

F.J. And Sons Chocolate Wonders

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The store is what you needed it to be. An apology to a spouse, a gift to a friend, or a birthday trip for your son. No matter who walks through the door, and who makes the little bell above the threshold ring, they find what they need. But like most things that fit their roll so well, you must know where to look lest you pass it by.

At least that's how it started, when the street was new, and the bright yellow awning was one among many. When the streets were still cobbles and not laid brick. When the roads grew fully dark and the new buzz of gas lights didn't keep the illusion of a never-fading twilight. When more oxen passed the storefront than popping, cranky automobiles. Now, the shop's name is known far beyond the faded sign that reads: F. J. And Sons: Chocolate Wonders.

Inside, the smell greets you like a friend. Children most of all know the scent of sweets, especially chocolate. A hint of bitterness, a sweet cream that melts on your tongue and lingers. The memory returns easily.

The store, like the street, is alive with new electricity. From either wall, brass fixtures hold warm yellow light. Dark oak shelves stand guard beneath the light, lined with boxes, tins, and spools of ribbon colored the same yellow as the awning. As you walk further inside, you pass a pair of barrels. One is labeled in red: Chocolate covered pomegranate seeds. The other labeled in green: happy accidents! Free samples! One per customer. Each nugget in the barrel is misshaped, some fused together, others too small, or formed in lumpy messes.

You take one. It's a small piece, supposed to be in a square shape, but one side is too short. It still tastes the same, though. Smooth chocolate, with the double crunch of salt and the layer of wafer hidden inside.

Though the barrels are nice, you move past them, enjoying the last remnants of the wafer stuck between your teeth. There are greater treasures, and more answers to be had within the

store. They lay in the cases.

Oh, the cases: the jewel that draws in customers and makes them stay long enough to see every sweet behind the thick glass. Either side of the store is lined in the cases. The cabinet on the back wall stretches floor to ceiling. You crouch to see under the counter, smiling at the smudges left behind by children's eager faces and grimy fingers as they peered in at F. J. And Sons' Chocolate Wonders.

Each case holds three shelves, and each shelf holds three trays. Each of those holds a different breed of chocolate, sitting primarily on paper wrappers, with a card that describes them. In red, loopy letters, the first says: blood orange-cream truffles. It marks rows of dark brown spheres dusted in orange zest. You take time to read each label, but not time enough to remember them.

Salted caramel nuggets. Pecan-sprinkled bars. White chocolate disks. Marbled white and dark chocolates that color a molded heart, a bow, a bull. Each cases you pass increases in price until you reach the back wall, where instead of trays, bell jars hold individual sculptures.

These aren't molded. They are carved by hand, by either F. J. or his sons. The first is a horse, reared on its hind legs, dark brown mane streaming behind it as if caught in the wind. The next holds a swan, neck arched just so. One is a bird's nest, with white chocolate eggs cracked open among the branches, and baby birds with their beaks opened towards the ceiling. You don't dare look at the prices, and instead turn hoping that no one never bring themself to eat such works of art.

There is much simply *right* with the store, in a way no one can deny it, but that doesn't mean it's perfect. There are cracks in the plaster walls. The lights flicker. Patrons track in dirt that is yet to be swept. The smudges on the cases give it character. The flecked paint on the counter top speaks to many years of service. If the store was too pristine, it might lose its magic.

You can't decide on one chocolate. There are too many. With the hint of the salt still in your mouth, you can't choose whether to try something new or indulge in more of the same.

But the store has something for even the indecisive. All it takes is a quick word to the cashier, “surprise me” and in seconds, a yellow box is placed in front of you, the top labeled as everything else: F. J. And Sons: Chocolate Wonders.

You pay, and thank the cashier, and snag another free sample on your way out the door. In places like this, “one per customer” always meant “take one for the road.”

Chocolates in hand, hat tipped back on your brow, and coat folded over the crook of your elbow, you only have one choice left: whether to share your treats at home or to enjoy every one yourself.