STORY 1

The Great Fruitcake Exchange

Briar Hollow, Christmas 1953

Aunt Winifred Pemberton made one fruitcake every Christmas, and it weighed as much as a cinder block.

She baked it in October, wrapped it in cheesecloth soaked in brandy, and stored it in a round red tin on the top shelf of her pantry. Every week until Christmas, she climbed a step stool and gave it another splash. By December, the fruitcake was dark as a church pew and so heavy that her nephew Leonard once used it to hold the garage door open during a windstorm.

And every Christmas Eve, Aunt Winifred carried the red tin next door and gave it to Dolores Quimby.

"Merry Christmas, Dolores," she would say. "I made it just for you."

Dolores Quimby did not like fruitcake.

She did not like the candied cherries, which were too red, or the green ones, which were not any color found in nature. But she was a kind woman, and Winifred was her oldest friend, so she always said, “Oh, Winnie, you shouldn’t have,” which was perfectly true.

In 1953, Dolores looked at the red tin on her kitchen table and had an idea.

The next morning, she tied a fresh bow on the tin and carried it to the parsonage, where she gave it to Mrs. Thurgood, the minister’s wife, with a warm smile and a short speech about the spirit of giving.

Mrs. Thurgood did not like fruitcake either. On New Year’s Day, she gave it to Mr. Halvorsen, the mailman, as a thank-you for his faithful service through the snow.

Mr. Halvorsen’s wife gave it to the high school band director. The band director gave it to the barber. The barber raffled it off at the Elks Lodge, where it was won by a farmer named Amos Wetherby, who used it as a doorstop until his wife made him give it

to somebody at church.

By Easter, the red tin had visited eleven households, and it was back in the Quimby kitchen, because Mrs. Wetherby had given it to Dolores.

Dolores stared at it. Then she put it in the back of her pantry and waited.

The next Christmas Eve, Aunt Winifred arrived with a brand-new fruitcake in a brand-new red tin. That night, Dolores sent the old one back out into the world.

So it went, year after year. Somewhere in Briar Hollow, there were always at least two fruitcakes traveling from house to house, and nobody ever said a word about it. It became the town's best-kept secret. The old tin picked up a dent in 1955 when it slid off a sled on Hill Street. In 1957, somebody added a sprig of plastic holly to the lid, and it stayed there. People began to recognize it the way you recognize a neighbor's dog.

"Uh-oh," the barber would say, when a customer walked in carrying a round red tin

with a dent and a sprig of plastic holly. "Here it comes again."

Leonard, who was now grown and married, kept count. By 1963, the original fruitcake had been given away forty-one times. It had been to a wedding shower, a retirement party, two Christmas pageants, and, briefly, to Ohio, when a visiting cousin took it home by mistake and mailed it back.

Through all of it, Aunt Winifred never suspected a thing.

At least, that is what everybody thought.

On Christmas Eve, 1963, the doorbell rang at Aunt Winifred's house. On her doorstep was a round red tin with a dent in its side and a sprig of plastic holly on the lid. A card was tucked under the ribbon. "Merry Christmas, from a friend," it said.

Somebody, somewhere in the chain, had lost track and sent it home.

Winifred carried the tin inside and set it on the kitchen table. She looked at the dent. She looked at the plastic holly. She pried off

the lid and unwrapped the cheesecloth and leaned down and took a good, long sniff.

Then she went to the telephone and called the Ladies' Aid Society.

The Christmas social was held the next evening in the church basement, and Aunt Winifred arrived wearing her best green dress and carrying the red tin like a crown on a pillow.

"Friends," she announced, "I have received a very special gift this year. I believe it is ten years old. And since it has clearly been to visit every one of you, I think every one of you should have a piece."

The church basement went so quiet you could hear the coffee percolator.

Winifred cut the fruitcake into thin slices, forty-one of them, and she walked around the room with the plate and stood in front of each person until they took one. Dolores Quimby. Mrs. Thurgood. Mr. Halvorsen. The band director and the barber and Amos Wetherby and his wife,

who was trying very hard to hide behind a coat rack.

"Go on," said Winifred sweetly. "Eat up."

They ate. And then a strange thing happened.

Mr. Halvorsen said, "Huh."

The barber took a second bite. Amos Wetherby asked if there was any more.

After ten years in a tin, soaked in brandy and patience, Aunt Winifred's fruitcake had become, by general agreement, the best thing anyone in Briar Hollow had ever tasted. Moist. Rich. Spicy. Even the green cherries were good.

"Fruitcake," Aunt Winifred explained to the room, "needs time. Most people never give it any."

Dolores Quimby set down her fork and narrowed her eyes. "Winnie," she said. "How did you know it was ten years old?"

Aunt Winifred smiled and refilled her coffee.

"Because," she said, "I'm the one who put

the holly on the lid."

Nobody in Briar Hollow ever passed along a fruitcake again. Instead, every Christmas Eve after that, the whole town lined up at Winifred's back door, and every family went home with a round red tin and a note in her careful handwriting.

The note always said the same thing.

"Do not open until 1974."

Your Turn to Share

- Was there a holiday food in your family that everyone pretended to love?
- What is the funniest gift you ever received, or the funniest one you ever passed along?
- Who in your family was famous for a recipe, and what made it special?

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