

Charles McCrorry

No-Bake

It would be Bridget's first Christmas without alcohol, and relating this fact to her sponsor she was conscious of using the seasonal language of loss: "My first Christmas since the divorce," "Our first Christmas since Rachel died." Gratitude, or the pressure to feel grateful, compelled her to admit she'd been spared such pains. Trent had stayed married to her through Blendergate and the ensuing six weeks of rehab, and Selena, their daughter, would be meeting them by train from her college for Christmas dinner at Rob's. She'd managed to keep the bakery and the upstairs apartment, and her hand had healed nicely, leaving just a few silvery crosshatches and numbness in her index tip. The blender was nonrefundable, but then she was only counting blessings.

She packed for Rob's in a mode of self-armament, sensing that she was neglecting sunscreen or a life raft or crucifix. Christmas was sure to implode on itself; she could smell gunpowder.

"You're projecting again," Claire told her over coffee at the bakery. They met this way every morning at seven, an hour before she opened the store. Claire sat poised for her morning run in a tracksuit and ponytail, with a Big Book on the counter between them. "You're creating this picture of what Christmas will look like, and you really have no idea."

"I have quite a precedent to go on," said Bridget, and before she could catch herself, she was on a roll. "Every Christmas since Selena was born we've gone to Rob's. Rob and Trent sequester themselves on the porch and drink because they can't stand each other sober. I hover over Vicki in the kitchen because we *must* allow Vicki to cook every year, even though I'm the one who went to Le Cordon Bleu and she'd julienne her fingers if you didn't watch her the

whole time. Selena sequesters *herself* in her room with a book, which hurts Vicki's feelings and pisses off her kids--"

"And all the while..."

"--and all the while I'm drinking, yes. And after dinner Rob calls the spades game to order, and always it's him and Trent against Vicki and me, some middle-school boys-versus-girls bullshit, and I bid too low or too high and everyone's jumping down my throat, and I'm dying for a drink between hands so I don't exactly focus on my strategy; besides, it's just a game anyway, but then Rob rears his head and says, 'Yeah, that's why you've gotta *win*.'"

"Yes honey, but you can't control them."

"I know I can't control them." She wiped a hand on her apron. "That's why it's so overwhelming. It's the same thing every year."

"But is it the same thing this year?" She paused theatrically, letting Bridget anticipate the answer she knew was coming.

"This year," Claire said, "Bridget's not drinking."

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At ten she left the morning shift to her sous-chef and let herself in upstairs. Atop the liquor cabinet she'd cleared out and restocked with homemade jellies sat a small white box Trent must have brought in before leaving for work. A bright gold tag on the lid read: "To Bridget, Love Vicki and Rob. Merry Xmas!" Opening the lid, she returned instantly to the summer she was seventeen and the engine of her first car had overheated, the hood popped to acrid fumes, suffocating smoke. The smell was unmistakable: whiskey. Good whiskey: bourbon. There in the box, on a bed of rice paper, were two dozen homemade no-bake bourbon balls.

Her own laughter surprised her. She was actually howling; they might even hear her downstairs in the shop. What an idiot Vicki was. What a clueless, insensitive... Or maybe an asshole. She couldn't be both, and yet Bridget wanted to hate her equally for both possibilities. She could hear herself recounting this incident at the A.A. meeting tonight, clarifying Vicki's folly for the benefit of anyone unschooled in regional desserts. *It's not like a rum cake, she would explain. The alcohol doesn't cook out. It doesn't cook at all, actually, you just roll up the dough raw.* Scholarly nods from some of the more domestic women in the room; grunts of tolerant disinterest from the men. *And never mind sending me desserts when I run a damn bakery for a living; why she had to send me bourbon balls is beyond me.*

Her projection hit a snag. Why would she be addressing this in a meeting at all? Unless—
You are encouraged to offer anything threatening your sobriety as a topic.

The powdery lumps stared back at her from the rice paper. Were they, at this very moment, threatening her sobriety? Had she just opened some insidious trap, a Trojan horse, bomb disguised as a cake? She smudged one thumb thoughtfully against a ball, as if submitting her prints at a police station. Would it be relapse, really, if she ate one? She'd made bourbon balls dozens of times before, they were a hit at parties, sweet and robust and (she prided herself on this point) daringly strong. But even with her liberal interpretation of the recipe, she estimated that you'd have to eat your way to insulin shock before acquiring a decent buzz. You metabolized more alcohol from the Sacrament than she would from a handful of Vicki's offerings (and anyway she only took the wafers at mass these days). Could she really be blamed for eating one?

