

# How Fresh Is the Cake?

## A Cruel Metaphor about Women

Tossie Ruffle



*Japanese Christmas cakes on display in a bakery window.*

**BEFORE YOU READ:** Discuss the meaning of “metaphor.” Try describing something using metaphor. What would make a metaphor “cruel”?

### Japanese Christmas Cake

In Japan, every family buys a beautiful cake to celebrate Christmas on December 24th or 25th. Since this is the time of year that thousands of cakes appear on the market, deciding on what kind of cake to get is just as important as having Christmas presents!

Unfortunately, in my culture, we sometimes use “Christmas cake” as a teasing metaphor to

describe women who have not married. The conversation might start with a middle-aged man saying this to a woman in her 20s: “You know when is

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**Then the man asked, “Do you know what will happen to the unsold cakes?”**

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the best time to buy a Christmas cake?”

The first time I heard this, I understood the question literally, and I responded, “Of course, it is best to buy a Christmas cake one or two days before Christmas.”

Then the man asked, “Do you know what will happen to the unsold cakes?” Again I responded

naively, “They won’t be fresh. People won’t want them, and they will be discounted more and more each day.”

But, I missed the point. I thought we were talking about cakes. In fact, this man was making a cruel comparison between cakes and women, as if we have an expiration date too!

### These Are Not Just Cruel Words

This is not an abstract problem in my culture. These words have an impact. I had a nightmarish experience when I was working as a receptionist for a psychotherapist

in Tokyo. He was a middle-aged single man who was not only my boss but also the only other worker there. He seemed to be struggling with finding a young bride for

himself. He started harassing me all the time by saying, “Maybe you are young but that’s only for now, and soon nobody will be interested in you, so you should marry soon.” I was only 24 years old at the time, and I was busy thinking about building my career. He kept pushing his opin-

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ion that he believed that a woman’s happiness is about marrying and having kids. Slowly this harassment was driving me towards depression, and I ended up quitting the job.

He was an absolute jerk, but these people – who think of women like cakes gradually going stale – are everywhere. Many women are suffering because we can’t escape from these stereotypes. In the worst case, your parents rush you to marry too.

However, there are also women who believe that marriage is their life’s goal. They are like a princess waiting for their prince to come find them in a dark forest. Other women are actively on the “marriage hunt.” They go to parties, visit fortune-tellers, and get professional help from a marriage arrangement agency.

### The Metaphor Falls Apart

Christmas cakes are supposed to be a joy. And marriage should be a joy too. But after that, the metaphor falls apart. A cake is something you buy and consume, and it’s over. The person you marry is a complex individual whose ingredients do not have an expiration date.

Why can’t women value ourselves – and be valued by others – just as we are? It might be difficult to wipe away an old stereotype, but there is some evidence that women are not falling for the cake metaphor anymore. Over the last 30 years, Japanese women are getting married later in life. They are finishing their degrees and working full



*Tossie Ruffle and her husband enjoying some cake.*

time before they get married. I sincerely hope that Japanese women will realize their true value and love themselves whether they are married or not.

**AFTER YOU READ:** According to the author, what is cruel about the metaphor that compares women to Christmas cake? How did this stereotype of women hurt her personally? What effect did it have on her mental health?

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## Explore figurative language!

Look at the examples of metaphor and simile. Is the third example a metaphor or simile?



There are so many ups and downs. Life is a roller coaster!



It’s not heavy! It’s as light as a feather.



I love my grandchildren. They’re as sweet as pie.