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Ice Cream Cake

by Juliet Robinson

‘Here she comes!’ Trina jogged my arm, directing my attention to my mother-in-law.

‘Oh Christ,’ I muttered. I closed my eyes and hoped that when I opened them my delightful mother-in-law might somehow have been struck by an act of God.

When I opened my eyes and sadly she was still there, her snowplough of a chin driving her forward as she marched towards me. It was the only solid feature on her otherwise insipid face. The rest of it could have been rolled from dough. It was rounded and pastry-like, reminiscent of an undercooked bun. Wrinkles radiated out from her eyes. Lines deeply worn due to her refusal to wear the glasses she needs, because God does not make mistakes. Her milky blue eyes, glared at me from their deep-set resting place like glazed currents.

‘Well. Where is he?’ Mikela barked. Her hair, which resembled a fine dusting of white sugar, caught in the breeze, and flattened to her scalp, pink skin flashed in the sun.

‘He’s playing with his cousin; they’re looking for slugs in the compost.’ I gestured towards the far end of the garden, hoping she would go off in search of her grandson and leave me alone. But she didn’t. She actively avoided anything vaguely physical, there was no way she would trek that far. She was a young, old person. One who had decided when she was in her thirties that she was middle-aged. So, by the time she turned sixty last year she had tricked her body into enfeeblement. Stopped and tired, aching and wasted. There was no way she was going to hike to the end of the garden. She looked pointedly at Trina instead.

‘That would be your son then?’

‘Well, yes.’ my sister replied sardonically. Mikela had of course met Trina and her son Simon, my nephew, many times. But she always persisted in this dismissive game.

‘Its very hot. Why did you not think to have some shaded seating set out?’

I fixed a smile on my face, ‘It’s only May and the weather forecast was for clouds. If it’s too hot for you feel free to head inside.’

Mikela shot a look towards my house, she had always been disparaging of it. She couldn’t stand newbuilds and she rudely referred to my place as a cardboard box. Never bothered to consider that it was all I could afford after her son walked out on me and left me to raise our child, Ben, on my own.

Just then the dogs started barking, announcing the arrival of another guest. My son raced down the garden, his cousin in tow, their faces painted with excitement. This was the first birthday we had been able to celebrate since covid and Ben was hyped to the max.

As they disappeared into the house to greet the guest Mikela fixed me with another of her practiced glares. ‘Did you invite your man?’

I stiffened, how did she know about Robert, I certainly hadn’t said anything. He was coming, he was bringing the cake, but even now over a year into our relationship I hadn’t been brave enough to tell *her* about him. Robert had grudgingly and kindly agreed to my pleas for secrecy and frankly I didn’t think it was any of Mikela’s business.

‘Well, yes actually.’ I tried to sound causal and not defensive. The grimace on Trina’s face told me I had failed.

Mikela tutted and for a moment we stared each other down.

Then Ben was back, ‘Mum, Mum its Robert! He brought ice cream cake! Did you know that was a thing?’

Surrounded by bouncing dogs Robert followed the boys into the garden. He looked over at me and smiled and despite Mikela’s presence my stomach did a little excited flip.

Next to me the witch stiffened, ‘Well, he doesn’t look like anything special at all.’