

The Ice Cream Man

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My cotton t-shirt had a black and gold tobacco leaf painted on the front, which clung to me, as did everything I touched. Sweat rolled down my arms, tanned from the summer of waitressing and working outdoors. I brushed hair out of my eyes yet again, squinting against the setting sun. A white cooler entered into the corner of my vision, swinging back and forth due to the precarious nature of the individuals toting it. It brought a simple message. He had arrived. He was infamous, in a way. A recurring theme in my summers, first in childhood, and now, here in the beginning of my young adulthood, he strangely reappeared. His ragged t-shirt and greasy ball cap gave him the appearance of having just stepped off a tractor. Which he had. The cigarette, painting gray on the surrounding sunset sky, was a crumpled sign of the toll nature had taken on this man's life and reminded me of when I'd first met him, summers ago. He climbed into his pickup truck and waved to his daughter and me as we peered back at him through the mesh enclosure of the trampoline in their backyard. He was living a life in a neighborhood. Suburban perhaps, but not at the core. Daily trips out to the farm were necessary, yet he always returned to his wife and family in the suburbs. Now, he was a full-time farmer. The wife was still in the suburbs. The children were scattered, chasing their own dreams, blending their paved and dirt passions into one mix, tangled but tangible.

"Hey. You work earlier today?" was the typical greeting I received as he passed by me with his ice cream. "Yeah I did, sure was hot out there. Glad to be here at the ballpark now, though, and away from all the people I had to wait on today." A nod of empathetic agreement was thrown in my general direction as he pushed gallons of ice cream up on the top shelf. Their white plastic containers meshed with the sterile shelving, a bland camouflage against the hues of green the clientele approaching the counter wore. "Might rain later." "Think so?" "Yep." "Hope not." Another shrug.

I never cared much for listening to the weatherman. I'd rather just look at the sky. Yet out here, the ice cream man could predict what was coming, clouds and customers, the gift of years in a field. It was still sunny as could be, but he said rain. I wanted to know which life experience he was drawing that conclusion from, but never got the chance. Our weather conversation was interrupted by a man who asked me for a roster of all the players. I dug one out from the depths of my booth, halfway watching the sky, and halfway watching the guest. He took the roster and headed to a seat above home base.

The crack of wooden bats echoed behind my head; the innings blurred together. The crowd was thin enough that I could see straight out the front gate from my booth, past the box office and into the neighborhood that had fallen on hard times. The home of the all-American pastime was situated right in the middle of rows and rows of individuals rocking on front porches for whom the American dream had left much to dream about and little to show for it.

Smoke filled my lungs, and I looked up into his face. He leaned on my booth and blew the smoke carelessly in whatever direction seemed easiest to turn his head. We would people watch and talk. About cotton, the latest flavor of ice cream, his daughter's new apartment, whatever topic popped up. As I told stories of my encounters with jetsetters at my country club day job, he would tell me of the entitled individuals he had to work for daily. The crops demanded attention, in the early morning and late into the night, like small children, susceptible to the great big world, with all its predators. He battled the invasions of bugs, spraying them into oblivion, and sought to keep the cotton in line despite its unruly personality. His greatest tool was the only thing that did run like a deer, the infamous John itself. I could visualize the array of green and yellow that weaved together, blurring the lines between crop and machinery as it crept down the straight rows.

We were shooting the breeze in harmony, yet we both had jobs to do. I was to help solve the problems that arose. The go-to person for bee stings, lost children, complaints, and general questions. He was to bring the pleasure that comes from the taste of homemade ice cream to everyone who walked through the gates of Fleming Stadium, piling up the green bills they slid under the glass in exchange for a Styrofoam cup. We strived to seem like a best friend to every new customer. Our jobs didn't fade with the setting of the sun behind the distant trees, or with

the hurricane like rainstorms. Come thunder, lightning, hail, people locked in the bathroom, a fourth of July mob, the game goes on. And with that, so do the dessert and demands.

We were a support system of sorts. He was there to ease the tension of my blushed stammering when a young man I'd never met asked me out on a date and continued shameless flirting. I was there when he discovered one night's vandalism had included the theft of several gallons of his pride and joy. Neighborhood kids apparently wanted in on the pleasure as well, choosing the most popular flavors to cool off their bodies and taste buds from the relentless summer heat.

So we continued, the ice cream man and me. I'd set up my booth and then look over to see the flicker of jumbled Christmas tree lights that adorned the outside of his stand. When they were turned on, he was in the building. His assistants would promote the ice cream while he would wander and talk to friends like me, people watching. And smoking. After checking the status of his nightly sales, he would slide the dirty cooler into the bed of his big white truck and roll off into the darkness, diesel whining until the crack of the bats started up again the next night.