

by Tobey Crockett

The first time Cameron saw the empty storefront, destination of many of her childhood sorties in search of tongue-searing candies and space age frosting, a small gasp escaped her lips. “Oh,” she squeaked involuntarily as she felt bittersweet pangs of nostalgia wash over her on this crisp October day. Walter's International News & Tobacco had once nestled at the corner of the building on 92nd street, its gleaming windows beckoning to the children from a sootcovered Beaux Arts facade.

Cameron used to trail the gang of older kids she idolized the few blocks from home to this corner of Broadway – a central artery of the vast treasure house that was the Manhattan of her girlhood. The “candy store,” as they called it, was tucked under the cornice of the twelve story former glory at 2477 Broadway. All gone now, she thought with a resigned shrug. Today the apartments above her were renting for a ransom, but back in the day, as she recalled it, a genteel sort of depression governed the city and it was not nearly so crowded. Which was worse? It was hard to say. Stepping out of the stream of pedestrians to pause, she hunkered into the doorway for a minute and peered inside.

The New York of Cameron's youth was vanished, and this empty storefront may well vanish too, she surmised. Could anyone afford to put a simple mom and pop business anywhere on the Upper West Side, she wondered. She detested the morass of gentrification that now claimed the long slender island where she first kissed, first spoke French, first ran away from home. It

rankled her that every time she returned home to New York, more and more of what she felt was her hometown had simply melted into the slipstream of the past, like so much sudsy rinse water spiraling down the drain of a sub-basement laundry room. But at least you can walk down the street without being accosted for change or hearing lewd suggestions every two feet, she sniffed to herself. That was an improvement, she conceded.

Shading her eyes from ambient glare, Cameron guessed that the last time she had been in the candy store, she was probably about nine – all colt legs, long blonde hair and bangs. A regular little pony of a girl, though she wouldn't have known it at the time. Squinting her eyes to gaze into the dusty windows of the corner shop, she saw that it was completely empty, except for a long lost red plastic milk crate declaring itself the property of Dairy Maid. Her eyes lingered over the the dirty porcelain mosaic floor, its blackened grout and hexagonal tesserae attesting to decades of cold water mopping, spilled coffee and the ground-in dirt of tens of thousands of pairs of New York shoes stopping in to buy a Daily News, a pack of violet gum, cigarettes, baseball cards or to peruse the pornographic titles tucked semi-discreetly in the back of the joint.

Cameron recalled her own giddy feelings of walking here unattended, some four blocks from home where she lived on Riverside Drive. Unimaginable today, she thought grimly, as she fingered the glass onto which golden magnetic tape still clung, masking the wires of a now long defunct alarm system. Kids today had no opportunity to run around the streets playing Ring-a-Leerio, or learning to roller skate, play stick ball or sled down Dead Man's Hill without adult supervision. Trick or treaters would soon be out and about, but none of them would be as nonchalantly released into the neighborhood as she and her compatriots had been. I sound like a bonafide curmudgeon, she thought humorlessly as she continued to survey the abandoned tobacconist shop.

She loved the tiles of the floor, set by hand into graceful patterns, especially the street number 2447 which declared itself elegantly in a dark mediterranean blue, a motif echoed in a border all around the floor of the tiny space. She was reminded of the Pompeian room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art – they had similar a mosaic floor in there, she recalled. They don't build them like this any more, she thought, and hoped that whatever new business came in would leave that old floor intact.

There used to be built in shelves, she recollected, holding racks of candy displays, paper backs, and books of crossword puzzles, hidden words and jumbles with which to kill the creeping time. Waist high vitrines contributed to the effect of being inside a multifaceted jewel, their glass shelves holding cigar boxes in many tropical colors. The bright boxes squawked like a case of muted parrots, their tobacco leaf legs banded tight with gold foil stamps, lined up beneath the sloe-eyed gaze of sensuously composed women on far away islands. Lovely and beguiling, those cigar boxes were filled with promises of grade school craft projects: rarely realized adventures in banjo making, African thumb pianos and the like. She smiled and caught her reflection in the window, startled to realize she had been lost in thought so long.

She licked her lips, smoothed her hair and straightened her shrunken black riding jacket, which was getting hitched up in her big shoulder bag. You have to carry so much crap with you when you don't have a car, she snarled internally, briefly missing her new home in California to her surprise. She shifted in her sturdy split hide cowboy boots, their clunkiness anchoring her silhouette in a knee length black and white vintage dress and black tights, as she slung the big canvas bag behind her, supported by her hip and elbow. She lingered for a moment more as she thought of the old fashioned candy they had when she was a kid: waxy lips filled with sugar liquid, tiny packets of confetti sized gum, pixie sticks of sweet and sour-flavored powdered

sugars and a plethora of sticky, chewy, salty and nutty candy bars. Comic books too had been on her list of coveted items, once she finally learned to read. She liked Betty and Veronica, Richie Rich and Casper the Friendly Ghost, but she often read whatever was left around by the older kids.

