

The Irish Christmas Cake

Tessa Killen

LIGHT CUE: LIGHTS UP
SOUND CUE 1 – RUDOLPH

SETTING: A common kitchen. There's a counter center stage acting as an island. There are 12 [electric] candles on a small table. They are turned on, but because of the stage lights, the glow isn't as noticeable. Finally, there is a small christmas tree hidden behind the island with LED lights. The lights are turned off.

SPEAKER Enters mid-song. She brings out a few bowls of ingredients. And, of course, wine. She dances to the music, putting on an apron, humming along, and pouring herself a glass of wine. The more she drinks, the looser she gets. Eventually, she turns down the radio while laughing.

SPEAKER:

[Flamboyantly] The key to an Irish Christmas cake is [waving around the wine glass] patience. And booze. Lots of it. But mostly patience. And not the kind of patience you're thinking of. Oh no.

The holidays bring stress. Mama and Daddio are trying to plan the holidays. Papa and Grandpa are constantly asking for times and dinners. They want to help in the kitchen, but trust me they are no help. Aunt Kristy is always asking where the gin is. My brothers are stressed about how in the hell they're going to make it up north with little ones. The little ones are just babbling about Santa Claus. The sister-in-laws want to bake something or help in that regard. Aunt Kristy really wants to know where the gin is, and now papa is in on that train. Grandpa still wants to know what time dinner is, but the roast isn't cooking fast enough. Now where in the ever living hell is the gin because mama needs some too!

[Laughing] And then there's me. The college student. The one lone wolf. The caffeine addict with a cat and a fucked sleep schedule– and no driver's license. Yeah, that makes things a little complicated, especially with that wicked snow storm that's coming down on us the week of Christmas. But, that's the holidays.

That is not the patience I'm talking about, though. No, the key to a traditional Irish Christmas cake is patience– in a sense that, you could start this damn cake in October and it still won't be 100% up to Mimi's standards by Christmas day. No, at best you should start your Christmas cake in July. I can still hear her now. [in Mimi's Voice] William! This cake needs to soak in whiskey for at least 4 months! Don't you touch it. [In Speaker's Voice] God, I love her.

And you heard the woman– that cake better be soaking. And I mean *soaking!* If you haven't started planning your cake now, then you might as well throw in the towel. It's a lost cause. Head back to the kitchen in search of gin and call it a night. But, if you must know...

[Speaker pulls out a notecard with the recipe, a mischievous look on their face.] This is how you get started. Don't. Tell. Mimi.

3 cups of raisins. $\frac{1}{3}$ cup candied orange and lemon peel. 1 medium orange, zested. 1 medium lemon, zested– wait can you hold this for a second *[speaker passes notecard to audience member]* I have something I need to get off my chest. I've been making this damn cake for years and I still don't know what counts as a *medium* orange. An orange is an orange. A small orange is a cutie, so a cutie is a cutie. A clementine is a clementine and I don't even think that *counts* as an orange. And don't even get me started on lemons! So what– *[Speaker glares at audience member and snatches notecard away.]* Don't read ahead! Jesus. Moving on. $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of cherries. Are they *medium* cherries or *small* cherries? God forbid they're *large* cherries. That's just scandalous. $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of chopped or sliced almonds.

[Speaker looks out to the audience shaking their head, mouthing 'I hate almonds']

2 cups of all-purpose flour. 1 teaspoon mixed spice. $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground nutmeg
 $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups of butter, room temperature, specifically set your house to 71 degrees fahrenheit and allow butter to warm gently in a little blanket so it doesn't get a sinus infection from the rapidly bipolar Kentucky weather. $1\frac{2}{3}$ cups of brown sugar. 5 large eggs, room temperature– mmmm better not be a medium egg. The notecard says so.

And 1 cup of irish whiskey. *[Beat– speaker pulls out a pen.]* 2 cups of irish whiskey. *[Beat].* 1 whole bottle of irish whiskey. Tentatively. Maybe 2 for good measure. *[Looks to audience]* You got all that? You better be keeping notes, because I'm not letting you get your grubby hands all over this again.

And before you even get started with the cake itself, you want to soak the raisins, candied peel, and citrus zest in whiskey overnight– preferably on a warm night in July.

