

## Nonperishables

On the morning of my fortieth birthday, I woke up feeling as if something had fluttered loose inside me. I wanted to pin it down, catch it, figure it out. I read once that the hunger for something, the pursuit of a thing that we imagine can make us whole, comes from our awareness that we are, in fact, incomplete. I woke up feeling incomplete.

This was not expected, because I had already accomplished most of what I wanted to achieve in my life. I had graduated with a degree in business, married, divorced, launched my own company, sold it at a tremendous profit, and no longer had to work. I had traveled, spent long, pleasant hours in the company of friends and family, and bought a lot of silly presents for my niece and nephews. I dated when I felt like it, but wasn't anxious for a long-term relationship that might cause ripples in the pond of my peaceful life. It felt good to have everything settled and serene, but here—suddenly—was this feeling of needing something . . . more.

My friends, Helen and Jack, took me to dinner that evening for my birthday. Helen and I have been friends since high school, and Jack seems as if he's been around forever. I told them how I had felt that morning. "I think I need a project," I said.

Helen and Jack thought about this. They have neither children nor nieces and nephews. Helen often relieves her maternal feelings by mothering me, which works out well as far as I'm concerned.

"Why don't you take a class?" Jack suggested.

Hmmmm. Helen said, "Oh, that's a great idea, Tremain. You could take a foreign language, or sewing. Or you know what? They have memoir-writing classes at the high school as part of the community education program. You should write your memoirs."

Now *that* got my attention. "Yeah! I'll write my memoirs. When are the classes?"

“Oh, you know what? I think they start again in September. You can get a schedule at the library and find out. Can you wait a month to start your project?”

“Sure. I’ll go pick up a schedule and see what else they’ve got going on, too. This is great, you guys! I’ll get all proficient at something, and fill my time and learn to do new things. Hurrah!”

I went to the library the next day, and learned that the fall schedule for community education courses wasn’t available yet. “There may be a spring schedule left over somewhere,” the reference librarian told me. She pointed toward the section of the library where they kept copies of tax forms and lots of community service information. “That will give you an idea of what’s offered, and the hours. There may be a Web address on the schedule, too.”

I thanked her, and went looking. There were lots of publications available on newsprint, and they had all gotten kind of scrambled up together. I spent about ten minutes tidying up, stacking the women’s health publication on one side, and the car trader paper on another. Maybe my project could be to volunteer at the library, and keep things neat. Then I noticed a fresh stack of papers on one shelf with the screaming headline, “STATE FAIR ENTRY REGULATIONS AND PROCEDURES.”

“Hi-de-ho,” I said out loud. “What’s this?” I tucked one of the papers under my arm, along with a women’s health one, and took them over to a table to review.

“You’ve got an enormous black smudge on your nose,” Richard said. He is my next-door neighbor. I had stopped at his house on my way home from the library because I couldn’t wait to tell someone my idea.

“Good,” I said. “That means I have probably absorbed some of the state fair entry regulations and procedures into my pores. Guess what? I’m going to win a blue ribbon at the fair for my pound cake!”

My success in business, as rapid and amazing as it was, never kept me from doing other things. I had spent time doing other things I enjoyed—listening to violin music, running on the trails of Cherokee Park, and baking. So when I saw that the state fair had a category for all-butter pound cake, I knew I’d found my project.

I waved the state fair newspaper at Richard. “Best of Show! That’s what I want to win. If I win Best in Show, not only do I get a blue ribbon, I also get a gilt-edged crystal cake plate with a cover, engraved with the state seal in the center. What do you think about that?”

I had several favorite pound cake recipes, and I made them in turns depending on my mood and whether or not I had the right ingredients on hand.

“I love your pound cake,” he said. “I say go for it.”

“Well, can I come in and sit down? I want to discuss my choices with you—I brought my cookbooks. Do you have any coffee? This is going to take some time.”

“Well, I guess I can make a pot,” Richard said dubiously. “Sure, come on in. Ignore the mess.”

He was being silly; Richard’s house is very feng shui and he puts both Helen and me to shame with his standards of cleanliness and order, which he apparently learned before he retired from the Navy. Richard and I have made a pact that when we’re both old and feeble if we haven’t married again we’ll move into one house and take care of each other. That would work out fine for me, but I think Richard’s hoping he’ll meet someone as clean as he is and marry her before it comes to that.

