*Chocolate soup!*

*A short story set in a busy shopping cenre*

*by Veronica Heley*

Sally misread the wording over the shop front, and giggled. She’d thought for a moment that it said, ‘Chocolate soup!’ instead of ‘Chocolate shop!’

A harsh voice said, ‘I don’t see nothing to laugh at!’ He was an elderly soul in a wheelchair, perhaps a little too well wrapped up against the cold on what was actually a fine spring day.

Sally reddened. ‘Oh, that was me being silly. I thought for a moment it said ‘Chocolate *soup* instead of *shop*.’

His mouth twitched into a smile. ‘Chocolate soup. Do you remember the children’s show on the telly, years ago? The Clangers. Didn’t they live on green soup, cooked by the Soup Dragon? My kids used to love that, but they’re scattered now, Australia, America. I’ve no one in this country. I pay a woman to bring me to the shops once a week but today she’s as cross as two sticks. She’s dumped me here so that I can’t buy the treats I’ve saved up for.’

‘What did you want to buy?’ said Sally.

He became almost animated. ‘Chocolates; a big box that I can dip into after I’ve had my tea. Flowers; a great big bouquet of daffodils to remind me of the sun. Cigarettes; the doctor says they’ll kill me but they haven’t done it yet and at my age what do I care? I was going to buy her some flowers and chocolates too, but she says she doesn’t eat stuff that will rot her teeth and she’s never seen the point of spending money on flowers. She says that if I want to throw my money away I can put it in the nearest charity box but that seems like dropping it in the ocean to me.’

Sally thought the man wept, but didn’t like to look. He stared ahead, probably not seeing the crowds that passed and re-passed before him.

She said, softly, so that he could ignore if he wished, ‘What kind of chocolate would you like?’

He said, equally softly, ‘Chocolate peppermint creams. A good dark chocolate, mind.’

She slipped into the shop and bought a big box of the best peppermint creams. It was expensive, but she didn’t care. She gave the chocolates to the man saying, ‘Enjoy.’

A freckled hand took the box and hid it in the folds of his rug. ‘Will you get me some cigarettes, too?’

‘No, I won’t help you to kill yourself.’

He said, ‘Get yourself some flowers, then.’

‘I have a garden full of spring flowers back home.’

‘Then buy some and give them away to someone who’ll like them.’ He thrust some notes into her hand. ‘Uh oh, here she comes!’

Up came the middle-aged woman who must be his carer, ranting about the girls on the till in the supermarket and how they were out of stock of the man’s special cereal and he’d have to make do with something else, and what was it coming to, if they’d run out of stock in a supermarket?

The last Sally saw of the man was his hand waving goodbye as he was wheeled away.

Sally looked down at the notes he’d given her. Three tens and a twenty. Fifty pounds

in all. The old man had wanted to give his carer a present and she hadn’t let him to do so. So he wanted Sally to act for him? To buy some flowers and give them away to people who would like them?

Now Sally was a diffident, private sort of person. She didn’t like to stand out from a crowd. Her first reaction was that she couldn’t do what he’d asked, but then she supposed she ought to try. Just inside the door of the supermarket were pails of daffodils in bud, at a pound a bunch.

She lifted some out of the pail. How many could she carry? Fifteen, twenty? Twenty was enough. They were slipping out of her arms already.

She paid with the twenty pound note the man had given her, and walked out of the supermarket into the covered walk outside. It was noisy there. People were turning in and out of the shops, looking worn and tired. Children lagged behind, bored and weary.

Sally spotted an elderly woman in a headscarf, who was laboriously pushing a basket on wheels. ‘Would you like some flowers? Free.’

‘What!’ The woman hadn’t many groceries in her basket. Was she so short of money that she hadn’t been able to afford a bunch of daffodils, or didn’t she want to be bothered with them?

The woman was suspicious. ‘No one’s bought me flowers since my Archie died.’

‘I’m giving them away. Free.’

The woman blinked. ‘You’re mad.’ But she stowed the bunch in her basket and trundled slowly away.

‘What you doing?’ A child of about eight, chewing on an iced bun.