LIGHT CUE: BLACKOUT

SOUND CUE 2 – FIGHT SONG – LIGHT CUE: LIGHTS UP

TRANSITION: SPEAKER puts on a high school letterman and takes on a younger persona.

SPEAKER:

The world changes the summer after high school graduation. You sing your highschool fight song one last time, throw your grad cap in the air, and suddenly the most significant chapter in your life is over. May is a party. You graduate. You celebrate. You look on in hope with a university acceptance letter in hand. The air is warmer. I passed on the crown of “President of the Creative Writing Club” to Emrel and the badge of “Yearbook Editor” to Collin. So no responsibilities on my plate.

I don't think I'll miss high school. I'll miss bowling. I'll miss lunch gossip sessions with the yearbook editors, but I will not miss Scary Lady Brubs and the journalism class. I hope WKU's photojournalism program is better. I'll miss Mrs. Anderson and hiding in the orchestra room when I got overwhelmed. But, overall, I won't miss it.

June, the preparation starts. Packing. It's still far off though. No need to pace or stress. You have plenty of time. I mean, all you're doing is picking yourself up from your childhood home in which you've never left before and going to a random town 4 ½ hours away with nobody that you know and no driver license to go home when you want. Don't think about it. I mean, you still have some grad parties to go to with your friends. And you have that vacation... Don't think about it.

[Beat] July it starts to soak in. It goes from “I'm leaving after summer break” to “I'm leaving in one month. Less than one month. 2 weeks. 5 days... tomorrow.”

I'm leaving....

SPEAKER takes off jacket and stands back behind the counter, dusting off their hands with flour.

SPEAKER:

Preheat the oven to 280°F. Butter and line a 10-inch baking pan and set aside. Rinse the cherries off then pat with a paper towel to absorb any excess liquid. Quarter the cherries then lightly toss in flour. Set aside. In a large bowl combine the flour and spices, set aside. Set. Aside. Set. Aside. Set. Aside-

Being set aside is polysemous. In this case, these things are set aside because they have meaning, you know? A greater use. A significance later on in the process. And these things are lucky. I mean, if they don't know their path in their existence, they can just look at this recipe card and it's all laid out. Right in front of them. And they have a hand to guide them...

But for other things, being set aside means that you are no longer wanted. Forgotten. Like our orange that we zested earlier– she’s no longer pretty and she’s harder to peel, so who would want her? No one. So she’s set aside...

SPEAKER takes another sip of her wine. Reset.

The key to an Irish Christmas cake is courage. I mean, think about it. A fruit cake is never ever a good gift to someone– And a fruit cake that’s been set *aside* and locked away in a dark closet for half the year isn’t appealing in the slightest when you think about it. But, I’ll be damned if I don’t eat my serving. The old folklore glare that Mimi would send my way could put anyone into a coma. Love that woman, but Jesus christ.

She was the one who taught me a lot of things. That woman was the embodiment of kindness and strength that only a mother would know. And she raised my dad so you know she had to be strong. *[beat]* I didn’t visit her when she was in the hospital. I don’t like hospitals. The downside to being hemophobic and prone to passing out in medical contexts is that you can never say a first hello or a last goodbye. When someone is in the hospital, you’re often left in the dark because your family knows it takes a lot out of you to hear the details. It’s a weird limbo, and it’s hard to grieve. But, the upside is that I never had to see her all hooked up to the monitors and ventilators and... No, I just see my mimi when I think about her. The lively mimi who took me to the zoo, played with dolls, and taught me how to make an irish christmas cake.

Irish Christmas cakes often allow the baker to reflect. Ever since Mimi passed, Mama and I took over the tradition of making it. And before we start mixing, we remember those we’ve lost. Nowadays, I remember many people. Michelle. August 2017. Mimi. August 2018. Grandma. July 2019. Hannah the cat. September 2019. Uncle Kenny. March 2020...

SPEAKER crosses to bring out 4 of the candles and places them on the small table. Beat.

