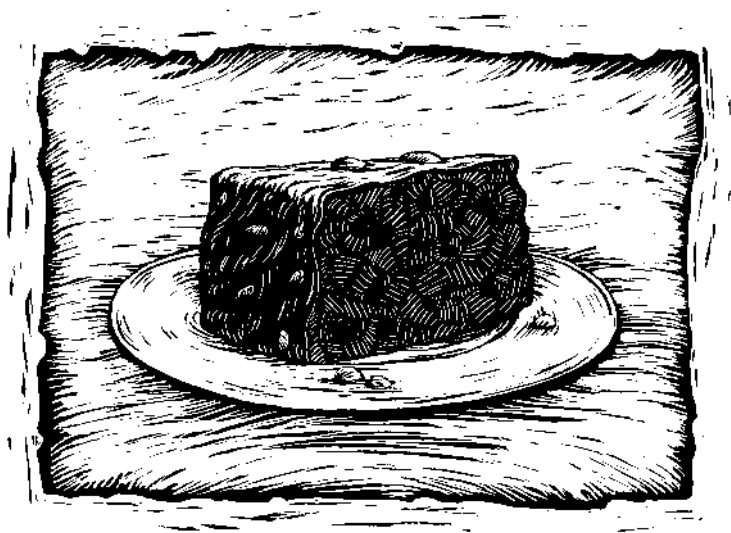


The Fruitcake Special



I never thought I would discover something quite so amazing by accident. I was a chemist at the Amos Cosmetics factory in New Jersey, USA, trying to design a new perfume when it happened.

I was trying out all the usual mix of flowers and things - just like I always did - when I decided to throw in a piece of the fruitcake Momma had packed for my lunch. I don't know why I did it - I just did.

I put it into the mix with all the other things. Before long, I had a little bottle of perfume made from the things I had mixed together. I put some on the back of my hand. I thought it smelled nice, but there was nothing special about it, so I put the bottle into my handbag. I couldn't give something like that to my boss. After all, I am a chemist and my job is to make perfumes in a proper way. If I told him how I made this one he would tell me not to be a silly girl. Later, he would probably make a joke about it to his friends at the golf club.

That's the kind of man my boss was.

'Anna!'

It was my boss, David Amos, the owner of Amos Cosmetics. He happened to be walking past where I worked. He never usually spoke to people like me. What did he want? I felt nervous.

'Yes, Mr Amos.' I said.

'You're looking terrific today! Mmm . . . what's that lovely smell? It's like fresh bread and flowers and sunshine all mixed together with . . . I don't know - is it you, Anna?'

I didn't know what he was talking about. I couldn't smell anything special.

Mr Amos had an expert nose for perfumes. And he knew it.

'Yes, it is you!' he said loudly. All the other chemists nearby could hear. It was embarrassing.

I had never heard my boss speak to me like that before. Or to anybody else, come to think of it. David Amos is a dark, handsome English guy who would never dream of saying nice things to ordinary looking girls like me. He preferred to be with pretty young models who liked his appearance and his money. When he did speak to the chemists he was usually complaining about something. Was he playing some kind of joke today?

Suddenly he came over right next to me. He spoke in a quiet voice close to my ear.

'You know, Anna, I've never really noticed it before - I can't think why - but you really are a beautiful woman!'

'Mr Amos. I . . .' I tried to answer but I didn't know what to say.

'No, it's true, Anna,' he said. 'I must see you outside this dull factory. Will you have dinner with me tonight?'

'Well, I . . .' I was still too surprised to speak properly.

'That's great! I'll pick you up at your place tonight at eight. See you then,' he said.

He was gone before I could say anything.

As I went home on the bus I thought of the strange situation I was in. My boss, who was famous for going out with beautiful women, had told me I was beautiful and had asked me out! But I know I am just ordinary looking and not his usual type at all. When I got home my Momma was in the sitting room talking to my Aunt Mimi.

