

THE SWEET CHOICE OF UNFAILING LOVE

a free short story by Penny Reeve

The child entered the old local store with a look of nervous wonder, staring first at the bells that hung above the doorway and then at the row of sweet jars on the counter. Red and white swirly humbugs, soft pink rose drops, burnt blue aniseed, there were so many. How could she choose?

'Are you makin' your mind up, or taking my time up?' The store owner asked in a voice that sounded harsher than her face.

The child twisted her fingers in the ends of her skirt, showing off a slightly grazed knee. 'Will you tell me their names, miss?'

'Who's names?' the store owner frowned, wondering at the brightness of the child before her.

'The sweets, Miss,' spoke the girl. 'Will you tell me the sweets' names?'

The store owner glanced around her shop after this unusual request, then leant forward obligingly across the counter. 'I'll tell you,' she said in a low voice, 'but I'll only tell you once so you'd better be a listenin.'

The little girl nodded.

'Now this one here,' the store owner tilted the jar of aniseed drops, 'These are called *Worry-plops*.'

The child screwed up her nose. 'They don't sound nice.'

The store owner continued her naming, tilting a jar of white peppermints. 'These are called *In-regrets*, very tasty, easy to eat a whole handful if you're not careful.'

The little girl nodded with an expression of seriousness.



The store owner paused then pointed to the third jar. 'These little chocolates each have their own name, the pointy ones are *Comforts*, the square ones *Ease*, the round ones are either *Bustle* or *Busy* depending on their centres.'

'Can't you tell by the outside?' asked the girl.

'No.' The store owner frowned. 'Sweets are a little unpredictable like that. Do you want to know any more?'

The child paused and stared at the remaining jars. 'What about them?' She pointed to the largest jar, full to the top of dusty irregular shaped toffees. 'Are they nice?'

'Are you asking if they are nice or what their name is?' The store owner asked leaning back to study the child.

'Well, the other ones don't have such pretty names so I'm thinking perhaps I should be asking about taste instead before I ask for a bag of any.'

The shop owner nodded slowly. 'I see your logic. Well then, these are quite delicious. They taste like...'

'Tell me in pictures, if you don't mind, miss,' the child interrupted.

'Pictures?'

'Yes. My tongue isn't so good. The flavours people describe don't taste on my tongue. I seem to taste things in a different way to normal folk. But if you tell me the flavour in pictures, then perhaps I'll be understanding what you mean.'

The shop owner took a breath and pulled the jar of toffees closer. The child watched and waited patiently, no longer twirling her skirt.

'These,' the shop owner commented at last, 'Are like findin' a beautiful flower, and then liftin' your eyes to see a whole field of the very same.'

The child's eyes grew wide. 'Mmm...'

'They're like comin' face to face with a hungry Bunyip and watching that Bunyip flee like his tail's on fire because he just found out your best friend eats Bunyips for breakfast!'

The child sighed in delight.

'These toffees're like swappin' your favourite day for a year of something better. They're like openin' a present to find it full of bigger presents inside. They're like findin' a view so beautiful it takes your breath away...' The store owner stopped suddenly, her eyes lifted from the child's face to stare beyond the store front window as if it were the scene she described.

'Miss?' The child fidgeted as politely as possible. 'You were saying the view was so beautiful. So beautiful and then what?'

The store owner blinked back to the store and focussed once more on the child. 'Then, my dear one, then you turn around to learn you have been given wings and may fly over

every field and river and mountain in that view, even to the heights where the wild birds build their nests.

'Wings?' The child asked in wonder. 'Real wings?'

The store owner nodded and pushed the jar of un-named toffees forward an inch.

Deep honest longing now lit up the little girl's eyes. 'May I have some?' she asked, her voice still soft in awe. She raised her hand to display the few coins that were her spending money.

'May I have as many as this much can buy?'

'No,' the store owner replied seriously. 'This kind of sweet, unlike the others, is not for sale.'

The child's face dropped. Her eyes smarted with moisture but the store owner twisted the lid of the jar and reached for the sweet tongs.

'Put your money away child, these ones are free for anyone who bothers to ask. The one who supplies them demands it be so. Put out your hands, let me fill them up.'

The child hurried to stash her money away and held out her hands as instructed. One after the other the store owner piled the toffees into the eager fingers until they were so full another toffee would have made the load fall. At this point the store owner stopped and returned the tongs to their hook. The deep sweet caramel smell of the toffees filled the store.



'Will that be all for today?' the store owner asked.

The little girl could only sigh contentment. She walked to the door of the shop, moved to one side as another customer entered then stood in the doorway holding the door open before she looked back at the store owner. 'What are these ones called?'

'I thought you didn't want to know,' returned the store owner unmoved behind the counter. 'I didn't want to know before,' answered the little girl most seriously. 'I was afraid. But not anymore. Please tell me their name so I may come back as often as I like to get some more.'

The store owner laughed lightly and screwed the lid back on the toffee jar which seemed still as full as it had before the child had even entered the store. 'Those ones, my dear, 'Are called *Unfailing Love*.'

'I thought so,' said the child and she stepped from the store, letting the door shut and the little bells tinkle.



***'But I trust in your unfailing love;
My heart rejoices in your salvation.'***

Psalm 13 verse 5.



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