Thinking of comics at that age reminded Cameron of being alone in a friend's apartment, where she found an eerie E.C. Comic laying on the table. The home belonged to a big rollicking family and she was free to let herself in and out. Many of the kids in the big building did the same – it was, she realized, a kind of vertical neighborhood. Cameron gave a shudder, recalling that surreal afternoon. She remembered that the television news was blaring away, with live scenes from the front lines of the Vietnam War while the then new Beatles album was loudly playing “She's So Heavy” from Abbey Road in the other room. The scary wails of the guitar, the sonorous pounding of the bass and the screeching sounds of wind combined with the zombie-like figure on the comic book cover and the growing body count of the dead on the screen. These things were forever locked together in her impressionable mind. Life in those days was a trip, no matter whether you were on drugs or not, she thought with a tight grimace. So full of promise and conflict all at once. She pulled her jacket tight around her once again, as though she felt a chill. Someone is walking on my grave, she thought, with a shiver, and a few brown maple leaves scurried past her boots.

She turned to face the street, away from the window and smiled again as the warmth of the October sunshine hit her full in the face. She remembered standing at this corner as a teeny girl of five or six and seeing an amazingly handsome and strikingly tall black man come striding up the street. He was wearing a brown ribbed turtleneck, a golden leather sports jacket and black pants and the world's most outrageous footwear. He was glorying in all the attention, as folks

could clearly not tear their eyes away from his massive, clear plexiglass platform shoes which had a pair of live goldfish swimming around in the heels. Cameron chuckled, still giving a slight shake of her head at the theatricality of that long ago moment. Yes, New York City and the Mod counterculture of the Beautiful People had been something to behold. No wonder she had wanted to be a 'flower child' when she grew up! How long ago was *that?*, she asked herself rhetorically and then with a pang, looked at the time. Collecting her thoughts, she swiftly continued her walk down Broadway.

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The next time Cameron saw the retail establishment at 2447 Broadway, a small gasp again escaped her lips. "Oh," she squeaked with wonder, like a child at Christmas. Indeed, it was the holiday season, and the old candy store was utterly revitalized. Amazingly enough, it still sold candy. Only now the candies were sumptuous chocolates, enrobed in luxurious packaging and satin bows, offered to the gaze of passersby on lovely architectural cake stands and set in a window display that invited lingering.

Cameron did so, gazing inside, rapt by the magical sparkles of a hundred or so crystal tear drops that had escaped from their chandeliers, all invisibly strung above an apparent snow scene. Folds of soft white batting were lit from below, glistening with faux snow while all kinds of small white plastic horses and unicorns pranced among the tiers of bonbons. The sweetness of the scene was offset nicely by the dark gleam of piled up shapes, some dusted with cocoa, some sprinkled with gold, some striped and all of them mouth-watering. And there was something else....

To underscore that there was a little bit of evil abroad in that good way that evil can be, there were a few dark chocolate imps hiding behind white trees, or nestled in the drifts. They were not to be mistaken for elves or something saccharine, despite their red ribbon decorations. No, these creatures were about to ambush those piles of chocolate, if only they could get to them before the customers could!

Cameron couldn't help but laugh with appreciation at the wit with which the whole presentation was orchestrated – the angelic and the naughty, all combined in total seduction. “Black Widow Chocolatier” said the window in great big Baroque loopy letters. And she went inside. There was a small line, giving Cameron ample opportunity to look about the shop before it was her turn at the long white marble counter that dominated the rear of the store. She looked down and saw the same old mosaic tile floor, now softly gleaming up at her.

Cameron had always had a keen sense of smell, and she was now quasi-intoxicated not only by the strong scent of chocolate and sugar, but undertones of vanilla, maple, honey and coffee. There were hints of fruitiness, citrus and even ambergris. As she lingered over a case that was piled high with caramels, she caught the homey aroma of melted butter while the sea salt brought her instantly to the shore. What a magical place, she thought appreciatively and turned her gaze to the proprietress.

Cameron turned her head first one way and then the other, for she suddenly had the notion that she knew this woman, this black-clad baroness of bonbons. Cameron crept closer, ostensibly looking at a beguiling stack of beribboned boxes in golden striped wrapping paper with black accents – very elegant, Cameron noted with approval, but wasn't this a woman who had lived with her elderly parents back in Cameron's old apartment building at Riverside Drive? They had emigrated from Eastern Europe, refugees from pogroms or the Holocaust or both, she

recalled. If it were her, she'd have to be over seventy by now, Cameron quickly calculated.

