

## Bread and Jam, After a Divorce



Here I am hours and miles and years away from my old life, in a light-filled kitchen in the late afternoon, making a quiche from scratch. My cell phone rings in my back pocket; I tend to keep it there so my two sons are able to reach me. One's a busy college student, the other's in his final year of high school and, well, out a lot. So I hastily wipe my hands off on a towel, and answer. It's not one of them.

But it's a familiar voice. It's their dad, my ex-husband. It turns out he is cooking something, too, or about to; he wonders if I have the easy honey-whole-wheat bread recipe he used to use. He was never much of a cook, but this became a popular specialty when our children were small. After a while, he wasn't home with us much anymore, and the recipe and its warm smells faded from our lives.

I hesitate, blindsided by the synchronicity and then, despite myself, cast back to those days and the house we once shared—the way the light was in that kitchen in the afternoons. But in moments I revert to my present stance towards this man, which is, keep it brief. I don't have the recipe he seeks or if I do, I'm not inclined to drop what I'm doing, paw around and find it for him. I suggest—a plausible idea—that the piece of paper it was written on might be wedged into the How to Bake Bread cookbook. I wasn't at our house when he moved out (I took the kids to my Boston cousins' house that weekend), but he left me all the cookbooks except that one, which never troubled me. Bread-baking isn't my thing. I sign off politely and return my attention to rolling out the quiche crust.

The weekend comes and I exchange a few calls and text messages with our older son, the one who's in college now. His cross-country running team is traveling to Boston for a big invitational. It's too far away for me to attend, but I wish him well and ask him to let me know how it goes. He reports that his dad, who lives in that city, is planning to attend. A nice gesture, I allow. Did my son also invite the cousins? No, he did not explicitly invite them; they are on the Dad Blacklist, for a variety of reasons that are hard to explain to people outside our family. It's a trying blend of resentment, jealousy, vindictiveness—typical of his dad. Well, I say gamely, at least somebody will be there to cheer for you!

After the race, this son checks in. He did well! He saw an old teammate from high school, now running for a rival college! They ran together for about a mile! And yes, his dad was there. "He gave me some stuff before I had to board the bus back." Stuff? "Well, a loaf of homemade bread."

For an often-strained relationship, that loaf of homemade bread was a nice offering. Perhaps a peace offering, or perhaps his dad gave it as a gentle reminder of happier days, when we all lived together and the house was redolent of the comforting, yeasty scent of fresh-baked loaves. Or perhaps it will end up being just some carbs to tear into on the long ride back north, maybe sharing with teammates? “No,” my son says, “I think I’ll save it till I get back to my apartment.” I had given him a jar of my homemade blueberry jam when I saw him recently. (I am very proud of my blueberry jam—it has lime zest in it, and sweet traces of cinnamon and nutmeg. It rocks.) “Is there any jam left? Why not have them together?” I suggested. “Yes!,” our son exclaims; I could almost see his bright eyes and the fist pump.

Before I could stop myself, I blurt, “It will be a snack that is the best of both of your parents.” Hard to tell on a phone call, but I thought I detected something childlike in his voice as he pictured and pondered that and replied, “Yeah, Mom. That would be good.” The divorce hurt all of us, not just me. Good? It’s hard to feel this and hard to say this, but I feel that word twisting inside of me. The divorce hurt all of us...but, there’s this delicious bread and jam.