Aunt Mimi. I like my Aunt Mimi, but she simply can't mind her own business. She has wanted me to find a husband for ages. She didn't like the thought of me being single and having a career. She thought it wasn't natural for a twenty-seven-year-old woman like me not to be married. Aunt Mimi thought that the least she could do for me was to find me a husband. I was used to this by now, but it was still embarrassing.

'Aunt Mimi - how nice to see you,' I said.

Aunt Mimi looked at me and smiled. 'Anna, my little girl . . . but look at you: you're not a little girl any more, you're a twenty-three-year-old woman already! How time flies!'

'Actually, I'm twenty-seven, Aunt Mimi,' I said. She always got my age wrong.

'So soon? And you're not married yet? Your mother was married when she was eighteen. Eighteen! And you were born when she was nineteen!' Aunt Mimi looked sad as she said this.

She decided to say what she thought at once - as she always did.

'So when are you going bring a nice boy home?' she asked, looking me right in the eye.

'There was that boy Armstrong you saw two years ago. He was nice,' said Momma, trying to help me.

'Momma, Armstrong was the pizza delivery man,' I tried to explain, but Momma never did listen.

'Armstrong was here a few times. I liked him,' said Momma.

'Momma,' I said, 'that was when the cooker broke down - remember? We ate pizzas for almost a week until it was fixed. Armstrong just delivered the pizzas.'

'I don't care,' said Momma. 'I liked him - he had nice eyes.'

Aunt Mimi raised her eyes in surprise.

'You mean to say you let this Armstrong boy go?' said Aunt Mimi.

'But he was only the pizza delivery man,' I said, weakly.

'Then he was. By now he probably owns the company!' said Aunt Mimi. 'And you let him go! Anna!'

It was no use arguing. I knew they were not going to listen to me. So I changed the subject.

'That fruitcake was nice, Momma,' I said.

'Aunt Mimi brought it,' said Momma. 'But don't change the subject - your aunt has something to say to you.'

Oh no! She's trying to find a husband for me again!

Aunt Mimi began, 'I've found the perfect boy for you, Anna. Well . . . he's not exactly young, but neither are you any more . . . and he's still got his own hair . . .'

I decided I had to put a stop to this - I didn't want to meet Aunt Mimi's 'boy' even if he did have his own hair.

'Thanks, Aunt Mimi,' I said. 'But I'm already seeing someone tonight.'

I hadn't meant to tell them but I had to do something to stop Aunt Mimi. It certainly surprised them. They both looked at me with their eyes and mouths wide open like a couple of fish.

'Yes,' I went on. 'I'm going out with my boss, Mr Amos. He's picking me up at eight.'

That certainly surprised them!

Momma and Aunt Mimi were very pleased, of course. They went off together to plan the wedding and left me to get ready for the man they hoped would be my future husband. I was beginning to wish I hadn't told them. After all, I had no idea why my boss had behaved towards me in that way. He had never even noticed me before now. However, he had noticed the perfume I had been wearing. Lately I had been wearing a perfume called Intrigue. It was made by another company and I actually preferred it to the perfumes we made. Mr Amos did have a very good nose for perfumes. Perhaps Intrigue was so good he just couldn't stop himself. Who knows?

Anyway, I had to get ready for my evening out. Although I couldn't explain why Mr Amos had suddenly found me attractive, I really wanted to find out. In my own way I'm as bad as my Aunt Mimi, I guess. The funny thing was, I don't really like men like Mr Amos. But I wanted to find out why he had changed.

So I put on my best black dress, lots and lots of Intrigue and my one pair of high-heeled shoes. The handbag I use for work is the only one I've got because I don't go out that often. I took it. Then I heard the doorbell ring.

Momma and Aunt Mimi were at the front door before I could move. They wanted to see my date. Both of them were trying to get me to hurry up. They had big smiles on their faces.

I opened the door.

'Hello, Anna.'

