

COFFEE CAKE  
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When I was twelve Robin DeFlamminis and I fell in love. We were glued to each other. We walked to school together and spent hours after school talking. We made many intricate plans for our life together---- running away to New York, traveling to Hollywood to be in the movies, living on a desert island.

In all of our scenarios I pictured us living an idyllic life a la The Saturday Evening Post. Robin would go off to some exciting job where he would make lots of money to bring to me in our pretty house. We would play long games of Monopoly and Parcheesi and go swimming every day in our big swimming pool. I would cook many delicious meals for him. All of the plans seemed well within the realm of reason, except I did not know how to cook.

My mother was a wonderful caring person. She took very seriously her role as a parent, but she believed very strongly in the boundaries of her domain. The work of the kitchen was out of bounds for me. When I began asking her questions about cooking like "How do I make lasagna?" or "How do I bake chocolate cake?," she would say "You'll have plenty of time to cook when you get older? Why don't you take your sister out for a walk?"

It was important to my mother that I take seriously my role of a daughter and did the chores she felt should be my duty to perform like cleaning my room, setting the table, helping with the dishes and taking care of my little sister. Oh sure, I had helped my mother make brownies from a boxed mix, could make toast and had even scrambled eggs under her supervision. That was about the extent of my cooking experience.

One lazy August afternoon my mother announced to me that she was going to visit Aunt Ruthie. "Put your book away, and comb your hair."

"Oh, Ma! Do I have to go?" Aunt Ruthie was an older, querulous relative who lived a block away from us and was a strong believer in the adage "Children should be seen and not heard."

"I can stay here and dust the furniture," I offered helpfully.

Ma looked at me thoughtfully. "I won't be gone long. All right! Don't open the door to strangers and call me right away if you need me.

After about ten minutes, I finished the chapter I was reading and went into the kitchen for a snack. "Wow" I thought as I looked around the empty kitchen. Maybe I could cook something good for dessert. It would be big surprise for Ma, and I could even bring some to Robin.

I walked over to a shelf of cookbooks and pulled out a book called "Simple Desserts." "Perfect," I thought, when the book opened up to a picture of a scrumptious looking coffee cake. The list of ingredients wasn't too long, with pictures illustrating the various steps. "I can do this," I thought.

I went carefully down the list of ingredients and assembled them on the kitchen table; got a big bowl, the big spoon Ma always used and began following the step by step directions.

Number #1 - Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. That was easy enough to do. I turned the bake dial to 350, the light went on, and I was on my way.

I mixed, measured, added, creamed and stirred. Shortening, eggs, sugar, seasonings, and, of course, a cup of coffee from our big three pound can of Maxwell House my mother kept in the pantry. The batter actually seemed to be coming together like the pictures showed. I spread the mixture in the type of large pan pictured in the directions, sprinkled it with nuts, cinnamon and sugar, and carefully slid it into the hot oven.

After one hour, I put on oven mitts and opened the oven door. The cake looked like the picture on the recipe--puffed to the top of the pan, browned and glistening. I set it on the counter to cool.

About an hour later, my mother returned. I heard her key in the lock, the front door open and her steps as she walked into the kitchen. Silence. "Shirley come in here. Where did this cake come from?"

"I made it, Ma," I said proudly and showed her the cookbook recipe I had followed.

I expected that she would explode at me; but she only looked at me sternly for what felt like a long time. "We'll have it tonight for dessert."

That night, after we had finished dinner, my mother brought the coffee cake to the table and announced that I had baked it. Lots of oohs and aahs and how did you do it, as Ma portioned out the cake. I watched, proudly, as my family began eating.

As each bite was taken there were "Yechs", "Gross", and mouthfuls spit into forks. I was horrified as I took my own first bite. It tasted awful -- bitter and grainy.

"What happened?" I left the table and ran up to my room in tears.

My mother came to my room later that evening. She hugged me, smiled, and said, "Next time the recipe calls for coffee, use brewed coffee and not coffee right from the can" and then, miraculously added, "Let's try another one tomorrow."