When the ice cream truck comes, honey, grab the money and run.

Sweet Somethings

BY JODY MACE

I'M SETTING THE TABLE for dinner when we hear the jangly song. My son is off, his oversized eleven-year-old feet clomping down the hall. "Better run!" I say. "Catch that truck!" He grabs a couple of bucks from his desk and dashes outside barefoot, leaving the front door open. As he races down the street he's joined by others. Mothers with toddlers. Teenaged boys with baggy pants. Kids in bathing suits, hair plastered to their heads, wet from sprinklers.

The truck stops, and they line up to buy ice cream.

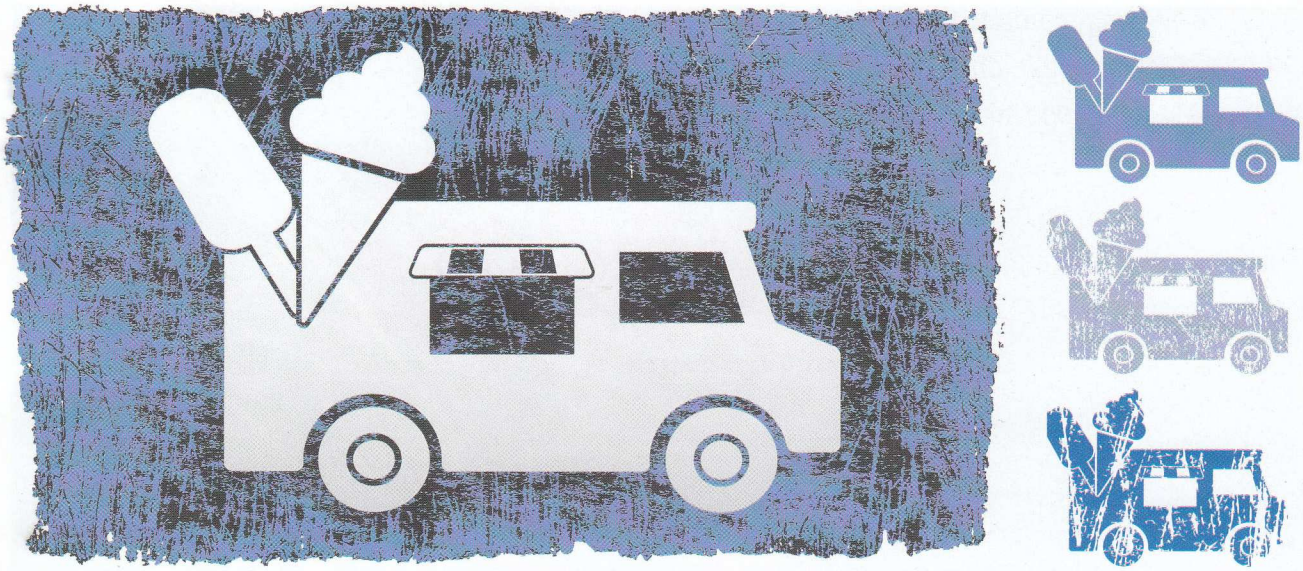
I explained the economics of the ice cream truck to my son once. He pays $1.75 for an ice cream bar from the truck. For $4.69 you can get twelve from the supermarket. Plus his dad and I will pay for the supermarket ice cream, but he's got to buy his own ice cream truck treats. His answer was, "I know. But it's the ice cream truck!"

It doesn't matter what he's doing when he hears the call of the truck. He could be playing his favorite computer game, engrossed in a book, building a civilization out of Legos. The ice cream truck takes precedence over everything else. It doesn't even matter that there might be ice cream in the freezer. Better ice cream.

I'm not one to chase ice cream trucks. It doesn't really make sense to me to spend too much money on a Fudgsicle. I'm such a cheapskate! But even so, when I hear that song, for a moment my heart leaps, and I make an infinitesimal move toward it, an involuntary response. It's like a muscle memory, the way my foot lifts off the brake pedal when the traffic light turns green.

I remember long ago hot, muggy afternoons, time hanging as heavy as the air, and then the ordinary would be shattered into a million pieces by that song. I'd run. I'd study the chart and try to decide what I wanted. An ice cream sandwich or a chocolate éclair? A Drumstick or a Rocket pop? It was a delicate thing, this balancing of needs, the sorting out of desires: crunchy vs. creamy, fruity vs. chocolate. Purchase made, paper unwrapped, the challenge was to savor the treat as long as possible without letting it melt onto my hand. Because when it was gone, it was gone. There was no going back for seconds; the truck was on another block.

Sometimes my son comes back empty-handed because he didn't catch the truck. There's not much in the world sadder than a boy holding a dollar bill and no ice cream as he plods, barefoot, back from a receding ice cream truck. But that's part



of the deal. Years ago, my husband and I were on a vacation on the West Coast, driving from Seattle to San Francisco. We had a couple of weeks to make the trip, so it was a simple matter of mathematics to figure out how much we had to travel each day. But before we even left the state of Washington, I noticed a listing in a guidebook for a bed and breakfast at a llama ranch, quite a few miles inland. We could keep going south and stick to our plans and schedule. But we turned left. We spent two nights at the bed and breakfast. The second morning, as the sun rose, we watched two llamas mate. When llamas couple, it turns out, the male llama sings to the female, sort of a humming, gargling sound. He sings the whole time. And llamas do not rush—I can tell you that. Maybe the song gets the female in the mood. The singing even has a name—orgling. Orgle has just one legitimate meaning: the sound that a male llama or alpaca makes during mating.

I could have gone my whole life without watching llamas mate, without hearing that strange, warbly love song. I never would have known that I missed anything. But isn't life richer for the odd, beautiful things that we experience?

Just as the ice cream truck calls to my son, and the entry in the guidebook caught my eye, there will be other "ice cream trucks" that will enter my boy's life. They will be just as sudden and fleeting, but will bear different pleasures. A dish on a menu that seems a little too exotic. A sunset burning orange in his rearview mirror, begging him to pull over even though he's driving somewhere important. An impossibly good price on a plane ticket to Morocco. A girl at the next library carrel whose eyes seem somehow familiar to him. Each one will show up at the right time; I believe that. I hope he will savor the unexpected delights of young manhood as much as he enjoys the ice cream bars of his dwindling little-boyhood. "Better run!" I want to tell him as the girl gathers her books to go back to her dorm. "Catch that girl!"

So when he hears the ice cream truck I let him go. It makes no difference if he's in the middle of cleaning his room. I don't care if he's been an angel or a pain that day. And it doesn't matter if dinner will be ready in five minutes. He's allowed to try. After all, ice cream trucks come into our lives randomly. We don't call for them. They just show up. When they do, you try your best. You grab your money and run. If you're lucky you get that Push-Up pop.

Today he's lucky; he catches the truck. Although he's on a collision course with adolescence, he still skips home. When he closes the door I see that he has two ice cream bars.

"I got one for you," he tells me.

And from the first lick it's as sweet and welcome as any I've ever tasted.

JODY MACE is a writer from Charlotte, North Carolina, who lives with her husband and two teenagers. You can read more of her work at www.jodymace.com.

The first time I wrote about my son (now age thirteen) for Brain, Child, *he was three years old and staging pizza parties and cat fights with naked Barbies. Parenting him and his older sister as tweens, and now teenagers, has provided fodder for many essays; however, I'm barred from sharing most of them with the public at this point. I'm glad that the topic of this essay was not too embarrassing for him, and that I could "come home" to* Brain, Child *after a long absence. I'm also glad he still runs for the ice cream truck.*