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An Oven of Healing

I drag myself down the bus steps and begin the trek up our winding driveway. The soothing scents of lilac and freshly wet grass contrast the rising dread in me as I near the front door. I gingerly turn the knob, as if one wrong move will trigger an explosion. As I crack the door open and slip inside, the sounds of a mixer whirring simultaneously eases my anxiousness and heightens it; I know I still need to be on high alert.

As I pass through our mudroom into the kitchen, I am greeted by a familiar sight. My mother stands with her back to me, hands on her hips as she watches the mixer spin. Her hair is pulled back into its usual tight, low bun, not a strand out of place. Her foot taps as she plays Rent's "Seasons of Love" on repeat. A part of me softens at the sight, finding comfort in the normalcy of the scene. Another part of me knows I must proceed very carefully. As she turns, I see her eyebrows are furrowed, frown lines etched into her forehead. Although she would never admit it, she wears her stress, and today is no exception. The tray of meticulously lined muffin tins speaks to that.

The mixer hums rhythmically, swirling a concoction of mashed bananas, sugar, and softened butter. This batter, creamy and golden and smooth, represents much more than a sweet treat on a spring afternoon. This medley of ingredients is an apology, an amends for words that cut deeper than broken glass. But we both knew the batter is just that. It is no concoction that heals all wounds.

The rattle of chocolate chips hitting the bottom of the mixer jolts me out of my stupor, lost in recollections of the night before. I greet my mother emotionlessly, unsure of how to approach the interaction. She returns my hello with a soft smile; one I could almost take as being apologetic and genuine. She goes on to ask about my day and remark about baking my favorite snack, yet with every word I feel any sincerity slipping further and further away. The invisible wall between us is up, and no candid chit chat can change that.

I drop my bag in my room and return to the kitchen to watch the remainder of the process. My mother is now separating the batter into their tins. She taps out the very last of her mixture, and I see her shoulders drop, sighing as she pours her apology into her efforts. She closes the oven door and sets the timer, sitting at her desk and watching in anticipation. It's as if she believes each bit the batter rises, each chocolate chip that melts, is a wordless "I'm sorry" passed to me. Finally, the timer dings and the tray is removed, golden brown tops peeking over multicolor tins.

The scents of freshly baked banana and rich chocolate percolate the kitchen as the muffins cool on the rack. The fragrance draws me in, pulling me back into a choreographed dance with the woman who had been so hostile with me just the night before. She offers me a muffin, warning me of its heat. Her eyes shine with the hope of reconciliation as I accept the peace offering of freshly baked goodness.

I take my first bite, and I can taste the blend of flavors – ripe banana,

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pure chocolate, hints of vanilla. I savor each warm bite, each yielding a mouthful of comfort and fondness. With every chew, I can feel my harbored grudges slipping; I am forgiving, although not forgetting. The troubles that had seemed so alarming in the hours before were fading. The stress of the day was melting away, just as the chocolate sinks into the fluffy dough.

I glance to my mom, sharing my feelings of amnesty with a smile. Her face relaxes in relief, a silent acknowledgment of my acceptance, eyes sparkling with gratitude. For now, everything is okay. A fresh concoction of banana muffins was the temporary fix we both needed.

Throughout my childhood, that recipe remained a constant, and always arose at an opportune time. When I came home to those golden-brown treats baking, I knew she was saying sorry, even though she couldn't quite find the words to do so. And while I wished she could, or would try, I recognized she was doing something, and doing what she could. Even as I grew older, the familiar scent of banana chocolate chip muffins reminded me that through anything, the love of a mother for her daughter would never fade.