

I was working thoughtfully on a written meditation on food, beginning with Eve's apple in the garden and ending with Jesus breaking bread on the road to Emmaus. Then I opened John and Susan's lovely Thursday devotional. They had gotten to it a day before me! When I gave them a hard time about stealing my idea, John suggested I take the opportunity to follow their suggestion.

So here is my food story and recipe. Many of you know the main characters.

It was a warm summer evening in the mid 1970's. Robby had returned tired and sweaty from delivering milk to Colonial Williamsburg. I had harvested a few tomatoes, the baby eating garden dirt and the toddler pocketing every worm she found. I was looking forward to a simple tomato sandwich supper, baths, and early bedtime for everyone.

Then the phone rang.

On the other end was the gracious voice of Rebekah Nice. As Miss Zook, she had been my revered third grade teacher at WRCS, the person who introduced me to my lifelong love of knitting. After she married Lloyd Nice and raised her own family, I had their son Joey in my first year of teaching Grade 6 at WRCS.

"We are going to be an hour late," she said, so very apologetically.

Dreading the answer, I had to ask. "I'm sorry, but late for what?"

It turned out that some days earlier, when Robby was helping their family of six load up some items for the move to Durham, North Carolina, he had invited them to have dinner with us when they returned to pick up the last load. Apparently, he promptly forgot he had extended the invitation.

She tried to gracefully bow out, but we weren't about to let that happen. We had an hour!

The mood around our house changed instantly. What did I have in the cupboard? Not much but a can of fruit cocktail. Wasn't there some kind of recipe that took a can of fruit cocktail? I rummaged in my recipe box and found it.

While I preheated the oven and stirred up the easiest cake ever, dusty children underfoot, Robby hurried to the store for sandwich buns and cheese and meat. I turned the table sideways and put both table leaves in, so that the table extended into the living room where we set up folding chairs hastily borrowed from Uncle Morris and Aunt Janet next door. Mismatched silverware paired up with odd drinking glasses, but our gold-edged wedding china was splendid on an African table cloth. There were just enough plates for the dozen people that were soon finding their places around the hastily laid table. (A few extra relatives of the Nices had come along to help!)

Oh, and those red tomatoes fresh out of the garden? What a beautiful tray of slices they made for the center of the table! The smell of the humble fruit cocktail cake transformed the kitchen into a delectable bakery, and we sat down to the simple meal with joyful hearts.

Everyone was so tired and hungry that the sandwiches tasted like royal fare. We laughed and talked and passed the bountiful tomatoes around one more time. The children played in the Hobbit Hole around the corner while we brought dessert to the table, and by the end of the evening, not a crumb of that fruit cocktail cake remained.

One of my lasting memories of the dinner is how the white dove that lived in our home fluttered into the dining room to sit at the table and coo a blessing over the hastily-prepared meal.

Unfortunately, that evening wasn't the last occasion on which my husband invited people for dinner and forgot to tell me. And I can't say that I have made that fruit cocktail cake ever again! But I was able to find the yellowed recipe card that I used then. I am sharing it with you, not because it's my favorite recipe, but because it is one of my very favorite lifelong memories, and a reminder that shared food and community elevates a dreary supper into a memorable feast. And, during this pandemic, you might just find a can of fruit cocktail languishing in the back of your pantry and transform it, like me, into a special memory.

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FRUIT COCKTAIL CAKE

Mix: 1 1/2 c. sugar
2 c. flour
2 t. soda
1/4 t. salt
2 eggs
1 med. can fruit cocktail

Put into 13" x 9" pan. Sprinkle over top; 1/4 c. brown sugar,
1/2 c. chopped nuts. Bake at 350° for 40 min.

ICING

Boil 1 min.:
3/4 c. white sugar
1/2 c. canned milk
1/2 c. oleo
Add; 1 t. vanilla

Pour icing over cake as soon as it comes out of the oven. May
add 1 c. of coconut to icing for better flavor.