I sat at his slate-topped kitchen table while Richard brewed coffee. “I’ve got four or five different recipes. I’ll tick them off for you.”

“Go,” Richard said encouragingly. He poured water into the reservoir of his coffee maker, and pushed the “on” button.

“OK. Five-Flavor Pound Cake. That one has—surprise, surprise—five different flavorings added to it.”

Richard was silent for a moment, while he reached into the cabinet for two coffee cups. Then he said, “That sounds like too many flavors. Don’t they compete? Doesn’t it end up tasting . . . brown? Like you mixed too many colors together?”

“No, it turns out great. The recipe calls for vanilla, rum, butter, coconut, and lemon. I use vanilla, almond, rum, coconut, and lemon. It’s yummy.”

“I’ll take your word for it. What’s next?”

“Well, there’s one called Perfect Pound Cake, but I don’t remember it at all and so I’m wondering how perfect it could be. I’ll have to make it again just to see. I wouldn’t want to miss out on making the best one because my memory failed me. Then there’s your particular favorite—pound cake loaf.”

“Well, that’s the one,” Richard said. “That is a fabulous pound cake.”

“I know, but here’s the thing: It nearly always comes out of the pan ugly, and sometimes it comes out in two pieces. That would be a disaster. I’m just not sure I can count on it. And since I’m not absolutely certain that it *does* taste that much better than the others, I don’t want to settle on it without some testing.”

“I’m all for testing,” Richard said. “What else?”

“Chocolate pound cake. I’ve never been a huge fan of chocolate pound cake. But there are a lot of people out there who love it, and three of them may be judging the cakes at the fair this year. Finally—and this one is a serious contender, Richard—there’s this one called Heavenly Pound Cake. It has a heavenly texture, and a pretty darn heavenly taste. It comes out of the pan beautifully—most of the time—and it calls for an entire box of confectioner’s sugar.”

“Makes my teeth hurt to think about it,” Richard said. “OK, so make one of each, and I’ll be your tester. You should start right away, and then you can perfect the one you decide to submit to the fair. Make one a day for the next several days, and let’s see how they turn out. Come on,” he urged, “I need to try a little of each kind, to help you make this decision.”

“All right,” I said briskly. I stood up. “Let me borrow a piece of paper and a pen. I’m going to make a list, and get all the flour, sugar, butter, eggs, and milk I’ll need. Plus cocoa, flavorings, shortening, and maybe some bananas.”

“You’re going to make a banana pound cake?” Richard asked. He sounded like he hoped I would.

“No, I need them after I run.”

“You aren’t going to have time to run!” he said. “You need to be in the kitchen, perfecting your pound cake.” He handed me a cup of coffee, and fetched the cream.

Before I left, Richard had actually set up a matrix on his computer that showed the five different types of pound cake, and the ingredients each required. This would make shopping much easier.

The next afternoon I was whipping up a Five-Flavor Pound Cake when Richard called. “When can I come over?” he asked.

“You can come over anytime you want,” I said. I broke eggs into a small bowl and threw the shells into the disposal side of the sink. “I’ve finished the pound cake loaf this morning, so it’s ready to be tested. I think it turned out pretty well, but maybe just a tiny bit too brown. I’ve got the electrician here now, checking the oven. I think it’s running a little hot.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Richard said. “I like a nice firm crust on my pound cake. Don’t worry so much about perfection. Don’t treat it like a work project. You need to put in a lot of love to make a great pound cake, not a lot of chemical or scientific know-how.”

“Perfection is my goal!” I said. “I want a blue ribbon. I want to be the Mother Teresa of pound cake. She was a perfectionist, and now she’s a saint.”

“Mother Teresa was a kinder, gentler Type A personality,” Richard said. “You are just Type A, period. And very competitive. Why can’t you relax and enjoy the fair? Enter a pound cake, by all means, but why make it a do-or-die proposition? After all, some of those old ladies have been entering cakes for years. They know all the tricks.”

“That’s the thing about a pound cake,” I told him, beating my five flavorings into my creamy, fragrant batter. Mmmmm. “There are no *tricks* except the kind that . . . that an alchemist might use. You have to tweak the flavorings . . . and mix the hell out of the batter so that it’s smooth and glossy going into the pan and then it comes out with a crumb so fine that if you tore the cake apart with your hands, very few crumbs would actually hit the floor.”

