
ICE CREAM SUNDAYS

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I used to hate them; I used to think they were a right menace. Sundays were the worst. You'd begin to hear them from miles away; they would gradually wend their way closer until the blaring jingles were echoing in your street, were blasting through your open windows. I really used to hate ice cream vans. And even when their excruciating music had stopped, you had to put up with the loud droning engine which caused interference on the TV. Then they would rev up and drive off again and give you a further salvo of their rotten tune. They were far worse than the Salvation Army band that used to come round of a Sunday morning and wake me up. That was *"Onward Christian Soldiers"* at 10.00 am after a night on booze. I ended up throwing a bucket of water on them. But ice cream vans were far worse and you couldn't do anything to stop them. On a summer Sunday you could have two or three coming round every hour. All you could do was try and ignore them but that strategy never really worked, they still got to you and some mornings I'd wake up and find myself humming one of their stupid tunes. Well, this is what I used to think about them, but then something strange happened. It all started with Surinder, the little girl in the downstairs flat, it was she who introduced me to it. Suddenly for me and many others in our street, Sundays were never the same again.

Apparently, it began with the pistachio super whip. This was one of three flavours that Luigi's van had for sale. It wasn't however Luigi, but Abdul Khaliq who ran the van, although, in actual fact, all the kids called him Popeye because that was the tune he blared out. Now, not many people used to bother much about pistachio, it was definitely a minority taste. Most people went for vanilla or strawberry with perhaps a dash of syrup or a chocolate log on top. But then strangely, people began turning on to pistachio. It was slow at first and then the requests began to grow and grow. It got to the point where he'd only go down one street and be sold out. So Abdul Khaliq switched what he called his 'special' ingredient to all the flavours and his customers grew at an even greater rate.

I well remember my first popeye super whip, thanks to Surinder. It was a real revelation I can tell you. I sat there in the living room with the cornet I had bought. At first it seemed the same as any other and I couldn't see what the fuss was about, typical vanilla froth with a slightly greenish hue to it. But then I started to feel this exquisite tingle in my mouth, it began to taste extremely good, delectable in fact. Then I found myself savouring it delicately, lick by lick letting the flavour ease over my tongue in mouth-watering ecstasy. By the time I had finished I was quite light-headed and I remember sinking back into the armchair feeling totally peaceful and satisfied. It was something I'd never experienced before and although I didn't know what made it so delicious, I knew I'd instantly become a fan. From then on ice cream vans took on a different meaning and Sundays, boring old Sundays as I used to think of them, became a source of expectation and delight.

Of course, the thing I had to do was to listen for the tunes, the very things I'd hated and tried to ignore in the past. I soon realised there were three main vans that served our neighbourhood. There was 'Greensleeves'; Mr Sam's super whip 'freshly made for you', and there was 'Teddy Bear's Picnic', Collettas 'Super soft GOLDEN ice cream'. These two were both Asians as well, but what they sold was the usual boring stuff. It was after these two usually that you heard the sounds of 'Popeye the Sailor Man'. A tune that brought a flutter to my heart and a broad grin to my lips, as soon as I heard it, I would get my coins to the ready and wait with great anticipation; and I can tell you, hundreds of others from all around were doing the same. Popeye was the talk of the area, he was the local hero.

I would go down to the Azad general store for my cat's food and fresh coriander and would hear them gassing away about Abdul Khaliq. What was his 'special' ingredient? There was all manner of speculation.

"Kheera," said old Mr Chohan, his bald head shining.

"Monosodium Glutamate," squeaked the haughty Mrs Snout.

"What about spinach?" said little Saeeda with a cheeky grin.

"I just hope that it's halal," said Mr Butt, the worried looking storekeeper.

And Seamus Maloney, swaying as if he was on board ship, said "I don't give a fuck what's in it, s'long as it tastes good."

This was the way the speculations would go, everyone having their own theory and everyone wanting expound it. And when the ideas had been exhausted, each little round of chatter would usually end with Mr Butt pronouncing that “Abdul could be the districts first millionaire.”

I suppose Popeye could’ve made it to the big time, but he played a dangerous game and like all who do so, he made his enemies. However, he didn’t have any enemies in our street. As soon as the sounds of the Sailor Man signalled his presence in the vicinity, people would begin to go out to wait for his arrival. Like a Sunday street party you would see them, dozens of kids rowdily playing and rows of adults on garden walls jabbering away to each other. There was all manner of expectant tongues, Bengali, Punjabi, Patois, and Brummie; different tongues all waiting for the same delicious flavour to ease over their taste buds. And if ever Greensleeves or Teddy Bears Picnic went past, you would hear jeers and catcalls and see their sad dark faces peering through piles of unwanted cornets. Khaliq had cleaned up the trade.

Then the moment we had all waited for would arrive. That familiar orange and red van with the lollipops and ices painted on the side would turn into our street; the magic jingle would begin to play, the kids would cheer and start to sing...

“I’m Popeye the sailor man, Popeye the sailor man.”

...and everyone would begin to move to his stopping point. By mid-summer, the queues were very long, but Khaliq and his helpers would work like beavers to ensure satisfaction for all. Fists full of cornets filling up six at a time, the ices would flow out and the jingle of coins would flow back in. There were ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ and giggles and shouts and above it all there was Khaliq with a beaming smile on his face. Once served, we would then dash back to our homes and in the comfort of our armchairs, would slowly savour those delightful dollops of succulent snow.

