

CHEESY SYMBOLISM

RELATIONS

my in-laws and I have come a long way since our first unexpected meeting. My partner has a propensity for klutziness that exhibited itself early on in the relationship. She locked the keys in her car the morning after the night before, and had to call her dad for back-up. I was barely able to don a bathrobe before he arrived at my door with a spare set.

Nobody had time to prepare. A quick handshake with limited skin contact was accompanied by hurried hellos all 'round. My future father-in-law actually backed up as he shook my arm.

That was five years ago. Now they invite me to Florida.



**KATE
BARKER**

My in-laws have been snowbirds for years, driving south for a three week vacation every October. They invite their son and his family for one week, and their daughter for another.

Finally in October, I went south for the first time in 14 years. We arrived in Fort Meyers amid a sea of nearsighted, pastel-wearing Floridians, who would a week later have so much trouble with those pesky ballots. My in-laws were relaxed and tanned and anxious to get back to paradise. She golfs, he reads and I wanted to float in the sea looking for sharks. Sadly, there were none. I looked every day. I returned from the beach hungry after one shark-spotting excursion and met my mother-in-law hunkered over half-made sandwiches.

"This isn't the right sort of cheese. I told you to buy the Kraft cheese," she frowned at the cheeseless sandwiches and eyed the unopened Cracker Barrel with venom.

"They didn't have Kraft," from behind a book on the couch.

"Did you look?"

"Yes, dear."

"I'm sure they must have had Kraft," she glanced at me for back-up.

"Everyone has Kraft." I nodded, shrugged and took a sandwich.

"Honestly!"

"Sorry, dear."

"Good sandwich," I offered uncertainly. And suddenly I was looking into a pair of eyes eerily similar to those of the woman I love. And she held my gaze calmly, as though considering her options. And then she smiled.

I realized then, clutching my excellent — if Kraft-free — sandwich that we were at a crossroads, my mother-in-law and I. No longer to be treated politely as a guest, I was permitted to witness the petty inner workings of family life. I was, simply, one of them now, warts and all.

We had been building up to this for some time. She let slip the odd criticism of a family member in my presence last Christmas. She had openly complained within earshot about her husband's minor crimes for years. But this was different. I hadn't accidentally overheard a private and mundane family snipe session. I had been a part of it. I felt strangely honoured.

"Well, anyway," my mother-in-law broke the moment with her trademark I'm-bored-with-this-let's-move-on expression. We carted the sandwiches and drinks to the porch for lunch. My father-in-law emerged from behind his book as my partner came out of the bedroom. It was the master bedroom. They insisted that we use it.

"Do you know what this means?" she excitedly asked me our first night together in Florida, as we lay on the king-sized bed while her parents took the twin beds in the smaller room. Of course I did, this was huge — the master bedroom, my God!

But my epiphanies tend to come in smaller packages, and this one appeared in the guise of sandwiches and a mother-in-law's smile.

Relations is dedicated to exploring our many kinds of relationships.