There was a silence on the other end of the phone. I waited.

“Are you on crack?” Richard asked. “And by the way, Mother Tourettesa, you’re making a *heavenly* pound cake, so watch it with the swear words.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” I said confidently. “And if I’m going to make a heavenly pound cake, I guess I better beat the hell out of it.”

“That’s the spirit,” Terry said. “Go hard, or go home.” Terry was the electrician from Evans Electric.

“Gotta run,” I told Richard, and hung up the phone.

Terry was squinting at his special oven thermometer.

“How’s it looking?” I asked.

“Looking good,” he said, but now he was staring at the pound cake loaf that was under the glass-domed cake plate on my kitchen table. In my new role as Mother Teresa, I took pity on him. “You need a slice of cake,” I said encouragingly. “Or don’t you eat pound cake?”

“I eat all the pound cake I can get,” he assured me, and we sat together and ate pound cake and drank coffee while the oven continued to heat up.

The service call and calibration cost me \$95. “But I tell you what,” Terry said. Coffee break over, he leaned against the kitchen counter next to the coffee maker and watched, mesmerized, as I swirled my pound cake batter into the bundt pan. “I tell you what. I’m a little worried about your baking element. I think that, given you paid full price for a service call today, I oughta come back tomorrow, no additional charge, and recheck it when the oven’s cool. If you’re going to win this blue ribbon, you need a perfectly calibrated oven.”

“I certainly do,” I agreed. I knew what he was really after, but I was happy to give it to him to have my own personal electrician at my beck and call to keep my oven properly calibrated. “You come back tomorrow whenever you can stop by, and give it another look. I’ll have a fresh pound cake by that time, and I’ll hold off on making the next one until after you’ve been by.”

“That little old pound cake you had today was the best I’ve ever eaten,” he said, looking again at the cake plate on the table.

“Well, I hope this one is going to be good, too. Let me pop it in the oven. We’re preset for 350 degrees, right?” I maneuvered the bundt pan into the center of the oven, closed the door, and dusted the flour off my hands onto my jeans. Then I turned to the pantry and grabbed a box of Ziploc bags. “Why don’t you take a slice of that pound cake loaf with you?” I said over my shoulder. “I need to clear off the cake plate for the new one, anyway.”

• Terry was looking at me like I was his new best friend. “Why don’t I come about noon time tomorrow?” he said. “If it’s OK with you, I’ll stop by after my lunch break, check your calibration, and see how things are going.”

I watched as Richard and Terry sampled the Five-Flavor Pound Cake. “It’s a little more complex,” I said. “Maybe it’s too complex. But I really like it. Well? What do you think?”

They were sitting there chewing and not saying a single word. It made me crazy.

Terry said, “Ms. Clay, I thought that pound cake yesterday was good. But I’m here to tell you, this pound cake right here is the best thing I ever put in my mouth.”

Richard was frowning slightly at this. “What?” I asked him.

He had the last slice of the pound cake loaf and a fresher slice of Five-Flavor cake on his plate. “Well, I think I like the more delicate flavor of the loaf,” he said. “It’s elegant, simple, delicious. The Five-Flavor is very, very good, too, but I think you’re right—it’s a little too busy.”

“I never said it was too busy,” I snapped. “Personally, I like it very much.”

Richard held up a hand. His eyes were closed, and he had a patient look on his face that made me mad. “If you can’t take criticism, Tremain, then you better not enter the fair at all.”

Terry shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Ma’am,” he said, “as far as I’m concerned it would be a doggone crime if you didn’t enter these cakes in the fair. You sit up in here and make pound cakes like it’s easy as falling off a log, and they turn out like this! Of course it’s just my opinion, but I think you’re like an artist, only in cake instead of paint or pencil.”

I beamed at Terry and pushed the cake plate toward him. “Have all you want,” I said. “And you should call me Tremain.”

Terry checked the oven temperature again while he was there, and assured me that it was running right on target. “Thanks so much,” I told him, putting a hand on his arm. “Now, you stop by here anytime this week. I’ll be trying some more recipes, and you can help decide which one I should enter.”

