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For Love of Ice Cream

by S. Ray Granade

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I sometimes think of the first betrayal I can identify. Its images, sounds, and smells remain as fresh as if the experience had just occurred.

As a child, I spent most winters with upper respiratory infections, a label I learned in the Army. When we lived in Louisville, KY, while Daddy finished his work at The Southern Baptist Seminary there, upper respiratory infections and earaches plagued me. The doctor told my folks that time in the sun would cure me. We had gone to Mother's sister-in-law's family cabin in Grayton Beach and the doctor's words had proven prophetic.

A couple of years later, less than a hundred instead of almost 700 miles north of wellness, URIs still afflicted my juvenile frame. Daddy had accepted the call of the only Baptist church in a small county-seat town in impoverished rural south Alabama. Evergreen had several physicians but no hospital or even clinic. So when Dr. Rob Stallworth laid the infections at the door of my tonsils, the implications were huge. Without them, he assured my parents, I would be healthy. Like any parents would, they trusted the doctor's advice and arranged for my tonsils to come out. That meant time at the clinic that existed about thirty miles north in Greenville.

I knew Greenville and where it was. One of my daddy's brothers was county agent there. Although of pre-school age, I knew why I was going there. My parents provided enough information for me to know that "they" were going to "take out" my tonsils. I didn't know who "they" were, only where "they" were. That was more than I could say for my tonsils (well, other than somewhere in my throat, down which the doctor always peered to see them), or exactly what "taking them out" entailed. Was it really like snipping off a hangnail? As to the aftermath, I gave that no thought at all. All attention focused on "taking them out."

The appointed day came and we ascended the clinic steps. Someone met us at the door and ushered us down the hall to a room that was neither large nor small, but quite different from home. The Baptist parsonage in Evergreen was old, built along the lines of most turn-of-the-century Southern homes. Its white frame exterior and large porch along the front and down one (the north) side contained three rooms on the left. Bedrooms all, the front housed any guests, the back my parents, and the middle what passed for a den. The right side, adjacent to the porch, likewise had three: the living room (into which one stepped from the front door), then the dining room, then the kitchen. The central hallway, walled off with a door from the living room, one into my parents' bedroom, and one onto the back porch (actually doubled, what would have been called French doors if I'd known the term), contained the heating unit and doubled as my sleeping quarters. The French doors were my window on the world. All ceilings were high and the uninsulated building drafty, an artifact of its being constructed to dissipate rather than retain heat in an unair-conditioned South.

The Greenville room was stark white, glaringly so, with a bed much farther from the floor than my own. A single door gave out to the hall, a single window to the outside world. The white tile floors were brighter, and louder, than the wooden ones at home. Even as a child I recognized a cold, sterile, antiseptic feel and smell, though I would have lacked the adjectives. It was my introduction to institutional healthcare.

We went in and I changed into pajamas. My folks helped me onto the bed as part of an inquisitive little boy's exploration of his new surroundings. Fortunately for us all, before I could absorb and become comfortable enough with my new environment to ask how long I'd be there, a smiling lady in white entered the room.

The alien spoke to me. That should have been a clue. Adults, even ones clad in white, didn't talk with children unless to reprimand or direct them. And the words issuing from her mouth were nei-

ther correction nor direction. Instead, they were reasonably warm (really warm for a non-family member) and inquisitive. She asked if I liked ice cream!

One high point of my life up until that time had been going with my parents to Evergreen's one eatery that offered ice cream at what a young lad considered exotic hours. We had a soda fountain in one of the local drug stores, but it operated only when the drug store was open. The Spotlight had many more operating hours and offered Black Walnut and Butter Pecan (probably others too, but those were for us the main flavors) for one to eat at the diner or on the move. I was sure that heaven was a Spotlight kind of place. My answer wasn't really in doubt.

Affirmation on my part brought another question on hers: "Would you like to go get some ice cream?" Now, I knew that ice cream was a special treat, reserved for evenings and only then if I'd eaten well. It wasn't evening. The day's meals weren't over, so assessment of my worthiness for a treat wasn't possible. I also knew that this lady was a stranger and that I wasn't supposed to accompany strangers anywhere. Like a dutiful son I looked at my parents and asked, "Is it OK?" They assured me that it was, and that I could go with the lady. If my parents, whom I recognized as being at the strict end of the scale, approved (even encouraged), then it must be OK!

I got down off the bed, put my hand in hers, and we walked down the hall together. I could already taste the ice cream!

It took almost no time to reach the swinging doors. My childish brain had not yet twigged to the fact that she hadn't asked me my favorite. As soon as we opened the swinging doors into what I would quickly discover was not a good room, I smelled the proverbial rat. I asked where the ice cream was, only to be told that we had to do something first. When I saw the table and the masked people, and when the lady wouldn't let go of my hand, I got worried. I screamed and fought valiantly. With some satisfaction I realized that I had hit and kicked several of them, and that they had found reinforcements necessary. My satisfaction, sadly, was short-lived. The guy with the strange wire-mesh, cottony-looking mask in his hand ensured that.

The tonsillectomy was for my own good. It did indeed improve my health. My parents did exactly what they thought they ought to do, what healthcare professional told them to do. Those performing the surgery and providing care obviously practiced competently. I did get my ice cream.

On occasion, I can summon up the wet, sticky-sweet smell of ether and the odd sound of my childhood screams echoing through the white haze into which I descended. Rarely, the nausea that accompanied the original surfaces as well. I've forgiven my parents. But I've never liked ice cream again.