‘Giving flowers away. Want some?’

No reply. A blank stare. She’d been told not to accept gifts from strangers? A harassed-looking woman who must be the child’s mother came up, pushing a baby buggy. ‘You’re giving them away? What for?’

Sally began to wish she hadn’t started this. ‘An old man wanted to —’

‘Give us, then.’ The woman snatched a couple of bundles, and dragged her daughter away.

Sally spotted a woman in a sari selling the Big Issue, and offered her a bunch. ‘It’s free.’

The woman said, ‘I’m selling the Big Issue. You want to buy one?’

‘No, I want to give you some flowers.’

The woman wasn’t interested. She looked beyond Sally, calling out, ‘Big Issue!’

Sally moved on. She held out two bunches to a young couple, saying, ‘Please take some. They’re free.’

The man and woman consulted one another and, to Sally’s relief, took the bunches and walked on. A group of teenage girls came up, ‘Free, are they? I could have some for me mum.’

‘I’ll take some for me auntie, too.’ They took five bunches, hurray.

A large woman in a padded coat confronted Sally. ‘What do you think you’re doing? I paid good money for my daffodils and here you are, giving them away! That’s not right! You’ve stolen them, eh? Is that it?’

‘No,’ said Sally. ‘A man gave me some money to buy daffodils, to give away. Here, have a bunch.’

‘I’ll take two, but you’d better be off before I report you to the authorities. You’ve no right to be begging around here.’

‘I’m not . . .!’ said Sally.

‘We’ll take the rest if they’re free!’ A couple of teenage louts, shoving and pushing, one on either side of Sally. They jogged her arm so that the flowers shot up into the air, and fell to the floor. And then they went off, laughing.

A young woman dressed like a Goth all in black, helped Sally pick the daffodils up. ‘They know no better. You’re from one of the charities, are you?’

Sally was closed to tears. ‘I did a good turn for someone, and he asked me to buy some daffs and give them away. Will you take the rest, then?’

‘Why not? But if you’ll take a word of warning, I’d get out of here if I were you. Those boys like to hang around on Saturday mornings, looking what mischief they can get up to. They’re under age, so they know nobody can touch them, see.’

Sally did see. She had had enough. It had been a dreadful morning. She needed a sit down and a coffee . . . perhaps with a croissant?

She walked along till she came to one of a chain of coffee shops. It was busy, as usual. A dumpy woman stood by the door, a supermarket bag bulging with tins at her feet. Not well-dressed. She was looking into her purse, and not liking what she saw. She turned away from the cafe to pick up her bag. Didn’t she have enough money left to buy herself a coffee?

On impulse Sally said, ‘Excuse me. I need a coffee and a sit down, perhaps with a piece of cake. Will you join me?’

‘I don’t have enough to—’

‘My treat.’ Sally led the woman inside. ‘Are you hungry? Could you manage an all-day breakfast?’

‘You can’t just come up to someone and say . . . Well, I suppose. Yes, all right.’

Sally ordered and paid for one All Day Breakfast, a pot of tea and a cappuccino. She found them a couple of seats in a corner.

Her guest sat down with a thump, and said, ‘I’m not going to cry. I always used to have a coffee in here after I’d done the shopping. My husband and I both had jobs. But he went off with a silly young girl and I lost my job and suddenly everything changed. You don’t think it could happen to you, but it can. I signed on, and I’ve got another job starting Monday, but I’ve had to get vouchers and go to the Food Bank every week and for the rest I’ve been living on baked beans. I don’t know what I’d do without the Food Bank. Me, going on charity! I still can’t believe it.’

‘Drink up and tuck in,’ said Sally, pouring out tea for the woman. ‘After the morning I’ve had, it’s a pleasure to see someone enjoying their food.’

‘What you been doing then?’

‘Trying to give away some flowers.’

‘You can’t eat flowers.’

‘No,’ said Sally, feeling ashamed of herself. What on earth was she doing, using good money to give away flowers to people who needed food?