He smiled at me, and nodded, and headed back to his truck. Terry and I understood each other perfectly.

I closed the front door behind Terry and returned to the kitchen.

Richard looked up. “Oh, wipe that Mona Lisa smile off your face, Tremain. It is not attractive.”

“It’s a Mother Teresa smile,” I corrected him. “I’m an artist in pound cake.”

Terry’s praise inspired me, and I set out to make a chocolate pound cake, a Perfect Pound Cake, and a Heavenly Pound Cake over the next two days. Richard gave up testing after day two. “My teeth feel like they’re coated in butter,” he said. “I really can’t eat any more, at least not until I’ve gone through a cycle of eating nothing but salads for awhile.” Fortunately, Terry was made of sterner stuff, and he was over every day around lunch time or just after lunch. He was very complimentary. He even loved the chocolate pound cake.

For the next several weeks, I was happy and busy, making pound cakes and having different people try them. It became clear that the Heavenly Pound Cake was the champion—my Best of Show contender. I had developed a nearly

fool-proof method of getting it out of the pan without bald-heading it (leaving patches of the brown crust stuck to the inside of the pan), and I had made several cake plates following the state fair suggestions: rounds of corrugated cardboard covered with aluminum foil. I was ready for the fair.

"Tomorrow's the day," I told Richard. "I'll make my cake in the morning, and deliver it for judging early in the afternoon. The deadline is 5:00."

"Are you nervous?"

I thought about that. "No, I'm really not," I said. "I feel pretty confident. I feel like this was meant to be. I'm going to win Best of Show."

That evening, I was ticking off my ingredients and making sure everything was in order when the phone rang. "I'm at the hospital," Helen said. "Please say a prayer, Tremain. Jack has been in an accident, on his way home from work. They won't even let me see him."

I closed my eyes and tried to think. "I'm on my way," I said. I was already shoving my feet into boat shoes.

When I rushed into the emergency room, Helen was nowhere to be found. The whole place was completely empty; even the receiving nurse had left her post. I assumed Helen had finally been allowed to go see Jack, and I slumped into an orange plastic chair to wait. Against the wall, underneath a bulletin board, was a large cardboard box. The sign on it read: "Deposit donations for the homeless here. Nonperishables only, please."

*Nonperishable* was a nice word. I tried to concentrate on all the nonperishables I could think of—faith, hope, love, and joy.

When the receiving nurse finally returned, she noticed me and said, "Oh, are you here to be with Mrs. Knox?"

"Yes," I said, jumping out of the chair.

"She's in the chapel. I'll show you where it is."

"Thank you." I was relieved. Helen had gone to the chapel to pray for Jack. Maybe she was already praying a thank-you. I followed the nurse through two sets of double doors, and down a short hallway. She opened the door for me, and allowed me to walk in past her. Helen was sitting on the back pew. Another nurse and a doctor stood over her. Helen's eyes were blank and confused, and when she saw me she held up her hands, and I took them in mine. "I have to sign some papers," she said. "Tremain, he's . . . gone."

Her hands twisted in mine, restless and sweaty, not wanting to be released, but not able to be still. My palms started sweating, too, but my mind was not working at all. I couldn't comprehend what had happened. Finally, I said, "When you're ready, I'll drive you home."

Back at Helen's, we didn't talk; we just sort of floated around. Helen was beyond words, locked somewhere in a place no one could reach, looking deep inside. She hadn't spoken since she called her parents with the news. They were planning to come down the next day. Jack's parents were both dead; Helen

had not been able to reach his sister. She told me she would wait and try the next morning. I wanted to set out walking and find them so they would know, but instead I walked through the house, with Helen.

Helen was so restless she walked through the house all night. As it grew darker, cold moonlight filtered in through the skylights, and she moved from room to room, from light to shadow. I tried to stay in the dark of the shadows, unobtrusive but near, and as I saw where she intended to go next, I acted as her guide. I created pools of light where they were needed, and I brewed cups of tea. Helen even drank some of the tea, from time to time. Her face was a mask of moonlit blankness.

I don't think she slept for a single minute that night. I dozed off on the couch from time to time, but each time I woke up, Helen was walking the floor.

