

Vanilla Bean

“Morris, I think you just hit the car behind us.”

“Oh, did I?” he said with a big chuckle and a shrug. “Accidents happen.”

After all, it was tough parking in this particular dinner district of Philadelphia. They were lucky to have even found a spot. The timer had already begun for them to tiredly search for enough quarters that would keep the Philadelphia Parking Authority at bay and bored for the night.

“Right, Morris.” She smiled.

He gave her the puppy-dog look as he often did when he begged her approval. Next month would be their 60th wedding anniversary and Ardes had become accustomed to her husband’s apathetic, reverent, reasonable approach to life. It was Morris who had taught her how to relax, how to be temperate, how to let go, how to “let God”. He was always so easy-going, but she had long ago gotten over it striking a small nerve. Throughout all of their years, she even learned to crave his approach. She envied his casualness.

Ardes paused to consider that if she hadn’t met Morris that day at the small-town ice cream shop in the suburbs of Philadelphia, in 1954, when love songs were still enchanting, she probably would have ended up an utter worry wart. Ardes’ mother Mrs. Sweeney was pessimistic, to say the least. Mrs. Sweeney had acquainted herself with the end-of-the-worlders in their neighborhood and waited, on a daily basis, for the arrival of the end of times. She prayed as often as taking a breath, and Ardes was seldom permitted to interact with her

peers outside of school, let alone hang out “where the unholy ones were” around the ice cream shop. Still, even the most cynical of thoughts couldn’t prevent anyone from encountering illness, and the time came when Mrs. Sweeney asked Ardes to retrieve for her some medicine from Pap’s Pharmacy down the street.

Ardes knew the way to Pap’s well since it was one of the few places she passed on her way to and from school. She hurriedly agreed with excitement to get out of the house for any other reason than school or to babysit for their next-door neighbor, Mrs. Cummingway. She hopped into the powder room and double-checked her long, wavy locks while applying some of the secret blush she had scored at lunch one day to prep herself for the walk. Unnoticed and as directed, Ardes retrieved some coins from Mrs. Sweeney’s “END OF THE WORLD” jar, and nearly slammed the door behind her in exhilaration. Ardes felt the sun kiss her forehead as soon as she emerged from the house. She smiled in contentment and began her one mile journey to Pap’s.

Up until then, the mid-spring day had been an unusually toasty eighty-one degrees with partial cloud cover, but, as far as Morris was concerned, the sun appeared to shine directly and only on the angelic being before him. Had he not recognized her uniform as one from Apostle Catholic, he would have certainly mistaken her for an actual angel.

“Hi. Excuse me.... would you like an ice cream cone? It’s free,” he offered as Ardes strolled by the front of his dad’s shop.

He noticed that her mocha brown hair glistened in the light as she slowed her wavering stroll and seemed to consider Morris’ offer. Ardes immediately thought of her mother and what she might say if Ardes were to even entertain the thought of stopping en route to Pap’s, mingling with someone her own age of the opposite sex, and, Heaven forbid, stopping for an ice cream cone that *could* trigger the Apocalypse.

The handsome boy was casually perched atop his elbows on the shop’s window counter, seemingly waiting for her to arrive. Ardes smirked to herself, considering still her mother’s ridiculousness, as the boy kept his eyes glued to hers. He tempted her with an adorable, begging smile and puppy dog eyes that nearly suggested he would be reprimanded by his boss if he wasn’t able to give her a free cone. He appeared to be about the same age as her. She could tell by the fresh shave of his youthful face and the trim of his well-kept, chestnut locks that he might attend Bishop Ryan. *At least*, she considered, *Mrs. Sweeney would like that*.

“Sure,” she shyly agreed. She tried to keep it cool. If but one thing, Mrs. Sweeney could not prevent Ardes from making girlfriends at the all-girls Apostle and Ardes quietly envied their daily lunch-time stories of first dances, first dates, and first boyfriends. She had wholeheartedly listened, longed, observed, and learned that playing it cool was apparently key to keeping them hooked.

