

Terry Savoie

Strawberry, Please

Buddy's head over heels for Bernadette. So what's bad in that? Sure, his mama rides him when he gets home seeing how Bernadette doesn't go regular to their church, seeing she was raised "no better than one of those dirty, brown urchins the melon pickers drag through here each August." And yes, all the loading dock boys ride him too, telling him he's wasting time with a girl all that ugly.

But Buddy knows the score. Nobody's got to clue him in. He can see the world for what it is and all by himself with no help from nowhere, thank you very much. He knows his Bernie's nothing much to look at and maybe, if he thought it through, he'd admit she was *paper-bag homely*, but that would be only when he's got the time. Buddy's thinking that face looking back at him in his mirror in the morning is nothing to write the Hollywood movie producers special delivery about either. His own face and holding down a forklift job stacking skiffs of lettuces, peppers, tomatoes and browning, overripe vegetables coming in from south of the border for open-air produce markets doesn't make Buddy a likely candidate for the most-prosperous-head-of-iceberg-in-the-crate-award either.

So, what's Buddy got to say? His life before Bernie had been nothing but that of a dog scuttling down a country back road, head down and tail between his legs, avoiding as best as possible the foreseen as well as the unforeseen hazards facing mongrels of his sort: swerving trucks trying their best to run him over, the beer bottles flying from pickup windows on Friday nights, the sometimes homeless traveler making his way on that homeless road in this homeless world. So he's thinking this here Bernie is the real capital L for Love kind. LOVE? Well, why shouldn't it be? Love at first sight or learning to love or love when there's no other choice from here to Toledo—they're all the same at the end of the night, not so? For Buddy, this love had lasted all of four months, a full quarter of the year. There's no one can tell Buddy what he's got isn't the true, the truest Love.

And Bernadette? She's the girl who does the between shift, the two to seven, at her papa's ice cream parlor up on North Mayfield, a business named Ice-D-Lite. That's where Buddy first spotted her. Now his arrival comes late each and every afternoon. He gets to the parlor mostly around a quarter past five, supper hour, the time when the neighborhood leaves the sweets alone until the kids have time to clean up all those overcooked vegetables before hitting the street.

So, half past five's Buddy and Bernie's banana-split time.

She's got his ready before he pushes open the door, setting off the tinkling bell overhead. The split's always got two scoops, both strawberry, nuts galore, and a whip-cream crown topped off by a cherry. The two sit on one of those wire-back, carpet-beater chairs at a dime-size table close to the street window with the red and white neon Ice-D-Lite sign dancing overhead. Then Bernie tells Buddy about the day's ice-creaming adventures, and Buddy gives out with his no-news on forklifting.

Now Bernadette, like Buddy always tells his buddies, has got her good side and she's got her not-good side. Catch her profile on the right, she's just plain ordinary. Black-rimmed glasses with those soda bottle lenses that ride down the bridge of her nose when she's sweating and a chin that's an understated comma. When she's at work, she pulls her hair back in a Whistler's Mom's bun. That's the good side. But catch her left side, you'll see what the fuss's all about. Her left side's got a wrinkly, pink patch painted on it that starts spilling from somewhere just above the temple of her glasses, drips down to blossom out over her full cheek, and then drains fast past her neck where it slips in, disappearing somewhere into the heavenly depths beneath the lace collar of her white, Ice-D-Lite blouse.

Buddy won't lie, no he won't. That red splotch proved to be the mad enchantment. Took him three weeks coming back evening after evening to finally get her to have his banana split ready when he opened the door. Took another three weeks of begging to get her to share the split with him when no one else was in the parlor.

Now it's share-banana-split late every afternoon when there's no customers. But let someone ring that bell and come in for a cone and Bernie's up, ready to do business. Besides her looks, she's gentle and kind, always turning her left side away from customers. When Buddy asks her why she does that, she says because sometimes kids will say things, but they don't mean no harm, like the time that little Goldstein girl from down the block looked up all innocent from her bubble-gum ice cream cone and said, "Lady, what's that red thing growing on your face?" Bernadette wants Buddy to understand that little kids will feel bad when they grow up and think back to the things that slipped out even when they didn't understand just how mean those things actually were.

So Buddy's happy and Bernie's happy. Banana-split time at five-thirty, sometimes together, sometimes with just Buddy at the table waiting and watching her behind the counter doing her scooping. Buddy always sticks around until Bernadette's old man gets in around six and gives a grunt Buddy's way. Then Buddy knows he's on his way home to clean up and have his supper—"eating backwards" is what Buddy calls it—before the time comes for his girl's shift to end so

he can pick her up.

That's the best time of the day. They walk the street past store fronts and small shops still open to take in sale items or the half-dressed mannequins getting fussed over for the next day's special. After it gets darker, Bernadette lets Buddy hold her hand and feel the length of each of her fine, long fingers, sometimes even the soft webs between her fingers. At an empty doorway, he'll pull her in where no one can see and whisper, "Strawberry, please." Then she turns her red side his way, and he closes his eyes, kissing her there where it's pink and papery and has a faint animal odor. The few times he dares open his eyes, she's looking right through him, a Mona Lisa smirky twist at the corner of her mouth. Then she blushes strawberry all over, and Buddy closes his eyes tighter.

Once a week, Fridays, they stop over at the old Coronet Theater but not so much to see what's playing. Buddy and Bernadette find seats in the corner in the dark in the balcony away from everyone else. He puts his arm around her, and after a while she goes all soft against his shoulder. "Strawberry, please," whispers Buddy. Then Bernie lets Buddy undo the top two buttons of her blouse so he can try to find the place where he imagines that strawberry ends, a few inches above her hard, dark-brown nipple.

But the rule is that Buddy's got to get his girl back to the ice cream parlor before close up at ten. If he tries to pull her into a doorway on the way back and talk strawberries, she'll push him away and keep on moving. Then it's business, all business. The thing is that her old man wants Bernadette to close up the shop. While she's closing, he'll come out to the sidewalk and have a smoke with Buddy. Nothing's ever said except the one time the old man pulled Buddy into the side alley for a quick word, shoving him up against the brick wall to hiss in his face, "No punk's going to give my sweet little girl any problems, you hear?"

Buddy doesn't worry. He knows the score. He gets along fine with Bernie's old man, just real fine.