The dumpy woman said, ‘You’ll be one of those do-gooders from the church, I suppose. I don’t go to church. Never have done. Won’t start now.’ She started to eat, slowly at first, and then almost gulping it down. Sally wondered when the woman had last eaten a good meal?

Sally sipped her coffee in silence, thinking that other, wiser people would know how to talk to the woman about going to church, but it really wasn’t something she felt she could do.

The woman polished everything off and sat back, sighing. Replete. ‘So, what do you want from me?’

‘Nothing. I needed a drink and a sit down. I asked you to join me. That’s all.’

The woman didn’t believe her. ‘I know your sort! You’ll be asking me to carry drugs for you next, or go on the game.’ She stood up, ready to go.

Sally was horrified. ‘No, really! No strings.’

‘So you say! Well, I’m off and I’ll thank you not to try to follow me!’

She marched out, and Sally tried to laugh. How very silly!

‘What do you expect?’ A big, black woman on the next table had been listening in. ‘You pick up a bit of trash like that, what do you expect?’

Sally said, ‘She needed a square meal.’

‘You’re too thin-skinned, that’s what you are. If you want to mix with the dregs, you need to realise you’ll get a kick in the face more often than you’ll get thanks.’

‘I understand. This all started because I tried to do a good deed.’ And she explained what had happened.

The woman gave a short laugh. ‘You in your expensive clothes, with money in your pocket. You stepped out of your nice comfortable life and got slapped in the face for it. So now you can give up and go home, thinking you’ve done your bit for the day. Right?’

Sally took a deep breath. ‘Wrong. I still have to buy some flowers to give away. I’ll try the flower stall outside the centre.’

‘Best of luck.’ The woman slapped a tenner on the table in front of Sally. ‘That’s for the breakfast you bought her.’

‘That’s not right,’ cried Sally, but the woman was already at the door . . . and gone.

Sally put the note in her pocket, feeling as if her world had been turned upside down. She’d started off that morning secure in her comfortable home where there was plenty of money to pay the bills, thinking she might buy her husband an expensive trifle to commemorate the season, and had come face to face with the knowledge that other people didn’t have enough food to live on. She remembered the elderly woman with hardly anything in her shopping trolley, and now the woman who’d been living on baked beans and handouts.

Sally acknowledged with shame that she was one of the lucky ones. She wanted to do something to help those in need, but she didn’t in the least know how to go about it. Why had the man in the wheelchair picked on her to do his dirty work? Why had the woman in the cafe paid for the All-Day Breakfast which someone else had eaten? Sally had been given sixty pounds in all, and only managed to give away flowers to the value of twenty.

But then, what value were flowers to people who needed food?

Sally didn’t know what to do . . . so she went on doing what the man in the wheelchair had asked her to do. She would buy more flowers and give them away.

She went outside the shopping centre to where people were queuing at flower stall on the pavement. She got out two ten-pound notes, wishing she could manage more than twenty bunches at a time. A youngish woman ahead of Sally turned round and said, ‘I saw you in the centre. You’re the one been giving out flowers, right?’

Sally blushed. ‘I’m not very good at it.’

‘We was talking about you, saying you didn’t even know enough to come outside for your flowers. The supermarket won’t give you a discount, see, but the stalls outside will.’

Poor Sally felt even more stupid than before. ‘Thanks. I should have known that, shouldn’t I?’

‘What you doing this for, anyway?’

‘Fulfilling an old man’s dream. He couldn’t buy the flowers for himself so he asked me to buy some and give them away.’

‘Totally bonkers,’ said the woman. It was her turn at the head of the queue. She bargained for a couple of expensive plants, and paid for them. Then she pressed a fiver into Sally’s hand. ‘That’s from me, too.’ And she was off.

In a small voice, Sally asked the stallholder if he’d give her a discount on twenty bundles of daffs. He neither shouted at her nor sneered, but took her twenty pounds and gave her twenty-one bunches of flowers.

She could hardly hold them all in her arms. Outside the tube station, a homeless man was sitting cross-legged on the pavement. Sally offered him the daffodils. ‘I have these to give away. If you hand them out to people passing by, they’ll give you something for them.’