This marvellous little ritual, this new found meaning to the institution of Sunday went on until about mid-August, and then, unfortunately, came the big bust up. The event itself was a bit of a laugh, but I can’t help feeling sad because it marked the demise of Popeye. After the bust up, Sundays went back to the TV doldrums, only far worse, because of the sense of loss we felt.

The day began with the usual scenario. We were all out there waiting. I was throwing a ball around with Surinder and Kendrick. Then came the familiar chimes of Popeye, as the orange and red van turned onto our street. Our heads turned and our hearts were glad. But then, following immediately behind, we heard the sounds of Greensleeves and Teddy Bears Picnic. As Popeye was moving up the road, we saw the other two chasing him. It wasn’t long before they over-took, headed him off and forced him to a screeching stop. Everyone in the street rushed forward.

When we got to the vans, Greensleeves and Teddy Bears Picnic had surrounded Khaliq and were shouting angrily. “Traacherous villain!” “Unfair trading!” “Filthy

cheat!” they were ranting with their fingers pointing. “I’m ruined!” bawled Greensleeves; “I’ve got six kids to feed!” moaned Teddy Bears Picnic. Soon there was a large crowd around the vans and the street was blocked off. None of us were very happy about the situation I can tell you; it was delaying our moment of pleasure. “Piss off!” “Leave him alone!” some of the crowd shouted, but the complainants continued their ravings. Greensleeves beat his hands in agony on the van and started to weep. Teddy Bears Picnic began arguing with some of the crowd. Seamus Maloney was there, “Golden Whip my arse!” I heard him say, “Yours is worse than shaving cream!” Next to me, I could see that Surinder and Kendrick were getting restless and I found that I was gritting my teeth. The two renegades didn’t know what they were doing, if they kept it up, they would risk their lives. Even Mrs Snout was getting irritated, “It’s really not cricket!” I heard her loudly complain.

Suddenly, there came the sound of another jingle, only this one was unfamiliar. At first I thought it was one more ice cream van that all the failures had ganged up and agreed a plan to ‘get’ Popeye, but then I realised what it was. It was the police; you could hardly have a more unappetising sound. But the arguments continued regardless. Poor Khaliq stood behind his counter, shrugging his shoulders and holding his hands up in gestures of helplessness. “We want Popeye, we want Popeye!” the kids started to chant. Eventually a policeman forced his way to the centre of the action and the crowd began to murmur amongst themselves about the new development. “Alright, what’s going on here then?” As soon as the beefy copper said this, a renewed set of ravings began, ice cream men and crowd all explaining events at the same time. The copper was clearly taken aback, “Alright, one at a time,” he shouted, trying to assert his authority. The order wasn’t heeded and the chorus of complaints began again. I managed to hear Greensleeves scream out “I could kill him!” as he started once again banging on the van. “What’s this, some kind of tribal warfare?” the copper said sarcastically. There was a moment of silence after this remark and then the crowd started murmuring, I think it was from then on that our street started hating the police. An attitude such as his wasn’t going to help matters and some of us were getting desperate for our sweet Sunday treat.

I found it hard to believe, but it was old Mr Chohan who started the trouble. While all the cussing and fussing was going on, he had climbed into Collettas van, presumably to get a better view; but he obviously got carried away because he poured out a cornet of ice cream and lobbed it at the arguers. It scored a direct hit on the copper’s nose. Immediately cheers and laughter filled the air. Then others got into the act and soon the copper and the two ice cream men were getting bombarded. It seemed as though the sky was raining ice creams. The cheers turned to dancing and the street echoed with loud choruses of our Popeye anthem. The policeman panicked, “Riot! Riot!” he screamed into his radio and then Khaliq shouted “The super whip’s on me!”

I never did get a final taste. Those who weren’t engaged in the bombardment all crushed up to Khaliq’s counter and I didn’t get a look in. All I can tell you is that not a

drop of his ice cream was thrown. It wasn't long before police reinforcements arrived, this time they sent two meat wagons full of burly SPG men. When I saw the awesome sight of truncheons and shields, my first thought was to get Surinder and Kendrick out of harm's way, so I bundled them through the milling crowd and into the safety of our front yard. Some of the younger and bolder lot of the street had set up an ammunition chain and firing line, they began splodging Golden super whip over riot shields and helmets, but it was hardly a fair contest. It wasn't long before resistance was broken and the crowd dispersed. Popeye, Greensleeves and Teddy Bears Picnic were arrested and so were some from our street. I remember seeing Seamus Maloney being bundled into the back of a van "F***ing fascists!" he shouted, and with a fists raised, "Popeye for Pope!"

We didn't hear anything for quite a while afterwards. They don't seem too keen to report on riots in the news these days. It wasn't until well after a month that someone read it in the local paper, tucked away in the courts column. It seems that Abdul Khaliq was sent down for two years. It wasn't for causing a breach of the peace or even for assaulting a police officer with an ice cream, although anything's possible nowadays. No, apparently the forensic lab did tests on his super whip and then they went and visited his back garden. It was found to be chock-a-block full of cannabis plants, and so, the secret of his 'special ingredient' was finally revealed.

We all missed him tremendously. Sundays were certainly never the same again. Mind you, if I was to be honest about it, I can't quite say the same about the super whip. I mean, it was so delicious. So, down at the back of my garden, hidden behind the potting shed, I'm doing my own spot of growing. In a few months' time I hope to have a good supply of that 'special ingredient'. But there will only ever be one Popeye. His name, Abdul Khaliq, his place of residence, Winson Green Prison. One ice cream seller did try to take up the Popeye jingle, the first day he did a roaring trade but then people found it was the same old stuff. The next day he got a brick through his windscreen, he soon changed his tune.