

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 3 **Summer Into Fall 2020**



My mind is bare. My head empty.

Days are quiet here. It's been hot and across the way in our neighbor's yard the baby rabbits have found a sand pit where they roll and kick up the dust. Cute. But too many. Perhaps the coyote we saw trot across will enjoy some of them. The turkeys sometimes join the rabbits, their gawky legs and geeky necks stretched in the dirt. A sleek doe picked her way across the edge of the woods below my office window. She delicately nibbled the weeds. I asked her to please eat the buckthorn. Goldfinches squabble at the feeders and humming birds angrily chase one another away from the hanging nectar. All pleasant distractions.

At my desk most of the day plugging away, working toward my deadlines. All I hear are the occasional squeaks of Denis' chair above me as he moves around his office. A light breeze ticks the shade cords against the sill. Quiet.

About 5:30 Denis asks, how was your day? The same as yesterday, I say.

Today day is a little different. I must leave *No Place*, the new manuscript, stop adding new sections to *God in the Sink* which is now called *This Place*, and quit thinking about the new epilogue I must write for *The Exact Place*. (Obvious theme here? The editor wants to release all three of these next spring as a trilogy.)

So today I switch gears because the next issue of "Letters" must be written. Guess what is rolling around my head? Nothing. All my brain space has been gobbled up by the trilogy. However, there is one thing—not my idea, Anita thought of it.

Cooking with Covid

In these days of isolation and semi-isolation for many of us, there has been an uptick in kitchen activity. That is all good, but also explains why sometimes there is no yeast or flour to be had for love or money.

Cooking has always been a satisfying, creative part of my life. It has many side benefits, beyond "your flaky, tender pie crust is the best I ever tasted." It is a great way to show you care for others. To say I love you. I thought to share

with you a few recipes we have enjoyed for ourselves and others. I've chosen ones that are pretty easy and have received stars from others. Especially Denis. And so ...



Fresh peaches make this coffee cake very special. I give most of it away to neighbors so I don't eat it all myself. It's that good.

Fresh Peach Coffee Cake with Pecan Streusel

Pecan Streusel

1 cup chopped pecans
1/2 cup brown sugar
1 tsp cinnamon
1 tsp salt
1 tsp ground cardamom, (optional if you don't have)
1/2 cup cold butter, cut in pieces

Cake

2 tsp baking powder
1 1/2 cups flour
3/4 cup sugar
3/4 cup heavy cream
1/2 tsp cardamom
2 tsp vanilla
1 large egg
4 T butter, melted
2-3 ripe peaches

Directions

Streusel: combine pecans, spices, sugar, and salt in a bowl. Add butter. Use a pastry blender until a sandy texture is achieved.

Cake: Beat cream, vanilla, egg, and melted butter until frothy. Mix dry ingredients and fold into mixture with a spatula. Don't overmix.

Gently rub peaches under running water to remove fuzz and slice each one into 8 wedges. Transfer batter to a greased and floured 9-inch springform pan. Arrange the peaches evenly over the batter. Press them in just a bit. Cover the top with streusel, pressing in lightly. Bake at 350 about 1 hour or until a toothpick comes out clean.

I know! The following may seem like an odd combo, but people love it. It is our favorite cold summer soup. The small bites of raisins are an especially sweet surprise. Serve as an appetizer or a light supper along with French bread and cheese.

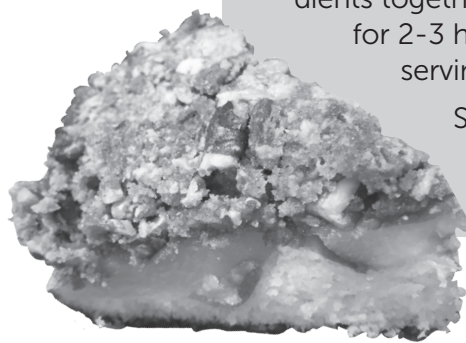
Cold Cucumber Yogurt Soup

1 boiled egg, chopped
1/2 cup raisins
2-3 cups yogurt
1 medium large cucumber, grated
1/2 cup light cream
1/4 cup green onions, chopped
2 tsp salt
1/2 tsp pepper
1 T parsley, chopped
1 T dill weed, chopped
1 cup cold water
6 ice cubes

Directions

Soak raisins in cold water for 5 minutes, drain. Mix all ingredients together. Refrigerate for 2-3 hours before serving.

Serves 4-5.



If you need a main dish that is easy, inexpensive, nutritious, and filling you will love this savory recipe. Yes, all that. And bonus! Leftovers are just as good the next day.

