

'Sweet Damnation' by Scribbler

All these years later, it's the smell that I remember most.

I was ten years old. It was the summer when the cicadas came early and didn't stop screaming. That was the same summer the candy store appeared. There was no grand opening, no ribbon cutting. One day it was an empty storefront, the next it was there, painted gold letters in the window spelling out 'Mrs. Gandy's Candies' in looping script. No-one in town remembered anyone buying the place. No trucks had come to deliver goods. It was as if someone had waved a magic wand and 'poof' there it was.

All the kids were buzzing about it, of course. I remember watching them press their noses to the window, their breath fogging the glass as they gawked at the displays inside. It was an old-fashioned style store with great glass jars brimming with gumdrops, mint humbugs, peanut brittle, cinder toffee, aniseed balls and other delicious treats. All along the counter were rainbow swirls of lollipops taller than your head. On the back shelf sat foil-wrapped chocolates shaped like animals and stars. And behind the counter was Mrs. Gandy herself; a sweet elderly woman with a face like an apple left too long in the pantry and hands wrinkled with age. It looked like something from a dream. If a kid had drawn a picture of a candy store, it would have looked like Mrs. Gandy's.

My parents wouldn't let me go. They were strict Baptists of the bible-thumping and brimstone variety, which meant no sweets, no Halloween, no birthday parties with other kids. I had no friends because of them.

"The body is a temple," they told me, over and over, as I watched other kids my age gorge themselves on treats for report cards not even half as good as mine. "Gluttony is a sin. Sugar is the Devil's bait."

I used to resent them for it. Watching the other kids line up outside Mrs. Gandy's while I was dragged to Wednesday night Bible study felt like punishment just for being born. When I was eighteen I high-tailed it out of that house and made a life for myself where I wasn't just existing but really *living* for once.

But that came later. I left my old life behind years after Mrs. Gandy's Candies devastated the town.

The first kid to vanish was Tommy Lorrell. He was a fat boy, always sticky-fingered and red-faced like he was on the verge of a tantrum. He got bullied a lot and was always threatening to run away from home until his parents gave him what he wanted. His mom said he had gone into Mrs. Gandy's on his way home from school and never came home. Cops searched the store from top to bottom and questioned Mrs. Gandy. They found nothing but spotless floors and an old woman who smelled like burnt marshmallows – no sign of foul play anywhere. In the end, they chalked Tommy's disappearance up to him finally making good on his promise to run away. Maybe he'd had enough of schoolyard taunts and decided to vanish, they reasoned. His case went cold. The town moved on.

Except then came Haley Wilcox. And after that Riley Sherman. Always the same pattern. Last seen near the candy store. Always alone. No signs of struggle. No trace. All with a history of wanting to run away from home. Haley Wilcox's dad used to beat her. Riley Sherman was adopted and said he wanted to find his biological family. The cops checked the place, found nothing, put them down as runaways and moved on.

I'd pass it on my way to church, and I swear those gold letters grew shinier with every child that disappeared. We lived on the same street as the store, and when I walked home from school Mrs. Gandy would watch me go past and wave, gesturing to all the sweet treats I could not have and rubbing her belly, then beckoning me inside. It was as if she saw me as an unattainable target, forever out of her grasp because setting foot in her shop would have gotten me in big trouble at home. I feared my parents more than I longed for candy.

Then Daisy Howell disappeared.

She was only eight – the youngest yet – a bright little thing with sunflower barrettes in her hair and big blue eyes. Everyone loved Daisy. Her parents were regulars at our church; devout folk who loved their daughter with the kind of fierce, trembling devotion that bordered on holy.

When the police shrugged and said she had probably packed a bag and slipped off like the rest, her father exploded in a way I did not think possible. He spat in the sheriff's face and screamed that he *knew* where she had gone. He shouted that they *all* knew but everyone had just been too afraid to say it. He said that if they weren't going to find his little girl and bring her home, they should at least punish the one who had taken her. Of course, the sheriff had no such power without more evidence than a quickly growing urban legend.

That night, I woke to sirens and a red-orange glow pulsing down the street. I remember standing at the window, watching fire devour Mrs. Gandy's Candies. The flames licked the sky, turning it the colour of blood and burnished brass. There were people in the street, milling around and yelling like that would help anything. And over it all, I could hear screaming.

Mrs. Gandy did not sound human when she screamed. Her voice carried, high and shrill, like a kettle shrieking or a bat caught in a snare. She was upstairs in the window of the apartment above the store, shrieking and writhing as the flames turned her silhouette into something strange and elongated.

"I gave them escape," she screeched. "I gave them the freedom they needed from the pain you people caused!"

Her words echoed down every street and alley, through every crack and crevice in our town. Even though I had the window shut, I could hear her so loudly that it made my skull vibrate and I had to cover my ears. It felt like her voice was reaching right *inside* my head and tugging at a part of me that had only ever whispered before: the past of me that longed to walk out of my parents' house and run away from their rules and punishments forever.

And that's when they came.

The children.

Every boy and girl who had ever bought candy from that store rose from their beds, left their houses and ran to the candy store. I watched them stream from their houses in pyjamas and nightgowns, barefoot and silent, like sleepwalkers under a spell. Some climbed out of windows if the doors were bolted too high for them to reach. Some dodged parents standing in their path.

They all ran straight into the fire.

Not one of them screamed.

Not one of them hesitated.

They all just ran as if possessed and vanished into the hungrily licking flames.

When the firemen finally put out the blaze, all that remained of Mrs. Gandy's Candies was a blackened husk and the reek of burnt sugar. They combed the wreckage for hours but found nothing. There were no bones, no charred bodies, not even teeth. The building was completely empty and the apartment above nothing but an empty shell.

After I left that godforsaken town, I rebelled by drinking, smoking, doing a plethora of drugs and all manner of other sinful things my parents had been so devoutly against. It lasted long enough for me to develop enough problems that I checked myself into a rehab centre.

When I got out, I briefly considered going home for a visit. I called a kid I had gone to Sunday school with rather than my parents, trying to see how it felt to reconnect with that part of my life. We chatted for a while and, inevitably, memories of Mrs. Gandy's Candies came up. The cops never did find out what the

hell happened that night, or what happened to the kids who disappeared. One thing he did tell me, though, was that years later Daisy Howell's mother left her husband after finding pictures of Daisy on his computer. So maybe Daisy had a reason to want to run away from home after all.

I didn't go back to that town. But I remember.

And sometimes, when the nightmares come, I wake up and all I can smell is the scent of burnt marshmallows that had filled the street for days after Mrs. Gandy burned up along with her shop.