



FICTION

ICE CREAM

harry dobbs

A stylized illustration of a cupcake. The frosting is light gray and shaped like the map of the United Kingdom. An American flag is planted in the frosting. A black silhouette of a person stands on the dark brown base of the cupcake. Three small black star shapes are scattered on the frosting.

ICE CREAM

Reading time: about 10 minutes

I turn and see Blake struggle up the pot-holed street. Directly above him, an old woman smokes on a balcony, her bare arms resting on its metal railing.

Blake looks like a tourist. An American tourist. Which he is. Basketball vest, baggy shorts, battered trainers. A back-to-front baseball cap. Two years in London haven't softened his edges.



HARRY DOBBS

Harry Dobbs is a bartender and writer based in London. Prior to this, he has worked (with mixed results) as a

Reaching the top, he squats to the cobbled ground and catches his breath.

‘What’s the rush?’ he asks, removing his cap and fanning himself. His hair is thinning, the Sicilian midday sun exposing his scalp. I’m not sure he has the face for baldness.

‘No rush,’ I assure him. ‘You’re just slow.’

He squints up at me.

‘We’re on vacation. And It’s hot.’

I point to an alley on the other side of the square, past the gurgling fountain and wooden benches.

‘We’re almost there. It’ll be worth it, trust me.’

Slowing my pace, we walk side by side.

‘My nonna took me to Paolo’s every visit,’ I remind him. ‘She swore it was the best gelato for miles.’

‘Yup. Sounds like Grandma loved ice cream.’

We turn into the narrow passage and are bathed in shade. There’s a distant ringing of church bells, and in front of us a three-legged cat scampers into a shoe shop. Ahead, right outside Paolo’s, stands a small queue.

communications manager, barista, recruitment consultant, and digital marketer. He also lived in Japan for a year and a half.

He is currently working on a short story collection. When not writing or serving drinks, he likes reading books and watching films, especially ones that deal in themes of loss, disappointment, and resignation.

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‘That’s strange.’

‘You mean the line?’

We reach the spot, and I’m peeved to hear people speaking English. Two young men take selfies with their cones, which are stacked with luridly coloured scoops. A debate ensues about the best filter to use on the photos.

Paolo mans the counter alone. He looks younger than last time: his hair somehow less grey, his face now clean-shaven. He doesn’t notice me, and I watch him dole out a generous serving of a chocolatey flavour into paper tubs. Scanning the vats, I note the new offerings, their little signposts sticking out bilingually in Italian and English: peanut butter, sour watermelon, marshmallow swirl.

Paolo finishes with a customer and his eyes finally land on me.

‘Signorina Katie!’

His eyebrows jump and he gives me the same face-creasing grin he had for the last customer.

‘Da quanto tempo! Come va?’

I tell him I miss my nonna and he nods sympathetically, indulges me while the queue builds up behind us. I introduce

Blake, and Paolo switches effortlessly to English. Eventually, he asks our order.

‘Any gelato alle mandorle?’

‘Ah! It wasn’t selling. A shame, but...’

He shrugs.

I settle for pistachio. Blake opts for salted caramel, then dissolves into the crowd to chat with some fellow Americans. I catch a few words about the US’s recent overseas military intervention. A part of me wants to join them, to give my opinion on the whole fiasco, but I lack the energy in this heat, and worry it’s rude to turn my back on Paolo.

‘You’re popular,’ I tell him. It sounds like an accusation.

‘Since *An Italian Murder*.’

‘That wasn’t filmed here, was it?’

‘Close enough. And cheaper to stay here.’

He hands us our order. Cone in one hand, Blake uses the other to retrieve a banknote from his back pocket. He hands it to Paolo, who scrabbles about for the correct change. Blake tells him to keep it, and we wander off with our desserts.

‘How is it?’ I ask.

‘Nice. But not as good as Angelo’s.’

‘What?’

‘Near Wethersfield. The one I was telling you about, where my sister worked in high school.’

