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Ice Cream Man

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Most ice cream trucks play the same five note jingle looped over and over. It gets stuck in your head and in January you find yourself suddenly craving an orange push-pop.

In Mapleton, Montana, on a sticky, windless day near the end of August, an ice cream cart playing a different sort of tune rolled down the street in the center of town. The man who pushed the cart was near middle age and of middling height and weight. He turned a crank on the cart as he pushed and a beautiful layered song rang out of a speaker on the top of the cart. The music shimmered through the air like ice crystals on the wind.

Like any ice cream truck, this one needed only to let its song sound to be surrounded by a crowd of eager children, dripping wet from swimming pools and clutching damp dollar bills.

Other trucks held two and sometimes three rows of brightly colored tubs bearing labels like Bubblegum Birthday Explosion! or Fudgy Banana-Mallow Ripple. Some of the more respectable carts even carried an old crystalized tub of French Vanilla for the sensible adults who sometimes accompanied their children to the carts.

This particular truck, though, held only one tub of ice cream. It bore no label, but the side of the truck read: Mister Me Trillium's Ice Cream For YOU! Single dip of your perfect flavor $1 Double Dip $1.50.

Some children, upon discovering that they could not order their usual two scoop Fudge Tracks with rainbow sprinkles, left the cart sad faced, with their money still in hand. But not many. Mister McTrillium had found that children are generally adaptable and will usually play along, at least where ice cream is concerned.

The first girl in line looked skeptically at the cone Mister McTrillium handed her. It was a silky orange color with darker orange flecks. "This isn't my perfect flavor," she pouted. "I get cookies and cream."

Mister McTrillium smiled. "Try it."

She took a hesitant lick and her eyes widened. "Marmalade," she smiled and took a huge mouthful. One of the other children whined, "but I don't like marmalade." Again, the ice cream man just smiled.

The next child in line was a young, dark haired, frail looking boy named Joey. As Mister McTrillium reached into the same unmarked ice cream tub, silver scoop in hand, Joey whispered, "I don't mind marmalade." But when Joey's scoop was heaped into his cone, the children gasped. It was brown, rich and shining. The children whispered to each other as Joey bit into the cone. His small white teeth cracked through a chocolate shell and revealed a soft pink cream underneath.

"Chocolate dipped strawberry!" Joey exclaimed loudly, a chocolate ring around his smiling mouth.

Next, a scoop with petals, shaped like a flower and tasting of honey and rosewater was pulled from the cart. A stocky boy named Bernard beamed when his dark reddish brown scoop proved to be roast beef flavored, though the other children groaned and held their noses. The next boy in line eyed the cart nervously but when his cone came out, it was green, topped with a dollop of whipped cream. The whole line clapped and the boy pronounced it the best pistachio he'd ever eaten.

There were cones of raspberries and cream, butter brickle with real butter ribbons running through, fresh blackberry, chocolate fudge brownie with rivulets of frosting, lavender cones and honeydew melon.

When at last the line was gone and the children had all gone back to their sprinklers and sandboxes, Mister McTrillium raised his head from his cart and looked around.

There was a man leaning against the trunk of a broad red maple tree about a hundred yards away. His oil stained, dark blue jumpsuit bore the name Andy. The ice cream man smiled and Andy walked slowly toward the cart. "Ice cream?" asked Mister McTrillium.

"I remember you," said Andy while fidgeting with the zipper on his jumpsuit. "You haven't been here in thirty years. I looked every summer."
“Oh? well, I travel.” The ice cream man smiled a vague smile. 

“You remember me? Summer of ’79, right here on this corner?” Mister McTrillium did not respond so Andy continued. “You remember. I bought a cone. It came out peach, but it was rotten?” He looked at Mister McTrillium expectantly, growing frustrated when he gave no response. “It was filled with little white worms,” Andy’s voice was angry now. “They wriggled in my mouth.” He wiggled his fingers slightly with a look of disgust on his broad tanned face. He shuddered. Mister McTrillium was not smiling now, but watched Andy carefully. Andy stared at the ground where the toe of his thick work boot rubbed a groove in the soil. 

