

Katie Orr

Ice Cream Dream

There is a new attraction in my hometown called Ice Cream Dream. It is advertised as an ice cream *experience*: "...not just any ice cream parlor... the ice cream tour of your dreams" etc.

I meet Gabby there. She's a childhood friend I haven't seen in three years, and with whom I maintain an obligatory friendship that's based on nothing other than the fact that so much time has already been invested. We both cherish the regiment of tradition even if it's not enjoyable. To end our friendship now would feel like we wasted our whole lives.

The outside of Ice Cream Dream is meant to look like a castle. The interior is drenched in hot pinks and reds, painted cherries lining the walls' borders. 1950s themed and steeped in fluorescent light, it's finished with bright red leather booths and jukeboxes, cotton candy machines, a disco ball and a dance floor. There is an ice cream counter with pre-pubescent employees scooping apathetically. It was Gabby's idea to come here. Personally, I'm at a stage in life where I'd rather meet over a martini. But Gabby has always found some kind of twisted comfort in infantilizing herself and consequently, me.

It costs \$26.50 for three flights of ice cream. The first flight comes with cookie dough, strawberry, and pretzel potato chip.

Gabby and I sit at one of the red leather booths and take polite turns eating, our spoons sometimes awkwardly bumping. Kids run wildly around us. A pop song from a decade ago blares from the speakers even though the juke boxes don't appear to have music dating after 1960. The castle looks clean from afar but if you look closely, there is a thick layer of dirt covering the baseboards... like moldy Babybel cheese covered in a polished red wax.

At first the ice cream tastes fine; good, even. But by the time I get to the pretzel potato chip, it all starts to feel like a syrupy paste gluing my tongue to the roof of my mouth. When I finish, I am left with a frothy film on my teeth.

Gabby tells me about her job as a court clerk, about her fiancé and how he refuses to move in with her before they get married, and how she thinks her leasing manager is out to get her.

"She's a crazy bitch," she says, licking the tiny plastic spoon. "I sent *four* emails about how unsanitary the gym is, and she never replied. Then one day the trash valet just stopped taking my trash! They just stopped. Do you think that's a coincidence?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "Maybe..."

"It's not. She's a bitch. And if they raise my rent next year, I'm out of there." I notice her hands shake when she talks about this. "This is why Levi needs to get his shit together. I can't afford to live alone as it is and if she raises my rent, I'm *fucked*." She gazes into the empty plastic ice cream cup and for a moment, I think she might cry. Instead, she says, "Let's get the next flight." My stomach hurts at the thought.

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Gabby gestures to get the attention of an employee. I look around trying to digest the overstimulating nature of the place, the clashing colors and smells, the screaming children. At the counter is a large and sweaty, mostly bald man leaned over with one hip popped to the side. He flirts with a young employee who smiles compulsorily at him as she juggles three trays. I think I know who he is. But when he turns to the side to check on some kids, presumably his, I am positive I know him. A basketball coach Gabby and I had from the fourth to eighth grade. A man who never crossed the line, never even reached it, but who got so close that it's almost worth mentioning. I don't mention it. Because when I see that Gabby sees him, there is a horror on her face so fleeting but so profound that I think it better not to acknowledge his presence.

Gabby eats the second flight with a determined fervor, eyes down like she has a job to finish, a seriousness on her face like she isn't enjoying it. We don't speak.

The last flight of ice cream (mint chip, blueberry, toffee) can only be earned with a mandatory professional photo taken under cheap, hot lights by a man in suspenders. We have to walk past the basketball coach to get to the photo backdrop. He beams at his kids as they run in sugar high circles around him.

Gabby and I stand in front of the camera, a gap between us and pose with our cups of melting ice cream. The photographer says he can text us the photo for \$18 each. We decline.

Gabby finishes the last flight herself and afterward looks at me like she forgot I was there.

As a prize for finishing all three flights, we are given complimentary sour popsicles that taste like Clorox. Gabby finishes hers quickly then announces she has to go to the bathroom. She is gone for five minutes... ten...twenty. I count to 30 then go check on her.

"One minute!" she yells after I knock, sounding so startled that I don't say anything. I go back to the booth; its leather has developed a briny odor. I sit for another two or so minutes before watching as the basketball coach walks out of the same door Gabby walked into. He wipes his palms on his pants then drops to one knee, spreads his arms out wide. A child runs into his chest. I get up – *run* out of the exit door, my stomach ballooning painfully.

"Have a dreamy day!" an employee calls after me as I leave. I don't hear from Gabby again.