

DING!

by Dallas Woodburn

The old man baked bread every Wednesday. An early riser, he baked before the sun came up. Even before he did the crossword puzzle — in ink, for he's a brave soul — because he often baked before the newspaper arrived.

He baked cinnamon bread. More like cake, actually. Flour, sugar, eggs, water, butter, and the secret “starter” ingredient of dough saved from last week's batch. Chocolate chips, sometimes, if he made it for the grandkids (which he usually did, considering he had nine of them.) Walnuts if he brought it to the office. Just plain for him, maybe an extra pinch of cinnamon — but he hardly ever made it just for himself. He could never finish a whole loaf before it grew dry and stale. And it seemed like such a waste to throw half a loaf away. His mother would have scolded him, just as she had when he was a boy during the Depression and didn't clean his plate.

Eat your carrots, Ollie! she would say. *Plenty of kids will go to bed hungry tonight and would give anything to have those carrots to eat. So be thankful! Wastefulness is a sin!*

Cooked carrots are a sin, the young boy thought then and the old man thought now, stirring the thick batter with a wooden spoon. His arm muscles would ache by the time the batter was smooth and ready for the oven, but he still stubbornly mixed everything by hand. To do it any other way seemed like cheating. A few years ago his youngest daughter bought him a shiny high-tech electric mixer for his 75th birthday. The best mixer on the market, the one Emeril uses. No matter. It went straight to the attic, its brand-new box unopened, out-of-place amidst the boxes filled with sweaters and mothballs and the old Christmas decorations and the rocking horse he'd made so long ago and never found the heart to give away. You have to sweat a little bit, toil a tad more, add in a pinch of labor and two doses each of love and honest effort, if you want to get a decent result at the end. *If something's worth doing, it's worth doing your*

best. Those were his father's words. Good old Pop. He didn't care for cooked carrots either.

As he stirred the batter, watching the ingredients slowly soften and melt into one, the old man hummed quietly to himself. A show tune, from the Big Bands era. No words, just music, music, glorious music. *Da-dum-de-de-dum . . .*

Soon he was tapping his foot, swishing his hips, swaying across the worn tile floor with an invisible partner in his arms, the batter-coated spoon still clutched in his right hand, momentarily forgotten. Nearly a decade had passed since he last shared a dance with her, but he could close his eyes and still feel her warm body pressed against his, the soft brushing of her skirt against his shins, her cheek gently resting on his chest. *Dum-dee-dee-dum.* He reached out his arm and twirled her — oh, how she loved when he did that! — and then gently pulled her back to him, their bodies sharing a secret language all their own.

They hadn't always danced this way, of course. When they were younger they moved hard and fast, quick steps, twirls and hops, stomping boots and clicking heels, panting and sweating and laughing with youth's overflowing well of energy. The years had slowed them down, as years always do, but the old man didn't mind. Looking back, of all the dances he ever shared with her — the square dance at the country fair where they first met, the jig at their senior prom, even the dance of honor at their wedding — their slow shuffling waltz around the kitchen was his favorite, her breath warm and sweet against his cheek as she whispered something in his ear, the subtle hint of her perfume on his shirt afterwards. *Dum-dee-da-dum*, a memory. . .

DING! The oven timer sounded and the old man opened his eyes. The oven was pre-warmed to 375 degrees. Batter dripped down the spoon's long wooden handle and he went over to the sink and washed it off. *Don't lick the batter, Ollie*, his mother used to say when she caught him with his tongue on the spoon. *It makes you look like a heathen with no upbringing at all.* His dad would just smile and shoot him a wink. Pop understood the best part about

baking was licking the spoon afterwards. Funny that now, when the old man finally had the chance to do so without getting scolded, he always found himself washing the extra batter off at the sink anyway.

He gazed out the window above the sink. On clear days you could see the ocean, and on even clearer days the Channel Islands far away. But this early in the morning he only saw fog.

They had taken a boating trip to the islands one time, just the two of them, before she got sick. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, was that possible?

It rained on the boat trip back and everyone huddled under the awnings, wet and cold and miserable. Everyone except for her. She stood in the rain clutching the boat railing, her face upturned to the dark veiled heavens, her long hair bouncing across her shoulders with the jerk of the waves. He remained under the awning with the rest of the passengers, watching her laugh and shriek as the foaming waves splashed against the boat. Then she turned and called to him, looked at him with those eyes, and he found himself out on the deck beside her. Her kiss tasted of salt and rain.

