

Esther's Gift -- Excerpt

Swaddled in a pink chenille robe and wearing a mesh hair net, Esther Bolick sprawled in her recliner, staring at the ceiling.

The view of the brass chandelier from Home Depot vanished; in her mind's eye she saw an imaginary row of two-layer orange marmalade cakes standing proud on her countertop.

By tomorrow afternoon, the whole caboodle would be baked, filled, frosted, and ready to roll out of her kitchen as gifts coveted from one end of Mitford to the other. She and Gene would trot to the five o'clock Christmas Eve service at Lord's Chapel, then strike out in their van to make deliveries.

Though she'd never been much on frills, she had for years longed to use paper doilies to set off her marmalades, and for a fleeting moment imagined a circular, scalloped doily with machine-made cutwork under each of her creations. However, a package of such doilies was four dollars, and that was four dollars she wasn't willing to part with. No ma'am, she would never be using doilies, so why even think about it?

In her imagination, the doilies disappeared and the cakes sat directly on cardboard rounds, which she'd cut from packing boxes found at The Local.

While she was minding costs, she wondered what it was costing her to bake an orange marmalade these days. Though she'd formed a vague notion over the years, she was inspired to ask Gene to compute the actual figure. It seemed to her that two-layer had once come to around four or five dollars. She didn't mind giving away a cake that cost five dollars, not at all, she'd been doing it for years, especially at Christmas, when the flat broke and lonesome seemed to have a particularly rough go of things.

She reached over to Gene's plaid recliner, immediately next to her own, where he sat dead asleep and snoring.

"Wake up!" she said, shaking his arm.

"Whoa! What's the trouble, hon?"

"I need you to do somethin'."

Esther knew that she a lucky woman to have a husband who actually liked doing things for his wife. The only other man she reckoned to be in that category was Father Tim—it seemed like he was always trotting around Mitford on some errand or other, he even did the grocery shopping.

“I need you to figure what it costs to make a marmalade. I’ve got my receipt for th’ ingredients.” It was a whopper, too. She had blinked when she saw it rolling out of the cash register thingamabob.

“What do want to figure your time at?” asked Gene, the wheels already turning.

“Why figure my time?” she said. “Just figure ingredients and divide it by seven cakes. Flour’s runnin’ around a dollar eighty-nine for a five-pound bag, sugar’s runnin’ around two dollars, eggs are highway robbery...”

“You can’t get a realistic bottom line without throwin’ in your time,” said Gene, who had managed a warehouse for thirty-seven years. He adjusted his glasses so he could see her better while making this point.

“Oh, law!” she said, exasperated. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to imagine all the up and down and back and forth, from cleaning the beaters to setting the finished product on the counter. “Say three hours a cake, start to finish—that ought to do it!”

“What d’you think your time’s *worth* a hour?”

“I don’t know, you’re th’ one to know such as that. Set a figure you think is right.”

He reached to the lamp table where he kept extra eyeglasses, old newspapers, notepads and a calculator. “Ten dollars a hour!”

“Fifteen!” said Esther, indignant.