

The night before Joe left for college, we all went out to dinner together. Our mother asked our father to join us, “for Joe’s sake,” and for the most part the dinner was fine: no fighting, everyone restrained. But then Joe and my mother got into an argument about whether he had to wear nice clothes for the trip, and she started to cry. “I have tried so hard. And *everything* I have done is a failure: my marriage has failed; I don’t have a career; my sons think I’m a joke.”

“OK, Mom,” Joe said. “I’m sorry. I’ll wear nice clothes. It doesn’t matter.”

“It’s not that, Joe. I wanted this night to be special for you, and I’m ruining that, too. I’m sorry. I never wanted to put you boys through any of this. Being a mother was the only thing I

was ever really good at, and now I’ve made a mess of that, too. And now you’re leaving.”

She got up from the table in tears.

That night my brothers and I stayed up late watching TV. We couldn’t or wouldn’t say why: that we were scared to go to sleep, scared to be apart. When I finally went up to bed, I walked by my mother’s room. Through the door I heard her crying, and I thought I should knock, should try to console her, but I could not go into that room. Still, I went to the door just to listen and make sure she was all right. And that’s when I heard my father. I could not hear his words, but his voice was quiet, soothing, gentle. As I turned to leave, the light under the door went out. ■

Cold Solace

ANNA BELLE KAUFMAN

When my mother died,
one of her honey cakes remained in the freezer.
I couldn’t bear to see it vanish,
so it waited, pardoned,
in its ice cave behind the metal trays
for two more years.

On my forty-first birthday
I chipped it out,
a rectangular resurrection,
hefted the dead weight in my palm.

Before it thawed,
I sawed, with serrated knife,
the thinnest of slices —
Jewish Eucharist.

The amber squares
with their translucent panes of walnuts
tasted — even toasted — of freezer,
of frost,
a raised delicacy delivered up
from a deli in the underworld.

I yearned to recall life, not death —
the still body in her pink nightgown on the bed,
how I lay in the shallow cradle of the scattered sheets
after they took it away,
inhaling her scent one last time.

I close my eyes, savor a wafer of
sacred cake on my tongue and
try to taste my mother, to discern
the message she baked in these loaves
when she was too ill to eat them:

I love you.
It will end.
Leave something of sweetness
and substance
in the mouth of the world.