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Smilemakers in the Kitchen

Jackson Cook

Prose

Last week, I bought a secondhand cookbook bound together by three rubber bands. On the front cover, someone painted a fisherman hiking along the streambed while a pale cloud of smoke billowed from beyond the tree line. No information in the surviving pages pointed towards the book's title, where it was from, or what group had contributed the recipes—but it really was a great painting.

"Why do you buy these?" Maretta asked, watching me place the book in its new home above our kitchen counter, "You'll never make a single recipe from in there."

She was right, and despite the amount of real estate they commanded in our petite kitchen, I hardly ever fixed anything from my rescued cookbooks. On the day we moved in together, Maretta stood in the front yard and observed me individually carry each cookbook inside, probably thinking the collection was a little absurd and bordering on hoarder behavior. Luckily, she was also understanding, and on our first Valentine's Day together, shortly after I disclosed my hobby of collecting used cookbooks, she insisted that I make dinner.

Characteristically, I made recipes cut out of magazines or ones my sister would send me through the mail in neatly stamped pink envelopes. I also used to have a few meals memorized, which I would watch my mother make weekly for years. Truthfully, I hadn't made any of Mama's recipes since she passed away, and I wasn't sure if I could accurately recreate them anymore. I certainly never made anything out of the collection, but Maretta was being considerate by taking an interest, and there didn't seem to be a reason to decline. The final outcome was, at best, disastrous.

In hindsight, the meal I chose might have been destined for failure. It was pulled from a disintegrating cookbook published and collected by the Kostopulos County Junior League in Minnesota, discovered at a Goodwill near Madison, Arkansas, and primarily comprised of casseroles, pot pies, crockpot creations, and aspic: a hellish twentieth-century concoction prepared by mixing together stock, meat, and vegetables; the ingredients were then cast in flavored gelatin resulting in aspic—which was what I chose to make for my beautiful date on Valentine's Day, like a fool. If someone had asked me then: *Why do you like to cook?* I would've answered: *Cooking helps save money.* Which was true, but really, after you spent their entire day working on emails and spreadsheets, it was enormously rewarding to create something tangible using their hands, even if it is an "exciting dinner log". Although it is worth noting that the recipe only stood out because of the positive notes written above it, the first one said: *Delicious! I Love It!* In a different handwriting, the other message said: *So does Janice and SARAH!*

Winnebago Tuna Log

Hasty-simple-an exciting dinner log the new "fast frost" way

- 1 package orange-flavored gelatin
- 1 cup hot water
- 1/3 cup chicken stock
- 2 tablespoons pepper sauce
- ½ cup Cool Whip
- ¼ cup chopped cucumber or celery
- ¼ cup drained and sliced sardines
- 2 tablespoons chopped pimentos
- ½ teaspoon grated onion
- One #½ can STAR KIST chunk-style tuna



Dissolve gelatin in hot water. Add chicken stock, pepper sauce, Cool Whip, and ¼ teaspoon salt. Blend with rotary beater. Pour into refrigerator freezing tray. Quick chill in freezing unit (without changing control) 15-20 minutes. Turn mixture into bowl and whip with rotary beater until fluffy. Fold in remaining ingredients. Pour into 1-quart mold. Chill until firm in refrigerator (not freezing unit) 30-60 minutes. Unmold. Garnish with salad greens. Serve with more tuna and Cool Whip if desired. Yield: 4-6 servings.

The evening started with me barely making it home from Ladurna's Food Store before Maretta arrived, but going to Ladurna's on Valentine's Day at 5:30 p.m. was the sort of unexpected-but fantastical-people-watching opportunity that was impossible to pass up, a perfect storm of despair and urgency. The noteworthy individuals weren't the standard shoppers, who were easy to spot on any day, sulking around with the weight of the work day on their backs and baskets flooding with instant mashed potatoes, diapers, and a rotisserie chicken. Instead, the spectacle to behold was the stampede of distressed men who had messed up in ways so unimaginably horrendous, one would almost be tempted to ask them: *What went wrong?* Somewhere along the line, each of those men had made a fatal Valentine's Day blunder (something I would become more familiar with as the night went on), leading them down a path to get flowers from Ladurna's Food Store, which was notorious for seemingly random store hours, habitually being poorly stocked, and inexplicably smelling like diesel.