It was Mr Amos. He looked very handsome. However, he was quieter than before and was looking down at the floor. I could hear Momma and Aunt Mimi behind me. I could tell they liked him. It was embarrassing.

'Hello, Mr Amos,' I said.

I was expecting him to say something friendly, like 'Call me David' or something. But he didn't.

I managed to get him away from my Momma and Aunt Mimi without too much trouble. I guess they thought we should be alone together if they had any hope of hearing wedding bells in the future.

He hardly said anything in his car, either, apart from polite conversation about how nice I looked. I could tell he didn't mean it. Men have a way of calling you 'nice' when they really mean they don't care how you look.

Anyway, he drove me to an expensive French restaurant where we spent some time having drinks and ordering food. All the conversation was of the polite kind, but I could tell he was getting ready to say something. Then he turned to me with a serious look on his face and spoke.

'Look Anna . . . ' he began.

I knew it! He'd changed his mind and was trying to think of some excuse to get out of our evening together.

' . . . about today, at the factory,' he continued. 'I don't know why I behaved like that.'

'I thought it was because you found me attractive, Mr Amos. And because you liked my perfume,' I said, wondering why the Intrigue I was wearing didn't seem to be having any effect on him. But it was obvious he hadn't been listening to me.

'You see, Anna,' he said, 'if we can see this as . . . as . . . '

'As what, Mr Amos?' I asked.

He suddenly put on a smile. 'As a reward for all your hard work at the factory. After all, you are one of our best chemists. It's the least I can do to show how much I value your efforts. Have this meal on me! I'll pay for it!'

If the meal had been there, it would really have been on him - I would have thrown it at him! So he had changed his mind and now wanted to get rid of me. I didn't believe for one moment that this meal was a prize for being a good little chemist. I needed to be on my own to think what to do.

'Excuse me for a moment, Mr Amos,' I said, getting up from my seat.

'Of course,' he answered, looking less nervous than before.

I went to the ladies' room. I felt like breaking the furniture or something. I was annoyed! I had my pride, after all! And why hadn't my Intrigue worked? Perhaps I hadn't put enough on, even for his expert nose. I decided to put a lot more on. Perhaps that would work. I looked in my handbag - it wasn't there! All that I could find was that bottle with the fruitcake in it that I had made at the factory. I didn't care, I put it on. I used up half of the bottle. Then I went outside again.

As I was walking back to the table I almost ran into the waiter who had served us. He stopped and looked at me with a stupid look on his face. Then he remembered he had a job to do, walked on and knocked down a table with some cakes on it.

When I finally reached the table, Mr Amos was looking embarrassed, as if he didn't want to be seen with me. I could see he was trying to hide it but he couldn't. Suddenly a strange thing happened: he opened his mouth, as if he was going to speak, then stopped. He had smelled the perfume - the fruitcake special - that I was wearing, and the change that came over him was immediate. His look of embarrassment just disappeared. Instead, he looked like a dog who had just found a bone; his eyes shone and he smiled until I thought his face would break in two. He stood up.

'At last you're back - I missed you, Anna,' he said. 'I've been in a terrible dream and I've just woken up.'

'A dream, Mr Amos?' I asked. I didn't understand what he was talking about.

'Call me David, darling . . . ' he said.

Darling ? What did he mean? What was happening?

'Yes . . . ' he continued. 'I dreamt that I was being awful to you, treating you as if you were just someone who worked for me. The truth is that you mean so much more than that to me . . . '

I wondered what he meant. Was he going to raise my pay?

He went on. 'You must realise that I'm crazy about you, darling.'

He was calling me darling again. He was being serious.

I have to say that at this point I was feeling very confused. Five minutes ago my boss didn't want to be seen with me. Now he was saying he was crazy about me! What could be making him behave like this? Then, all at once, I realised: it was the fruitcake special! Intrigue might smell great, but it didn't make a girl attractive to men. But my fruitcake perfume did.

