Cold Stone

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“Happy Birthday” *straight lines, straight lines* “Dirty Pirate Hooker.” Red, whipped icing squirted out the wrong end of the piping bag as the last “r” threatened to topple off the edge of the ice cream cake. The sentiment legibly entertained Karen 2 PM’s wishes, save for the word “day” wearing a tremor from the employee checking that the order form indeed indicated such a felicitation. All in all, the lettering met the Standards for 16 Year Old Ice Cream Shop Employees Pretending to be Cake Decorators as well as possible. The Cookie-Doughnt-You-Want-Some cake stood complete: two layers of vanilla sponge cake, two layers of ice cream, slathered in whipped cream and topped with a crown of cut up cookie dough pieces, chocolate ganache, and icing swirls.

Glittering in ice crystal, buccaneering glory upon the table, the employee placed the confection under a plastic dome and entered the walk-in freezer. Fog seeped from the vacuum seal door, dramatized by the industrial grate covered yellow light and whirring generator. Spirits of frozen treats mingled between apron fabric as the girl placed the cake among other orders for the day. The label reading Karen 2PM faced outward, a name the girl would soon be putting a face to. Nerves ensued – risks ran that if the icing looked like a child’s practice handwriting sheet or worse, if Dirty Pirate Hooker was somehow a misread of Karen’s father’s full name Daniel Paul Hoover, the conversational exchange in asking for $40 and waiting through two minutes of dial up credit card processing could get awkward.

At Cold Stone Creamery on 5th street, customers flocked from every corner of Hartford, Connecticut because the other two Cold Stone franchises went out of business. Something about keeping up with health regulations when bare hands mix every topping into ice cream on a cold stone. Usually after dinner, sweet toothed customers of the survivor store sat on foam bitten red vinyl chairs pushed under round diner style tables. Room enough for a few families or maybe a traveling softball team could fit within the three checker tiled walls surrounding the counter. Posters of yellow and brown milkshakes cheering, a woman stirring “house made” ice cream, and a cone caught in a confetti rain storm adorned them. Next to the bathroom, a plastic house plant with an American flag stuck in the soil showed the homely touch of the couple who owned the location, Steve and Linda.
Behind the counter, the “Staff Only” back room was the size of those drinking fountain spaces outside department store restrooms. Mullet contrast of gaudy, bright to industrial, brown felt immediate upon entering. Hiding from view as if backstage, the stainless steel cake decorating table took up limited walking space and divided the freezers from the three-sink. Melted green mint and blue cotton candy ice cream covered the surface like a pastel planet with rainbow sprinkle stars, drippings of a recent messed-up kid’s cone hastily set down. Wet sugar and stale milk smells wafted through the drains sourly. Efforts to mask the smell in the front were succeeded by baking cinnamon waffle cones.

None of the plastic drawers beneath the table could shut all the way, jumbled professional toy boxes that accommodated tools and crumpled franchise marketing posters. The place wasn’t organized in the least, but 2000’s Microsoft Word clip art smiley faces attempted order, printed and laminated with speech bubbles advising, “Closing? Turn off the lights!” “No phones!” or “Return dishes to designated locations!” More clip art icons of spatulas, pans, and plastic cartoon character cake toppers were scotch taped to the fronts of the drawers, un laminated corners grimy by proximity to the drain. No spatula could be found in the spatula drawer and no pan in the pan drawer, but after two years of faithful service to Cold Stone, the red icing stained employee knew how to navigate the quirkiness of the place.

The walls housed many nights of teenagers washing mountains of blenders and almost empty pans at the three sink, eating the remnants of ice cream by hand. A video camera monitor perched at the shelf where extra visors were kept knew a wealth of secrets of school dance dramas, difficult customers, and college dreams. Larry the boss man left a note taped on the computer that morning, loose script on yellow memo pad saying, “Had to pick up son from airport - Thanks for opening up, make sure to take the fresh batch out of the blast before end of shift – Larry.”

