

The Groom's Cake

By

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The trouble began when Imogene Spunkwuzzle steamrolled through her swinging kitchen door with a smoking pan of blackened Oatmeal Fuzzies. With the flair of one who impresses guests by yanking the tablecloth from under the best china, she stripped off her apron and announced, "I've had all I can stand! I won't bake another morsel until that oven has been replaced!"

The effect of her announcement couldn't have been more violent if the First Lady had announced she was leaving the Oval Office in search of a more satisfying career with Cirque du Soleil. Imogene's guests gasped and gawked, flailed their hands and jerked their knees. A woman fainted. If sackcloths had been available, those present would have painted their faces with the requisite dirt and gnashed their teeth. Even the redbreasted robin that perched on the windowsill coughed out a sickly squawk and flew away.

While those seated around the dining table revived themselves and helped the less fortunate off the floor, Imogene grabbed a cup of coffee and, breaking all precedents, sat down to join her neighbors in conversation.

Imogene the Baker was revered, however, no one had ever really paid notice to Imogene the Woman. With the removal of her apron, Imogene had stripped off her mask, lay bare her true nature, and replaced the vague image of an aged and calloused June Cleaver with that of a human army tank bearing the expression of a heartburn victim. Her permed hair, a hazardous shade picked out at the local five-and-dime, resembled a Brillo pad after a distressing encounter with a rusty pan. Her narrow eyes peered out from their fleshy prisons and examined the nervous guests.

Every morning at seven sharp an eager crowd headed for Imogene's small dining room--conveniently adjacent to her kitchen--and banded together under the guise of sharing tidbits of gossip and friendly conversation with their elderly neighbor. The gathering attracted specimens from every tier of society: from men of importance on their way to the city to those who spent the better part of their day prone under automobiles; from harried housewives who had been scrubbing floors since dawn to stay-at-home dads with intimidating "honeymo" lists. Eager parents pulled toddlers on leashes through Imogene's front door, and elderly folks propelled themselves through that same door with tin walkers.

It didn't matter that Imogene rarely partook in the banter. In fact, that was the point. The entire town knew that the old woman would be bent over her ancient stove producing the tastiest treats this side of heaven. She was a baking machine. Their real agenda was to be on hand when Imogene wanted a tester.

The Spunkwuzzle baked goods were of legendary stuff. Those with a fondness for Grandmother's tarts had only to taste Imogene's Chocolate Splatter Pie to shake themselves back to reality and send Grannie packing to the nearest culinary school. Grown men had been known to propose marriage to young women purely on the coincidence that Imogene would bake the groom's cake.

One such man was creeping out her side door now. He was tall and dark--a healthy specimen

among his peers. His firm jaw spoke of moral certainty, his athletic carriage bore a reminder of college football victories, and his bright eyes pointed directly toward the future. If he had been a puppy, his nose would have registered cool and damp. Charlie Whatnot was penciled in to marry his sweetheart, Penelope Rose, in two weeks, but the bloom had just wilted off the impending ceremony.