

IT'S *JUST CHOCOLATE*

Another Time in L.A.

Written by

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The little bell tinkled as I opened the door of the shop. Ah. Just like I remembered. Amidst the Christmas decorations, the smell of chocolate filled the air, that sensuous, smooth scent unlike any other.

I took a deep breath, smiled, and walked in, grateful I'd found the place again. It used to be everywhere: Allen Wertz on Wilshire, Allen Wertz in the old Town and Country Shopping Center on 3rd and Fairfax, Allen Wertz at their home store on Los Feliz. Their candy was always better, richer, less sweet than See's, a little more expensive, but worth it. That's why I can't understand why See's is everywhere and the only place you can find Allen Wertz now is pre-packaged in Gelson's, and in this dinky little shop on Glendale Boulevard. I had panicked when I went to their original store on Los Feliz and it had mutated into a Payless. The Allen Wertz family had been making chocolate there since 1931. Their recipes had been handed down through *generations*. I couldn't believe they'd move *here* from the building they owned, where they hand-made all the candy – the English Toffee, the thin mints, the peanut butter chews, the Bridge mix, the dark and light creams and nougats, and, best of all, the turtles.

My brothers and I liked the bittersweet turtles, just like Daddy did. Dark chocolate with almonds or with pecans – I could never make up my mind. I had to have both. My grandmother, Baba, liked the light chocolate ones, but she was an aberration. My mother, always the rebel, preferred English toffee. But thank God nobody in my family wanted white chocolate, which is a lie anyway – there’s no such thing as ‘white’ chocolate, it’s just some perverted form of wax.

My family’s favorite shop was the one nearest Hancock Park, in the Town and Country. It wasn’t so much that going there was a treat, because we pretty much got what we asked for, but it was a tradition. Mary had the night off on Thursdays, so we always went out to dinner. If we didn’t go to DL’s for J.J.’S, Suzie Q’s and Z sauce, or Ollie Hammond’s for steak sandwiches, then it was the Town and Country. Fisher’s for double hamburgers with thousand island, or for Fish and Chips, depending on how deep-fried we wanted to get. Except for my mother, who refused to conform and insisted on going to Andre’s for spaghetti. That was a time when the Town and Country had shade trees gently draped over the patios, which were extensions of the unique shops and restaurants. It was where I strolled with my girlfriends after 6th period at Fairfax High, giggling and flirting with boys, and it was where I bought my first Beatles single. That was long

before the infestation of Sav-on and K-mart shoppers and Ralph's double coupons drove out the small businesses. After we had dinner, always sitting together no matter where we ordered, we got our eagerly anticipated dessert on the way out. For the French, maybe it's petit fours or tarte tatin, or the Italians, tiramisu or gelato. But for us, it was a stop at the little corner Allen Wertz shop. It was always the same blue-haired saleswomen who waited on us, the ones who migrated from one L.A. institution to the next. The bell tinkled its lilting tones when the door opened, and molecules of sugar floated in the air, waiting to be claimed. And always, always, no matter what else we got, there were turtles for everyone.

The chocolate was dense, dark and rich, the caramel creamy and not too sweet, the nuts fresh and in whole pieces – the perfect combination of crunch and tang and sugar and chew and melting. We'd eagerly accept any samples offered – even marzipan – while waiting for the good stuff to be wrapped. Then we'd have the real thing when we got home to the big house on McCadden.

When everyone had their fill, mother and daddy hid the extras in the butler's pantry, always in the same cupboard next to the Pall Mall drawer. As if no one would figure it out.

They never lasted the night.

When my parents moved to the condo on the wrong side of Beverly Hills, my mother became a full-time turncoat, and migrated to Littlejohn's Toffee, in the Farmer's Market. It was just across the street from Fisher's and Andre's and the corner Allen Wertz, but a whole world away. Just like now.

I was startled when the stillness in the Glendale shop was broken by the tinkling bell. I watched as the single customer strolled out with her peppermint stix. This place should be bustling, but there wasn't a soul here except me and the woman behind the counter. The saleslady beckoned me towards the cash register. Her nametag read "Brenda". I explained to Brenda that I had trouble finding this store, couldn't believe they'd moved. She shrugged, unconcerned: guess they got a lot of money for their building, and now they make all their candy up in Chino, anyway. Too expensive here. I gulped, had a queasy feeling, as I explained I always bring the waitresses at Art's Deli a three pound box of Allen Wertz chocolates for the holidays. It's been my tradition for the past decade, because they take such good care of me through the year. When I go in by myself, if I want to be left alone to read or work, they leave me alone. If my attention isn't buried in a piece of paper of some kind, they'll engage in conversation. They instinctively know. So I like to show my appreciation for their

kindness. Kitty and Carol, gone now from cancer, always oohed and aahed over the entire assortment. Sybil's favorites are the nougats, Roberta's the creams, Sascha's the chews. I tried to make Brenda understand that Art's wait-staff *like* that I don't just go and buy the ubiquitous See's. Brenda nodded, pretending for a moment that it mattered to her. I backed off, not wanting to intrude on her apathy. I wandered around the small space, peering through the glass display cases while Brenda was packing up the traditional three-pounder, wrapping it with a pretty green and red bow. I was looking for something specific. I became anxious. I couldn't find them. I looked again. And again.

No turtles.

I don't eat them anymore, but my heart was pounding loud anyway. I strolled back to the cash register, casual, commenting that they were out of turtles. Must've had a run on them. Not gotten their shipment in from *Chino*. Brenda the saleswoman scrunched up her forehead. She didn't know what I was talking about. I could barely breathe as I described the turtles, the layers, the taste, the damn crunch, the chewy but doesn't get stuck in your teeth texture. She relaxed, the light dawning: oh, those. We don't make 'em anymore. I must've looked stricken, because she apologized, with a shrug: sorry. I was determined she must be wrong. I

argued that that was impossible. Unacceptable. Allen Wertz ALWAYS made turtles. ALWAYS. For the last, oh, 100 years. There's an upscale version at Neiman's, but they're way too big, overdone like everything else at Needless Mark-up. And Edelweiss, the hand-made chocolatier on Canon Drive, *they* have them, but they're not even *close*. And Godiva? Give me a break. Tasteless. Overpriced. *Viscous*. I was still protesting as I paid for my three-pound assortment. Brenda ushered me out, patting my shoulder, no doubt anxious to get rid of the babbling, pissed-off person in front of her.

I stood on the sidewalk, stunned. I couldn't move. Shit.

Now I'm going to have to go to the Farmer's Market. The new version – the Grove. At least I know they have homemade turtles at Littlejohn's, nestled right next to my mother's English toffee. My mother always was ahead of her time. But damn, I'll miss those tinkling bells...