Quieteness from Larry’s absence accentuated the cheesy Christmas music gratingly. The girl emerged from the backroom’s shade into the glaring artificial lighting of the workspace behind the counter. Sanitizer bucket in hand, blue water sloshed over a patch of stepped on chocolate. Using a tennis shoe toe, the employee mixed the substances together and kicked the murky water towards the drain. More candy would rain down in a matter of time.
Looking out, sleet clouded the glass storefront and an air of evening superseded the reality that the clock only read 11 AM. A rare car inched into a front parking spot, drawn in by the ironic ice cream cone sign lit “open” in the window. Dirty snow sprayed from Toyota wheels.

*Ding.* A mother and son entered the shop.

Larry’s Lego metropolis displayed in the first quadrant of the counter stopped most customers almost immediately upon entrance. “Hello there” the woman said sing-songily, wearing a homey blouse and pulling with resistance the boy’s magnetized attachment to the Legos. Gaze adorned by red eyeglasses, the woman stared at the labyrinth of ice cream options on the board ahead. Both mother and son’s mouths hung open and brows furrowed towards chosen targets which avoided the girl’s anticipating stance.

None of the employees knew how long the Lego figurines and their lodgings had collected dust for, but the turns of the street corners upon the green ridged connector surface made Lego town look like an antique snow storm recently passed through. Primary colored high rises mystified indiscriminate ten year old boys like this one and erred on the side of kitsch to fancily dressed dates.

“Our boss enjoys collecting Legos.” The girl pulled a rag out of the bucket, thinking of wiping at least the Lego police station while the two gawked, but thought better when the corner of the heavy cloth almost toppled a next-door cottage, the one with the operating doorbell.

“What’s the difference between the Founder’s Favorite and the Birthday Cake Remix?” the woman inquired, the boy jumping up and down at noticing Minion figurines boarding a Despicable Me bus.

“Mommy look!”

“Donald, not now, look at the ice cream!”

Arm tugged, Donald cried a little before averting attention to the rows of fluffed up ice cream trays, a rainbow of milk fat like heavy, cold pillows. Slippery custards edged against each other under the scrutiny of display lighting. “Samples are always available! The difference is just in mix-ins. The Birthday Cake Remix gets brownies, sprinkles, and fudge hand mixed into Cake Batter Ice Cream on the stone. The Founders favorite is the same thing, except with pecans added and mixed into Sweet Cream Ice Cream.”
“Mix-Ins?”

The ordeal required exasperated explanation. Eventually, the girl grabbed two shovel-looking scoops, flicked up a “Love It” sized dollup of Sweet Cream from the tray, and plopped it onto The Stone – a cold, marble surface upon which ice cream got mixed in with a menagerie of sugar forms. Toppings tumbled from scratched containers lined up like a bookshelf in the glass. Scrapers rested in a river of candy polluted water flowing around The Stone, sputtering to drain excess. Wiggling out a brownie, shaking down sprinkles and pecans, and squirting a star shaped portion of fudge onto the ice cream, the girl cut, mashed, mixed, cupped and served.

The cash register brought the most human aspect of the ordeal. Cashier number three, enter. $3.95 please. Card? The card machine takes a while to process, sorry. How was your morning? Good? Good.

Two minutes of transient time. The mother’s heavy breaths and swallow sounds from licking the ice cream spoon before handing the cup to Donald. Staring up at the dropped ceiling and then at the back wall where the fresh waffle cones stood stacked, smelling like stale, sweet cinnamon. Deck the Halls with boughs of holly, nothing being said, any question possible, hanging in the air palpably as almost, maybe, but get out as fast as possible. A human being holding up a brain thinking thoughts telling toes to tap and fingers to zip winter jackets up to the neck to prepare to leave. An appointment between two strangers positioned on either side of a counter top waiting on a tiny screen showing a loading wheel revolve until ching the cash register door burst open and shush the receipt printed showing the day’s date and prompting the exchange of felicitations.