

Nam

By Faith Ellis

When Nam died, I decided to stop cooking for a while. I felt guilty telling Mom no when she asked me to bake cakes, but I know she didn't mind. When a year passed, however, and Nam's birthday came around, I forced myself to overstep the boundaries I had placed.

On the afternoon of the day before April 6th, I laid out the ingredients to her four-step pound cake. Her recipe book lay untouched on the shelf above me. I had learned the recipe years ago, when she taught me to cook out of her self-written pages. Four cups of flour... I scooped flour out of the sack and leveled it with a knife. I was exact at first, analyzing each measure, but I stopped. Though Nam wasn't there to correct me, I knew there was a good chance I was correct. Though I flinched inwardly at what seemed to me overconfidence, I continued. It was surprisingly relieving to assemble the ingredients without worry.

Once done mixing, I put the mix in the oven right away. I hoisted myself onto the counter across from the oven and took up a magazine. Whether it was my odd position or my wandering thoughts, I couldn't read a word. Time after time my eyes wandered to Nam's collection of books. The cake was all right. It was noticeably uneven, especially at the ends. The icing I had prepared beforehand was thankfully still as soft and silky as I had left it. The trimmings I applied rose and fell like ribbons on the edges. With pink icing I wrote Nam's name at the top.

I brought the cake to the table where Mom sat. She had bought twelve candles for the occasion, but she applied only one. We cut it and ate a piece each. The sadness I felt when I tasted it wasn't new, but it was different. I didn't taste the usual sting of guilt and imperfection, though imperfection was still there, definitely. It was heavy, dense, and a bit too bland. But the slice I had, though odd, was good. I hated myself for messing it up so badly. I didn't want to admit I liked it better this way. The bland taste was a nice change, though it changed nothing for me right away. As weeks passed and Mom and I finished it, I understood something new. We had finally donated the last of Nam's things as she asked. She had mentioned her cookbooks didn't apply. They still sat on the shelf above the sink. I checked her cake recipe. I thought before I had done it wrong. Three cups of flour instead of four. I had.