

Sugar Cubes of Static Snow

by Victoria Hunter

I look out of the window, wondering at the scene outside.

The main road has been gritted, but the narrow pavements are ankle-deep in sugar-white snow. I'm so desperate for a hot drink that the endless white stretch drifting the roadside conjures warm milk before my eyes.

Caro tells me I must be careful in winter, especially on the pavements – I could slip. She says I've slipped before, but I think she's confused me with someone else, because wouldn't I remember a thing like that?

Where *is* Caro anyway? I've been waiting so very long for my drink, just watching all those people hurrying past, heads down against the cold, clad in the winter triumvirate of hat, scarf and gloves, kicking through flurried drifts...

My reflection looks old – there must be distortions in the glass. I wonder whether anyone bothers to clean the windows during winter. With all the rain and snow and –

Well, just look at my reflection.

I look so very old, positively ancient, eighty-five *at least*.

I'll have to point it out to mother. We've been coming to this cafe for years, since it opened – it was barely a cafe then, just some chairs outside and the odd table by the window. Mother would buy me hot chocolate – maybe a toffee apple if it was near Bonfire Night – whilst she sipped on black, tar-oozing coffee, a break between chores and housework.

Mother would eat sugar lumps. I remember her laughing as I watched, amazed and revolted, pulling childish faces. No wonder she had terrible teeth in the end, lips always pursed around the glistening cubes as if they were sweets.

John loves a couple of sugars in his tea, but even he draws the line at that.

Mother would be surprised to see how much the cafe's changed. They serve take-away drinks now! In cardboard cups that look like penguins! The sugar still comes in cubes though, so she'll be happy about that. I must tell her about it when John and I next visit, and remind her about the hot chocolate and toffee apples.

Where is John with my hot drink? I really must have a drink soon; it's so cold here by this window. I think he has the newspapers as well – they're not on the table.

But a hot chocolate is.

How strange. I was just thinking about that...

Oh yes, of course.

I fancied a change – I was thinking about mother and the cafe near our old house when I was small. The sun used to reflect off the windows, mixing with the opaque glass, until it looked like boiled sweets had melted across the panes, like the sticky, sugary red of the toffee apple casing...

Yes, I *do* remember now. I surprised the girl at the counter – she's so used to me ordering coffee. Just one now; no tea, not anymore. It reminds me too much of John.

God, I miss him...

Mother will be pleased about the hot chocolate, although it's not the same as it used to be. The hot chocolate of my childhood was bitter cocoa, stove-warmed milk – none of this over-sweetened, whipped-cream, commercial nonsense.

That girl on the counter must be new, serving me this mess.

Never mind – I'm cold and grateful to be out.

Caro is good to bring me; I know she's very busy with the children and work. I think she was going to help me do my Christmas shopping, but I can't remember if that's today or next week... Where is she anyway? Did she go back to order another drink?

I sip the hot chocolate as I search the cafe for her. The warmth of the milk pierces my tongue, flushing my cheeks; I wince at the sweetness in the aftertaste. It's just not bitter enough –

A lorry rumbles past the window, throwing up slush; the sound of it roaring and spattering the pavements makes me jump. I pause at my reflection again.

I don't remember my eighty-fifth birthday.

Why do I look so very old? Perhaps the glass really is distorting.

John will make me feel better, when he brings my hot drink. I look around for him, suddenly unsure. Where is he? Did he go to the loo? He must have – he's fetched my drink, although it isn't what I usually have...

And when did it start snowing?

Caro's always telling me to be careful in this sort of weather, in case I fall over. I slipped last winter, on my way to the post office to buy a – a... I don't remember what it was, but there was grit in my mouth, the iron taste of blood. I broke my wrist.

A life of extremes.

I tap my cup, watching the surface of the hot chocolate ripple.

I must tell mother about it – even though it's not the same. I think I'll ask John if he can get me a coffee when he comes back from the toilet – I need a proper drink. This is too sugary; I don't know why I asked for it in the first place.

But he's always good to me like that...

I miss him constantly. I think Caro knows how empty the days are now; that's why she brings me out like this. She's very good to distract me – I loved him so much – all the mornings spent here, in our little cafe...

Except this isn't *our* cafe, is it?

I must tell my mother how much it's changed – she'll be so sad she can't see it now. I'll tell her about the hot chocolate, when John and I next visit –

And how they still have sugar lumps.

My mother always used to eat sugar lumps like sweeties, and I'd sip my drink and watch her, as the glass panes shone rainbow lights across the snow – so much snow, where did it all come from?

I sit and look out of the window, wondering at the scene outside.

Copyright © 2016 Victoria Hunter