



A Soul Cake

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

The house smelled of turkey in the oven and cider mulling. The kitchen was warm. I had medieval Christmas music on the CD player, even though the kids didn't like it. The crumhorns and hurdy-gurdy, the strange soul of the ancient music, made them uneasy. They liked *Home on the Range*, *A Cowboy Christmas* and *Elvis' If Every Day Was Like Christmas* more, maybe because those were easier to make fun of.

But the kids weren't home at the moment. Rupert, at thirteen my oldest, was at his best friend's house, playing some tournament video game that lasted two or three days with pauses to re-energize with junk food and sugar sodas. They'd been playing it since they got out of school for Christmas break. Twelve-year-old Liz was doing some last-minute shopping—she had borrowed twenty dollars from me. I figured she had finally realized she needed presents for her parents. Carrie, the little one at eight, was next door with her best friend, probably driving my neighbor Moira crazy.

Everybody, including my husband Jim, my sister Anna, her husband, and her terrifying nine-year-old twin boys, would be home by five if the Lord was willing and the creek didn't rise, and they would be expecting Christmas Eve perfection.

I wiped sweat from my face with the edge of my apron and stooped to peer through the window into the oven. The turkey wore a tin-foil tent. Was it drying out? I opened the oven, lifted the turkey tent, basted, then washed up and headed to the dining room. I added the extra leaf in the center of the table so it could seat nine instead of the usual five. I got the high-backed chairs out of the attic.

I laid out the special holiday tablecloth with the poinsettia borders, and the green and red cloth napkins. I got out the crystal candle holders, put fresh red candles in them, and arranged a centerpiece of Christmas ornaments and pinecones in a big brass bowl.

The good silver had been sitting in a velvet-lined box all year and had managed to tarnish even so. There was no time for polishing, so I set the table with our everyday stainless. My husband and children wouldn't notice, but my sister would.

Notice and comment, the way she did at every holiday event I hosted. I could trust my sister to say nasty things, but usually only to me, alone, in the kitchen while we were fetching more food or washing dishes. She liked to watch the work of her needles, but she didn't need to flay me in public. For such small mercies, I was thankful.

How had Mama done this year after year? Every year a beautiful table, a warm house, perfect food which all finished cooking at the same time —

The rolls. I had to bake the rolls. They were take-and-bake, another thing Anna would point out to me later, as though I didn't know. The salad. I had to make the salad. Boil the potatoes and mash them. Get all the condiments set, the butter on the silver butter dishes, refill the crystal salt and pepper shakers and set them on the table. Make the rice pudding for our special Hidden Almond game after dinner. Did I have the prizes for the game? For a moment I panicked, thinking I'd forgotten to buy and wrap the little gifts you won if you found an almond in your pudding. But then I remembered. I'd gotten them.

I tried to clean as I went or there'd be hell to pay later, when I still had gifts to wrap and the tree to decorate, though Jim would help with those, if you could call it help, really, when I had to do most of his chores over after he fell asleep. He was well-meaning, but he had no wrapping skill, and no visual sense about where the next ornament ought to go. His idea of tinseling was to throw handfuls at the tree and hope some stuck.

I had a dream of making the holiday perfect for my family, a celebration and a delight, hiding my efforts so the kids could imagine elves had done everything. Everyone should get to believe in magic, at least for a little while.

Had I changed the sheets on the guest room bed? Set out the cots in Rupert's room for the twins? Oh, God, what if I hadn't? Maybe I could do it after supper, or while everyone was eating dessert. The pumpkin pies! Had I made those? No, wait. I'd bought pumpkin pies from the really good bakery, and I had real whipping cream. When was I supposed to whip it? I guessed I could wait on that, whip it at the table when it was time for pie, make a production of it and try to pretend my bad planning was a virtue instead of a flaw.

I headed back to the kitchen. Time to peel the potatoes and set them to boil, if it wasn't too late already.

But instead I found myself sitting at the kitchen table, scratching my arms. They itched. They itched and itched. I scratched so hard I drew blood. It startled me. What was I *doing*?

