar is at the bottom of the pan,” she said slowly with her head in her hand.

“Will it bake okay?” I was worried about Nana’s reaction. I had made this cake for her and now I had ruined it.

“Yeah, it will. It’ll just be fun getting the cake out of the pan,” Mom replied as she stuck the cake in the oven. We returned to packing.

Soon the small apartment was filled with the smell of warm cinnamon. The packing and the cake finished around the same time and we all eventually made our way to the table for breakfast. My streusel-less coffeecake was placed front and center. It was jokingly titled “Upside-down Coffee Cake.” We struggled to get the pieces with sugar thoroughly cooked on the bottom out of the pan, but once free the cake was enjoyed by all.

“I am so glad we’re all together,” said my Nana, smiling, tears forming in her eyes.

That was the last time I saw my Nana. I am so happy that I made it a point to make one of her recipes for her. Although I was (and slightly still am) disappointed with myself for my mistake caused by hurrying, I can now see the humor. Everyone enjoyed the cake. Maybe the fact that it wasn’t perfect is a good thing, it shows that I still have learning to do.

Baking’s final product produces an image that most of us can think of, such as, a scene that centers on a celebration or holiday: a birthday, a wedding, a graduation party, Thanksgiving, or Christmas. Together we celebrate with love and what can make a better statement of “I love you” than something wonderfully sweet at the center of it? Then there are people who don’t think of the final product when they think of baking. Instead, they think of the process of baking; the time they spent in the kitchen either preparing with loved ones or preparing for loved ones. Both images of the process and the final product of baking come together in the end to create a

wonderful, nearly life changing experience of happiness and love that simply can't come from anywhere else.