

Wine at Christmas

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The newly-printed pictures trumpeted “A Burton Family Christmas” from the refrigerator. The pre-party to-do list and the rhythmic tapping of the pen in Carie Burton’s hand on the countertop underscored her stress as she directed her children from the coffee station in the corner of the kitchen.

“Mel, those cranberry and popcorn strands had better be on the tree before Nana gets here—can you make sure the dog gets in his sweater, too?”

Mel, a slim girl of twelve with crooked glasses, nodded, threading the puffs of popcorn at the kitchen table.

Her eight year old brother Mark, sitting next to her, looked up. “Mama, are we having wine like last year? Will Uncle Tom sing for everyone again if he has too much?”

Uncle Tom had caused a scene last year, crooning “Baby it’s Cold Outside” at midnight to his son’s girlfriend in the front yard. The girlfriend didn’t return any of their calls, after that. Carie wished she could forget this, but it wasn’t too out of character for her brother.

“Yes, unfortunately.” she said, tapping her pen on the countertop. “Nana wouldn’t come if we didn’t—but I won’t have any, and we’ll try to keep your Uncle Tom sober this year.”

Mel sniggered, tipping her chair back and balancing on just the back legs. “Nana had better stay away from the wine, too. Remember how she fell asleep during the Scrabble game last year? There are still stains from where she drooled on the couch cushions.” She slammed her chair down, and popped a cranberry onto her needle.

Mark snorted a laugh into his hand, but fell silent under his mother’s glare. “We’ll see,” said Carie.

Doug Burton strode into the kitchen, his chinos pressed crisply below a red sweater vest. Comb in hand, he flicked his damp hair into place with short strokes, and smiled upon his children’s craft. Giving Carrie a quick kiss on her cheek, he asked, “How’re things coming along?”

“Well enough. The food’s all just about ready—I just need to heat things up before folks arrive. I still need you to pick up your mom’s gift. Everything has to be perfect or it’ll be Labor Day all over again.” The Labor Day garden tea (entirely for her mother-in-law’s benefit, in lieu of their usual BBQ and cornhole tournament) had ended in a rumpus of mishaps—the tea was too sweet, the cucumber sandwiches were mushy, the grass was damp, all of which had irritated her mother-in-law’s temper and arthritis.

Now it was Christmastime. The perfection of this Christmas party was her best chance to redeem things with her mother-in-law. As she told herself in the shower that morning, a family Christmas party with extended family present—even if everyone is local and pretends to like each other—is a rigorous affair of white lies, smiling exercises, and tinny laughter. Refined, biting comments hang in

the air like tinsel, and good humor flares brightly at first, but soon fizzles out. Everything was stacked against her, but Carie felt she had to make this party a good one.

Finished with his coffee, Doug fist-bumped Mel, kissed Carie's cheek again, and then left with Mark to get his mother's gift and pick up a couple of bottles of merlot to go with dinner. Carie fussed over decorations with Mel for a while, then shifted into full-on stress mode as she slammed cupboard doors in the kitchen, dashing about to set the tables and warm up the food.

The doorbell rang and the front door wheezed open and then slammed shut. "Hey-hey! How's my beautiful sister?" Tom stumped through the front hall and caught Carie up in a hug. "My gosh, I'm famished. This place smells great!" He tossed his coat onto the couch, tousling Mel's hair as she drew near for a hug.

Mel squealed. "No, my hair!" Tom squeezed her close, laughing. Wriggling free, Mel announced, "Guess what! We're having a baked ham and Mom made a fudge cake! I didn't help."

Carie and Tom chuckled. Doug walked in, thumping down several overloaded brown paper bags on the counter. "Honey, my mom's here—she just pulled in behind me. Can we start supper after she gets inside?"

Carie pulled out potholder and poured a creamy sauce over the bowl of brussel sprouts. "Yes, I think so. We're just about ready."

Doug and Tom uncorked the wine and pulled out the wine glasses. Carie whisked back and forth from the table and the stove with the serving dishes. Doug eyed each as it went past with relish, and Carie gave him a quick kiss on her way to the table with the ham. Mother Burton entered the room, announcing her presence with a clattering of cane and high heels and dropping her coat on Mark.