Cuban Beans and Rice

1 pound dried black beans, soaked overnight. Drain. Cover with water, simmer until tender.

Saute

½ cup olive oil – can be more
1 large bell pepper
1 large onion, chopped
4 garlic cloves, minced

Add

1 cup cooked beans. Mash into onions. Return to the bean pot along with:

½ tsp pepper
2 tsp salt
2 tsp oregano
2 tsp ground cumin
1 bay leaf
2 T sugar
2 T vinegar

Mix well and simmer for another hour, stirring frequently. Add more water as needed. It will be thick. Serve over cooked rice. Top with chopped fresh tomato and hot sauce (optional).

This is a healthy, tasty way to get your greens and use up all that kale you don't know what to do with. Denis doesn't like kale much, but he enjoys this salad. The secret is cutting it into those small ribbons.

Raw Tuscan Kale Salad

1 bunch Tuscan kale, (or any kind will do)
½ clove garlic, minced
¼ cup finely grated pecorino cheese, (or other sharp cheese like feta or asiago)
3 T olive oil
1 lemon juiced
½ tsp salt
¼ cup crisp homemade bread crumbs
Pepper to taste.



Directions

Trim bottom edge of kale and some of the center rib. Slice kale into ½ inch wide ribbons. Place in a large bowl. Using the back of a knife, pound garlic into paste. Transfer garlic to a small bowl. Add cheese, olive oil, juice and salt, whisk to combine. Pour over kale and toss very well. Dressing will be thick and need lots of tossing. Let it sit for 5 minutes. Serve topped with crisp bread crumbs, additional cheese and a drizzle of oil. Serves 2-4. Is good the next day.

This is so over the top, I only make it when I am sad or need comfort food. (Stop it. That is NOT every day) Having said that, it is such an easy, easy treat—it is worthy of occasional consideration. I find using a loaf of English muffin bread is good because the slices are the perfect size to fit in a pan. Leftover slices can be frozen for the next time.

Caramel French Toast

½ cup melted butter
1 cup brown sugar
½ tsp cinnamon
English muffin bread
6 eggs
1 ½ cup milk
Dash of salt

Directions

Mix together butter, brown sugar and cinnamon in the bottom of a 9" x 13" pan. On top of butter mixture, layer English muffin bread slices in stacks of two high.

Whisk the six eggs, 1½ cup milk, and a dash of salt. Pour over bread. Refrigerate overnight. Bake 350 degrees 25-30 minutes. Or until bread is puffed up and golden brown.



I will always be thankful for our Hispanic neighbors who taught me so much about southwestern cooking when we lived in New Mexico. One of their favorite go-to dishes was flat enchiladas. It is easy, fast and reminds me of a spiced-up Minnesota hot dish. It's also very forgiving with amounts. You really can't go wrong.

Flat Enchiladas

1 lb ground beef, salted and browned, set aside
 1 pkg corn tortillas
 1 small onion, chopped
 2 cans green chile
 2 cans cream of chicken soup
 1 can water
 1 lb grated cheese (Monterey jack or mild cheddar cheese)

Directions

Grease a large casserole dish and mix soup with water in a bowl. Layer in this way:

1. Dip a tortilla in the soup. Place in dish. Repeat until the bottom is covered. You may tear one in half to make them fit.
2. Sprinkle a portion of ground beef on top.
3. Spread a 1-2 T green chile and raw onion.
4. Add a small handful of cheese.

Repeat these layers until you use up the ingredients. If there is leftover soup. Pour it on top and end with a last handful of cheese. Bake at 350 for 30 minutes or until it is hot and bubbly.

We used to get the best scones from a bakery in Rochester. When they published their recipe I was delighted because I'm very picky about scones. They must always be like this: biscuit-y in texture and not like a piece of dry cake.

Daube's Scones

3 ½ cups flour
 ¼ cup sugar
 1 T plus 1 ½ tsp baking powder
 1 tsp salt
 ½ cup butter
 ½ cup raisins or currents
 1 T grated lemon peel
 2 large eggs
 ¾ cup heavy cream (I fudge on this and use ½ & ½)
 ¼ cup milk



Directions

Preheat oven to 400.

In a large bowl combine dry ingredients. Mix well.

Add butter and blend with a pastry blender. Stir in raisins and lemon peel.

Whisk eggs and cream. Add to flour mixture stirring quickly with a fork until dough leaves side of bowl.

Press into a ball with hands. Roll on a floured surface to about ¾ inch thick and 9" in diameter. Cut with a round cookie cutter or other shape. Place 2" apart on an ungreased baking sheet.