Sharp eyes assessed her expensive clothing. ‘Give me a tenner, and I’ll bless you for it.’

She drew back. ‘That’s not what this is about.’

She crossed the road and walked along to the church. It wasn’t the one she attended, but it was a church. She would sit in the grounds and think what to do next.

She turned in through the gate and was sent flying by someone hurrying out. The daffodils went flying up in the air, and so did Sally. She landed on her back.

A middle-aged woman wearing an apron over a jogging suit bent over Sally as she lay on the ground. ‘Sorry, sorry! Oh, are you all right? I wasn’t looking where I was going.’

Sally struggled to sit upright. She breathed in and out. She was wearing a good warm coat, and it had protected her from damage but, ‘Oh, my poor flowers!’

‘No harm done.’ The woman in the apron began to collect them. ‘I was running late, you see, and it’s as if it was meant, although I should have been looking where I was going, but I was in such a hurry to get some more daffodils for tomorrow and there you were!’

She beamed at Sally. ‘Are you all right? I can buy them off you, can’t I? We need enough to give everyone in the congregation a bunch tomorrow, and my friend was supposed to get them early this morning, but she didn’t get enough and there was I worrying they’d be sold out, and what would we do then?’

Sally got to her feet. Her tights were laddered, and her handbag smudged with dirt. She had a graze on her left wrist, but she was otherwise all right. ‘Take them with pleasure. I was trying to find someone to give them to.’

‘Splendid, splendid! You’re not a member of our church, are you? But an angel in disguise today, what? I’m so pleased. Saved me a journey. Here’s the money.’

She thrust a note at Sally and dived back into the church, calling out, ‘All is well, Alleluia!’

Sally looked at the note. Twenty pounds. She started to laugh. Then stopped, realising she was on the verge of tears. A lone bundle of daffodil buds had been overlooked by the woman. Sally picked it up, and limped along to her bus stop. She’d had enough, and more than enough for that day. A bus was coming. Good. She needed to sit down.

The only seat available on the bus happened to be next to her good friend Dora, who greeted her with pleasure. Sally was also pleased to see Dora, because she was someone who always knew exactly what to say and do. Sally thought that if Dora had been given fifty pounds to spend on flowers to give away, then her mission would have been accomplished efficiently and without a tumble in the dust. Surely Dora would know what to do with the money Sally still had on her?

So Sally told her friend the story of her adventures that morning, finishing up, ‘He gave me fifty pounds, and I’ve ended up, one way and another, with forty-five. It’s quite ridiculous. What am I to do with it now?’

‘Keep it. You laid out some for yourself. You bought the man some chocolates and treated a woman to breakfast. Or, you remember I collect for Cancer Research.’

Sally shook her head. ‘That’s not the right answer. The man in the wheelchair wanted to give people a treat and that’s what I must try to do.’

They came to their bus stop and got off. Sally had stiffened up, and moved with difficulty, juggling her one last bunch of daffodils. ‘Thanks for the advice, Dora. I’ll let you know what happens with the rest of the money. Meanwhile, I’ll just pop into the supermarket over the road for some Hot Cross Buns.’

While waiting to pay at the check-out, Sally spotted the big Food Bank bin. It had a notice on it asking customers to donate basic food stuffs. Anyone in need could apply through doctors, churches and Job Centres and be given food for three days. Sally stared at the notice for a long moment and then asked to see the manager. She would donate the forty-five pounds and add some of her own, to buy chocolate for the Food Bank. A treat for those who had little joy in their lives. That’s what the man in the wheelchair had wanted to spend his money on. She felt he’d approve. The manager helped her pick out heaps of Easter eggs for children and adults alike. A job well done.

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On Easter morning Sally came downstairs to find the daffodil buds in her bunch had opened up overnight.

She thought of other bunches of daffodils which she’d bought and given away, which would also have opened up overnight. She smiled, thinking of the delight brought by unexpected treats to so many homes.

She didn’t think of the trouble she’d taken.

She thought of the man in the wheelchair who had sacrificed his money to bring pleasure to others.

And she thought of another sacrifice, the one made by Jesus, which had brought joy and light into the world.