And so there was feasting. The food was served following a quick prayer and a descant by Mother Burton on the foul weather sure to arrive in the next few days to ruin everyone's Christmas. Carie hmm'd and groaned in a proper display of empathy and dismay as they passed the dishes around and everyone began pillaging the mounds of food on their plates. No one there disagreed with Mother Burton if they could help it. She perched at the foot of the table and set everyone's teeth on edge with her litany of grumbles and odd comments in between glasses of wine:

"Mel, your hair sure could use a wash and brushing. Do you want to look like a hippy?" Mel glared, pulling her hair into a ponytail.

"Doug, child, pass me the green beans. Did you know, we used to raise our green beans and they were splendid, just splendid. Nothing like these frozen things you find in most houses today—these couldn't possibly hold a candle to my mother's beans!" He passed the beans in silence.

"Carie, this is an interesting merlot. I don't really think it fits with the ham, but since you don't drink the stuff yourself, how would you know?" She swirled the wine in her glass and watched it settle. "It must have been just terrible, growing up afraid of this stuff just because your father was an ass!"

“Mark, are those your feet that smell so awful, or is it your Uncle Tom?” Mark sat bolt upright and became very still. His grandmother waved her hand at him. “Put your shoes back on.”

Carie smiled and nodded, playing her part in the conversational dance. She nibbled at her food and refilling Mother Burton’s wine glass when prompted. Hopefully Mother Burton’s mental energy would flag as soon as the wine hit her system.

After the supper dishes were clearing away and as the dregs of conversation were settling, Carie brought out Mother Burton’s gift. Doug passed the small gift down the table to his mother. “Since we won’t see you on Christmas Day itself this year, what with going to Carie’s mom’s house and all, I figured we might as well give you this now.

“You shouldn’t have, Doug.” She patted his hand, lingering. Her attention slowing.

He smiled at her, leaning forward in his chair and folding his hands. “Well, I hope you like it, Mom.”

Carie watched her mother-in-law’s knobby fingers crumple away the wrapping paper, wondering if having a glass of wine to prove the goodness of it to Mother Burton would be such a bad idea after all. She told herself no, I only drink wine during communion, and stood up to fetch the cake and dessert plates.

“Oh, Doug! A Christmas Carol by dear old Dickens!” she riffled the pages and set it next to her plate. “I’ll stick it in the back bedroom at home—I’m keeping all the paperbacks there these days, since they don’t match the leather in the front study.” Carie winced.

Mother Burton finished off her fifth glass of wine and beamed at her son. “Thank you my dear. So thoughtful.” Mark, who was sitting beside his uncle and half-hidden from his grandmother, rolled his eyes and hit his forehead. Mel kicked him under the table, glaring. Doug looked tired and vaguely pained, and Carie hopped up to break the tension.

“Cake time!” she said, casting a forced smile at Mother Burton. Really, she shouldn’t care if the gift wasn’t appreciated—nothing else was, anyway.

Uncle Tom was getting limbered up after his wine. He slumped back in his chair, his hand folded across his stomach. Carie slipped the bottle under the tablecloth by her feet—he’d had enough and she knew he was at the point where he would start telling his stories.

“This one time,” he started, “I was in France on Christmas Eve—oh, I don’t know how many years ago. It’s been quite a while. Anyhow, this girl I’d been with had just dumped me and I was just miserable. It was awful.” He paused and looked at his nephew. “Mark, boy, don’t ever do what I did—I went out to the nearest bar and drank until I couldn’t remember why I was there.”

Carie sat, uneasy. This was a new story to her and Tom’s stories were always unpredictable, but at least it took the focus off of Mother Burton.

Tom served himself another slice of cake and continued, his mouth full. “After several hours, I finally left the bar, but I didn’t remember where my hotel was, so I went to a nearby church, instead. It was a cold night and the church was all lit up and looked warm.”

“So, when I got in there, there was a service going on, and everyone was going forward and lining up before the rail for the bread and wine. I didn’t have a clue what was going on, but I got in line with everyone else, and walked forward. That place was all glowy with lights and pictures and incense and it was just beautiful, simply lovely. And I looked at my grubby hands and concentrated on walking and kept having to hold onto the chairs on the edges of the aisles to walk straight . . . and I knew I was dirty and filthy and needed some serious help. Everything that girl had said about me, earlier in the day, was true, and I realized I was the filthiest guy I had ever seen. Nothing in my life was going right, and it was all my own fault.

“So, when I got to the front and took the bread and crossed myself with everyone else, I saw the cup of wine coming my way. And let me tell you, it was huge. It was this big gold thing that was filled with what seemed like simply a lake of wine. And everyone in front of my was taking these little sips—like this”—he took a tiny sip of his wine—“and I knew that wasn’t going to be enough for me. I needed it all and I needed it now. So, when it came to be my turn—and I think I was nearly the last in line. I grabbed the thing from the priest, and just dumped it over my head. I had to. I needed it all.”