SPEAKER crosses back to the “counter”

High school wasn’t fun for me. Every year was a “year of firsts.” You know, senior year I found myself wondering, “who’s next” because loss became my normal. A year of firsts is supposed to teach you how to grieve, how to go about all your yearly traditions with a seat missing at the table. It’s supposed to ease you into normalcy. But, when you have constant years of firsts back to back to back and overlapping one another, it ends up becoming this cacophony of static and grief. You can’t see the end of the road where normalcy lies but everyone puts on a brave face as they turn numb. Nothing creams together. And nothing is ever the same.

BEAT. SPEAKER takes another sip of wine to reset.

Cream together the butter and sugar on HIGH speed until pale and fluffy. Be sure to incorporate it fully or else your mix will separate later on. Add in the eggs one at a time then fold in the dry ingredients. Lastly, fold in the boozy fruit mix, chopped almonds [*SPEAKER shakes head no, again*], and cherries.

It is also traditional to make a wish when putting the ingredients together. I usually have a hard time thinking of anything to wish for though when I help make it. Sometimes I wish a wish would come to me, but by that point I've already used my wish in vain. Christmas cakes, new years, shooting stars, birthdays... I never make a wish.

LIGHT CUE: BLACKOUT

SPEAKER sits center stage. She lets out a deep breath before pulling out a cupcake and a lighter. She lights a candle on the cupcake – the only light on stage.

SPEAKER:

[melancholy] Happy 19th... first college birthday. Yay... *[Beat]* Happy 20th. *[Beat]* Happy 21st.

SPEAKER (singing):

Happy birthday to me.

Happy birthday to me.

Happy birthday to me.

Happy birthday to me.

SPEAKER goes to blow out the candle, but hesitates. She does the same quizzical expression like before, then blows them out.

LIGHT CUE: LIGHTS UP

SPEAKER looks at the bowl of ingredients and skips the wish stage. She shakes her head before moving on.

SPEAKER:

Pour the cake batter into the prepared pan and smooth out the top. Bake on the middle shelf for 1 hour, then reduce the temperature by 40 degrees and continue to bake for about 2 hours. This gives the cake ample time to... think. You know how in the Great British Baking Show the contestants always stress-watch the ovens even though the baking process is so slow you wouldn't notice the changes. I always thought those people were crazy.

SPEAKER finishes the wine glass. Reset. Big breath.

When the cake is hot from the oven, poke holes all over the top with a skewer and drizzle over 2 tablespoons of whiskey. Or more. Knock yourself out, I don't care. Once the cake has cooled completely, wrap it up well in baking paper and foil and store in a cool dry place until christmas.

Now you start to 'feed' your Christmas cake every 2 weeks with a little whiskey, and be sure to-

SOUND CUE 3 - PHONE RING

SPEAKER startles before picking up her phone.

SPEAKER:

Hey mama. Yeah what's up. Oh... no- no yeah. That's fine. Yeah we'll figure something out. No worries. Yes, I'll get up there somehow I just... No you're right, I don't want you or dad driving in that snow. I just need time to think it through. Yeah it's fine. No, we can facetime at dinner. Yeah. Don't worry. Okay. There's always new years... Okay... love you.

SPEAKER hangs up. Beat.

Sorry.

Beat. SPEAKER looks for more wine as she speaks

Um- be sure to be diligent on feeding your irish christmas cake every two weeks. It's not just to get the cake boozy and drunk and not feel anything for the holiday season- uh, it's just to preserve it.

The key to an Irish Christmas Cake is... authenticity. You need to follow every step and pour your heart into it, or else it will fail. If you try to rush something, avoid another, or flat out change the recipe, it won't work. Follow the path that is clearly laid out in front of you, the recipe at hand. If you don't, the failure will be far greater than you can imagine.... And it will be nothing more than a stale old fruitcake that nobody wants. But once you perfected your cake, hide any imperfections with candied peel, take a breath, and present. Last but not least, make a wish before digging in.

SPEAKER does the same quizzical look but something dawns on her. Something she wants to wish for. Big breath.

SPEAKER (*singing*):

I'll be home for Christmas
You can count on me
Please have snow and mistletoe
And presents under the tree
Christmas Eve will find me
Where the love light gleams
I'll be home for Christmas
If only in my dreams
If only in my dreams

LIGHT CUE - BLACK OUT

END OF PLAY