And hooked Morris already was. He scooped her two heaping mounds of Vanilla Bean “because it’s the best”, he said, wiping some Vanilla droplets off of the counter as he handed it to her.

“I love Vanilla,” she said.

His cleaning efforts were to no avail, though, as Ardes would prolong finishing the melting cone as she and Morris spent the next hour talking, laughing, contemplating the health benefits of ice cream as a whole, and pondering the future. They discussed Mrs. Sweeney, Ardes’ babysitting tendencies, and Morris’ decision to work and take over the shop someday instead of enrolling in college. Had Ardes not guiltily recalled her ailing mother and insisted she must move on to Pap’s in order to get home, the conversation may have carried into the night. Ardes thanked Morris for the cone, and said goodbye.

“I hope to see you again,” he said with a smile.

He was thrilled. He closed up the shop a couple of hours later, making sure he followed and double-checked each step on his dad’s instructional sheet. Still smiling, he rushed home.

“Mom,” he said, barreling through the door and into the kitchen where the pot roast was being seasoned. “I met Aunt Kathleen’s next-door neighbor. You never told me that Silly Sweeney had a daughter! She’s beautiful.”

“She does? Mrs. Cooney wondered. “Ahh, that makes sense. I’ve seen a young girl go in and out just a few times. I thought Silly Sweeney had just hired a shopper for herself. You know... to stay safe.” They both chuckled.

Morris found his father in the living room, awaiting dinner and enjoying his night off. George Burns and Gracie Allen had only been on for a few minutes when Morris walked in.

“Did you remember to turn the lights out this time?” his dad routinely wondered, noticing Morris seemed earlier than usual.

“I did, Dad,” Morris said, with a temperate sigh and a roll of his baby blue eyes. He was still paying for the first time he closed up shop and left the exterior “COONEY’S CONES” sign lit overnight. Morris could understand his dad’s concern with leaving his only son in charge of his only shop without supervision, but Morris was confident in his abilities and therefore, he let his dad’s inquiries slide. He hoped his dad would become more trusting with time.

“It was one time, John,” Mrs. Cooney gently reminded her husband from the kitchen. “Quit sweating the small stuff!” she insisted. You could hear the smile that accompanied her jovial, motherly interjection. She had no doubt Morris would be an impressive shop owner down the line.

Morris flipped a penny towards his dad, who was perched on his preferred, chocolate corduroy chair.

“I owe you for a cone.” Morris winked.

Mr. Cooney winced and tore his eyes away from Gracie to acknowledge and catch the coin, and he looked up to Morris with delight. He instantly knew what Morris had done, and he was impressed for having passed on such chivalrous methods to his son.

“Someone’s in love, eh?” he asked, concerned for his son’s romantic future.

“Since first sight,” Morris confirmed.

Morris eagerly waited for Saturday’s arrival, when he knew Aunt Kathleen would be joining his mother for a drive into the city for shopping. He now knew Ardes would be asked to babysit the Cummingway kids of whom she had spoken so dearly-- the same kids he knew as his little cousins.

When Ardes arrived at her neighbor’s house, she was delighted to see the cute ice cream boy with whom she had shared her afternoon, secrets, and so many laughs earlier in the week. He excitedly explained that she was actually inside of his aunt’s house, and he apologized for wanting to surprise her with the news. She was too impressed to care. The foursome chatted for a while before the afternoon crept up on them, and shopping remained necessary.

“Carry on now, Morris,” his mother said, still too traditional to leave the couple at her sister’s house, alone. “At least now you know how to find her,” she reassured him.

When Mrs. Cooney and Mrs. Cummingway left, en route to the city, they acknowledged the blooming romance between the two young adults, Mrs. Cummingway wasn't surprised.

"She's a darling girl," she said. "The kids love her. And Morris would treat her right."

"Amen," Mrs. Cooney replied.