She had not wanted the Ativan that the doctor had prescribed to help her sleep, and I had been glad she didn't want it because I was terrified of leaving her alone while I went to the drugstore. Now I wondered if she would ever let herself sleep again. I had that feeling again of being incomplete, of wanting something desperately and not knowing where to find it.

As the moonlight faded from the skylights, and the cold gray sky of dawn could be seen reflected in them, I slumped at the kitchen table, exhausted. I could drink no more tea. I was no longer needed to turn on lamps. What could be done? The fact is, I was terrible at times like this. Helen had always been the one to prop *me* up. I didn't know how to do a single thing that could help her. The only thing I knew how to do anymore was bake pound cake.

So that's what I did.

The kitchen table was tucked into a nook, and the nook had a built-in china cabinet. The glass-front doors had been removed, and the cabinet was used for cookbooks instead of plates. Helen, like me, had a copy of *Carter County Cookery*, and since it was familiar, I took it down and let it fall open.

Being Helen's copy, it fell open to a page with vegetable lasagna on it. Funny, when I opened my copy at home, it fell open to the pound cake section. I flipped to the index and looked up the pound cakes. Helen's pound cake pages were unmarked; the pages of my copy were crusty with dried batter that I had flung onto the pages when lifting the mixer from the batter bowl.

I checked the ingredients for the different pound cakes—as if I didn't already have them more or less memorized—and then I scouted them out.

When I opened the refrigerator door, the light inside hurt my eyes and my head. I was beyond tired. Still, I took out three sticks of sweet butter and five eggs. In the pantry, I found a Rubbermaid container full of flour, and it was almost certainly all-purpose flour; my recipe called for cake flour but I could fudge that by cutting back a little bit. Cake flour is just a little lighter than regular flour, so for every cup of all-purpose you can take out a tablespoon or so and have, more or less, the equivalent of cake flour. Helen had a full one-pound box



of confectioners' sugar. Heavenly Pound Cake was a strange animal—it only called for four ingredients, not counting the two flavorings. There was no milk in it at all. Maybe that was part of the reason it was called “heavenly”—the fact that it turned out to be a cake at all was a sort of miracle.

I looked through several cabinets without luck, before finally locating the spices and extracts above the stove. Helen had vanilla and lemon extracts. They would do nicely. I preheated the oven, dug a bowl out of the cabinets, and found the hand mixer, a spatula, and a bundt pan.

There is a rhythm to mixing up a pound cake, and moving through the measurements and additions, one at a time, beating well after each. Beating is so important if you want a light cake, with a nice crumb. I beat the hell out of that cake.

I greased and floured Helen's bundt pan, and poured the batter in, scraping the sides of the bowl with the spatula to get it all out. I was so tired that I swayed a little on my feet; holding the bowl with one hand while scraping seemed suddenly like hard labor. I put the bowl back down with a thump, and shoved the full pan into the oven. Closing the door on it, I felt like I had just completed the most monumental task of my entire life.

But I hadn't. I found that out when I turned around and saw the mess I'd made. Wearily, I began to wash up. I scraped batter off the counters and floor, put away the mixer, threw the rinsed spoons and bowls and measuring cups into the dishwasher, jammed eggshells down the disposal.

“What are you doing?” Helen asked. She walked into the kitchen. Her face was pale and puffy, and I wanted to cry when I saw how bereft she looked. Like a five-year-old who's just gotten out of bed to come tell you about a bad dream.

“Making a pound cake,” I said.

She nodded, as if that were normal. “For the fair,” she said, as if reminding herself.

“No,” I said. “It's for you. And your family, when they get here.” I rinsed out the sink, and turned off the water. “I hope it turns out okay.”

Helen sat down at the table, and put her head on her arms. I walked over and put my hand on her head. A glob of pound cake batter transferred from my thumb to her hair.

“I just got cake batter in your hair,” I said. “I'm so sorry, Helen.”

And we started to laugh, and realized we were so tired that we really should try to lie down. I was asleep as soon as I hit the guest bed, and didn't get up until I heard the oven timer letting me know the cake was ready.

At Jack's memorial service, the minister read from I Corinthians: “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable.” I thought about the box of nonperishables at the hospital emergency room. Why do we give food and flowers to people when someone dies? They are terribly perishable.

