The Vanilla Kid

Vanilla is often dismissed as the flavor of indecision. It's what you choose when you're afraid to choose, the fallback for the cautious and unimaginative. "Plain vanilla," they call it—synonymous with boring.

Basic.

Safe.

For years, I've felt I have something in common with this underdog of flavors, a symbol of simplicity too often mistaken for dullness.

I'll admit it—vanilla is my favorite ice cream flavor. Nothing compares to a pint of Häagen-Dazs Vanilla Bean or a medium vanilla milkshake from Joe's Drive-In—the nostalgic ice cream shop three miles from my parents' house—on a 75-degree, partly-cloudy kind of day.

It's subtle.

Dang it, I *like* vanilla. Vanilla iced coffee, a tube of vanilla maple Burt's Bees lip balm, regular iced chai lattes with vanilla syrup, vanilla cake with a vanilla bean browned butter glaze, and homemade vanilla extract in ribbed glass bottles with red ribbons wrapped around them like neckties, gifted to me from my Aunt Karen every year on my birthday.

And I hate—truly *despise*—vanilla when it's sharp, sugary, and sickly sweet, like the stiff frosting that pairs well with boxed vanilla Betty Crocker. Both are the epitome of the processed and soulless—mass-produced relics of the 1930s that the unambitious have latched onto for the sake of convenience, the art of baking tossed aside for ease. Vanilla, when reduced to a pre-packaged, syrupy sweetness, doesn't provide the intoxication it's meant to.

It's a shortcut.

It's the same shortcut served in a Wendy's vanilla Frosty, making me shiver and cough. The chalky powdered milk inside clings to the roof of your mouth and begs for rejection. It's so forgettable—often replaced by seasonal flavors like Triple Berry, Peppermint, Salted Caramel, Pumpkin Spice, and Orange Dreamsicle—and understandably so.

This famous representative of vanilla doesn't have any vanilla in it.

Vanilla isn't supposed to be nauseatingly sweet—it's supposed to be warm, intoxicating, like my mom's snickerdoodle cookies fresh from the oven on Christmas Eve. It's supposed to be pure, in a small vanilla milkshake on a first date.

My first date was to Joe's Drive-In. The boy from marching band bought me the small vanilla milkshake and ordered a medium Blue Goo—a vanilla cone drenched in a thick, "blue raspberry" coating. Sticky and sickly and foreign. But I didn't mind. I sipped my shake and smiled, because something about an old-school ice cream shop with a hazel-eyed boy felt real.

Vanilla is supposed to be *real*.

When I was seven, my big sister and I were gifted a blue, plastic ice cream maker the size of a kickball—add ice and rock salt in one end and a simple mix of cream, sugar, and pure vanilla extract in the other. We would sit across from each other with our legs spread on the kitchen linoleum and roll and roll and roll.

It was a labor of love.

Sometimes the seal wasn't quite tight enough, and salt water leaked into the mix, giving the ice cream a briny edge. Sometimes we got lazy, and the cream didn't even set, leaving us with bowls of vanilla soup instead of scoops.

But on the good days, after what felt like hours and hours of rolling, we'd crack the lid open and scoop out just enough for two small bowls. My sister would disgrace hers with peanut butter sauce or cold caramel drizzle or hot fudge or, worst of all, thick banana slices and rainbow sprinkles.

My bowl held only homemade, hard-earned vanilla ice cream.

"You're so boring," my sister would roll her eyes as she shoveled goop into her mouth.

I didn't think it was boring. I just liked how real it tasted.

Vanilla, after all, isn't a flavor that smacks you in the face. It reveals itself slowly—an aroma that lingers in the kitchen air, a hint of floral warmth on your tongue after each bite. Producing vanilla is an art form. The process for producing it is meticulous, unforgiving, and exhilarating. Vanilla isn't just plucked from a plant or tree, like strawberries or peaches. It starts as a delicate orchid, blooming for a single day. If it's not pollinated in those few short hours—by hand, no less—the opportunity is lost. Once harvested, the pods are plunged into hot water, sweated, dried, and cured until their fragrance blooms. Each step requires patience and precision.

