

## **Isaly's**

By Bonnie Copeland

(949) 646-9494

[bonmail@pacbell.net](mailto:bonmail@pacbell.net)

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“Isaly’s,” Daddy said, coming out of the house in a clean short-sleeved blue shirt. The screen door slammed behind him. Dry wood slats squeaked under his feet as he crossed the porch to Mother’s chair. He nuzzled her hair, dislodging the red bandanna that covered her pin curls. The car keys jingled in his pocket. “Isaly’s,” he said again. “It’s too hot to cook.”

“It’s too hot to move,” Mother moaned, straightening the bandanna. “I don’t want to go to Isaly’s. Take Bonnie. I’ll get the money.” She hurried into the house for her purse.

I sat near the porch railing on a metal folding chair, swinging my legs, sucking my braids, and wiggling my bare toes. Daddy sat on the chair next to me and tapped his feet. I clambered over his leg onto his lap.

“Isaly’s,” he said, looking down at me with a smile.

“Isaly’s,” I repeated, but I didn’t look at him. I looked at the lilac bushes near the porch and the leafy trees lining the street in front of our house. The Sunday afternoon sky was blue, not the bright orange that it had been during most of my 7 years in Pittsburgh. World War II was over and the blast furnaces were dark.

Heat lay over the lawn like a woolen blanket. The air was so still I could barely smell the lilacs. Traffic on Beechwood Boulevard sounded muffled and far away. I watched the trees. Not a leaf stirred. It was too quiet.

I couldn’t stand it.

I rose to a kneeling position on Daddy’s lap and wiggled around until we were facing each other. As loud as I could, I yelled, “Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy.”

“A kid’ll eat ivy too,” Daddy sang as I bounced up and down on his lap.

“Wouldn’t yo-oo-woo?” we howled together, laughing.

I bumped Daddy’s glasses and collapsed against his shirt. It smelled of Clorox and Tide and Old Spice and sweat. Daddy’s tummy was soft because he was fat. I stroked his arms. They were covered with fuzzy hair like a bear’s.

I looked at him and he looked back with the same flecked blue-green eyes. We touched our foreheads together and said “Isaly’s” at the same time.

The screen door opened and Mother came out with my red PF Flyer sneakers and her sequined basket purse. Her white sandals slapped against her heels as she walked across the porch. She rested my shoes on the railing and rummaged in her purse for three crumpled dollar bills.

“Get a pound of chipped chopped ham and a bottle of barbeque sauce.” Mother said. “I can make barbeque sandwiches tonight and fry the leftovers with eggs tomorrow. I have relish so don’t get a pickle, and we have a rye so please don’t buy that lousy white bread.”

“I like white bread,” I whined.

Mother glared at Daddy over the top of my head. “It’ll rot her teeth. Don’t get ice cream. It’ll melt before we have a chance to eat it, even if I keep it in the refrigerator. And make sure Bonnie wears shoes,” she said. She handed Daddy the money and my red PF Flyers.

Daddy put the money in his shirt pocket. “Let’s go,” he said. He stood up and I slid down his legs until my bare feet touched the porch floor.

He turned to Mother and puckered his lips. “Isaly’s,” he said.

“Islay’s,” Mother replied and puckered. They touched their lips together three times. Then he took my hand and we walked down the path to the car.

Daddy opened the passenger door of our 1939 DeSoto and I scrambled inside. He put my sneakers on the floor. He knows I like to be barefoot. The key ground three times before the ignition fired and the car glided into the traffic on Beechwood Boulevard like a big maroon boat.

My world slipped by the window like a movie: small duplexes like ours, then larger homes where richer people lived. We rumbled over the Greenfield Bridge and Beechwood Boulevard turned into Panther Hollow Road. It slid into the dark leafy glens of Schenley Park. Kids tumbled on the grass and ran after balls. Grown-ups played cards at picnic tables in the shelters. Men tended barbeques and lounged under trees to escape the heat.

A large white sign peeked through the trees as Panther Hollow Road widened into the Boulevard of the Allies. “Isaly’s,” it said.

Daddy turned left into the parking lot and stopped. He jumped out of the car, ready to run around and open the door for me like he did for Mother, but I fooled him. I wiggled under the steering wheel and plopped my bare feet onto the steaming asphalt on his side of the car.

Isaly’s was three stories high and blinding in the afternoon sun. Fluted columns stretched from the ground to the roof and bands of raised gold and white tile circled the building. An ornate gilt canopy hung from chains over two heavy brass doors, the kind they have at a bank. The windows were so clean they sparkled.

Daddy held my hand as I hopped across the hot asphalt. He wrenched one of the heavy brass doors open and my bare feet touched the cool black and white tile floor. Daddy let the door go and it closed behind us with a whoosh.

Inside, Isaly’s was a feast for the senses. Refrigerated air cooled my skin. My mouth watered from pungent scents of meat and pickles. Fruity ice cream smells teased my nose. The music of murmured conversation and tinkling silverware rose from the dining area.

