

*Aaron Hahn*

**Girl from the Candyland**

"LOOK, DADDY," Emma exclaimed in delight, pointing at the hot air balloon in the blue sky, "There's a man in the balloon!"

The bright sun made the daddy squint, but he also spotted the man in the basket waving at the crowds in the street as if all the people in Bristol were his friends.

"Darling, you are quite right! He IS there," he said.

Then, he gently grabbed her waist with two hands and put her on his shoulders as if Emma were a little pet bird.

"Can you see him better now?" he asked, "Do you want to fly too, little bunny?"

While young Emma was making cheerful noises on top of her daddy tower, her mum came out of a legal office with a cold disgusted look on her face. She had lovely long brown hair and was wearing a warm red dress that matched her daughter's red cashmere beanie hat. To celebrate the rare family reunion, the parents took the girl to a mall and bought her dolls, a cute romper, and a puzzle.

The girl especially adored the puzzle artwork depicting everything she liked about her neighborhood. It captured a splendid spring day in the charming harbor town. World famous Clifton Suspension Bridge sitting 75 metres above the water below, the Bristol International Balloon Fiesta which was Europe's largest annual meeting of hot air balloons, the quirky vistas along the River Avon with colourful toy-like houses, etc. Although Emma didn't know their names, she felt them through colors and shapes like roses and lilies and daffodils and poppies.

After shopping, Emma asked her daddy if she could go to the candy store she visited once. Her daddy told her that sweets are not good for her teeth but her mother said she didn't have to listen to her daddy all the time.

"Your daddy can't always decide everything, can he? The judge said I'm in charge today, Richard. Remember that. After all, today is a special day, sweetheart," she said, driving faster.

She didn't know the candy store Emma was talking about but found one on the internet and they were there shortly. Treasure Island Sweets. It was a classically decorated bright red store situated opposite of an identical looking yellow bookstore. A poster on its front door claimed, "The Original Bristol Sweet Shop," which seemed fitting even in Emma's eyes.

The girl ran towards it and leaned her head against the window glass. There were all sorts of old fashioned retro sweets to choose from. Her eyes twinkled as she glanced at the lindt chocolate gold bear packs, lollypop selection jars, and retro selection jars full of candies on display.

"Go on, sweetheart," her mum said indulgently, opening the door, "Get some candies you want."

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"Strange. She doesn't like candies. She never..." Emma's daddy said, looking at the girl.

When she entered the store, a middle aged man in a smart brown checkered suit with a white handkerchief sticking out of his upper pocket welcomed her. His hairline was receding but he didn't have a lot of wrinkles. He had the most outrageously exquisite mustache - in the shape of V. With big round blinking eyes behind a pair of glasses, he said, "How do you do? I tell you what, I bet you are doing excellent indeed today, and I know it. You know why?"

"How do you know?" the girl said as her parents came in behind her.

"Well, you look like an angelically beautiful young lady who's got lots of goodies in the first place. But more excitingly, you just happened to be here on a special day at a special time. Congratulations! You are our one millionth customer!"

"Darling, you are the luckiest girl in the world, aren't you?" a female store clerk remarked next to him like a chorus singer who glorifies a star with a minimum enthusiasm and abundance of digression.

"Yes, of course. You really are lucky because...you know why?" he asked the girl with everlasting enthusiasm, exaggerated gestures, and a high pitched voice like an old comedian.

"Why, sir?" she asked politely, holding her daddy's hand.

"Because you can taste all you want today and choose a free basket of candies of your choice or..." he said as if he were waiting for her to reciprocate his excitement.

"Or?" she said happily.

"Or you can create your own flavor of candies here and get it as a gift. We have given this option to every one thousandth customer we had but most of them chose the bestseller flavor package right here," he said, showing a small basket of boring looking candies, "Anyway, would you like to take a picture with me to remember this special event? Arnie." Arnie, the part timer, appeared from behind the man with a polaroid camera. He looked about 18 and was wearing a pink bow tie and a little bunny hat.

"Video mode, Arnie. Shoot... Ok...We have over 2,000 varieties of candies, chocolates, red fruits, nuts. we have them all. Over this way, we have our whole American, Asian, all different types of candies from abroad," the man kept talking like that without any sign of fatigue.

"You should try this one first," the man said, handing out starbursts.

"It's yummy, fruity, and chewy," Emma said.

"What about this? Crunchy like a cookie but sweet, isn't it?" he said, giving her a piece of a chocolate bar.

"This one is sweet and sour," she said, tasting the sour balls.

"Yes, that's right! You just have all the right words. Brilliant!"

Then, she tried Hershey bars and fluff marshmallows. One by one, she tried every single one of the candies on display for almost an hour - a

choke-full of sweets of every description, including bubble gums.

Now it became obvious that Emma was unexpectedly taking too long choosing her candies. Well, she was five years old and didn't know the nature of business niceties with three axioms: come, buy, and leave quickly. The store owner accordingly seemed to have lost his enthusiasm by then and Arnie stopped making the video. Other staff were busy greeting new customers, packing candies, and counting paper bills.

Her parents were sitting on two different corners. Her daddy was playing with Dracula Teeth while her mum was talking on the phone.

"I see my mum once a year... Mr. Dunbar," Emma said to the store owner abruptly, as she felt more comfortable with him without realizing that he was a tad bit exhausted by her lingering there.

"You can read?" He said, glancing at the name tag on his chest. "That's too bad. Can I ask you why?"

"I don't know why but my mum said it's better for us that way for now," she said.

Mr. Dunbar turned around and saw her mum playing with her hair and talking to someone on the phone the way a typical girl talks to her lover. Her daddy on the other corner was checking out his watch and female customers, with his eyes fixed on a pair of straight legs in stockings.

"So what are you going to do with all of those candies?" Mr. Dunbar said, looking at Emma's basket with quite a load of sweets.

"It's for my mum," she whispered secretly, "because she can't see me every day. She calls me sweetheart. So she can have one sweet a day, thinking of me. Then we will meet again a year later. And she will still remember me," she said, showing her tiny white teeth.

Mr. Dunbar banded down and looked at her eyes more closely, which made Emma giggled quietly. He said, "It's a wonderful idea...Why, I will throw some lucky charms for you as well. After all, it's our country's favourite."

"Thank you very much Mr. Dunbar!" she said. Then the girl and her parents left the store with a big basket of candies.

Emma liked it when she saw her mother walking on her left side while her daddy was walking on her right side. There was a certain rhythm to their steps like music. The music she learned from Ms. Emily's class. Indeed, she began to hum softly and imagined flying. She felt as though she could fly anywhere. And she could do anything. Then she carefully decided that it's the right moment.

"For you, mum," Emma finally said, handing her mum the candy basket proudly, "365 candies. You can have one everyday."

"Ow, sweetheart," her mum shouted, phone in hand - she seemed to be irritated by the male voice coming from the phone - "But they all taste the same. Overly sweet at first and disgusting at the end...Give them to your daddy."

Minutes later, Emma's mum got in her car and drove away. After that,

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Emma and her daddy walked towards the train station. She was still holding the same basketful of candies but something felt different. Emma looked around to see if anything had changed but couldn't tell. Then she noticed that the balloon had gone when she looked up to the sky.