

Mr Whippy's Woman

By Liz Martinez

When I first saw the woman she was holding an ice-cream high up above her head, like an Olympic torch, and a trio of young children were jumping up around her waist, pulling at her blouse, trying to reach it.

It was a classic Mr Whippy with a chocolate flake in a plain cone; the best kind of ice-cream that you buy from a van with a side window and a tinkly musical box tune. And it feels like a real treat because you weren't expecting it.

When we were children, there were Sundays in summer when we pushed our Dad out of his garden recliner on hearing the unmistakable sound of the ice-cream van on its way up the road.

'Run!' we yelled, 'before it goes,' because they never seemed to stop for long in a quiet, residential area like ours. Dad would have to find shoes, money, shirt, house keys and tear out into the road looking for the van – then carry back ice-creams for everyone, leaving a trail of drips behind him.

'Don't lick mine, Dad, just hurry up!'

Her hand was now covered in melted ice-cream. It oozed from the gaps between her fingers. Little rivulets were running down her arm and would soon find their way inside the sleeve of her blouse.

'It's mine!' she laughed.

'Share! Share! Share!' chanted the children.

'What? With all of you?' and she spun in a pirouette, ice-cream held high, head thrown back, laughing.

'Share! Share!'

'It's good to share,' said a girl.

'Is it really?' asked the woman, standing still for a moment and looking directly at the imploring child.

'Yes, it's good to share.'

'Well I don't agree,' the woman said. 'I don't like sharing. I want it all for myself, and I think each one of you wants it all for yourself too.'

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The children were quiet now. One girl put a finger in her mouth. Another anxiously searched the others' faces for support. The boy was staring at the ice-cream.

Then he spoke in a clear, confident voice; 'She's right. I want it all for myself.'

The woman smiled at him and handed him the ice-cream.

'Then you can have it.'

'Do I have to share it?' he asked, with a sideways glance at the girls.

'Do you want to share it?' she said. 'If you share it you will be a good boy, but you don't have to share it. I have given it to you.'

'No, I don't want to share it.'

He licked round the drippy sides of the ice-cream cone and then gobbled the top off the whippy bit.

The smaller girl started crying. The older girl glared at the boy.

'That's not fair!' she said to the woman.

'Why is it not fair?'

'Mummy says I have to share my things with him, but you said he doesn't have to share his ice-cream with me.'

The boy grinned.

'I let him choose and he chose not to share. That's okay. It's his ice-cream,' she said. She shrugged her shoulders and held up a gooey hand.

The boy stuck his tongue out and very slowly dragged it in a spiral around the ice-cream, saving the chocolate flake until last. The woman stood studying him for a moment.

Suddenly she turned to the girls.

'Oh, and...' eyebrows raised. They waited.

'I'm going to give you something that you don't have to share with him!' cried the woman, excitedly.

The boy stopped grinning.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Mind your own business. It's not yours.'

'That's not fair!' cried the boy indignantly.

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'Oh, yes it is,' said the woman. The other children were nodding sagely. 'You have had your ice-cream, my ice-cream actually, and you decided you didn't want to share it with your sisters. Now they will have their treat. Why should they share it with you? You agreed with me that sharing isn't good.'

Outrage spread all over the boy's face, beginning at his hairline, forming deep frown lines in his forehead, flushing his cheeks with hot spots of pink. His eyes opened wide and he stared at the woman. For a second he stood with his mouth open but no words came out. Then he spluttered;

'But, but ... you said I didn't have to!'

'Yes, I did, and I meant it. I also reminded you that good boys share, but I gave you the choice. It was your ice-cream. You chose not to share and that's totally okay.' She smiled and nodded. Silence.

'You seemed quite happy about it at the time. Now your sisters can choose whether to share their treats with you, that's all. Don't worry, sweetie. It's nothing to do with you.' She patted his head and smiled sweetly at him.

The girls grinned at each other. Then the bigger one folded her arms, looked directly at her brother and smiled a sickly sweet smile too.

'You can have my flake,' offered the boy. The girls shook their heads at the saliva-covered, glistening, narrowed stump. Besides, they were beginning to feel at an advantage in the game.

The woman opened her handbag, grabbed a tissue to wipe her hand, then reached in and took out two small bottles. All three children recognised them instantly. The girls cheered and danced up and down.

'Bubbles!' they shouted, clapping.

'Giant, multi-coloured bubbles!' cried the woman, laughing with the girls.

The boy turned his back on them, walked over to a bin and hurled the remains of his ice-cream cone into it. He stood for a minute looking down at the floor, frowning and put his hands deep into his pockets.

'Do we have to share?' asked the bigger girl through a massive smile.

The woman held up a cautionary finger.

'Do you want to? It's your choice.'

'NO!' shouted the big girl.

She opened her bottle and ran over to the boy, blowing a long stream of bubbles in his face. He batted her away; 'Get off!'

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The smaller girl paid no attention to the others. She opened the bottle, dipped the hoop into the liquid and then, extending her arm, span round in circles, watching a shower of glossy bubbles swirl around her. She stopped, inhaled deeply, closed her eyes and shook her hair. Her face lifted into the sunlight. She smiled at her brother, then at the woman.

‘Can we share if we want to?’