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THE WALK ON FIFTH STREET



THE VERNAL POOL

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It has been a few years since Jillian has been to the ice cream shop on Fifth Street, the street where her mother took her for walks when she was a child. She remembers getting the bubble gum flavor, and having to, instructed by her mother each time, spit out the small pink squares into the corner of the paper cup. These trips with her mother often lasted hours, and it was in these memories that she recalls her mother most vividly. The slight wind that blew the colorful leaves across the pebble walkway had caused her mother to wear the fall sweaters that Jillian had admired, knitted cables that fell perfectly to the line of the jeans. They matched the warm tone of the leaves, the same colors they were then as they are now. Her mother always wore sneakers and oftentimes the sneakers were of various colors that did not match her clothing. As a young child she was unaware of the fashion fault until she developed a fashion sense of her own.

Today, John's Ice Cream is slow, and she is the only one in the shop at 3:00 p.m. The parlor is smaller than she remembers, the place cramped, the red tables and matching chairs too close together. The black and white checkered tile walls look clichéd. Jillian decides that the façade is tacky, something that had not registered as a young child. She used to be fascinated by the pattern on the walls, always searching for a fault in the repetition of the black and white but failing each time to find one. She walks up to the counter and admires the array of flavors offered. Normally, a coffee ice cream is her preference but because this trip is for memories Jillian orders a small bubble gum flavor. The old man moves his gaze from the small TV

hanging on the opposite wall.

“It’s going to be two sixty-nine with tax,” he tells her without having to ring it up. He takes a scoop from a pitcher of water and puts her pink ice cream in a paper cup. She notices him look at her periodically, furrow his eyebrows slightly. She slips her leather purse from her shoulder and rests it on the counter. She unzips it and extracts her wallet, pulls a five from the front. She waits for him to finish scooping her order and tries to follow the men on television playing baseball.

“You grew up to look just like your mother.”

Jillian looks back at the man. “You knew my mom?”

“You two used to come in here,” he tells her. “Saturdays. You always got this kind.”

He gives her the familiar cup of ice cream in exchange for her money.

“How is she?”

Jillian smiles slightly and shakes her head as he figures her change.

“Oh,” he says, first slipping the coins into her palm and placing the two ones on top. “I’m sorry to hear that. You should bring your little one in here, keep tradition.” He winks at her and she smiles and slips the change into the Styrofoam cup with the word “tips” written on it in bright colors. She says “I will,” thanks the man, and exits. The door makes a ding sound from a bell at the top that she had not noticed when she had walked in.

She sits across the pathway from the ice cream shop, the same bench she had sat on with her mother. She begins to

eat her ice cream, feeling instantly nostalgic, but finds the tiny black spoon almost comical – this utensil used to feel adequate, had been the appropriate size for her hands. Now she feels silly using it, each bite of ice cream smaller than she'd like it to be. Upon encountering the first piece of gum, she does not remember to spit it out. Instead, the piece is accidentally ingested. She smiles; never in her childhood had this happened, and she laughs at herself now for being so mindless. She wonders if it had been because of her size back then. The piece would have felt much larger; she wonders if it had been due to her mother's careful attention and care. She touches her belly, a belly evident of six months of pregnancy underneath her black coat. After four miscarriages, Jillian had almost stopped trying, but she knows this one will stay. She is curious of the sex of the baby, but has decided to wait. It will be more of a surprise that way, she always tells herself, although she secretly wishes for a girl but does not admit this to her husband who, she is sure, wishes for a boy. She wonders what the baby's favorite ice cream flavor will be, what memories of her the child would grow up to keep forever. She begins to weep at the thought of her mother gone, never getting to know her first grandchild.