Bake 12-15 minutes or until golden. Makes about 24.



May we all cultivate love and grow in grace and beauty even when times are uncertain and difficult.

RansomNotes

Do the small things

Our hearts ache over what is happening in our country and the world over. We have thought and prayed much about how to be faithful. What I contribute has always seemed small and insignificant but it would be wrong to stop doing what is right in front of me. Since cooking is my creative go-to I've been sharing it when I can while remaining socially distant—a small way to spread a little love. Denis has felt so burdened about our country's response to the pandemic and the racial tensions and tragedies, he has addressed these issues by using his ability to write.

We knew the response to his essays would be mixed. We understand. Some have been encouraged and challenged in a good way. This, in turn, has encouraged us. Others have been angry and want nothing further to do with us. Our hope is that together we would love one another and strive for unity in Christ.

The writing life

Sticking close to home in virtual lockdown these past months has been good in some ways. No social obligations or contacts has meant uninterrupted time for writing.

Six weeks ago my editor at Square Halo Books asked for my work by August 31. I said yes. Denis frowned a little. (In a kind way.) Knowing me. In the spring of 2021 they want to release three books as a trilogy.

1. *The Exact Place: A Search for Father* will have an additional chapter telling a little more about how some things ended.
2. *No Place: A Desert Pilgrimage* continues on from where *The Exact Place* ended and is an account of our searching and growth during our years living in the Southwest.
3. *This Place: A Few Notes from Home* (formerly titled *God in the Sink*) It includes many new essays added to the collection.

It's now the end of July and there's still a ways to go. Until I began writing books I had no idea how much work and how many details must be attended to beyond the writing itself.

Give praise

In these days of uncertainty and economic crisis for so many, financial giving to Ransom has been unusually steady through the summer months. During this season of the year our finances are generally lean and scarce. Long ago we made a choice to not do regular fund raising but to rather pray and trust God to provide. I'm not saying we have always done this well. But each year for 39 years our needs have been met. This is due to the generosity of so many of you who give. We are amazed and so thankful.



My cucumber plant going crazy on the deck and producing more than we can eat.

And Finally...

My first encounter with Mexican food was disgusting. The following is an excerpt from my new memoir *No Place* which will be released next spring.

It made sense if we were going to live in the Southwest we should learn to appreciate local food. Before the globalization of ethnic foods, Mexican cuisine was so far from my Scandinavian trained palate I had no idea what an enchilada was or even that there was such a thing as green chile. Although I was pregnant and a little queasy, I was willing to try. On our way to New Mexico we pulled into Rosa's Cantina. As we walked through the door a wall of cooking odors hit us. The pungent smell of red chile sauce and onions swirled us to our table. We looked at the menu and decided to order a combination plate including the most popular dishes: Enchiladas, a taco, and a tamale.

Our food came on large oval platters drowned in a reddish-brown sauce and dropped in front of us. We paused wondering where to begin. We could not identify anything except what looked like a pile of rice on the border. We didn't even recognize refried beans, the second most ubiquitous dish that accompanies every Mexican plate on earth. I poked at the mass with a fork and tentatively extracted a lump from beneath the sauce. In one second I realized I had just placed a flame thrower in my mouth. I drank a full glass of water trying to extinguish the spicy heat of red chile. When the throbbing did not subside, I forced down a few tortilla chips. I was mollified when Denis couldn't eat his food either, and he wasn't pregnant. We left most of it untouched. At the car, I leaned over and left what I had eaten on the pavement in a stinking puddle. We both vowed never to eat Mexican food ever again. We didn't care how godly it was for missionary-types in the Southwest to learn to eat Hispanic food. We would need to find other ways to please God and love people because it was no enchiladas for these gringos, por favor.

This changed, but it took time as many things do.



Typical Mexican Combo plate



Warmly,

Margie

About Letters From the House Between

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Tennessee – come together, you pass over the dams that bind them and a land emerges bordered on all sides by water, simply called The Land Between the Lakes. As we drove, we thought about the changes coming as we aged and needed to move from Toad Hall, our home of thirty-three years. We needed a place where certain features were on the main floor so as body parts fail one doesn't need to climb stairs to reach them. We thought of that place as "The House Between," a place bound on one side by years past where we raised children, continued our ministry and grew older, and on the other side, a place in heaven where God holds a perfect place of restoration yet to come. Our new home is a reminder that this is only a "place between" what is now and what will one day be true Home forever. Thus: The House Between.

Letters from the House Between is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added automatically unless requesting otherwise. Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives Critique magazine. To receive them send your mailing address to:

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