Carie gasped. Tom chuckled, tossing his napkin onto his plate. “The priest didn’t look very happy with me, so just I bolted out of there. I must have found my way to the hotel somehow, because I woke up the next morning, all sticky and in my own bed. Betcha the housekeeping staff wasn’t too pleased with me.”

Tom grinned, and Mel and Mark made faces at each other from across the table. Carie murmured, “Kids, stop that,” and looked to see what her mother-in-law’s reaction would be to this bizarre anecdote.

Mother Burton drained her wine glass, and made disapproving eyebrows at Tom. “You’re appalling, Tom. Wine is to be savored, not dumped over your head like bathwater.” She glanced at her son, and then at her watch. “It’s quite late, Doug. I think I should go home now. I’ve had quite enough excitement for the evening.”

Doug stood up. “That’s quite a story, Tom. You do the craziest things—guess you can do anything when you’re alone in another country, eh?” Tom grinned, stretched and sighed. He was comfortable. This made Doug uneasy.

Carie caught her husband’s eye. “I’ll clean up. The kids should go to bed, though.”

Doug glanced at the children, scraping the last bits of icing off their plates and licking their forks. “All right kids, that’s enough there. Go get ready for bed—I’ll come up to tuck you in after I drive Mom home.”

Carie smiled at her husband. “Thanks, dear.” She stood up and began clearing away the dessert dishes. The bottle of wine still sat under her seat, nearly empty.

Mother Burton stood up as well, swaying slightly. “No, no, don’t bother driving me home. . . I’ll be just fine. I can drive myself.”

“No, Mom, I insist. We’re going to take care of you, okay?” He glanced at his wife and gestured at the decimated cake, “Carie, that was a work of art. Thank you.” He helped his mother into her coat.

Mother Burton turned to Carie. “My dear, this evening was half-way decent. Next time though? Use fresh green beans. You’ll never have a good spread if you use frozen vegetables like that.”

She blew her a kiss, and Doug helped her down the hall and out into the night. The kids tramped up the stairs, and after some fussing in the bathroom and slamming of bedroom doors, the house grew still.

Carie hovered about the kitchen, clearing up the dishes and stuffing the leftovers into the fridge. Her brother slumped in his chair at the table still, gazing into the darkness outside the kitchen windows and humming to himself. He stroked the stem of his wine glass over and over again.

When the final dish was in the dishwasher, Carie wiped down the counters and sighed. “Guess that could have gone worse—this year wasn’t as bad as last year.”

Tom smiled. “She’s an crazy old cat. Don’t let her get to you, sis.”

Carie sat down next to him, and put her chin in her hands. “Nothing’s ever good enough for her, Tom. I guess maybe we don’t try as hard as we could, but—the green beans were fresh, and I didn’t know she doesn’t like paperback books, and oh! sometimes, sometimes, she can just make me want to crawl out of my skin and die.”

Tom patted her shoulder. “Sis, don’t worry about it. You’re great.” He stood up slowly. “I think I’m sober enough to make it home. I’ll drive slowly—don’t worry about me.”

“Okay.” She stood up and hugged him. “Thanks for coming. And thanks for getting Mother Burton to stop talking for a bit. Call me when you’re home, okay?”

“Sure thing.” He tramped down the hallway, and the front door fell shut behind him.

Carie stood at the counter by the sink. The to-do list lay crumpled on the pile of bills in the corner, by the bottle of leftover wine. Doug shut the front door behind himself, and headed upstairs. The dishwasher churned and hummed to itself.

Everything felt empty already, and Christmas wasn’t for three more days. Carie glanced at the bottle of wine and smiled, suddenly content. There wasn’t much left, less than a glassful. She pulled out a wine glass from the cupboard.

“Family Christmas parties,” she said to the picture of herself and her family on the fridge, “are so messy.”

She poured the last of the wine into her glass and lifted it until the sink overhead light shone through the liquid.

The dishwasher shifted cycles and fell silent. Standing very still, she held the last sip of wine in her mouth, letting the warmth fill her nose and head before swallowing and breathing in deeply as the unfamiliar burn sank into her body.

“It’s like Tom said,” she whispered to the empty room. “I needed it all, and I needed it now.”