The following Saturday, per Morris' request to avoid Silly Sweeney, the sisters arranged for Ardes to "babysit" yet again, and, instead, Morris surprised Ardes with a romantic request for prom. Though he had been an exceptional student academically, he didn't have a varsity jacket or even a class ring to share with Ardes, so he offered the invitation to his prom as the only thing he knew she might not refuse. He put a napkin around the ice cream cone to keep it from dripping. He hadn't planned for her to be a few minutes late, and he laughed at the irony. His little cousins giggled as they looked on.

When Ardes arrived, she excitedly accepted his invitation to prom, as well as the dripping vanilla bean, and mentally prepared herself for alerting the back-to-healthy Mrs. Sweeney that she'd be attending Bishop Ryan's prom with a boy. Although, the more Ardes thought about it, the more she confirmed with herself that it wouldn't really matter what Mrs. Sweeney's response was... Ardes was eighteen and newly confident. School would be out soon, she was of age to marry, and a life with Morris was intriguing. She found him to be congenial, affable, and romantic. She loved her mother dearly but sought life outside of worry, cynicism, and hesitation. She longed to start living the life she had been granted.

One disappointed Sweeney, two proms, one Vanilla Bean proposal, two sons, three daughters, one flourishing ice cream shop and six grandchildren later, Morris still hadn't perfected his parallel parking skills. A scratch to the back bumper was part of the small stuff, and Morris was too focused on making Ardes' 77th birthday memorable. He had made reservations at her favorite inner-city restaurant, Umai Umai, and was ecstatic for later when he'd watch Ardes' face light up as their five children, now grown and bringing their own children, would surprise her with a birthday/60th anniversary bash back at their house... the same house where the late Mr. and Mrs. Cooney had once established themselves so many years ago. As part of the will, Morris and Ardes were granted both the house and the ownership of Cooney's Cones, and their lives had been a roller coaster of mostly high climbs, short drops, and utter contentment. Their children had been healthy, now successful, and ever-loving. Morris and Ardes were holy, debonair, ideal, and innocent. They never quite lived below cloud 9.

Morris slowly acquired a stack of quarters from his center console while Ardes patiently waited in the front seat. Once set, he exited the car on the street side, watching carefully for cars and shuffled around, as per usual, to let Ardes out of the car. He always drove them into the city when necessary. Ardes never trusted herself to keep from worrying about traffic, scary areas (she told Morris these were "scareas" as he'd laugh), and fast drivers. Morris continued to encourage his bride to stop sweating the small stuff. Ardes could not help that she carried a little bit of Mrs. Sweeney with her, no matter how much they both tried to reduce it. *Someday, she'd tell herself, I'll be more like Morris.*

They were still entering the second-to-the-last quarter that allotted for two hours inside for dinner when a loud crash occurred in the intersection. It'd later be revealed that an 18-year-old female had been texting on her cell phone whilst driving. She hadn't noticed the once green light was now bright red, and, as a result, the front of her car met the driver's side door of another, sending the second car soaring onto the pavement.

Ardes threw her hands up and shrieked. She nearly fell over as the vehicle sent to the sidewalk missed hitting her by a few feet. The people who had just walked by with their dog, the woman who had just passed with a brown bag carrying her dinner, were now all screaming and running to the area behind Ardes. Ardes worked up enough nerve to turn her eyes towards the accident, horrified to discover the young driver dead in her vehicle.

Where's Morris? she thought, distracted, assuming he'd also narrowly missed the vehicle. She imagined they would repeat the story back to each other a few times, confirming the timeline of events, repeating how scary the noise was. The kids would not believe how close the car came to them.

There was confusion, chaos, now sirens... everyone was still screaming. *Stop screaming*, she thought. *Morris won't be able to hear me, even with his aids. Where is he?*

"Morris!" she yelled now. Nothing. He was missing. Five seconds ago, he'd been squinting to see how many minutes had registered on the meter. He surely couldn't have disappeared into thin air. She was concerned, and her fear was growing. She spun, examining the space surrounding her.