Not that Vicki's cooking tempted her; a batch of her sister-in-law's Oreo balls or mesquite-hard brownies she'd have left untouched and unconsidered. Honesty demanded that she

account for the smell, the nostalgic burn on the tongue, made to feel safe and wholesome by the nuts and confectioner's sugar. The smell she couldn't help; it had rushed upon her out of the box, a Proustian trigger (already it was all reeling back to her, the bleeding fingers shaking to replace the Precision-Blade in its box—quick, think of something, anything else). But what would she do, of what was she capable, with that taste in her again?

Beside the box, her phone suggested itself. Claire would now be finishing up her run; she wouldn't stop to hear Bridget bellyache about a batch of potentially evil-intentioned desserts. This was too silly to bother anyone about; she could figure it out on her own. Wasn't this new life of hers about making her own decisions, about learning when to say yes or no?

Any sane person would have thrown the damn things out by now, having quickly weighed the costs and benefits. But the longer she weighed them, the more power accrued in those bourbon balls. They had grown larger and heavier than themselves. She couldn't just chuck them in the trash. She would have to dispose of them in some special, ethical way, the way you disposed of toxic waste.

Her sous-chef wouldn't want them, and Trent never ate sweets. For an insane moment she considered taking them with her to the meeting. *Exhibit A: my sister-in-law's relapse bait, and my gift to you all. Dig in.*

The bakery donated each day's surplus to the homeless shelter downtown, but somehow it seemed dubious to lump this batch in with their donations. Was alcoholism not a rampant problem for the homeless? Hadn't it helped land many of them where they were now?

Immediately she recoiled from this line of thought. *Nice one; generalize an entire subset of the population. And anyway, if you want to see a real alcoholic—*

“Look in the mirror,” she said aloud to the empty kitchen.

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Blendergate had been Vicki's doing, too; not that Bridget could conceive of blaming her for it, but it was worth noting that Vicki was ubiquitous in these moments of crisis. She'd accompanied Bridget and Trent to the culinary expo in August, the one with the open bar (a term Bridget now feared like "open-heart"). Bridget had wryly enjoyed watching Vicki ooh and aah at the stainless-steel displays of elaborate equipment she'd never have the wherewithal to use. In her enjoyment she hadn't noticed herself getting staggering-drunk on half-glasses of chardonnay at the bar. So when, at the auction that concluded the event, Vicki started salivating over the pièce de résistance, something called the Dresner Precision-Blade Hand-Powered Blender, Bridget found herself on her feet and in the fray, shrieking bids against Trent's protestations until, for a sum she couldn't remember even now, the blender was theirs.

The cab ride to the apartment and the one to the hospital were separated by a timeless smudge of which she remembered only a few sharp details. Setting up the blender on the kitchen floor; Styrofoam packaging around her feet; directions in maddeningly small type on a printed manual; Vicki, not far behind her in alcohol consumption, watching attentively with her legs crossed. Trent had barged in a few times, begging her to put the blender away and go to bed, only to be appeased back into the bedroom ("I know what I'm doing," "Le Cordon Bleu" and all that). She still couldn't remember plugging in the blender. When the Precision-Blade started to whirl, doing to her hand what it had been expertly designed to do to a cucumber or banana, she had watched for a moment in detachment, her nervous system failing to verify what was happening even as the blender swam orange with bits of her own pureed skin. Her eventual screams had roused Trent to action (had he expected them, waited patiently at the door?), and in that second cab, Trent gripping the bags of frozen peas against her lacerated hand, Vicki passing

her numbing shots of vodka in baffled silence, the problem had become impossible to ignore any longer.

That whole night re-formed now in her mind despite her best efforts at suppression. The scars across her hand glowed like tidemarks as she punched out a hollow thank-you text to Vicki, along with the news that she wouldn't be making it to Christmas. She forwarded the text to Claire. Already she could hear the response. "*Pride will close every door in the world to you, honey.*" But was it pride, really? Or just an instinct of self-protection she'd lacked four months ago when she'd stuck her hand into a revving blender? She upended the box into the sink and flicked on the garbage disposal.