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Lady's Fingers

by Marion Umney

“Okra. That’s hard to grow, isn’t it?”

She looked at him curiously. This man had lived next door to her for some years, but she had hardly ever spoken to him. She occasionally saw him in the garden and, before the pandemic, she had glimpsed his wife from time to time. Never for long. She seemed to be one of those people who kept herself very much to herself.

During lockdown she had seen more of him, albeit at a distance; in the garden mostly. It seemed that he had made it his project and there was no doubt about it, he had created a thing of beauty. He was out there all hours of the day and possibly the night too for all she knew. She could understand the obsession. She too had found a retreat from the anxiety which seemed to be consuming the world in creativity. For her it had been a return to pottery, something she hadn’t done for years. She had dug out her old kiln from the garden shed and converted the summer house to a studio.

His wife had died, she had heard. Old Mrs Farland across the road had told her. Some would call her a busybody but she was a good source of information in the pandemic. It was as if lockdown didn’t apply to her and she always seemed to be at her door when you went out for your daily walk, or to do essential shopping.

“She’s gone you know; ‘er next door to you. The covid ‘e says. Funny though, didn’t see an ambulance or anything. ‘Spect ‘e took ‘er in himself. No funeral neither, but that’s what it’s like these days. I just don’t know what the world’s coming to”

That was how they’d slowly started to become friends. She’d popped a card through his door. ‘So sorry to hear about your wife’. Then they’d started chatting over the garden fence.

When things eased off and they were allowed to meet outside, she asked if she could come in and see the garden. She could only see part of it from her upstairs window, but what she saw was beautiful.

He was a bit wary at first. Well who wouldn't be if they'd lost someone to Covid. Then he said yes and they'd had a nice morning drinking coffee and admiring his handiwork.

She told him about her pots. Showed him pictures on her phone.

"You could make me some" he joked

"I could – some for your plants perhaps" her eyes wandered across the garden. A couple of green pots just in that corner would be lovely. A warm spot. They'd be great for something exotic.

"What would you put in them?"

He held her gaze intently just for a moment before replying

"Lady's fingers I think."

And he'd done it. It seemed okra wasn't so hard to grow after all, or he had a talent for it. They looked amazing in the pots she'd made for him. Which was why she was so annoyed when she heard the crash that night. Bloody fox. She'd seen him in the garden several times sniffing around. He was a way. She'd seen him going off the day before with two suitcases.

"Where are you off to?"

Was she imagining it or was he not best pleased to see her? He seemed startled and a bit put out by her sudden appearance on his drive. Then he smiled

"Just off to see my mother. She's in a home you know and it's the first chance..."

"Of course. That must be hard for you. You away for long? I can keep an eye on the house for you."

"That's kind. No. Just the one night"

He saw her eyeing the two suitcases.

"Just thought I'd drop these off at the charity shop. Some of my wife's things, you know. I need to do it sooner or later."

She got up and looked out of the window. As she suspected the fox had knocked over the pots with the okra in it.

So, she went round there the next morning to just clear up a bit before he got back. Through the side gate and into the garden. There was soil spilt everywhere and broken bits of pot. Such a shame, she'd enjoyed making those. She picked some up and gasped. They couldn't be...but yes there was no doubt about it.....lady's fingers.

The police were very kind. They had caught him and found body parts in the suitcases. There were several bits missing and they were going to have to dig up the garden. They were sure they'd find the rest of the body there. The hands he'd obviously just buried in the pots. The irony wasn't lost on them or her.