Pop’s Ice Cream Stand

The picture alongside the obituary showed a brutally thin man with caved-in cheeks and sunken eyes that seemed to need a friend. At first, I couldn’t remember how I knew him but when I read the obit it all came back to me.

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Some students insisted Pop had run the ice cream stand in the university commons since at least the Civil War. He looked about 75 that fall day when Jake and I stopped for a cone. I went to high school with Jake but we hadn’t known each other there, and didn’t know many people at the university. We found ourselves in an English 101 class late on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, so we sat with each other and talked until class began. It became our habit to get a cone after the Thursday class, when crowds had thinned out and we didn’t have to wait in line.

Pop would acknowledge us with a nod and a smile. He constantly sucked his cheeks into the space vacated by missing teeth. After two or three sucks, he’d ask the question.

“What’ll youse boys have?” he’d ask so enthusiastically  one would think he’d known us forever, but he greeted everyone with the same enthusiasm.

We’d ask Pop what flavors he had, and would hear the run down every customer would hear when they asked that question.

“I got Vanilla and Chocolate,” he would start agreeably. “I got Rocky Road and Caramel Crunch, Chocolate Chip, Mint Chocolate Chip, Maple Nut, Pralines and Cream, Peanut Butter Fudge, Toasted Almond Fudge, and everbody’s favorite, Butter Pecan.”

He’d speed up as he went through the list, like a train pulling out of the station. Then, after ‘everbody’s favorite,’ he would pause to catch his breath.

“Then I got your fruit flavors.” He’d smile big time and add, “Who don’t like fruit flavors? Peach and Strawberry, Black Raspberry and Bananas Foster, Cherry Cordial, Orange and Lime Sherbet, Pumpkin Pie, Raspberry Fudge.” This group went a little faster than the last, filled by another pause and another deep breath.

“Don’t forget your exotics, your Tutti Frutti, your Cherry Cheesecake, your Tin Roof Sundae. How about youse try Rum Raison, Somerset Shortcake, Southern Chiffon Cheesecake, Peppermint Stick, or Peachy Patriarch?”

He was on the home-bound train now, decelerating as he approached the station. There would be an almost imperceptible pause before he’d say, “And the last three. We got Scholar Supreme, Valedictory, and finally, Monster Mash. Prob’ly wanna know what’s in them last three, huh?” He’d always pause here, but I never heard anyone say, ‘Yeah. Tell me what’s in them. ’

“There you have it,” he’d conclude. “Thirty-two flavors, just like on the board.” He’d say this last statement with a flourish of his left hand toward a sign hanging overhead which listed the thirty-two flavors.

And so, on a Thursday twenty-five years ago, Jake and I stopped for a cone. Pop looked a little tired but he nodded, smiled, sucked his cheeks in, and asked what we boys wanted. When Jake asked, “What flavors you got today, Pop?” he responded immediately with the familiar litany.

He finished and Jake said, “I think I’ll have…Vanilla.”

Pop furrowed his undomesticated eyebrows and sucked his cheeks in five, then six times, pinching his cheeks as the color drained from them. At first I thought he was going to be sick. Eventually, though, he spoke. His voice was so quiet I had to strain to hear it, but hear it I did.

“Twenty years,” he said. “Twenty years ago they told me if I’d quit gettin’ sloppy drunk I could work here, so I come to run the ice cream stand. Summer and winter, it’s always the same. *Everbody* wants to know, and I mean *everbody*, ’What flavors you got today, Pop?’ So I tell ‘em. I got Vanilla. I got Chocolate. I got…”

The steam engine was pulling out as he went through the first part of the list.

“I got your fruit flavors…” and he listed the flavors.

“I got your exotics…” and he listed the exotics. As he recited them, I had no idea where we were headed.

At the end of the exotics, he gasped for air, then finished. “I try to make it fun. I tell everbody, I got flavors just for youse smart guys. Scholar Supreme and Valedictory. Then I bring it home with Monster Mash. I even ask them if they wanna know what’s in them last three. That’s it, thirty-two flavors, just like on the board. Then I point to the board so’s they know, fer *God’s* sake, it’s all right there, alls they gotta do is *look* at it. And I always, I swear to God, *always*, start with Vanilla.

“And what do they tell me? After I’ve made it fun? After I’ve shown them the board? They tell me, ‘Awww, I think I’ll have *vanilla*.’ Or, ‘okay, Pop, make mine *Vanilla.’ Or, ‘today,* I’m gonna try*…Vanilla.’”*

He shook his head and turned to fix Jake’s cone. Two scoops of Vanilla. Then he fixed his gaze on me; what was it in his gaze that spooked me? I didn’t wait to find out.

“I’ll have the same,” I said quickly.

When we walked away, I glanced back. Pop had his back to us and was sweeping the sidewalk, alone.

The following Thursday when we got to the stand, Jake asked, “What flavors ya got today, Pop?” then winked at me. I couldn’t look at Pop, but I heard his mantra of flavors.

“I got Vanilla and Chocolate,” he said, much slower than normal. I turned away, and tried to block his voice out of my head, but I couldn’t.

When he finished, and swept his arm in the direction of the sign, Jake said, sounding very much like a fourth member of the Trinity, “*Today*, make mine Vanilla.”

As Pop fixed the cone, his back to us, I noticed how stoop-shouldered he was.

“None for me today,” I told Pop as he handed Jake his cone. I never returned to the stand.

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I looked at Pop’s obituary again. He had no family, no survivors. The next day, I was the only one, besides the people who worked at the funeral home, at his visitation.

By Erv Klein Read more at