



Saturday, March 4, 2017 was a tough day. Our kitty, Giz, had undergone surgery the Friday before. She'd had a bad night and I'd spent most of it awake trying to comfort her. Vince and I knew in our hearts that we needed to prepare to lose our beloved pet. I was despondent and exhausted. Saturday, March 4, 2017 was also the first anniversary of Pat Conroy's death and the occasion of the first annual commemorative event, March Forth, to celebrate Pat's life at Penn Center on St. Helena Island.

It was a chilly morning and I had dragged myself into the kitchen before daylight to prepare boxed lunches for the March Forth festivities. I threw a jacket on over my chef's coat and headed out to deliver the meals to the hungry participants. When I arrived at Penn Center, people were scattered everywhere. I could see folks walking on the nature tour. Others had taken the short drive down the road to visit Pat Conroy's grave. Even more people were in the Frissell Community House discussing books and poetry and visiting with the event speakers.

I wanted to stay at Penn Center. I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to see Giz in pain. I just wanted to be numb. I spotted an old picnic table, the one place to sit that was outside of the Community House, and headed towards it. Weariness and sorrow kept me from remembering the exact chain of events. I'm not sure who was where first or second. Maybe it was Pat's widow, my sad friend Sandra King-Conroy. Maybe I stopped by to sit with her. Or, maybe I was alone and Sandra stopped to sit with me. I'm not certain. We were both downcast and weepy and we shared our heartaches with each other. And then, slowly, like birds flocking to a telephone wire, one by one, more and more friends joined us. Victoria Smalls and Margaret Evans came to sit with us. Will Balk and Maura Connelly dropped by, too. Louanne Spada and Lorrie Anderson showed up. Eventually, the table was full of people and even more were standing on the fringes. I don't remember all of the souls who ended up at that picnic table that

day. What I do remember, in my sorry state, was that we were all grieving. We were missing our friend Pat Conroy and dealing with other hurts and pains in our lives. Somehow, tears turned to laughter and sadness to comfort just because we were together. We were birds with bent beaks and broken wings sitting on that old picnic table tweeting and chirping with each other – and helping each other to March Forth.

This year, March Forth will be held on Sunday, March 3rd at Penn Center. March Forth is a celebration of life, of friendships and of books. It's a day of learning and fellowship and nature walks. I prepared the boxed lunches for the second March Forth event in 2018 and I'll be preparing the boxed lunches again this year. I hope that old picnic table is still there. I hope we all flock to it again. And, I hope that you will join us!

In loving memory of Pat Conroy, I'd like to share our mutual friend, Julia Randel's, recipe for Dunbar Macaroni. It's a classic Newberry, South Carolina comfort food and was a dish so special to Pat, that he published it in his cookbook, *The Pat Conroy Cookbook: Recipes and Stories of My Life*.¹

Dunbar Macaroni

(from *The Pat Conroy Cookbook: Recipes and Stories of my Life* by Pat Conroy)



1½ cups elbow macaroni

4 onions, chopped

2 (16-ounce) cans whole tomatoes, preferably San Marzano, mashed, without their juice

¾ pound sharp cheddar cheese, grated

4 tablespoons butter

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cook the macaroni. Drain and set aside. Cook the onions in 3 cups boiling water for 5 minutes. Drain. Add the tomatoes and cook over low heat for 10 minutes, until liquid has evaporated. Add the cooked macaroni, cheese, butter, salt and pepper. Mix together and pour into a large greased casserole dish. Bake for 30 minutes, or until lightly browned. Serve hot. Serves 8 to 10.

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