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### The savory scent of friendship

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In every savored memory, the kind that rolls through your head in warm colors and sounds, there's always someone touching those scenes with grace. And, perhaps, with the scent of a home-cooked stew.

I'm thinking of Porotos Granados, a humble Chilean medley that reveals itself in wafts of comfort -- the sweetness of corn and cubes of butternut squash, earthy red beans and tangy garlic, the sunny breath of basil. It's the scent of home, stirred by my favorite neighbors.

Mike Andrews and Jana Antos lived across the street from the cheery house with a wraparound porch that I rented in Raleigh's Five Points a few years ago. Mike was a rugged, red-haired Texan who could transform any routine gathering into a memorable experience. Jana was an effervescent South Carolinian with boundless empathy and a beautiful laugh. The day after I moved in, they brought fresh-baked cookies. I was in love.

At first I thought it wouldn't work out between us. They were cool, relaxed, quiet and organized. I was jittery, uptight and loud and could never find my keys. We seemed like a match made in therapy, with me as the patient.

Yet they turned out to be the dream neighbors from a sun-dappled fantasy I had harbored since childhood. Mike mowed my backyard weeds. Jana sweet-talked my spooked runaway cat. They introduced me to their friends and invited me to their backyard barbecues, Thanksgiving dinners and Outer Banks vacations. If Jana saw me crying in my car after a bad date, she would rap on the window and invite me to join her for a glass of wine.

### **Steady diet of joy**

Mike and Jana were so well-suited for each other, so energized with the easy joy of true happiness, that it made me, a hapless romantic, almost jealous. Almost. As proof that love will always attract love, they filled my lonely heart with hope.

Which brings me to the Porotos Granados. A staple of Chile's Indians, this vegetarian stew isn't typical Carolina fare. It's the kind of simple meal I imagined a pre-Che Ernesto Guevara eating on his "Motorcycle Diaries" travels. Mike made it one blustery afternoon when I was home with the flu. I was still in my pajamas when Jana knocked on the door, holding a warm Tupperware container and a slice of just-baked cornbread the size of a paperback novel. "Mike saw your car when he came back from work and thought maybe you weren't feeling well," she said.

This was just like Mike and Jana, trying to cheer up an under-the-weather friend with comfort food. But what made this gesture so extraordinary was that Mike was much sicker than I was. A year before, he had been diagnosed with ALS, a neurodegenerative disease that eventually atrophies the entire body. Those with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, remain sound of mind but trapped in their frozen bodies. Mike was still working, driving and cooking, but his handsome face was creased with worry and his speech was slurred.

He had first noticed problems the previous autumn, in 2002, when a group of us went camping on Cape Lookout. We spent the long weekend roasting fresh-caught fish, reading ghost stories out of a cheesy book and singing drunken renditions of Fleetwood Mac songs around the campfire. Mike, as usual, cracked everyone up. He was tireless -- hiking, fishing, kayaking and listening to our increasingly convoluted ghost stories. He and Jana walked hand in hand along the darkened beach, blessed by the smoky moonlight.

But Mike was garbling words. Was it the beer? Goodness knows we had indulged. Weeks later, though, Mike's speech was still slurred.

It took months of tests before he and Jana got the terrible news. Mike fought hard, undergoing experimental therapies and taking an intense cocktail of medication. He and Jana got married on the beach in Ocracoke, where they had spent some of their happiest times together. They stayed close to their friends, even as Mike grew weaker. By the time I left Raleigh in 2004, Mike was in a wheelchair. When I returned a year later to visit, he used a feeding tube and could no longer talk.

We communicated through a special computer program he used to type out his thoughts, which included the serious (his environmental advocacy work for the Sierra Club) and the hilarious (his daughter's then-boyfriend, who drew facial hair on images of power tools as art).

### **'Come back home'**

When I returned again in 2006, he struggled to hold up his head. I was crushed when I saw him, and I talked too fast, too much, in the avalanche speech of a person who cannot say goodbye. "We miss you," he wrote on the computer screen. "Come back home."

Mike died Jan. 19, 2007. He was 45.

I live far away now, in Athens, Greece, and I haven't been back to Raleigh since Mike's death. I still use his recipe for Porotos Granados, which Jana wrote down on an index card for me. Whenever I make it, my heart tightens with longing. The scents take me back to Alexander Road, and I can hear Mike and Jana laughing. If I close my eyes, I almost feel like I'm home again.