

Nine Mouths

Their names were Brenda and Eric. In winters no one knew them but in summers they were everywhere: the ice cream truck, their June-to-September job, clattering daily down our pale and sleepy streets. Brenda in bracelets and rings, all black hair and blacker concentration, nursing the truck forward. Right beside her, towheaded, nailbitten Eric, his head leaning out, electrician's tape on his glasses, the silver bell clanging from quick shakes of his skinny wrists and the tiny tinny melody calling Pop Goes the Weasel.

That summer, like the rest of us, they grew to love baseball. Rush City boasted a marvelous, lossless team: remember Alex Lebensky at shortstop, Reggie Wilson's dual grand-slam game? Nick Richards and his brutally low ERA? Every Wednesday, doubleheader night, we congregated in the bleachers, the truck parked shy of the left-field fence like an icebox on wheels. CHILLED PARADISE spray-painted on its vanilla doors and Brenda's moony face inside, sunburned Eric's closeby. Not once did anyone see them speak but at game's end the song began to play, high tinkling hurdy-gurdy, every fan stepping forward in a greedy line with the hot change scalding our fists.

In those dusty windworn months the players were our heroes and when they filed forth, their sunblock smudged and the coach's peptalk still rallying in their heads, we hovered to hear their chosen flavors. We watched Brenda take their orders. Watched Eric reach from the window to deliver, steadily, gingerly, their cones. And in those moments, we envied both of them--hushed girl from the back row of our classes; her frailly girlish sidekick--because they, Brenda and Eric, somehow knew those boys. They knew, even touched, those nine shrill superstars who had made the yearly roster, who lived in our town's best neighborhoods, who all summer long hosted hot-charcoal

cookouts and swimming-pool parties but never invited us. The Rush City Rebels huddled below the cottonwoods, their tongues on their cones and raw desire in their eyes, a separate universe from ours.

Sure we wanted them. But Brenda and Eric took their want further. Inside that truck, they invented their own game, her bracelets clicking like castanets, cold air fogging his glasses. They would wait until darkness, parking on some shadowy side-street the world had long dismissed. They would crouch breathless in the unlit cab and open, bang bang bang, the three latched ice cream tubs. I'll start, Brenda would say. Eric would hold spoons over each frost-starred cardboard bucket: Which boy, he'd ask, do you want first?

Always Brenda began with her favorite: Dan Davis, tall troublemaker who roamed centerfield and sometimes pitched for sweet relief. The bones of his face had been chiseled all-wrong but often, when stoned, he could turn gentle, grinning. Cherry Nut was his weekly preference and he always mumbled Thanks when Brenda served him. And although Eric hated the taste, he still played Dan's part: one measured scoop of Cherry Nut, held fast inside his mouth. The swallow, the shut of the eyes. And to Brenda, dreaming, Eric's tongue became Dan's. They kissed. Cherry pink, walnut exotic, licking and liquidly circling.

Eric's turn. The twins were the Masseys, Mason and Mike. Eric worshipped them, forever indecisive which he wanted more. Oh their shirtless shoulderblades, their ink-jet crewcuts. Mason with the comma-shaped scar below one eye; Mike, lone mole above his lip. Both dripped slow sweat like demons so before the kiss, Eric made Brenda--her hair tied back--spray her face with salted water. She wasn't Brenda anymore. Now she was Mason; now, Mike. Both Masseys loved Old Fashioned Vanilla: flavor that throbbed, on Eric's lips, whenever Brenda played their roles.

Cocky Seth Bowman was nicknamed Bomber or Carrot Top. He'd strut post-game toward the truck, an arrow to its sugary target, unpeeling the jersey from his

shoulders to expose his stomach's tangle of muscle. Over his top row of teeth, a retainer; to achieve this effect, Eric untwisted a paperclip, then lined it back across his grin. Brenda roamed her tongue over Eric's lips, lingering, moving into the mouth, at last touching Coconut on the curved tang of metal: Seth.

Reggie Wilson was the only black player, but after the grand slams, town numbskulls wouldn't call him Darkie anymore. He wore his catcher's mitt, heavy with the sundried smell of broomweed, both on-field and off. Red wristbands and a single defiant earhoop. Pink bubblegum was his flavor, Reggie wolfing both polka-dot scoops. Eric watched his tongue flashing wet on each luminous, skull-sized bubble. When Eric kissed his pretend sweetheart Reggie, he made Brenda stretch her gum-wrapped tongue far, farther into his mouth. Pink ooze on their chins, flavors melting in the dark.

And the others, too. Boys they didn't want as much, yet sometimes chose for variety, for thrill. Nick Richards, southpaw and strikeout king, who chose Coffee some days, Rocky Road others. Joe Ford picked Rocky Road too, slightly mustached Joe with the lazily slurred speech. Alex Lebensky: Butter Brickle. Steven Gatlinger: Penuche Chocolate Chunk. Brenda and Eric memorized every day's flavors, their detailed charts hidden below the seats. Between sessions of the kissing game, they never touched. Instead they quizzed each other--who knew the date when Seth didn't order? The only Rebel ever to choose lime sherbet? The stats on the day Steven paid for the entire team, crumpled shrapnel of a twenty in his sweat-dank palm?

By September their record was 21-0. School, as always, began again. CHILLED PARADISE returned to its Main Street garage; in our headlights' flare, we saw it shine behind the windows. But Brenda and Eric weren't there. We watched them in class or walking from school. They never spoke to us. But the Rush City Rebels, those perfect boys with bats like swords, with the muscles of angels, never spoke either. Like Brenda and Eric, we idolized them. Years and years later, we

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pretend we haven't changed those boys, haven't glorified and shimmered. We want to believe we were just as brave as Brenda, as Eric--that perhaps the rest of us were there too, together in their truck, celebrating each learned particular, those details that switched our fascination into love, our pleasure to rapture. Breathing each cloud of sweetened fog; humming harmony with Pop Goes the Weasel; filling our mouths with their favorite flavors. Closing our eyes so tight we saw stars. Pretending they loved us back.