

Ashes and Memories

Written by Debbi Covington
Tuesday, 01 May 2018 11:54



I had to bake a couple of cakes for a catering gig yesterday. At the last minute, I thought to add my Mama's secret ingredient, black walnut flavoring. That's what triggered it. As the cakes baked, my kitchen was ensconced with a lovingly familiar and kind of melancholy scent. My mind was flooded with memories. Smells do that to me more than anything else. And then, hot tears started streaming down my cheeks.

I've been thinking about my Mama a lot lately. I've been remembering her in her kitchen. That's where she hung out. Mama's kitchen was the busiest spot in the house. It's where we ate reheated taco pizza for breakfast while standing in front of the oven for warmth on cold winter mornings.

Mama's kitchen smelled like pot pies or date nut bars after school. It was Mama's kitchen where birthday parties were held, science projects were created and many of the real things in my adolescent life happened. It's where Mama cooked family suppers and Thanksgiving feasts for my grandmothers, aunts, uncles and cousins. It was where Mama baked her famous coconut cakes and hundreds of loaves of sourdough bread. It was where I did my homework, endured the torture of home perms, and the only place where I was allowed to paint my fingernails. Mama's kitchen was where I cracked pecans, snapped green beans and polished silver for punishment when I came home after curfew. It was where Mama and I drank two bottles of champagne, while laughing and crying, in the middle of the afternoon, when I received my college diploma.

I can still see Mama sitting at the kitchen table writing thank you notes, paying bills and

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addressing Christmas cards. There was always a pile of something on the kitchen table besides food – and more times than not, the family cat, Fluffy.

It was in my Mama's kitchen that I learned how to cook.

Three weeks ago, Mama's kitchen was destroyed by fire. A fire in my Mama's kitchen! I can't begin to imagine. I haven't seen photos but understand that the kitchen is a total loss. Even in the ashes and rubble, I have my memories. Very happy memories, actually. If the fire hadn't happened, I wonder if and when these things would have come to mind again. Right now, I envision Mama's kitchen quiet and dark with charred walls and burned cabinets. The good news is, her kitchen can be rebuilt and remodeled – and I hope that's what will happen. Fire can destroy a lot of things but it can't burn love. I still have that. My heart is full.

(Photography by Paul Nurnberg)

Banana Salad

Growing up, Mama would make this salad on special occasions. She used iceberg lettuce and

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of the little things that make life special. This is a little bit of a recipe, but the recipe is the way I've always cooked it. I've never



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