

CARVEL MAN

By Céline Keating

“Shush,” my mother said one day as I rushed into the house, slamming the door, “your father’s sleeping.” He lay, thinner all the time, his arm hanging off the couch, his fingers nearly brushing the floor. His mouth was slightly open, his head thrown back. His eyes, in the shadowed corner of the room, looked sunken, hollow.

That spring was warm with the sounds of roller skates and hopscotch, of marbles colliding and cracking in the dust. My mother never gave my father’s illness a name.

The Carvel truck appeared for the first time in our neighborhood that spring, vying for business with Good Humor and Bungalow Bar. Everything was strange. Daddy no longer went to work and my mother kept forgetting to call us in from playing, so we stayed outside as long as we wished.

“Mom, can I have money for ice cream?” My mother had been forgetful lately; perhaps she wouldn’t remember that I had already had ice cream that day.

“O.K. Take some change from Daddy’s dresser.”

I pressed my advantage. “Could I have fifteen cents?”

“All right,” she sighed, “just this once. And the same for Julie.”

I reached for the dimes and nickels; I’d never had fifteen cents to spend on ice cream before. Always I felt ashamed making the poorer selections in front of the other children, but now having more felt like sin. Once I asked my father whether to steal was a mortal or a venial sin, and he said it depended on how much was taken. I asked, “How much is mortal?”

He said, “Dimes and nickels and quarters are mortal, but pennies are only venial.” Every night I snuck into my parents’ room and took pennies from the pile of change on the bureau.

My sister, Julie, and I stood in line behind the other children. I already knew what I would choose. I held the fifteen cents tightly, imagining how the Flying Saucer would taste ... the dark chocolate, the vanilla glistening in the center.

I removed the wrapper and something twisted in my stomach. I put my teeth to the chocolate, withdrew. Too cold. I waited until the outer layer began to slide, then bit. The chocolate cake stuck to the roof of my mouth. Bitter. Devil’s food.

I went straight home from school the day my father went into the hospital. The air was hot and my plaid wool uniform itched, my nylon blouse stuck to my skin. When I walked in, Julie was hunched up on the couch and my mother was on the phone, her voice low, strained. I threw my books down and glanced at my sister. She didn't look up. What was the matter with her? My mother hung up the phone. Her back was to me and it seemed that she turned to face us in slow motion. At the look on her face I felt a hammering in my ribs, a long wheeze sounding like the gasp of an accordion. After my mother spoke my scream seemed to ricochet off the walls, to wind around me tighter and tighter.

The next morning the class stood to say the Pledge of Allegiance and make the Act of Contrition. If you told God you were sorry for your sins because you were afraid of going to Hell, that was sufficient. But if you were filled with the love of God and made the Act of Contrition out of that love, it was a perfect prayer, and then, the nuns said, your prayers would be granted.

I closed my eyes.

“... sorry for all my sins and for having offended Thee, my God, Who art all good and deserving of all my love.” I thought of Christ on the cross, gaunt, naked except for the tiny scrap of white around His hips, blood and sweat dripping down His contorted face, the crown of thorns piercing His skull. It wasn't the Jews who killed Jesus, the nuns explained, but all humanity, all our sins, my sins, past and present, “all my sins, sorry for all my sins because I love Thee, my God, Who art all good and deserving of all my love.” I squeezed my eyes tighter to hide my tears. Oh, the pain He must have felt on the cross, betrayed. ‘Father, Father, why hast Thou forsaken me?’

The scuffling of chairs roused me. The class sat. The prayer had been perfect, I knew it. I knew it as clearly as I knew my name, or the goodness of the nuns, or the marked blond wood of my desk.

When she wasn't aware of it I watched my mother, watched her lick her lips repeatedly or stare blankly into space, chain-smoking. She paced back and forth to the stove, filling and refilling her coffee cup, but eating nothing. She was rarely still. Once I watched her cooking; as if in slow motion her shoulders drooped, her arms flopped to her sides, and a spoon skidded across the floor. At night, when Julie and I were tired and wanted to go to bed, she asked us to play one more game of cards or to stay up with her to watch TV. The smaller apartment we moved to after my father's death had only one bedroom, and we all squeezed into the double bed, my mother in the middle. Sometimes she woke us in the night because she had been frightened awake by a nightmare. “Tell me a story,” she'd beg, and we'd lull her back to sleep.

“Let's pretend he's only on a trip,” she said. “Please? It'll be our game. Don't tell anybody. We'll say he's on a trip home to Canada.”

Outside everything was alive. Spring had turned to summer and the heat shimmered off the pavement in tiny silver darts. The trees shook their heads, sighing. The bark cracked and I peeled it with my fingers although the bareness beneath looked raw with pain. Windows reflected strange faces and the bricks of the apartments shifted and crumbled, the edges not meeting evenly. I kept away from walls and avoided the sidewalk. I was afraid it would crack and heave beneath me and I'd fall through to hell.

My mother went back to work, leaving Julie and me in the care of sitters. The pile of change disappeared from my parents' bureau, and I never pestered my mother for money. I began to save pennies, wrapping them in paper tubes and bringing them to the bank on Saturdays to exchange for quarters. I slipped the quarters into my mother's purse.

Summer turned to fall and it was time to get our wool uniforms cleaned and to polish our saddle shoes for school. I'd grown taller over the summer and was assigned a seat in the back of the classroom where, I discovered, I could escape notice and daydream if I sat very still.

The autumn was warm and dry. The leaves of the oak trees in the schoolyard simply browned and withered on the branches without turning their usual glorious hues. Sometimes, when we went out to the yard for recess, we'd hear the Carvel truck down the block, and the other children would screech and run to the curb. But the truck never came to the schoolyard; the nuns didn't want us having ice cream. I'd stand by the wire-mesh fence and listen until, even straining hard, I could no longer hear the lilting tune.