'I feel my heart growing with love for you, Anna,' said Mr Amos. He was looking at my body through the black dress.

Just then a waitress came to the table. She told me that I had a telephone call and asked me to answer it in the lounge.

I wondered what it was about.

'Excuse me, David - I won't be long,' I said.

'A minute is a long time when you're gone, Anna,' he said. His words were like conversation from a bad movie. But I kept quiet about it - he was my boss, after all, even if he had gone crazy.

When I got to the lounge I took the phone. I noticed someone waving their arms at me from another phone across the large room. I could see it was that waiter again - there were bits of cake all over his trousers.

Now what could he want?

I soon found out.

'Miss . . . ' his voice was excited at the other end of the line. ' . . . I know I am only a poor waiter but love makes me brave . . . '

Why did everybody sound like bad movies tonight?

'When I saw you just now,' said the waiter, 'I couldn't stop myself from falling in love with you. You are so

beautiful. Please tell me you will see me . . . I know I can offer you more than that rich fool you're sitting with. I may not have his money or his looks, but I love you far more than he ever could. Please be mine!

'Wait a minute, Romeo,' I said. 'Why don't you just calm down and serve the lobster, like a good little waiter?'

It was the perfume, my fruitcake special again. The waiter had a good smell of it when he had passed by earlier and now he thought he was in love with me, the poor man. It wasn't his fault. I told him that if he loved me he would not talk loudly about it.

'Of course, my love. I will not embarrass you . . . darling!' the waiter said.

So far I'd had two men call me darling in one evening. Aunt Mimi would be pleased.

But if the perfume had worked in that way on the waiter, I had better take care not to pass by any other males too closely. I could end up with a group of men following me home, all saying they loved me. And wouldn't that be awful? Well, wouldn't it? Well, maybe not but it wouldn't be easy to explain to Momma. And I wouldn't even mention it to Aunt Mimi!

Thank goodness the place was quiet that night. I walked back to the table, trying my best to keep away from other men who were in the restaurant. I was lucky; it seemed that they would have to get close to the perfume to get the effects.

When I got back to the table, I saw that Sabina, a beautiful young model who was his latest girlfriend, had joined David - their pictures had been in all the papers recently.

'So, you're Anna. I haven't seen you before, Anna.' Sabina said my name as if it were a dirty word. 'Don't you work for David making perfume or something? Terribly exciting.'

She held out her hand to me as if I were expected to kiss it. I didn't.

'Sabina,' said David. 'Anna is the woman I love.'

I could hardly believe my ears. David Amos was telling me he loved me right under the nose of his beautiful girlfriend, Sabina. All because of my fruitcake. I had to say something. This was getting to be silly.

'David, I really think . . .' I began.

But at that moment our waiter made another appearance. He was playing a guitar and singing 'O Sole Mio' to me at the top of his voice. Well, he did say he wouldn't talk loudly - I didn't say anything about singing loudly. I must remember next time.

As for Sabina, she didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the sight of two men both saying how much they loved me at the same time - and while she was there.

So she hit David in the face.

The waiter sang even louder than before. David hit him on the chin. As I moved away from the table, a fight developed between Sabina, David, the singing waiter and several more waiters who were trying to calm things down.

Soon the place was a loud, confused mess of cake, pieces of lobster, pools of wine and bits of broken guitar.

Time to go, I thought.

I ran downstairs and caught a taxi home. Thank goodness the taxi driver was a woman!

When I got home, Aunt Mimi had gone and Momma was asleep - she never could stay awake when she was excited. I had some quiet moments to think about what had happened. Why had my perfume had such an effect on men who would not normally take any notice of me? Nothing had been put in that was any different. Nothing, that is, except Aunt Mimi's fruitcake.

What a fruitcake!