After the service, Helen planned to go back to Indiana with her parents for an extended visit. I hugged her for a long time before she got into their car, and drove away. “Take care of yourself,” I said.

She nodded. “We’re taking the leftover pound cake with us,” she said.

“I’ll mail a new one to you in a week,” I promised.

I went to the state fair with Richard, and we ate as many fair foods as we could—elephant ears, roasted corn, pork chop sandwiches. Fair food was therapeutic, and so seeing the rabbits, sheep, pigs, and goats. I felt the sadness of the past week lift a bit. In fact, I cheered up a lot when we passed the tobacco exhibit, and the men who were competing in the cigar-smoking contest.

“How do you know who wins?” I asked Richard quietly, but he didn’t know, either. The men sat there, very solemn, in straight-backed wooden chairs, puffing away. A small crowd—friends and family, I’m sure—watched them with great anticipation.

“Look, the miniature horses are over there,” Richard said, coughing a bit. So I let him move me along and never learned the secret of the cigar-smoking contest.

We saved the main exhibit hall for last. Some of the handcrafts were quite beautiful, and there was a simple beauty, too, in the way that the jars of canned goods were arranged on glass shelves, neatly labeled.

I felt depressed again as we got to the section of the hall where the baked goods were displayed. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Richard asked.

“Yes,” I said, and we moved down the first aisle. Rows of glass cases held everything from fancy decorated cakes to plates of chocolate chip cookies, plain biscuits, and cornbread.

And then there were the pound cakes.

Of all the items displayed at the fair—quilts, jam, aquariums, pumpkins—none of them had the short shelf-life of a pound cake. Already there was a fly inside the glass case, knocking against the sides. I pointed the fly out to Richard. “It’ll make you think about death, seeing that,” I said. He shuddered.

“I know,” I said. “I know. It’s disgusting. All that effort, time, butter, and flour, and for what? For a fly to land on and make maggots. These glass cases might as well be coffins.”

Richard looked as if he regretted the pork chop sandwich. “Shut up,” he said.

“I don’t think I will. I think I will see about closing down this fair as a health hazard. What’s the use of displaying food? For that matter, where’s the sense in displaying quilts and pumpkins and gourds and rabbits? People should be enjoying them!” Helen and her parents had declared that my pound cake, the one I made the morning after Jack died, was the best cake they’d ever eaten. That was better than getting a blue ribbon.

“Well, people are enjoying them. Maybe not the pound cake—not now.”

“Certainly not. No, three judges tasted a tiny bit of each one, and that was it. Show’s over. These pound cakes were sacrificed to the god of ego, because somebody wanted a stupid damn ribbon to display. What’s the use of pouring your love into a pound cake, and then having three bites taken out of it just for purposes of criticism? You should spread them around! You should give them to the poor, the bereaved, the sick, and the lonesome. And electricians, if you have them. And you know what? That’s what’s nonperishable, Richard! Not the cake, but the thought and the love that make you give it!” I looked at him, feeling as if I were hovering a couple of inches above the exhibit hall floor.

Richard smiled. “Mother Tourettesa,” he said fondly, and he took my arm and led me away from those awful glass cases. “You deserve . . .”

An announcement over the intercom interrupted him. “Ladies and gentlemen,” a pleasant male baritone said, “we have a grand prize winner for Artistry in Wood. George K. Mills is our winner, for his work entitled, ‘Saturn’s Moons.’”

We stopped and applauded with everyone else, although we had not seen “Saturn’s Moons” and couldn’t say if it deserved applause or not.

Richard took my arm again, and we continued to walk. “Mother Tourettsa,” he repeated—he was terribly pleased with himself for coming up with that—“You deserve Best of Show, for Artistry in Pound Cake.”

“Thank you, thank you,” I murmured. “I shall have to treat myself to a crystal cake plate with a domed lid. I don’t imagine I can get one with the state seal on it, though.”

“Oh, I bet there’s an artisan in this building who could engrave it for you. All these handmade handcrafts . . . Well, not all of them *handmade*, actually.”

“True,” I agreed. “After all, only God can make a pumpkin. But I’d like to see Him try to make a pound cake.”

Richard stopped, and gave the exhibit hall a sweeping look. “Is there anything else you wanted to see, do, or eat?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m satisfied.”