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Masks

by Rosalyn Hurst

When Jules and Jacintha, Jazzie to her friends, moved into the Old Post Office on March 1st 2020 they thought they had found rural bliss. It was an old flint cottage opening directly onto the village High Street, the shop window still there, oak beams in the sitting room, a small log fire and just two bedrooms upstairs. The sweet smell of old stamps, string and brown paper still gently rose from the oak floors.

The kitchen was tiny. When Toby and Lucia called in, Jules laughed, “we don’t ever need to cook for we will eat out, explore the local eateries.” Toby and Lucia had bought the Old School House six months previously on the recommendation of Giles and Imogen who had bought the Old Bakery the year before. All knew each other from living in Islington and all had yearned for a second home in the country, outside London.

On March 23rd Jules found out three things.

The first was in the morning. Jazzie, his most recent wife, some twenty years younger than he and despite their agreement, said they were expecting a baby. The second was that his daughter Chloe, coincidentally the same age as Jazzie, had unexpectedly called to see him, and on being told the news by Jazzie, swore she would never talk to her father ever again. The third, that the whole country was to be closed down, a pandemic of extraordinary virulence was on its way. By evening, Jules was torn between feeling both smug, after all it showed that at sixty he was as virile as any younger man, and yet protective towards his nervous spouse, who was spending hours on the phone calling and texting.

“We must go,” she announced, leaving no chance of a considered discussion. Lucia and Imogen are all going away, so the village will be fine for a week or two.

She smiled in her excitement. Jules heart melted, he loved her sweet smile, her soft lips, her perfect white teeth. He kissed her tenderly. She stroked his face, so wise, so caring, his kindly eyes, his elegant hair, a few grey hairs giving him such distinction.

On June 23rd Jazzie learned three things, or rather faced up to something she should have known. The first was actually not unexpected. Her duplicitous former friends Giles and Imogen, had managed to get to Dubai. Jazzie Googled the local weather and at an unexpected high of 41 degrees, hoped they would fry. And to add to this Lucia rarely answered her calls and texts.

The second thing Jazzie learned was the local surgery was closed and that she had to disclose her symptoms to a receptionist. Who the hell confides in a receptionist about constipation, feeling too hot or too cold? Then the local hospital some twenty miles away. Jules, London born and bred, was unused to driving forty to fifty miles in one day. Finally, there was no getting away from it. That although the locals said the last postmistress had brought up a family of four kids the Post Office cottage was far too small to live in for more than a weekend.

On July 23rd both Jules and Jazzie looked at each other, as if seeing one other as never before. It was an *eat out to help out* early evening meal at the local pub. As she took off her mask, Jules noticed her mouth, once so sexy, so beguiling, had turned down, she was, despite her pregnancy, dissatisfied and it showed. And what had happened to her teeth, once so white, so, well glistening. Perhaps, he thought it was down to all that cosmetic dental treatment she had regularly in London. Her hair was now longer and he thought a very different colour to when they had lived in Islington.

She looked at him, he was still wearing the mask, though no need now they were sitting down on the chilly terrace. She noticed his eyes had changed, from tender and kind, they now seemed small, mean, selfish. Jules took off the mask with irritation, and pushed his hair back. His hair stood up on end, whether a symptom of his controlled anger or a result of her inept attempts as an impromptu barber, she was uncertain. And somehow it was turning white and thinning almost before her shocked eyes.

“Look,” said Jazzie, “isn’t that Giles?” The man was bronzed and distinctly over weight. She was unsure for that was not Imogen under that mask so carefully and expensively chosen to match her outfit.

“Leave them,” offered Jules wearily, “no one is sure who’s who these days, whether they have masks on,” and more thoughtfully added, “or off.”

