

Sugar

by Cheryl Diane Kidder

At first we thought we could get by using honey so we all stormed the SuperMart and cleaned the shelves out of Suzie Bee Honey. First the jars and then the squeeze bottles, but it wasn't the same.

Then Mary Sue yelled out "How about brown sugar?" and we all ran over to the baking aisle, but by the time I got there all the little brown and white boxes were gone. There was just a fine powder on the rim of the shelf and a line of it on the floor. I thought about getting down on my knees and licking it up, but figured the maiden aunts standing in line behind me might think that unseemly.

Radley, the manager at the SuperMart, stood behind the register licking his chops to see us all swarming over his store, buying up everything in sight. It didn't seem to bother him that his shelves were quickly emptying. I figured he probably had a secret stash in the back somewhere, and I suggested this to cousin Erma in a whisper.

"I bet that old Mr. Radley has a pile of sugar boxes in the back." Erma just stared at me, her mouth hanging open, a little drool starting.

"Let's go see," she told me and grabbed the sleeve of my sweater and pulled me toward the back of the store. She was in a bad way.

But Radley was faster than us. He'd already bolted the back door. I gave the handle a good shake just in case, to see if it might be loose or if maybe a quick yank with a crowbar would free it, but it was solid and didn't move a breath. Erma put her nose up to the crack in the double door and sniffed in.

"He's got sugar back there. I can smell it," she told me, not taking her nose off the door.

A crowd had gathered behind us, thinking we were on to something and not wanting to miss out. Even the maiden aunts had caught up. I hadn't seen them walk so fast since the Fourth of July

party about five years ago when Arnold brought out his homemade corn liquor and sold it for a dollar a jelly jar.

I tried to pull Erma away from the door. The crowd was pressing in on us and it was getting tough to breath or move much.

"Come on Erma, we can find something else. Nothing to see here." I pulled and pulled but she was on the scent and I had to leave her there.

I wandered over to the row of Formica tables lined up outside the deli part of the store. Usually, Sam the cop and Fred the barber could be found sitting in one of these tables, taking a coffee break, talking about the weather, or a stray dog or what Radley's wife was up to this week. But nobody was there now. I looked around me. The crowd was still at the back door, pressing in on Erma and for a minute I did feel a twinge of guilt. But I knew the maiden aunts would look after her. I mean, what could really happen? Nothing really bad ever happened here.

I slid into one of the small tables and had a look-see behind the napkin holder. The sugar holder was there but stark empty. Not even the fake stuff left. I got up and sat down back down in every little table until I hit the one in the very back. The one back by the bathrooms that nobody likes to sit in because it usually stinks back there.

I folded the pile of napkins over and looked into the sugar container—nothing. Then I pulled the jelly holder out and dumped all of them out and right under the last miniature jelly packet was a pristine white envelope of sugar. White sugar. Untouched. My mouth opened. I was salivating and I couldn't stop it. I looked up to make sure nobody had seen me.

Just then Radley came over the intercom announcing "The store will close in five minutes. We need to restock. Bring your purchases to the counter. The doors will be locked in five minutes."

I dug my finger into the jelly container to pry out the little white packet but I couldn't get it. It was stuck in between the front and back of the container. I pushed at it carefully, trying not to break it, feeling the sugar just on the other side of the thin white paper.

Radley came on the intercom again. "You have one minute to get up here and check out and then I'm calling the cops. I mean it."

I picked up the jelly container and held it up to my mouth to see if maybe I could get at it with my tongue. All the jelly packets fell into my lap. Finally I stood up, turned the container upside down and bashed it on the table.

Well, that did it. The crowd that had been heading out the door started heading for me. I thought about turning around and running into a bathroom stall but I was so close, I couldn't stop trying.

The maiden aunts got to me first. Each one of them grabbed my arm trying to drag me away from the sugar they could all smell. I gave up trying to get at it nicely then and just poked it open, turned the container upside down over my mouth, and let all the sugar run out. I held the container over my face until I couldn't feel even one more grain fall and just breathed in the aroma of the metal, the ancient paper packet and the final, last, wonderful wisps of sugar. I kept breathing it in deeper and deeper until all I could smell was rust and the maiden aunts L'aire Du Temps, their faces up close to mine as they tried desperately to lick escaping sugar granules off my face.

I pushed away from them and threw the metal container down on the table.

Radley stepped through the crowd telling everyone "Ok, that's it. Everybody out of here. I'm now officially closed." And he herded us all back out of the store, up through the cereal aisle, up through the empty baking aisle, its floor gleaming from the white washing it took from a hundred tongues.

We stood on the other side of the glass door as Radley closed it behind us. And slowly, we all spread out along the glass, our hands and faces pressed against it, breathing in the smell of the glass and the store and the memory of what used to be there, and nobody moved when the night came on, and nobody moved when the parking lot lights went out, and nobody moved or tried to sleep. We all just waited for the return of the sugar.

