



The Christmas Fruitcake

"Who gets the doorstep this year?" my husband grumbled.

"It's Sheila's turn," I replied. "I'll get it in the mail to her tomorrow." I sighed looking at the large red tin with embossed holly leaves that held the seven-year-old fruitcake.

The fruitcake was a longstanding family joke. It was ceremoniously passed from my father to my brother Doug, to me, and then to my sister Sheila. She'd get to send it back to the homestead next year. The giver of the sticky mess of unidentified chopped fruit welded into the circular tin was my father's Aunt Winifred.

Winifred Birnbaum had been a woman who delighted in giving her family gifts with varying degrees of uselessness. One year we'd all received subscriptions to *Psychology Today*, which may have been her way of telling us we were all in need of therapy. Then there was the year she splurged on donating \$1,000 in our honor to Mensa. The card read "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." The best year had been gifts of Cheese of the Month Club memberships. We'd actually enjoyed that, but probably didn't understand her true motive. Her final gift to the family had been the dreadful fruitcake. It was however, a quality dreadful fruitcake, lovingly handcrafted (this was on the tin) by the German bakery in our hometown where my parents still lived.

Aunt Winifred was in a word, horrid. A corpulent woman, she'd sit on the couch squinting toad-like eyes around a room, as she leaned on an ebony cane surveying her prey, which was usually my father. He was never quite good enough for

her. She'd prattle on about how successful or intelligent (or some such virtue his two brothers exhibited) and my Dad (in her opinion) did not. His brothers, Max and Richard were not quite that virtuous, and were downright relieved when it was our turn to have the woman at Thanksgiving. Her tactics were the same in every home, so my cousins knew the pain of her visits.

Good old, Aunt Winifred shared her presence with each of her sister's children in an orderly annual rotation. Childless and widowed 20 years, our acrimonious aunt made it a personal mission to keep her long departed dear sister's children and grandchildren in line. If only my grandmother had known what she'd let us in for when she went to heaven far too early and left us to manage Winifred on our own.

Aunt Winifred hadn't always been so mean—at least from what my grandmother had told me when I'd turned 16. She'd taken a turn for the worse after the death of her first husband, Frederic. It was all very hush-hush, but I think, Uncle Fred may have had a fling or two. This indiscretion of Uncle Fred's had broken her heart, Grandma explained, and made her a touch bitter. Ah, Grandma always did have a gift for understatement.

Winifred's gray hair was curled tightly to her head like those little cocktail sausages and her jowls were reminiscent of an English bulldog. She always smelled a little funny—something like garlic and vanilla. Her claim to fame was that she'd managed to outlive two wealthy husbands and was stinking rich. Seven years ago at 86, she'd made a grand announcement at Thanksgiving dinner of her imminent demise. She was dressed all in black, a long rope of pearls wound around her neck several times with a diamond clasp drooping from under her multiple chins.

"I know you've all been waiting for me to kick the bucket and it won't be long for you to finally get your wish. I just want you to know that my entire estate is going to charity and this year's Christmas present is your legacy, which you may divide equally between you."

There was a bit of a collective gasp around the table and the look on her face told me that she was enjoying every drop of drama. There were immediate murmurs

of "I'm sure you'll be with us for many years" and other insincere sentiments. After a bit of an awkward silence, my mother hurried to the kitchen to get the pies. Sheila and I joined her and had a quick summit meeting about Aunt Winifred's announcement. We decided that she was getting senile on top of her appalling temperament, and I cut her an extra-large piece of pecan pie.

Two weeks before Christmas my father got a call from Winifred's housekeeper that the old woman had passed away in the night. Her doctor informed us that congestive heart failure had been her road to ruin. After the funeral, we congregated at her drafty and dark Victorian residence where her longsuffering attorney passed out envelopes to my uncles and cousins, and then the awful, dreadful tin to my father.

"These are your Christmas presents, as per my client's wishes. She mentioned each of you fondly, but as you know her entire estate goes to charity, specifically The Salvation Army and the hospital foundation."

"Fondly? She mentioned us fondly?" my father practically choked.

The short, bald attorney, raised bushy eyebrows and merely responded, "Per my client's instructions." He clicked shut the battered briefcase, shoved a black stocking cap on his head, and bade us farewell. The three families stood looking at each other and then my cousins plowed into their envelopes.

"No kidding. The old bat came through," exclaimed my cousin Marty. "Here's the proof." He held up a check for \$5,000. The rest of the crowd crowed over similar checks in their envelopes. We stared at a very large fruitcake tin. Dad handed it to Mom who carefully opened it on the sideboard.

"It's well ... a fruitcake," she said. My Dad's eyes blazed and he muttered something under his breath.

"You know she was getting a little funny," my Uncle Max consoled.

"Let's go," Dad said to Mom. She shoved the cover on the tin and followed him out the door.

After tempers cooled and we laughed (albeit painfully) over the final insult from Aunt Winifred, we decided we'd continue to host her without quite as much misery by sending the fruitcake to each other as a memorial to her wicked sense of humor. And now it was time to send it out again.

I lifted the loathed item onto the kitchen counter and taped up a sturdy mailing carton for shipping it. How many years would we continue this rather bizarre tradition, I wondered rummaging through the junk drawer for a Sharpie. The doorbell rang and I heard my husband talking with a delivery man.

"Hey, here's that sound bar I ordered," he said gleefully shoving the long box onto the counter.

"Wait, you're ..." I sputtered. It was too late. The unwieldy box had blocked his view and in his eagerness to tear into new electronics, the tin was propelled across the counter and onto the tile floor. With a crash, the lid flipped off and the withered dark brown disc tumbled out, disintegrating before our eyes. Or had it?

"What's that?" my husband asked, pointing at creamy white globes that seemed to glow within the crumbs.

"You're kidding!" I gurgled, bending down to examine the fragments. "Her favorite pearls!"

"Look at these, Sara." He held up two diamond rings, brushing crumbs from the large stones.

"There's more!" Crumbling the larger chunks of cake in my fingers, two more necklaces appeared lavishly decked out with an assortment of gems. I sat on the floor, cake sticking to my fingers (which was exceedingly gross), laughing until tears rolled down my cheeks.