The old man greased the loaf pan and sprinkled a light dusting of flour on the bottom — one of her old tricks to prevent sticking — before carefully pouring the batter in, spreading it evenly with a spatula. He popped a small handful of chocolate chips into his mouth before pouring the rest on top of the batter. His mother's words echoed in his mind — *Don't do that, Ollie, it means less for the bread!* — but this time he ignored them. She, the other she, his wife, had always swiped a few chocolate chips before sliding the loaf pan into the oven. "Reward for the chef!" she would explain, flashing her smile like a secret shared between them, her mischievous smile, the smile he fell in love with that first night at the country fair. That smile was his downfall, and she long knew it. One glimpse of it and he forgave her for anything: uncovering three bottles of vanilla extract in the pantry because she never made grocery lists and forgot she just bought some two weeks before; ordering a dozen boxes of Girl Scout cookies because "the girls looked so cute in their

little uniforms” even though the kids had already left for college and it was just the two of them and they couldn't eat *three* boxes of thin mints, let alone a dozen; leaving him to drive to work with the gas gauge on Empty because she refused to go to the gas station until it was “absolutely necessary.” Which, in her case, was always “tomorrow.” Yep, he forgave her for anything, because of that smile. He even forgave her for dying.

The old man wiped his hands on his apron — her apron, actually; his youngest daughter bought him a new apron for Christmas one year but he had never worn it. Crisp and new and creased neatly in its folds, it remained in the bottom drawer below the stove. Baking was something his wife used to do, something he did now to be closer to her. The first few weeks after she died, he wandered around in a fog, lost, his fridge filled with casseroles from well-meaning neighbors, his countertop piled with unopened sympathy cards from well-meaning friends. Then one day his granddaughter came to visit with a loaf of “Grandma's bread,” this bread, plain but with extra cinnamon, the way he liked it.

“I know it's not the same as when Grandma used to make it. . .” she said, her voice cracking, and then tears were spilling out her big innocent eyes, and he was crying, too, as he cut them each a slice they tried to eat but couldn't.

A few weeks later, he went through some of her old cookbooks and found the recipe. The first batch was a disaster — burned on the bottom, uncooked in the middle, edges glued to the pan because he forgot to grease it first. Later, in the back of the refrigerator behind the casseroles, he found the saved “starter” batter for the bread. The secret ingredient. He gave baking another try, and this time the finished product was actually edible. An improvement, though it still wasn't nearly as good as hers had been. But the familiar smell of baking that filled the kitchen was like stepping into a memory, and he could close his eyes and imagine she was still there, right beside him.

So he kept baking, cooking, experimenting, paging through her shelves of cookbooks, watching The Food Network, trying out new

recipes on friends. It was like therapy, or maybe like a drug, an addiction, but sometimes it was the only thing that kept him going through the endless lonely days so he figured it was all right. He eventually bought new pans and pots and cooking spoons because the others were getting stained and grimy; he knew she'd understand. But he kept her old aprons, every one. He couldn't imagine wearing anything other than this faded flowered apron that had once cinched around her waist, that still smelled slightly of her perfume if he brought it to his face and closed his eyes and breathed in deeply enough.

Clutching the mismatched potholders his daughters had stitched in Home Ec more than half a lifetime ago, the old man gently slid the pan into the oven, savoring the familiar warmth on his face and hands. He set the timer. Time to wait. It seemed he was always waiting, now.

The old man sat down heavily at the kitchen table, resting his head in his arms, suddenly exhausted. Funny how the years crept up on a person, slowly and then — BOOM! — blindsided you. A blitz, like the coaches used to warn against in football. The old man broke his nose one time during a high school game. Jogged to the sidelines and popped it straight and stuffed some cotton up it to stop the bleeding. Then he ran back in and kept playing. That was when he was young, when he was invincible. Now he knew better.

Funny how baking took so much out of him these days. Or maybe it was the remembering. *I miss him terribly, Ollie*, his mother used to sigh after his father passed away. She seemed so much older as a widow. *I even miss him licking that goddamn spoon!* Funny how the things that used to annoy you were the things you missed the most when they were gone.

The old man missed discovering extra bottles of vanilla extract in the pantry. He missed the stale Girl Scout cookies. Heck, he even missed running out of gas. Sometimes he delayed going to the gas station for a day or two, just to see how close to Empty he could get, to remember how it felt to coast up to a pump running on fumes.

She only ran out of gas one time. He knew sooner or later it would happen; she would learn her lesson. But the one time she ran out of gas, it was at an intersection with gas stations on three — three! — corners. Needless to say, she didn't learn her lesson.

Funny how looking back, he was glad she didn't.

The old man closed his eyes. Imagined he felt the cool ocean breeze on his cheeks, saw the waves splashing the little boat, the rain streaming down her face. Her smile. He felt her in his arms, dancing across the boat's slippery deck, dancing around the kitchen, only it wasn't a ghost this time, it wasn't a memory, it was her, her, Her, and she was laughing as he twirled her, *da-dum-de-dum, Ollie I missed you so much. . .*

DING! An hour later, the oven timer went off. This time, the old man didn't hear it.