I stare at him, dumbstruck. He touches my bare shoulder with a sticky hand.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll take you.’



At the far end of the pub, Blake mounts a table. It shakes under his weight, and I worry the bar staff will pull him down. His face red, his shirt wet, he seems on the verge of total drunkenness.

The music stops and Blake is handed a mic by the ageing lead singer of the reggae band he’s hired.

‘I have another surprise for the birthday girl!’ he yells, and the message reverberates through the speakers.

Cheers from our guests. Blake’s guests, really.

‘I don’t know how many of you know this’—he shoots an arm in my direction—‘but Katie is a quarter Italian! She probably hasn’t told you.’

Laughter. I scan the faces around me to note the guilty parties, then realise it's nearly everyone. Blake smirks at the adulation. Loneliness washes over me.

'And what do Italians love?' he continues.

No response from the crowd.

'I said – *What do Italians love?!*

'Pizza!' tries one of Blake's braver friends.

'So close! Katie!'

He looks down towards me, then points over my head.

'Please lead our guests to the parking lot.'

Outside, parked horizontally across three spaces, sits an ice cream van. A bored looking South Asian youth sits at its serving hatch. Everyone rushes him until they've had their fill. I go for a standard soft serve with a flake. The taste is aggressively anodyne, and I struggle to feign enjoyment.

Later, we're still outside, milling about on the tarmac, the sky above us a wash of pigeon grey. The event is petering out, and I sense that Blake has no more big reveals. Conversation has turned to the chance of all-out war, and the UK's potential involvement, if so.

Night falls, and Blake's sister Tina shows up. I recognise her from the photos. He'd mentioned she was landing in London today, had hinted at the possibility of her coming, but my expectations had been low. She's in a khaki shirt tucked into cream chino shorts, with hiking boots laced up to her ankles. Her chestnut hair is tied back in a tight ponytail. She stands in a circle with me, Blake, and one of Blake's colleagues, a Northern Irish guy. He asks Tina why she's here.

'Just a stop-off before heading home. I've been travelling the last few months.'

The colleague bites his lip, gazes unblinkingly into Tina's face.

'Classic American-style Euro-trip, I'm guessing. France, Spain, Italy. Aperol Spritzes?'

Tina smiles.

'West Africa, actually. Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia.'

There's a brief eyebrow-raise from the colleague, but he says no more.

'That's amazing,' I tell her. 'Who did you go with?'

'A girl from college.'

‘Just the two of you? How did you get around?’

‘We rented cars.’

She says all this like it was the most natural thing in the world. But I detect no hint of boastfulness, either. It’s more like she’s reassuring us it was easy. Now I see a similarity with Blake – the belief that everything’s going to be fine, and that the world is an inherently friendly place if you choose to see it that way.

‘You must be exhausted,’ I say.

‘Kind of,’ she admits. ‘But the last few days in Banjul, we just lazed about the pool in our resort. So, I can’t really complain.’

Blake’s colleague looks down into his cider.

‘We’re stoked for our trip home,’ Blake slurs, swaying on the spot.

There’s a pause before she kicks into gear with a response.

‘Yes! Of course.’ And then, to me: ‘Your first time in Connecticut?’

I nod.

‘It’s–’

‘I’m taking her to Angelo’s,’ Blake interrupts.
‘Best ice cream she’ll ever have.’

Tina rolls her eyes, and I laugh.

She’s made a bad day better. I hardly care
it’s raining.



It’s very warm in Blake’s SUV. I’m envious of
the occasional pedestrians on the snow-
covered street. Blake’s put a CD on, a
compilation of R&B hits from around the
millennium. I’d prefer to listen to some new
stuff on the radio, but I stay quiet. We’ve
been travelling all day, and I don’t want an
argument, however mild.

On both sides of the road stand the boxy
colonial-style houses typical of Blake’s
hometown. We pass by countless iterations,
each painted a different pastel shade, each
suggesting generations of comfort and
wealth.