For a flavor dismissed as ordinary, it demands extraordinary effort.

There is meaning found in the moments I've been asked to bloom on command, to thrive in conditions that felt as fleeting and high stakes as that single day of flowering. There is elegance in the growth that comes with enduring the painstaking processes of self-doubt and quiet labor to become what I am—a version of myself that can be soft yet resilient, deliberate in ways you only notice if you linger long enough.

I don't thrive on loud success.

In the eighth grade, an occasionally rude boy started a rumor that I had an excused absence from health class when they covered sex ed. After all, I was "innocent" and gullible and boring, neutral, and beige and that would explain it.

Vanilla was my insult.

The European conquest of the Aztecs in 1519 brought the fragrant flower to Europe. It was cultivated in botanical gardens throughout England and France but it never offered up its valuable pods. It wasn't until 1836 that someone noticed vanilla's natural pollinator was the stingless Melipona bee, native only to Mexico. Desperation for the plant led to the hand-pollination method for vanilla that is still in use today.

Despite the admiration for it, vanilla was being used as a pejorative by the 1940s. A 1942 *Life* magazine article reports a "plain vanilla foreign policy," and a 1954 newspaper article described an athlete as a "plain vanilla scrub." Once sought after and desired—the word was reduced to playground taunts.

What is true is that I was born and raised in a nuclear family, forbidden to date until I turned sixteen, and spent every Sunday morning in a hard, oak pew. Vanilla, through and through.

Ouch.

Two boys giggled at me in biology. “It’s just a dumb joke,” my friend comforted me as my cheeks flushed. It wasn't dumb to me. I was mortified. I hated being seen that way—incomplete, incapable, or naive.

As if being soft and subtle was some kind of defect, as if being steady and warm wasn’t enough.

I wish I could tell my younger self that vanilla isn’t a flaw—it’s a choice. A deliberate choice.

There’s bravery in subtlety, in reservation. Vanilla doesn’t scream for attention, like rocky road or mint chip, hitting the top of your throat. It doesn’t sting. It seeps in quietly, warming the air with its scent, folding itself into moments without demanding the spotlight.

I like that about vanilla.

Its quiet grace is irresistible—giving the impatient a desire to replicate it. The extraction of vanilla involves splitting the beans open and soaking them in alcohol, creating the aromatic liquid we love today. It is a process of patience, allowing something to develop slowly and without force. Yet, in a world that demands convenience, ninety-nine percent of vanilla products contain a lab-produced chemical: synthetic vanillin. This mockery, derived from clove oil and tree bark fibers, doesn’t require the ritual of fermentation. A hollow attempt at vanilla, void of any complexity or depth. It lacks any nutrient, vitamin, or mineral, unlike vanilla—real vanilla.

True vanilla is authentic. It’s gentle.

It’s a gift. The gift of vanilla is patience and the discovery of what’s worthwhile.

I like being subtle and warm. I like keeping my depth to myself. I’ve learned what happens when I don’t—when I let people dig too easily, assuming they’ll find something profound. They taste too quickly, take me for granted, or worse. They twist the warmth into something syrupy and cloying, something that sticks to the roof of your mouth and leaves you feeling sick.

No, I’d rather stay hidden—like the black specks of a vanilla bean in a bowl of ice cream, quiet but unmistakable when you notice them. A speck might seem like nothing, but it holds the essence of everything—an entire world condensed into something so small it’s almost easy to miss.

Vanilla is a slow love.

It’s patient and steady, waiting for those who want more than the obvious sweetness, like marrying the boy who took you on your first date when you were sixteen and six days old.

I like when people fall in love with me that way. Gradually, deliberately. Because vanilla doesn’t ask for attention—it earns it. And when someone takes the time to revel in the genuine, they don’t forget it.