

The Ice Cream Cone  
(Helping Children Understand Divorce)  
by CJ Heck

Introducing Millicent, Jacob Cole's wife, mother of Kali and Kristin, and grandmother to Douglas, the eight-year-old son of Kali, her oldest daughter -- the same daughter who told everyone tonight at dinner that she and her husband were getting a divorce. It was news that rocked Millicent Cole's world for the second time that week.

Millie felt like she was falling off a tall building without a parachute. She was sitting on a folding wooden chair in the front row of the Rose Room in McDermott's Funeral Home. Her eyes were riveted on a rosewood coffin surrounded by flowers at the front of the room. Millie was there to say a final goodbye to her beloved grandfather, who had passed away two days ago and already she missed him terribly. Add to that the bomb Kali had dropped about the divorce at dinner, and it was fair to say, Millie was feeling very vulnerable.

Her thoughts wandered to a time long, long ago, back to a summer when she was just about Douglas's age. Millie sighed. That was the summer she was given the most precious gift she had ever received. The gift was so dear to her, and yet it hadn't come tucked in delicate white tissue paper in a fancy store box. It didn't have colorful wrapping paper or pretty ribbons and bows tied on it. It hadn't even come with a lacy store-bought greeting card. It had been such a simple and loving gift, and it had been from Grampa ...

Millie had just turned eight when her best friend, Kylie, told her that her parents were getting a divorce. Kylie was heartbroken and crying so hard that Millie didn't know what to say or do to comfort her. She couldn't understand why Kylie's parents would get a divorce and Millie was about half mad at them for hurting Kylie like that.

Millie rode the school bus home in silence. She couldn't stop thinking about her friend. It made Millie feel just awful to see Kylie so upset. When the driver finally opened the door in front of her house, Grandpa was there waiting for the bus and for Millie. She was happy to see him. Maybe Grampa could help her understand why this was all happening.

Grampa gave Millie a big hug. "Hi there, little Millie-Me." (That had been Grampa's special nickname for her, for as long as she could remember).

Millie told him she was sad. Then she told him about her talk with Kylie. She told him she felt so bad for Kylie and about the coming divorce. "Why would her parents do that and hurt Kylie that way? I don't understand, Grampa. Why do grownups do such hurtful things?" Millie asked in a voice that was choked with tears.

Grampa got down on one knee and hugged her again, thinking he needed to find some way to explain divorce to Millie. It had to be in a way she could understand and, suddenly, the perfect idea came to him. Grampa held Millie out so he could look in her eyes as he said, "How about you and me taking a little walk down to the park? I think it's time we go for an ice cream cone."

Reluctantly, Millie agreed and she took Grampa's hand when he offered it. It was a nice walk and Grampa's hand felt comfortable and safe holding hers. After he paid the vendor for their cones, they walked a little further down the little winding path, under the thick canopy of trees, past an old woman feeding pigeons, until they came to an empty bench.

After they had been sitting there for awhile, Grampa pointed to her cone and said, "You know, honey, falling in love and getting married are a lot like your ice cream cone there. You got one scoop and you took a lick. It tasted so good that you asked for another scoop right on the top of that one."

Millie was busy licking the little drips that were starting to run down the side of her cone to say anything back, so she just nodded her head.

After a few minutes had passed, Grampa pointed up to the sky. "Today sure is hot. Yep, you can feel the heat from the sun, because there isn't a cloud in the sky. The sun's shining down on you, and it's shining down on your ice cream cone, too, but it sure looks like you're enjoying it. Yep. In spite of all the drips running down your fingers and onto your hands, it must be pretty darn good, because the faster it melts, the faster you're licking to stop all of the dripping."

Millie nodded again. What Grampa said was true. The drips were coming much faster now. Her tongue was having a terrible time keeping up with them.

Grampa saw Millie nod, so he went on to say, "Do you see those flies and gnats circling? They've been watching you enjoy your cone and they want some of that great ice cream, too. Look how they've started dive bombing from all sorts of different angles and grabbing little bites all for themselves. With the hand that isn't holding your ice cream cone, I've been watching you swiping and swatting like crazy to keep all the bugs away."

Now Millie giggled. Grampa made the bugs sound like real people who wanted her to share! Grampa giggled, too. "Now, what if Old Blue was here? Let's say that old hound dog of yours was sound asleep in the shade over there." Grampa said, pointing at the grass under a huge oak tree. Let's say he suddenly wakes up and he sees all the drips you're leaving on the sidewalk down there by your feet. He would probably lumber on over here and lap up a few of those drips with his tongue. He might even like them so much he'd try and steal a few bites from the cone in your hand!"

Millie frowned, thinking about the melting ice cream and all the pesky bugs. "I'm sure glad Old Blue's not here, too, Grampa. There isn't enough ice cream on this cone for all of us!" She said in her loud voice.

"Well, there you are, honey. You'd be swiping at the bugs with one hand, pushing Old Blue away with your elbows, and the sun would still be melting the ice cream faster than your tongue can lick to keep up with it. Seems to me like you'd be in a real predicament. Well, sweet girl, it's all a lot like marriage."

The bugs were being so pesky now that Millie was getting angry. She got up from the bench and turned quickly to the right and then to the left to get away from them, when all of a sudden --

(( P L O P ))

Millie frowned. She looked down at the pile of mushy ice cream and the cone that had landed upside-down on the ground between her feet. Sadly, she walked back over to the bench and sat down beside Grampa. Millie sighed, and after taking one last peek down at her ice cream and cone, she asked, "Grampa, how can you say this mess is like people getting married?"

"Millie, marriage can be *just like* your ice cream cone. It's just exactly what you wanted when you wanted it. The love part truly is wonderful. Sometimes, though, there are a lot of outside things that keep getting in the way. Each of those things is taking big bites and little bites, pushing, pulling and shoving, and melting down all the really good parts. Sometimes, what finally happened to your ice cream cone happens in real life to a couple's marriage, even when they're really good people."

Millie thought about her grampa's words. Getting married sure sounded like a lot of work and a lot of problems. Millie folded her arms and took a breath so big that her shoulders ached. She had made up her mind. "Grampa, I don't think I EVER want to get married."

"Millie-Me, you have to think of it this way. That ice cream cone sure was good. Yeah, it finally dropped on the sidewalk, but you worked real hard to keep it, and I'm proud of you. I hope you'll always remember that for a while, it was really, really good. Wasn't having it worth all the work in trying to keep it?"

Millie finally understood. She gave Grampa a huge hug and he hugged her back. "Yeah, Grampa. It really was worth all the work. Thank you."

Grampa smiled and kissed the top of her head. "You're welcome, sweet girl. C'mon Millie-Me. Let's go home."

The organ music jolted her back into the present, but Millicent Cole smiled -- not a big smile, mind you, but a smile just the same. Those were such perfect memories, and I'll always treasure them. Grampa, you will be terribly missed. Thank you for your love.

"Hi, Gram." Millicent was surprised again, this time, right out of her daydream. She looked up to see Douglas's tear-stained face as he plopped down in the chair beside her. "This is a double-dang, triple-dang bad day, Gram," he said through fresh tears. "First Great-Grampa dying, then Mom and Dad getting a divorce (sniffle). Why? I just don't understand. It's not fair."

"I know, Dougie, I know." Millie said as she wiped at the tears escaping down his cheek. Then she hugged him. "Let's go see your mother for a minute. I think it's time you and I walked down to the park for an ice cream cone." And after wiping at a misbehaving tear of her own with a tissue, Millie added, "Come, Dougie, let's go make a memory."