‘Angelo’s is a little out of the way,’ Blake tells
me. ‘Tina’s going to join us later. She’s at a
lecture on campus, some ex-ambassador
giving a talk.’

‘About the invasion?’

‘Yeah, I think so. That whole situation.’

We leave town and find ourselves on a long stretch of road with conifers on either side. I'm imagining this place, this mythical Angelo's, to be in some idyllic pastoral setting.

Instead, Blake turns off the main road and parks in a strip mall. Pulling on our jackets, we get out of the car, and I notice, for the first time since leaving Wethersfield, people of different colours. Endless choice surrounds us – supermarkets, hair salons, restaurant chains, pharmacies – and around this abundance flows a steady stream of shoppers.

Angelo's is a narrow retail space between a gym and a Chinese buffet. Inside are two rows of booths and a counter manned by two women, one old and one young, who are speaking in Spanish. There is no Angelo. A TV is mounted on the wall, with a sitcom playing on mute. The walls, tables, and banquette seating are off-white, as is the uniform of the workers. Add to this the glaring overhead lights, and the space's overall effect is overwhelmingly clinical. The only pops of colour are the laminated menus on the tables, which promise every flavour and variety of iced dessert the mind can conjure.

Blake asks what I want.

‘Something low-key, not too heavy. Vanilla?’

‘Vanilla? Are you kidding?’

‘Maybe some strawberry as well?’

Blake sighs.

‘Sit down. I’ll get it.’

He returns with something that is, quite clearly, neither vanilla nor strawberry.

‘That’s not what I wanted.’

‘You’ll love it. I swear.’

I look at the frozen monstrosity under my nose: a slowly melting mass of brown, with occasional clusters of white and gold throughout. A plastic spoon sticks out the top. Blake has the same. He shovels it in as though it’s something mundane, like breakfast cereal or toast. The more he eats, the more a distracted, almost possessed quality takes over his features.

Following suit, I dislodge my spoon. The first small mouthful reaches my tongue and I experience a surprising frisson of pleasure. At that same moment, I see the older of the two workers, who’s been dusting tables, frantically beckon over her younger subordinate. My secondary school Spanish

helps me understand some of what she's saying.

'Mira, Elena. Mira lo que pasa a la universidad. No lo creo.'

Something about the university. Something unbelievable. The older one is pointing to the TV, and I look up to join them in this communal experience. There's a rolling headline beneath aerial footage of some buildings. It reads:

*AT LEAST FIVE DEAD IN ATTACK ON
UNIVERSITY CAMPUS. MULTIPLE
ASSAILANTS AT LARGE.*

It's Tina's university. She'll still be there now, at the lecture. Blake hasn't noticed the screen behind him, nor the animated tones of the workers. I should tell him. I take another spoonful of ice cream to my lips.

It's incredible.

There's nothing subtle about it. The flavour is big and brash. It's unashamedly sweet, but there's another note that stops it being sickly. Then I realise there are flakes of sea salt distributed throughout its soft mass. Chocolate ice cream and caramel sauce melt into a pool in my mouth, and I almost moan in pleasure as I watch the televised images of armed police swarming the

college, of distressed students fleeing for their lives.

There's new text on-screen:

*HUNDREDS OF HOSTAGES HELD WITH
FORMER US AMBASSADOR IN
AUDITORIUM. ASSAILANTS DEMAND END
TO INVASION.*

I'll tell Blake what's happening in a second.

He'll be distraught.

As for me – I feel serene.

This is the world.

I'm happy to be here.



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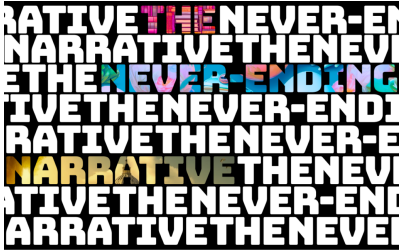
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