

Sweet and Sour

Al shouldn't own this store. The sign says he does, but he shouldn't.

Al's Candy Store—that's what's painted on the window in red, outlined in yellow, with three little blue balloons and trailing strings floating above the word *Candy*. It's an open invitation to all children. But, there should be a law that says even if you don't like kids; if you're going to own a candy store, you should at least be able to tolerate them. There's something about candy that screams "KIDS" and someone who owns a store that sells it shouldn't hate children.

Al's Candy Store sits on the southwest corner of Bonfield and Lyman in the heart of Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood. It's on the ground floor of a three story red brick tenement with several apartments above. There's a small wooden bench in front—not much of a bench, just a plank of wood between two blocks of concrete with barely enough room for three kids. But the size doesn't matter, because Al never wants anyone sitting there anyway. "Don't be hanging around here. This ain't no bus stop," is his response as soon as two or more kids sit there longer than five minutes.

It isn't an appealing corner for a candy store. The only warm colors in sight are from Al's sign on the window. Approaching it from the other side of the block, you have to cross a pitted asphalt street and a cracked concrete sidewalk that runs to the bottom of two crumbling cement stairs that lead to a peeling dull gray door, once black.

The inside is immaculate; something expected in a neighborhood where mothers wash the curbs in front of their homes at the beginning of every spring. The wood floors are cinnamon brown

except at the glass candy case where the feet of giddy children have scuffed them white over the years. The walls are pale yellow and the ceiling's a dull cream, cracked and peeling in spots—a repair job saved for the winter months when business slows. Two ceiling fans sputter slowly overhead, barely able to push the air from their blades let alone comfort any patrons wilting below with sweat droplets crawling past their cheeks and down their necks until wiped away with a quick swipe of their hand.

Upon entering, the sweet aroma takes your senses hostage. Your eyes are immediately drawn to the glass encased counter that stretches the length of the store. And when you inhale, the smell of sugar waters your mouth with every breath taken. There's candy from one end of the counter to the other: Hershey, Zagnut, and Almond Joy bars are mixed between Mary Janes, Nik L Nips, Bulls Eyes, Slo Pokes and every treat a kid could imagine; all just lying there—waiting. You can hear the candy beckoning you. And if it wasn't for the glass encasing this treasure chest just inches away, you would gladly oblige their siren call.

Bob, Kenny, Jerry and I race across Bonfield to Al's Candy Store, dodging the screeching car that blares a horn and ejects a waving arm screaming, "Goddamn kids!!"

Being the fastest, I'm the first to reach the door; which means I'm the first to enter and the first to buy. That's the rule.

I know I have to decide wisely. Candy too quickly consumed leaves nothing more than swift sweet memories. I won't let craving alone determine my choice. No, that'll be tempered by the

pittance of change fingered in the depths of my pocket. And I know there ain't much there; there never is.

As I sidestep down the counter, pausing at my favorite candies and pressing my fingers to the glass, out of the corner of my eyes I glimpse him standing there. He seems 110 years old—stoop shouldered, thin and wrinkled, with a scowl permanently etched on his face beneath his furrowed brow. He never really looks *at* you; he cuts *into* you through those tiny slits that hide the color of his eyes. Pointing his spindly fingers, he yells:

“Don't touch the counter! You're gettin your fingerprints all over it! Whataya want!?” His voice sounds as if his throat is coated with sand.

“I...Uh...I'm not sure. I'm still lookin.”

“Well, hurry up! I ain't got all day. How much you buyin?”

“I got a quarter.” Then, backing away from the counter, “Uh...uh...uh...I'll have one Slo-Poke.” (Slo-Poke is always a good choice; a six inch piece of flattened caramel on a stick lasts a long time, a bargain for five cents).“And ...uh... uh...”

Before my next choice is made, Al drops the Slo-Poke in a small brown paper bag and starts his running tally, “Okay, ya got twenty cents left. What else!?”

“Uh...let's see...uh...I'll have three Mary Janes.”

“Okay, fourteen cents more. Hurry up, what else!?”

He glances up as his darting eyes fix on Kenny, Bob and Jerry wandering in another section of the store. “Whataya lookin for over there?” he shouts as they near the rubber balls and pinwheels. “Don’t touch nuttin!”

When curiosity ignores his command and discovering fingers fondle the forbidden balls and pinwheels, Al’s quick with his next edict, “All right, I told you not to touch that stuff! Get outside! I don’t want more than two kids in here at a time.”

Jerry, Kenny and Bob stand rigid, dropping their hands to their sides. Their ashen faces turn to Al, then me, then each other. Kenny and Jerry slink from the store as Bob stays.

It’s quiet now as Bob and I hurriedly make our choices, take our paper bags, and leave. We do as we are told.

We do as we are told because we are children of mothers who wash the curbs in front of their homes at the start of every spring.

We listen, because this is Al’s candy store and he owns it—even though he shouldn’t.