I took it all in. The shimmering mirror that ran the length of the back wall was plastered with hand-lettered paper signs that advertised the wonders of Isaly's: "Chipped Chopped Ham 59 cents/lb" one said, "Flavor of the Month Pistachio." Tilted mirrors behind the brass and glass counters reflected young men and women in immaculate white uniforms and paper infantry hats, freezers filled with cylinders of ice cream in every color of the rainbow, slicing machines, rectangular blocks of cheese and ham and bowl-shaped hunks of boneless turkey, stainless steel pans overflowing with potato salad, baked beans and cole slaw. Neat pyramids of Wonder Bread, barbeque sauce, Heinz Ketchup and Spicy Brown Mustard marched from the ice cream to the deli department along a spotless glass shelf.

I turned hopefully towards the ice cream, but Daddy put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me to the end of the delicatessen line. I waited beside him, rubbing the shiny brass railing that kept the line straight.

Daddy ordered when we got to the front of the line. "I'll have a pound of chipped, chopped ham, a jar of barbeque sauce, a Wonder Bread, a half-pound of potato salad and a quarter pound of sliced Swiss."

"And a pickle," I chimed in.

The counterman lugged a chunk of pressed ham to the slicing machine. With a jerky back and forth motion, he shaved it into razor-thin slices and piled them on a paper tray. When the tray was full he weighed it and added enough extra ham to move the needle past the one pound mark. He took six paper-thin slices of butter-colored cheese out of the refrigerator case and weighed them. Then he wrapped the ham and cheese in white butcher paper and sealed the package with tape, scooped potato salad from a steel tray into a paper ice-cream container and put it all into a white bag with the Wonder Bread, barbeque sauce, and a pickle wrapped in waxed paper.

He took a pencil from behind his ear, wrote the numbers on the white bag, and added them. "Two fifty nine," he said. Daddy took the three crumpled dollar bills out of his shirt pocket. He put the change, four dimes and a penny, into his pants pocket and we stepped out of the delicatessen line. Then Daddy put the palm of his hand in the middle of my back and steered me towards the ice cream.

I slowly sounded out the paper signs that plastered the mirror while we waited in line. "Skyscraper cone 5 cents," I read, "Jimmies 2 cents extra. Phosphates, milkshakes, egg cream. Sundaes hot fudge, chocolate, butterscotch, strawberry. Try our root beer float. Banana split 3 scoops." Chocolate ice cream roll-up cake. Hand packed pints and quarts. Isaly's, home of the Klondike Bar. Strawberry center wins a free Klondike!"

Then I read the ice cream flavors from a metal sign that swung from the ceiling on thin wires. "Vanilla, French Vanilla, Chocolate, Chocolate Fudge Ripple, Strawberry, Rainbow ice cream, Rainbow sherbet, Chocolate Chip, Mint Chocolate Chip, Pink Cherry Vanilla, White House, Butterscotch Ripple, Maricopa, Butter Pecan, Walnut Fudge, Flavor of the Month, Pistachio."

I was tempted by the chance to win a free Klondike or savor the chocolaty goodness of Ice Cream Roll-Up Cake melting in my mouth, but I kept my promise to myself. I had sworn to taste every ice-cream flavor Isaly's made...and that meant trying the new Flavor of the Month.

I stood on tiptoes at the front of the line and ordered. "Pistachio skyscraper cone," I told the counterman.

"It's green," Daddy said. "You won't eat green things."

"It's ice cream," I answered, tossing my head until my braids bounced. "I'll eat it."

Daddy shrugged. "Vanilla for me. If you don't like Pistachio we'll switch."

The counterman stuck the cones between his fingers. He dipped a long, flat paddle into water and then into the ice cream. He pressed the ice cream onto the top of each cone so they looked like skyscrapers on the top and on the bottom. He wrapped each cone in a napkin and held them out to us.

I took the green one while Daddy paid. Then Daddy took the white one and we moved out of the line.

"Push it with your mouth so the ice cream doesn't fall off," Daddy said as we walked towards a metal table near the windows. We sat down. I shut my mouth as tight as I could and pressed it into the cold green ooze. It smelled flowery and sweet, like the vanilla Mother stirred into her white cake batter. I licked the green moustache on my upper lip, then the green beard on my chin.

"I like it," I said to Daddy. I licked again. "It's my favorite so far."

We sat across from each other, silently eating our ice cream. I swung my legs back and forth and examined my dirty toes. Daddy crossed and uncrossed his legs under the table. When we were finished, Daddy spit on his napkin and used it to wipe my hands.

"Don't tell your Momma about the ice cream," he said.

"I won't," I answered. I wiggled onto my knees. My metal chair screeched against the floor tile as I rested my palms on the table. I puckered my lips and said, "Isaly's."

"Isly's," Daddy answered, puckering. He touched his lips against mine three times.

We stood up and Daddy took my hand. As we approached the exit, Daddy paused so I COULD sound out Isaly's advertising slogan from the big hand-lettered paper sign above the brass doors:

"REMEMBER ISALY," I slowly read. "ISALY. I SHALL ALWAYS LOVE YOU."

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