“I got mad,” he said. “I pushed Becky Jones down and stole her Lemonade flavored cone. But when I bit into it, my mouth was full of worms and rotten peaches again.” Andy’s foot stopped scuffing the ground and he looked the ice cream man in the eye. They were the same height. “You do remember, I was so angry.” Andy shook his head but he didn’t look away from Mister McTrillium’s face. “I pushed your cart over. I guess I hoped I would find good ice cream inside. Or I just wanted to break something. I was so angry,” he said again. “Not just then, but always, growing up.” He fell silent. Mister McTrillium watched him curiously while Andy stared down the street, lost in thought. He spoke as if from far away. 

“When I threw your cart over, I told you to give me a new cone. A good cone. Like everyone else got. And you said,” 

“I said Andy, each person gets the flavor they deserve. Only a flavor that truly suits who you are will come out of the cart.” 

“And then I kicked your cart and the wheel fell off.” 

“You demanded that I give you a different flavor, but I told you that I could not.” 

“You told me that I was a sweet boy, but that something was rotten inside of me. You said I had to cut away the rotten part or all my ice cream would be filled with maggots.” Andy looked back at Mister McTrillium. “I’ve changed, you know.” 

“I’m glad to hear that Andrew.” 

The day neared its end. The shadows lengthened and the air began to cool. Andy and the ice cream man stood on a quiet corner in Mapleton and looked at each other across the ice cream cart. They appeared to be the same age. Andy handed Mister McTrillium a crumpled dollar bill. 

“I’d like a single dip cone,” he said. 

The shimmering scoop of purple cream was run through with dark red ribbons. Andy opened his mouth wide and sank his yellowing teeth into the the side of the scoop. For a moment, with his eyes closed, he appeared lost in ecstasy. Then his eyes opened. Boiling with anger he spat a writhing mouthful of maggots drenched in sickly smelling purple sugar on the ground at Mister McTrillium’s feet. The ice cream man took a step back. 

“Rotten,” Andy snarled. He spat again, threw the cone on the ground and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He stepped over the cone, now just a pile of sticky maggots squirming on the hot asphalt. 

“I want a new cone,” Andy said. 

“Now Andrew,” Mister McTrillium took another step back. “I’ve changed, goddamn it!” Andy pushed past the cart, grabbed the ice cream man by the front of his shirt and threw him roughly toward the cart. “Give me a good cone, old man.” 

The ice cream man knelt on the asphalt in front of his cart. Two of his shirt buttons were ripped off and his pale chest showed through the hole, sprinkled with wiry grey hairs. 

“Andrew, you know I can’t do that. That was your cone. There isn’t any other.” 

Andy charged at the ice cream man before he finished speaking. He kicked Mister McTrillium in the stomach and when he doubled over, Andy kicked him in the head. 

Andy kicked and yelled, but Mister McTrillium never made a sound. Andy grabbed him by the shoulders and raised him to his feet. Blood trickled down Mister McTrillium’s face from a number of small cuts. It ran thickest from his nose and the corners of his mouth, where several teeth had been kicked out. 

“Last chance,” Andy said. But Mister McTrillium shook his head sadly. He looked slightly regretful as Andy wrenched his body...
sideways and plunged Mister McTrillium's head into the open tub of ice cream. He held Mister McTrillium's head in the ice cream, made soft by the sun, until his legs stopped twitching. Then Andy turned and walked slowly up the street, hands in his pockets.

Mister McTrillium's body hung limp over the side of the ice cream cart, up to his shoulders in Lemon Meringue. Near his left ear was a swirl of graham cracker crumb crust.

The next day it was 104 degrees in Greenbough, Ohio. Near the center of town there was a large, green park. In the center of the park, a concrete oval supported four tall metal flowers that sprayed water down on shrieking children.

On the street an average looking man of middle age pushed a small ice cream cart. As he turned a crank on the side of the cart a beautiful layered song rippled through the air, like ice crystals on the wind.

Goldfish Constellation

Abigail Swanson

The sky crashed
Splashed my pants
With mud, up to the knee.

You crossed my lips
And the ocean swelled
Pushed
Clumped, wet sand over our shoes
And a goldfish popped out of my boot.

The goldfish skittered
Down main street
And a million dry teapots
Screamed-- scarring the air around my head
And the hair around your ears curled and smoked.

The hair on my arms prickled
Ashen
And charred my sleeves,
Squeezing fire out.
The moon pulls
At my low tide coffee cup
Cratered desolation pits
My stomach
And the wind howls wild;
But just around the edges.

Few organisms can survive desiccation.
I can
So long as the path remains
Cleared, and the sky stays up.