

## EATING YOUR ICECREAM CONES TWICE

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I must have been just eight years old, when I saw Wilbur eat his icecream twice, licking the last curl of his soft ice, his tongue moving in a methodical way, more as if finishing a boring task than enjoying himself. He gazed at the empty cone. A single pucker of his brows as if he was trying to do a particular hard sum. Suddenly ice from the cone again, rising in a weird snakelike motion.

I stared. It seemed like a neat trick at the time, but the whole world was filled with neat tricks, most of which I still had to learn. Hitting a ball all the way across the field or climbing the top of oak in the backgarden were the important things right then.

Wilbur was not much older than I, but already overtopping most of us by a full head. A hulking, taciturn boy, his replies most of the time a single grunt, it would have been surprising to ask him how he did it. So I wondered for all of two minutes and forgot the whole thing. Maybe I even told myself I had imagined the whole transformation.

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He was the first to get laid in our class. Wilbur was only thirteen but he looked like a seventeen, perhaps even older.

Wilbur was growing up fast, he made us feel ineffectual and horrible young. The world around his body was skyrocketing, his mind followed at a much slower pace. He never played with us but preferred to hang around with the older boys in front of the hamburger stand.

His dog always accompanied him, a sad-eyed bulldog, who spent most of his day sitting on the grass and gazing soulfully at birds. I don't think he ever chased a cat or buried a bone in the back garden. It is said that a dog starts to look like his owner, which I think is rubbish, but in this case it was true.

Both of them had a disconcerting kind of inertia, never hurrying or showing the slightest trace of enthusiasm. Almost as if they knew that nothing was definitive, that any occurrence could be repeated at will.

On a chill november night I saw his dog die.

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I was sitting on my bed, propped up by three cushions. The fever buzzed in my ears, my eyes burned. Beyond the window the street stretched in a pale sheet, almost a void, an imprint of tires vanishing the moment they were made. Snowflakes drifted from the sky, suddenly materialising in the streetlamps.

The world had become a hushed place no larger than my own street and not altogether real. I heard Wilbur's footsteps, the patter of his dog's paws the moment they turned the corner. It was that quiet.

His dog paused in front of the Grahams' house, lifting a hind leg. Steam rose from the ground around the lamppost.