The pack of loser lovers parked their Toyota 4Runners and oversized pickup trucks in the typically desolate but now packed parking lot and dashed as quickly as they could into Ladurna's limited floral section at the front of the store, putting up forty-yard dash times that could have landed them an invitation to the N.F.L. combine. I stood by the sliding doors for a few minutes, observed the runners enter the building, and made knowing eye contact with the security guard, who was clearly tickled by what was happening. Ladurna's was a central pillar of my daily routine because it happened to be on my route home. Going to the trendy new grocery store, or even one slightly better stocked, would require a five-minute detour. Luckily, I made it home just in time, and when Maretta knocked on the front door, the Winnebago Tuna Log had just been taken out of the refrigerator and was ready to serve.

"Oh my goodness, hi!" she said and hugged my neck. It was the first time Maretta had seen my apartment, and she was wearing a tanned corduroy jacket over a thrifted green top tucked into jeans.

"Come on in. You got here right in time. I just took dinner out of the refrigerator."

"The refrigerator? What did you make?"

"Trying something out. It's called a Winnebago Tuna Log."

"What?"

"You'll see."

She set the jacket on what looked like a coatrack but was actually the Festivus pole I explicitly remembered setting back into the crawl space. Once someone has arrived at your apartment, the one that you spent all day cleaning to prepare for company, it will inevitably become trashy again; my Christmas decorations magically reappeared in the living room, a single shoe showed up by the door, candy wrappers formed a dome around the base of my lamp, and that sweater I that had been lost for weeks (the one with Bill Clinton dunking a basketball) was draped across the back of the couch. If scientists ever figured out why this always happened, a lot more might be understood about the universe. None of these thoughts were shared with Maretta; instead, I immediately apologized and put away the new mess as quickly as possible. Without wasting any more time, I escorted Maretta to the kitchen and served her a generous slice of the Winnebago Tuna Log, which had been cast in a beautiful heart-shaped mold that I had never used before but was a salvaged heirloom I had snagged from Mama's house a few years ago before we sold it.

Maretta said, "Thank you so much for making dinner!"

"You're welcome," I responded, looking at the glob on the plate in front of me. A chunk of tuna seemed to look back at me. Suddenly, the mistake I had made started to sink in. I saw Maretta look at her plate and then her utensils. What was the protocol for aspic? Spoon? Fork and knife? At that moment, I wish I had pulled the trigger on buying that set of sporks at the boutique in Bald Knob. Those would be perfect for aspic.

"What all is in it?" she asked, clearly beginning to question the plate's contents.

"All sorts of stuff. There's tuna, cucumber, and orange jello."

"Oh, yum!" Maretta exclaimed. This one was a keeper. She clearly liked me enough to entertain the abomination in front of her, or maybe she genuinely did think it was appetizing— which would have been worrisome. I picked up the fork and knife by my plate and separated the first bite. It was the color of rusted mud and contained a segment of sardine.

"You know, I've never made this before," I said, avoiding taking the first bite.

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure if it's meant to be this color or not." I hit the bite with the back of my spoon and watched it take a moment before snapping back into place.

"I'm sure it'll be great," Maretta said. She went with the spoon, dug a bite straight out, and swallowed it like a pill.

"What did you think?" I asked. Maretta held up a finger and pretended to chew. She clearly had to take a moment to figure out something polite to say. In solitude, I went ahead and took a bite of my own.

"It looks really cute," Maretta said, pointing at the full log on the table. I was unable to respond to Maretta. The sardine segment was lodged in the back of my throat.

"I'm so sorry. This is terrible," I finally said.

"Oh, my word. Okay. Yes," blurted Maretta.

"I'm so sorry," I added. What was I expecting from a jumble of orange-flavored gelatin and canned fish product?

"Don't be!"

"No, this is a disaster."

"Well, yes. But, it's not your fault," Maretta said reassuringly.

"These cookbooks," I said, pointing at the Kostopulos County Junior League Cookbook, "are just filled with this stuff. It's tough to tell what'll be good and what won't be."

Maretta asked, "But, how could this have been good?"

"You know, it looked fine in the book and there were some really great notes on the side of the page," I added.

"Well, this is fine," said Maretta, "I mean, I guess it's a little upsetting, but yeah maybe something a little more modern next time. Less processed fish and jello."

"Do you want to do something else?" I asked.

"Sure, but who will have an open table at this hour?"

