



VANILLA

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inspired by *Morton's Moo*

The lady behind him was leaning forward already, reeling off syllables that should never go together, like fruit-a-razztastic-mallow-cuppa, or jamocha-choka-nanna-rama . . .

Jerry was counting pairs of shorty-shorts—a deeply sad fashion trend he'd hoped would never come back—when he heard the "Here you go" from the bangs-and-ponytail that had taken his order, and turned to claim the Styrofoam cup she had pushed through the window. The lady behind him was leaning forward already, reeling off syllables that should never go together, like fruit-a-razztastic-mallow-cuppa, or jamocha-choka-nanna-rama, plus she was talking sprinkles, whipped cream, chocolate dip. He made a chopping motion with his plastic spoon between

their faces, and then, leaving the woman hanging in the middle of a nutty-caramel swirl or a fudge-mint streak, he pointed out that Bangs had given him the wrong ice cream.

"No I didn't, that's exactly right," she said, not bothering to look at the cup he was holding under her nose. "One small scoop of nilla-magnamilla-chill."

"In fact that is exactly *wrong*," he said, "I ordered two big scoops of pistachio-maraschino-berry-bombalistical, sure as I'm standing here."

"Oh, I know you did, yep. But *that*"—she pointed at the cup she still hadn't deigned to look at—"is what you *get*."

"What do you mean that's what I get? I'm supposed to get what I ordered."

"No, no," she said and leaned out of the window, pointing at their sign.

The place had recently changed management, and they had installed new signs and decorations he'd mostly ignored. The sign said: ***We know what you want!***

"I know you *said* you want pistachio-maraschino-berry-bombalistical? But right now, Mister, what you really want is nilla-magnamilla-chill." She leaned farther out of the window and whispered, "It's really just plain vanilla."

"Which I have never ordered in my life! I . . . I . . . paid, what, more than three dollars for this, I should get what I want, I just . . . I just . . ."

"As I was saying," the lady behind him said, "If you could add the nutty-caramel swirl to the first three and—"

"So I suppose she's going to go all razzmatazz this . . ." he said, his plastic spoon jabbing at every syllable.

“Razztastic,” said the lady

“... and jamocha-nut that...”

“Jamocha-*choka*,” she said.

“... and then you’re just going to give her a slap of orange sherbet? That’s ridiculous!”

“No,” said Bangs, “I will not do that. This lady knows what she wants.”

The woman beamed.

“This is just unbelievable. This is—”

“Look, can you move it along?” The guy was straight out of don’t-fuck-with-me casting—a leather jacket, even, a head taller, of course. He had one arm around a pale, anorexic blonde in shorty-shorts and lipstick the color of blackberries. “Call the manager or something if you want to complain?” she said.

“Yeah,” he heard from several people in the crowd that had gathered into two clumpy lines waiting at the server windows.

“Just call the manager,” said some super-obnoxious kid.

He stepped away.

“It’s always the nilla-magnariffics who don’t know what they really want,” whispered someone in the crowd, followed by uh-huhs and yeps.

“It’s nilla-magnamilla,” he hissed. “*Chill.*”

“It’s okay,” said a tidy young woman wearing scrubs. “Yesterday I got a jamocha-choka-nanna-rama when I’d ordered a strawberry-splosion-peanut-chocoholica. I was upset, too. But I took a bite and then I realized that she was right. I really *did* want

exactly what she'd given me." She put a hand on Jerry's arm. "You'll see."

"No I won't," he said, "I really won't."

Jerry was right about that. He wouldn't see that nilla-magnamilla-chill was the flavor he really wanted. Just like he didn't see that the woman in the scrubs had stepped out of line in her effort to reassure him, that she had exactly the kind of clear brown eyes he loved with no distracting eye shadow to blur the color, that her hair had been brushed into a barrette at the back of her neck so cleanly, just the sort of attention to detail he admired in a woman. He didn't notice, either, that the gentle hand she'd laid on his arm was her left hand, and there was nothing on her ring finger.

On the way to his car, he dumped the ice cream into a trash can. Which says a lot about Jerry, doesn't it? Why didn't he offer his ice cream to the people standing around waiting to order, or take it back to the office and give it to whoever likes vanilla? But no. He just threw it away. Always throwing things away, that guy.