

Art and Half a Cake

M. Shayne Bell

On Saturday mornings, mother baked good bread.
She always called my two sisters,
My two brothers, and me
To come and eat the crusts hot,
Spread with butter and strawberry jam
Made from strawberries she had picked and washed.

Then she cooked thick pies
Filled with fruit and cinnamon
Or cakes and cookies rich with chocolate,
Dates, and walnuts to be eaten
With bottled peaches or raspberries topped with cream.

In the afternoons, she took a roast from the freezer—
Usually beef but sometimes pork—
And left it in the sink to thaw.
After that, she stirred a jello salad (maybe the orange one
Mixed with pineapple and grated carrots)
And put it in the fridge, by now too full.

At six o'clock on Sunday mornings, after working until late
Saturday night to clean a house already clean,
She'd make herself get up to "put on the roast,"
Timing the oven so the roast would be well done
When we got back from church.

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Then she'd scour the potatoes
And sometimes bake them with the roast,
Sometimes bake them wrapped in tinfoil
So the skins would all be soft,
And sometimes bake them unwrapped on the racks
So the skins would all cook hard and thick.

Father would leave for his meetings;
She'd wake us up, make breakfast,
And as we showered, listen
To the Tabernacle Choir
While she washed and tore the lettuce,

Diced carrots, radishes, green peppers, and an onion,
Chopped tomatoes and arranged these
In the dull yellow bowl that survived the flood
(We found the bowl chipped and filled with mud
But still a bowl),
Then put that salad in the fridge, under a pie.

After church, the house smelled like Christmas.
We'd change out of our Sunday clothes
While mother hurried to wash her hands,
Put on her apron, and start boiling peas
Or beets and carving cheese.

Meantime, my sisters spread two linen tablecloths,
One across each half of the table, while my brothers and I
Carried china plates, silver forks, spoons, knives,
And crystal glasses filled with ice and water:
Forks on top of the napkin to the left of the plate,
Knife and spoon on the right just below the glass.

With that complete, mother sent us carrying bowls
And platters heaped with food to the table,
And she managed to scoop plum jam into the serving bowls
Or pile the relish trays with pickles and black olives
Faster than the five of us could carry them away.

Then she whipped the cream with sugar and a capful of
vanilla
And covered all her pies with it but left them in the fridge.
Last of all she set the platter, with the roast,
Across my father's plate, for him to cut.
Then we'd wait.
Church work always kept my father late.

But after two minutes of watching the steam
Rise up from her food, she'd sit down.
"Let's eat," she'd say, "or this will spoil."
So we'd pray and pass the food.
Then he'd come.

"I knew it," she'd say. "We'd start and then you'd come."
We'd eat.
She'd sit proudly by, urging us to eat more,
To pass my father the corn, to eat more.
Someone would smell the forgotten dressing,
And she'd rescue it from the oven.

Afterwards, we'd sit, too full, till she'd stand
To clear away the food. We'd try to make her rest,
But she worked with us, always, till the end.
We hoped to save a pie or half a cake
For Monday's supper. By night on Sunday it would all be gone.