"Mama," I whispered. How had she done it? Every year until she died — three years ago, and I'd been trying to do it in her place ever since. Last year my sister hadn't had to search for things to complain about. My turkey had been overdone on the outside and undercooked inside. The stuffing had been cold and raw, not tasty with all the juices from the turkey. The gravy was lumpy, the pies ruined by too much salt and not enough sugar, the potatoes not quite done yet —

This year I'd been practicing all my dishes. Not often, just once a month, so my family wouldn't get tired of them. I had made successful turkeys and stuffing and gravy since then. I could do it tonight.

Maybe if I fixed myself a nice cup of tea –

I scratched my other arm. I wanted to be the child, coming home from playing all day to discover everything done, everything ready, everything glorious. I laid my head on the table. Just for a minute.

A gentle hand on my shoulder. “Nora. Honey.”

I took a deep breath. “Mama,” I said.

“Honey,” she whispered, “wake up. You’ve lots left to do.”

I sighed and sat up. The CD had finished playing. Dark drifted down outside the kitchen window, the unavoidable approach of night, and with it the approach of people who were expecting a beautiful supper.

No one was in the kitchen with me, and the potatoes were all sitting on the counter in their brown coats, still damp from being scrubbed with the potato brush and awaiting me and the peeler. My biggest pot was on the stove, half-filled with water, and the water was boiling merrily. I jumped up.

My arms were bloody. Such scratching. I felt ashamed now. What had I been thinking? I hadn’t been thinking. I washed off the blood, dashed to the bathroom to apply a little ointment, to the bedroom to change into a long-sleeved shirt. In the kitchen again, I peeled the potatoes and chopped them, dropped them into the boiling water, and moved to the next task.

The fear drained from me. I felt Mama’s hand on my shoulder as I moved around my kitchen, felt some foreign quiet confidence inside. In my fingers and my palms I felt shades of other women, my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, those who had sliced apples for pie, those who had roasted geese, those who had baked bread and sliced cheese, those who had churned their own butter and milked their own cows, those who had pulled turnips and potatoes and carrots out of earth. Their strength and their knowledge outlined my arms in faint light, made my fingers sure, let me walk through my dinner preparations without pause or worry, so that when the door opened and my husband and children tumbled into the kitchen, everything was ready, steaming, beautiful, perfect, and all I had to do was blot sweat from my face with my apron, hang it up, and wash my hands.

“Oh, Nora,” Jim said, and hugged me. “Oh, wonderful!”

“Wow, Mom,” said Liz before she ran upstairs to hide whatever she had bought. “Everything smells great!”

“Oh, boy!” Rupert said. He pressed the light switch in the oven and peeked in at the turkey. “Oh, boy!”

Carrie hugged me, pressing her face into my stained apron front.

“Welcome home,” I said. The front doorbell rang, and I went to answer it. Anna and her husband and the twins came in, loaded down with suitcases for their overnight stay.

Anna sniffed as she came in, searching for the satisfaction of something burnt. I smiled at her, full of some spirit she could not dent or scratch. I showed the guests to their rooms, and came downstairs again when they’d put away their suitcases, led the way to the living room, where there was a tray of small cakes I didn’t remember making. They were small round cakes of light-colored dough, dusted with powdered sugar, a raisin or currant here and there poking up through the surface of sweet snow. There was one for each of us.

“What’s this?” Anna asked.

“Appetizers.” I served cider in crystal cups with handles, and gave everybody a little paper plate with a holly print on it to put their cakes on.

I didn’t know what to expect from my first bite. I tasted history. I tasted the work of all those women, their kitchen histories, their dreams of creation and fruition. Sweet and dust and grain mixed in my mouth. I prayed a thank-you to everyone who had helped me tonight.

Anna left half her cookie on her plate. I ate every bite of mine, and licked sugar from my fingers. Liz ate hers slowly, slowly, glancing at me between each bite. Carrie took one bite and sneaked off to the kitchen, probably to throw the rest of hers out. I did not notice what the men made of their cakes. I looked at my older daughter and we shared a smile.

When I got up to bring dishes to the table, she came to the kitchen to help me.