“Where’s the GUY?!” she heard a female scream from behind her. The 18-year-old accident-causer was uninjured, yet sobbing, as she emerged from her now half car, half wall vehicle and was somehow announcing Ardes’ literal thoughts aloud. Ardes was relieved. She’d been concerned for the girl’s well-being, and anyone else wondering what happened to “the guy” at least confirmed that, even in Ardes’ Alzheimer’s condition, Morris had in fact been there, and was now missing.

“He’s trapped under the car!” someone else screamed. Ardes froze. Surely, it couldn’t be Morris. Morris was too godly and innocent to have been victim to anything so horrid. In any case, they had dinner plans, and it was Ardes’ 77th birthday. She was in denial.

It was the sudden sight of Morris’ loafer, face down, that brought Ardes to her frail knees. She screamed in anguish and began to sob as some passer-bys tried to lift her to the ground and escort her from the horror before them. Several cop cars and an ambulance flew onto the block. She tried to escape her captors.

“Morris!” she called out to him.

In a whirlwind of tragedy’s progression, she was inconsolable as an EMT’s head shake confirmed that Morris was already gone.

After such a self-proclaimed ideal life, Ardes was in shock and disbelief, and she was immediately angry with the God she’d formerly preferred to keep close. Her escorts tried to keep Ardes upright as she was invited to perch on a bench nearby. The police phoned her oldest daughter.

“I was supposed to be first,” she got out between sobs.

At the service, the Cooney kids addressed the congregation before them about the morals their father had instilled in them: that hard work results in success, ice cream is good for the soul and, perhaps most importantly, to keep God in all things. He had insisted that they never sweat the small stuff, lest they become as silly as Grandmom Sweeney. His sons spoke of how they learned to open doors for women, to be respectable and honorable, to remain chivalrous, and to ask politely and memorably for a first date. His daughters told everyone how they had never been afraid to make mistakes, and that their father had taught them to always pick themselves back up and move forward. They shared some of Morris’ famous clichés and quotes, from “it is smarter to be lucky than it is lucky to be smart”, to “life is short”, to “if you don’t clean your room, I’m going to put you upside down in a trashcan”, to “accidents happen” and, perhaps most fitting, “let go, let God”.

With her own children’s words fresh in her mind, Ardes was last to gently place a single rose atop Morris’ new home next to her in-laws’ graves. All of their children solemnly waited, patiently and yards away, heads bowed to the grass, as they allowed their dear mother this moment. Occasional glances witnessed a few tears nurturing the flower as Ardes failed to walk away, still not prepared to say goodbye to her best friend and life partner.

Suddenly it seemed like just yesterday when Morris called to her from the ice cream counter, and she bashfully accepted the free cone. She wished she had known *then* of the loss she would ultimately encounter, but, then again, had they known, Morris would have still told her not to sweat the small stuff.

With the passion of a broken heart, she churned her anger surrounding the incident into a prayer, calling for Morris' guidance and continued guardianship, proclaiming her love for him once more to the clouds, and apologizing to God for having opted to briefly blame him for taking Morris from her. She thanked Him for having let her spend the majority of her life in the presence of one of his angels, and acknowledged that she was a survivor, in all things, because of Morris. She asked God to guard him as Morris had guarded her throughout their lives. She tearfully struggled with considering Morris' former suggestion to let go, let God.

Suddenly, she felt the sun beam onto her forehead, just as she had that toasty spring day in 1954 on her way to Pap's, as she turned away from the casket. She looked back up to the sky and goose bumps surfaced down her arms as she observed a giant V-like rain cloud meeting a radiant ball of white puffiness, surrounded by countless mini cotton balls of clouds.

She calmly froze into her assumed stance on the cemetery grounds and wiped her face. Feeling refreshed with strength and a smile, she recognized the dripping Vanilla Bean cone in the sky, and, once more, accepted Morris' offer.