Then I had a thought. What if I, as a chemist, could find out what it was in that fruitcake that caused men to go mad with love? People would pay a lot to know a thing like that. I could make a lot of money! There was no reason, come to think of it, why I should let Amos Cosmetics know about it. After all, it wasn't their fruitcake. But I couldn't do a thing unless I knew what was in the cake - and only Aunt Mimi knew that.

I decided to miss work the next day - I would say I had a cold or something. I also wanted to avoid David Amos who might still be affected by the fruitcake special, or the fight that had followed.

Aunt Mimi lived in a nice little apartment on the other side of town. I had gone out before Momma got up. I didn't want to be questioned about my 'new young man'. It took an hour to get there on the bus.

When at last I arrived Aunt Mimi gave me a warm welcome. Soon we were sitting in her kitchen, talking about this and that. We both knew what Aunt Mimi was going to ask me about in the end, so neither of us minded talking about other things first. Aunt Mimi was good company when she wasn't talking about husbands.

I mentioned the fruitcake.

'Anna,' said Aunt Mimi, 'I've known you since you were born and you've never baked a cake in your life. Now you want to know how to bake a fruitcake. What's going on?'

'Nothing, Aunt Mimi, I just thought the cake was delicious and wondered if I could bake one too. There's no harm in that, is there?' Of course, I was lying. We both knew it.

'So,' Aunt Mimi said. 'This new man of yours - he wants you to bake him a cake. Who does he think you are, his mother? Just what were you two doing last night, having a cookery class?'

'Oh, please, Aunt Mimi,' I begged. 'I really need to know. I promise that as soon as you tell me I'll tell you everything about last night.'

Aunt Mimi was interested. 'Everything?'

'Everything,' I said. 'No secrets.'

Aunt Mimi smiled. 'Well, my dear, I hate to tell you this but I didn't make the cake. I bought it.'

'You bought it?' I said, unable to hide the surprise in my voice. 'Where did you buy it?'

'From a little place in the market, the open-air one that takes place twice a week in the park. There's an old lady there who said she used to bake them for her husbands. She had seven of them, would you believe? And they all ate her fruitcakes.'

Somehow, I wasn't surprised that she had had seven husbands. Not with those fruitcakes.

'Did she say what she put in them?' I asked, hopefully.

'Only that she put in a "special something" that she grew herself,' said Aunt Mimi. 'She wouldn't say what. She told me that she only baked that kind of cake a few times. As a matter of fact, she knew that I was thinking about finding a husband for you. I don't know how she knew but she did.'

Anyway, this woman who made the cake told me to give it to you and your problems would be over. I didn't believe what she said, but I used to buy the fruitcakes because they were delicious.'

I noticed that Aunt Mimi was talking about this old lady as if she wasn't around any more. I feared the worst. Was she dead?

'Can we see this old lady to ask her about it?' I asked.

Aunt Mimi looked at me sadly. 'I'm afraid she died last week - I went to her funeral. They say she was over a hundred years old. There were a lot of strangers there, not from around here, all speaking in some kind of

strange way. They seemed to think she was important, though nobody ever took much notice of her around here.'

'Except you, Aunt Mimi,' I said.

Aunt Mimi smiled. 'Well, you know how I can't mind my own business.'

I knew.

'Speaking of which,' she said, moving closer to me, 'it's your turn.'

'My turn?' I asked.

'To tell me everything that happened last night,' she said.

And so I did. Everything, just as I had promised. I don't know whether Aunt Mimi believed me or not, but if she didn't she never let it show.

She's not a bad old lady, my Aunt Mimi. Not when you get to know her.

In the end I had two days off work. I said I'd been sick and in a way I was: I wouldn't feel well until I knew the truth about the fruitcake. I knew that there was little chance of discovering what actually went into it. I would have to work it out from the small amount I had left in the bottle. I had used up more than I thought the other night.

But I was not sure that I wanted to make my fortune from the old woman's secret. Perhaps it was only right that the secret should lie buried with her.