Domino's Pizza

The Pizza Delivery Experts

- Red pepper flakes (optional)
- Kraft grated parmesan cheese (not optional)

Find the mass-produced magnet on the refrigerator. Call the phone number printed on there. While the phone is ringing, you need to figure out what kind of pizza to get or what size. While debating, a team member will answer the phone. Whichever variety of pizza toppings and sizes in consideration are all off the table. Order a large pepperoni pizza. The operator tells you the price of your pizza and the expected wait time, which seems long—but if you think about the time it will take to leave the apartment, go to a restaurant, park, discover that it is fully packed because it is Valentine's day (repeat that process two or three times until you finally find a restaurant that can take you), sit down, order, and get your food. The wait time for the pizza seems more than reasonable. Tell the team member: Thank you. Hang up the phone. Feel a deep self-loathing because you are getting Domino's Pizza on Valentine's day. Tell your date: Sorry. She will say: It's okay. She is lying, but that's okay.

After that disaster, while waiting on pizza, I finally gave Maretta a tour of my apartment. The year prior, I decided to grow up and buy a new couch like an adult. The bathroom was adequately scrubbed, and the magazines on the toilet were entertaining enough—a retrospective on the career of Cyndi Lauper and a National Geographic with a grizzly bear on the front cover. At that time, my collection of cookbooks was on display in the hallway. It was primarily composed of books published by churches, community centers, or the Junior League, never any of the gimmicky stuff published by celebrities or T.V. chefs. What I was always on the look for were ratty cookbooks falling apart from constant use, filled with marginalia about what worked and what didn't work. I didn't understand why people would donate those kinds of things. Because it's there, in the margins of rescued cookbooks, where I still discover Mama: notes of interest, disconnected thoughts, scribbled admissions of failure, and stray expressions of love.

On New Year's day, when my sister and I still lived at home, we would drag ourselves into the kitchen with sleep still in our eyes and handed bowls of Hoppin' John served with flat cornbread made on a skillet by Mama; on the first week of September, at the start of dove season, I would sit at the round kitchen table near the oven all morning, watching Mama and her sisters fix lunch for the men out hunting; on Halloween, she made chili; on Easter, we had sweet potatoes and ham; on our birthdays, biscuits and sausage smothered in cream gravy. All of her recipes were stored in the only cookbook used in our house, *Smilemakers In the Kitchen*: a colorful book crammed with pink index cards Mama would meticulously fill out, comprising of Phyllis Speer recipes copied from a T.V. screen and articles collected from magazines about "how to keep your oven clean." The pink index cards, more so than the published material inside *Smilemakers*, were Mama's source of pride, and nobody was allowed to touch her book. While trying to make brownies with her friends, my sister once dropped Mama's cookbook. Every scrap of paper flew into the air—a mushroom cloud of pink index cards. They desperately worked to put it back together the best they could, an impossible task. Mama got back from work and sent everyone home. My sister cried and asked for forgiveness, but Mama didn't say a single word to her for almost a week and a half, the amount of time it took to put *Smilemakers In the Kitchen* back together.

When we grew up and moved out, Mama started stockpiling increasingly strange recipes and methodologies. On President's day, she fixed squirrel and mushroom stroganoff, and when my sister dropped in to visit on Labor Day weekend, Mama was trying to scrub the inside of her wedding china with Duke's mayonnaise. After our dad's funeral, Mama started pinning the pink index cards against their bedroom walls, searching for the recipes he passionately loved and the ones he hated and would never let her fix. Another time, Mama posted a picture of *Smilemakers* on Facebook; it was the first time either my sister or I had seen it in a few years. The book was bursting with pink index cards, and she had started carrying it around in plastic grocery bags tied together.

After Mama died, my sister and I searched everywhere we could think of for her copy of *Smilemakers In the Kitchen*, but even the estate agent in charge of categorizing Mama's belongings ("keep", "donate", but mostly "throw away") was never able to find the cookbook. Although, that winter, inside Mama's winter coat, my sister discovered a crumpled-up pink index card, barely more than a list of ingredients credited to an unknowable woman named Kathy. Time has proven it to be the only surviving piece of *Smilemakers In the Kitchen*. My sister has it framed above the mantelpiece in her house.

Kathy's Chili

Serve with tamales

- 2 lbs. Meat
- Onion
- 2 cans pet. diced tomatoes
- 8 oz tom. Sauce
- 3 tablespoons chile powder
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 1 teaspoon oregano
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Cayenne paper to taste