Despite their sympathetic circumstances, all the kids had been a bit afraid of that particular grown daughter. She was not a petite person, in fact she was rather large and wore dark bouclé knit suits whose puffiness only enlarged her daunting physique. She was perhaps rather *robust*, if one were searching for a favorable cant on the whole first impression thing, mused Cameron, and she had had truly raven black hair and matching bristly eyebrows to match. Striking or handsome one might say, but never beautiful. She had had a powerful laugh, as Cameron recalled hearing it while she shrank back behind her mother's legs. *Mommy don't talk to her*, she remembered thinking. *Andrew said that woman is a witch!*

Pulling herself together in the lovely chocolate shop, Cameron straightened her backbone and lifted her chin to her full height – all five foot two of her. She certainly didn't think it was a bad thing to be a 'witch' in this day and age, but how was it possible that this could be the same woman all these years later? She didn't appear to have aged a day, and certainly didn't look like a seventy year old. Finally it was her turn at the marble top counter, and Cameron gave the owner her unwavering gaze as she smiled and asked, “Do you make these all yourself?”

“Oh absolutely,” replied the woman heartily in an accented contralto. “Old family recipes from the Old Country,” she said with an easy grace. In response to Cameron raised eyebrows, she added, “From just outside Torun, in Poland. It is famous for its gingerbread and other confections,” she proffered, and handed Cameron a sample.

As she reached for the paper cup with a small chocolate covered morsel, Cameron took in the proprietress's smooth skin, her sharply drawn eyebrows and piercing eyes. She couldn't help but notice the rich red lipstick which delineated this woman's generous mouth. She was looking at those lips curved in a soft smile when she opened her own to taste the treat she'd been given.

“Mmm,” she moaned almost unwillingly. A buttery, rich gingerbread unlike any she had ever tasted was drenched in a cinnamon-scented coating studded with praline. “Oh wow! I had no idea Poland was a place for such exquisite confections,” she said, almost blushing. This woman was having quite an effect on her, she realized uncomfortably.

Cameron looked down for a moment, and frowned. She squinted at the amazon in front of her and asked, “Is it possible that I know you? From a long time ago?” She bristled at herself for sounding like a Valley girl, all questions and rising intonations at the end of a sentence. She cleared her throat and consciously lowered her voice. “I mean, did you live at 180 Riverside Drive by any chance?”

The woman just brushed this aside with a throaty laugh, and said, “Oh, people say things like that to me all of the time. I just must have one of those faces,” she said archly and then, “How can I be of further assistance to you today?” Her gaze flickered beyond Cameron, over her shoulder as the door opened again. Cameron felt a slight wave of impatience float over her from behind, as people shuffled their parcels from one arm to another, and the silence began to swell.

“What are you looking for?” the woman asked encouragingly, warmly even. A beautiful intensity came from the depths of her eyes, and Cameron felt like she was seeing an old friend, or relative, or even something more. She felt a little bit drunk, she realized. What was in that candy?

“You mean besides finding true love and a winning lottery ticket, fame and fortune?” Cameron asked with a laugh. She surprised herself with this truthful answer. It was not like her to bare herself to strangers. After all, she was a New Yorker, and we just don't *do* those kinds of things, she reminded herself.

“We do our best to offer complete service at Black Widow Chocolatier,” the owner said with

a knowing laugh. “Special orders take a while longer,” she said. “But take my card, and we'll see what we can do,” she said in more of a whisper. “For now,” she said waving her hands gracefully over the counter, “Perhaps a box of assorted truffles for your grandmother, your aunts, someone nice?”

“I do have a grandmother and aunts in mind,” said Cameron with some astonishment. “Yes, let's do that!” and she completed her purchase for several boxed pounds of truffles and gingerbread bonbons, all the while holding tightly to the business card in the pocket of her black winter coat until she left, her purchases stowed in a chic glossy black shopping bag.

Walking up the street, she pulled the card back out and read, “Madame Pomerantz ~ Black Widow Chocolatier” and the address and hours of business. Cameron tucked the talisman back into her pocket and wondered if Madame Pomerantz could really make good on her implied promise to find Cameron's true love. She shook her head, knowing it was silly, but some inner voice counseled her not to be too cynical for once.

Don't I *want* to believe in magic and true love?, she acknowledged truthfully. How can I hope to find a magical love if I won't let the slightest whiff of it ever enter my life? She shook her head ruefully. Maybe in California, she thought with a sigh. New York is just too... too... *New York* to ever allow anything as sentimental as magic to take place, she scolded herself. She steeled herself to join the throngs barreling down the street.

And that's when she stepped off the curb and felt her knees inexplicably buckle, practically diving into the arms of a tall handsome man. “Oh,” she breathily murmured as she fell against him, losing her balance and her composure all at once. As the man she would later learn was named David helped her to pick up her packages and giant shoulder bag, he brushed off a few stray snowflakes that were falling from thin air just overhead.

“I'm so sorry,” she started lamely.

“Don't be,” he replied warmly.

They goofily stood there, aswoon in that mutual recognition between strangers that presages utter rapture, and she felt her heart fall away into the breezeway of Broadway and she knew that it was done.

New York might be too sophisticated for magic – but thank God she wasn't, she thought with a smile.