Then again, perhaps not.

Momma seemed satisfied with my explanation that things had just not worked out between me and Mr Amos, although she thought it a wasted opportunity - she wanted me to have a rich husband. Still, happiness is what really counts, she said, with a note of sadness in her voice.

When I finally got back to the factory there was a message left on my desk - could I see Mr Amos as soon as I got in.

As I walked towards David Amos's office I felt like a schoolgirl who had to go to see the head teacher. I was sure that the fruitcake special would not still be working by now - after all, he had not seen me for a few days. I knocked on his door.

Mr Amos was sitting behind his big desk with a large black eye. Standing next to him, smiling and wearing dark glasses and a hat, was Sabina. She had her arm around his shoulders.

'I hope you are well now, Anna.' said Mr Amos.

'Yes, thank you, Mr Amos,' I said. (I thought calling him 'David' might not be the best thing to do at this point. I could see Sabina wasn't pleased to see me.) 'I hope you are well yourself,' I added quickly.

'My eye hurts a bit - your waiter could hit hard!' he said with a little smile.

So could Sabina, I thought, as I remembered how she had hit him. But I said nothing.

'Anyway,' Mr Amos said, 'I managed to calm them down so that there was no more trouble and the police were not called. Your waiter had been partly to blame, too, so they accepted my apologies - at a price, of course. At least the name of Amos Cosmetics didn't appear in the newspapers.'

'And, as for that other matter of my strange behaviour towards you - I can't explain what affected me. I mean, a man like myself and a woman like . . . I mean . . . ' he looked towards Sabina.

Sabina finished it off for him.

'He means that a rich and handsome man like him could not possibly fall in love with a nobody like you when he has a beautiful girl like me. Isn't that right, David?'

'You express it so well, darling,' he said.

Sabina continued: 'So David wants you to accept a bit of money to make up for any disappointments you may have had, then you can go back to making perfumes at the factory again. Right, David?'

'Absolutely, darling,' said Mr Amos before turning to me again. 'Well, Anna, I hope that has helped to . . . er . . . clear things up a little. I'm sorry there had to be this, er, confusion. I hope this has sorted things out between us.'

I stood watching Sabina smile as she put her fingers down his collar.

'Well, Mr David Amos,' I said, 'perhaps you can use your famous expert nose to sort this out, too!' I had reached into my handbag for something to throw when I saw Sabina laughing. I took the top off the first thing I found and threw everything that was in the bottle all over the front of Sabina's dress.

'Take that and him too, you horrible little woman!' I shouted.

When I looked at my hand it was holding the now empty bottle of fruitcake special. The room was already beginning to fill with its smell. I got out before Mr Amos lost control of himself again, out of the office and out of my career at Amos Cosmetics.

Sabina, of course, would now enjoy all the extra attention she would get from strange men, thanks to the fruitcake special. I'm not sure that Mr David Amos would enjoy the competition, though.

It happened sometime later, shortly after I had begun to work at the factory where they made Intrigue. I was trying to make a fruitcake (I mean you never know!) when Momma and I heard a knock at the door.

'Momma,' I said, 'if it's Aunt Mimi with news of another "perfect boy" for me, tell her I'm not interested.'

'It's not Aunt Mimi, dear,' said Momma.

'Who is it?' I asked.

'I think you'd better come see for yourself,' Momma said.

I went to the front door. It was Armstrong, the pizza delivery man. He was holding up a pizza box which had 'Armstrong's Peachy Pizzas' in big letters on the front.

Armstrong now owned the pizza company.

He explained that he'd fallen in love with me when he first delivered pizza to us, but he wanted to be a success before asking me out. He said I deserved no less. Then he gave me some flowers. I never really noticed before, but Armstrong is quite good looking: a bit short maybe, a little thin on top - but nobody's perfect.

'Momma, get the man a drink,' I said, enjoying his smile.

And the smell of fruitcake went past us and out the door.