

## Cotton Candy

Looking past her reflection to the road whizzing by, Mrs. Morrision considered all of the good things she missed out on in life: her prom, the birth of her nephew, her graduation, the release of *Titanic*. Life and those little green pills had tried to pull her down and their time was just about over. From here on out, there were *only* good things, and sweet Jesus help anyone who tried to mess that up.

Goddamn right, Candy thought to herself. She was on her way to Heaven on Earth and ain't nothing was gonna stop her and Jimmy from getting there, not even those good-for-nothing nurses back at the hospital. "Nope," she said firmly. "Nope nope nope nope nope."

"What you nopin' for, sugar pie?" Jimmy asked.

"Oh nothing, don't you worry! Baby, I'm so excited I can hardly stand it!"

Jimmy smiled and held her hand tight. Candy closed her eyes and breathed in the cool, sharp air. *This* is what it means to be alive.

She wasn't technically supposed to have left the ward but she really shouldn't have been there in the first place. It was only a one-time incident and she just lost a little bit of control. That girl had it coming anyway. Everyone, even Candy's parents, said that something must have snapped in her brain and caused her to go wild. She wasn't crazy! Millie was trying to steal her Jimmy and that wasn't going to happen. Candy would die before she'd let someone take him away from her. Millie tried and Millie got a tire iron to the face. Bitch. She didn't *mean* to hit her that hard; it was intended to be a warning swing but the end of the iron got Millie in the mouth and pop! pop! two of her tiny bloody teeth dropped to the ground.

No one believed her when she said she didn't mean it. No one but Jimmy. Jimmy also believed her when she said the nurses were trying to kill her and he said he'd come get her and he did. Now they were riding down the highway, wind flapping against their faces and hightailing it to the best place ever: Candy Land. She

had only been there once before on her birthday when she was nine but her daddy said it was made especially for her. It was a magical place with Ferris wheels and funnel cakes and it was like the best fair you could ever imagine, except only better. She was given a special crown to wear because it was her birthday and birthday girls are princesses her daddy said. Candy played all the games and won a big stuffed panda on the ring toss. For the rest of the day, the panda followed her everywhere, his plush paws held by one tiny fist and one calloused hand. The panda even sat next to them on the Ferris wheel. Her father had wrapped his arm around both her and the panda as the bucket seat wobbled back and forth higher and higher. At the top, they looked out at the world before them and tried to find their house among the twinkling lights. It was emblazoned in her memory and no amount of drugs could erase that rollercoaster in her stomach every time she thought about it. It was the perfect place for her and Jimmy to go. She would share this place with him and he would be as enraptured with it as she was. They were gonna get married and go up in the castle and eat all the ice cream they could stand. She'd get a job as a princess and Jimmy would work the rides or pass out cotton candy to the kiddos. She had already taken on the Misses in her name

to get used to the change. She was gonna be Mrs. Jimmy Morrison. Candy Morrison. The Morrisons. It had a nice ring to it.

They were already about an hour out and they had at least eight more hours to go. The sun was descending past the trees and the sky was taking on a very light shade of pink and yellow. Candy was awful tired. Breaking out of a hospital is tough work.

First, you have to play nice so the nurses think you're totally one-hundred-percent okay with your state of consciousness. You take your medicine like a nice patient and then upchuck it right after into the toilet. She wasn't taking any of their crazy pills, no siree. *Then*, after you make it look like you're happy as a clam, you wait for outside time and enjoy the sunshine, knowing there'll be a lot more where that came from in your near future. Then, Jimmy will come and he'll walk the grounds with you and hold your hand and walk you back into the ward like a good visitor should. And while you're behaving, Jimmy will talk to the nurse right around the time security is changing shifts and that's when you make your move.

Ha! Nurse Patty was so distracted by Jimmy that she didn't even notice Candy waltz right out of the ward and sprint to Jimmy's

car. What a dummy! She laid down in the backseat all still and quiet until Jimmy got in the car and they were at least five minutes away from the hospital. It felt like eternity. All she had wanted to do was hop up into the front seat and plant a big wet one on his cheek. He was the perfect accomplice and would be the perfect husband.

Just thinking about all she had to go through this afternoon was exhausting. Candy tried to keep her eyes open and count the trees as they raced by, but her lids were so heavy that she couldn't stay awake very long. Candy finally shut her eyes right around the time the sky turned a lovely sleepy shade of violet.

Jimmy felt her hand go slack and he glanced over to look at Candy. Her head was leaned against the window, her mouth slightly ajar, and her chest rose and fell with each breath. It was almost eight o'clock and it was right about time to make a move of his own. He flipped on his signal to turn right and pulled off the next exit, careful not to make any sudden jerky stops so as not to wake her. He needed gas and greatly needed to take a piss.

The QuikiMart gas station he pulled into advertised the lowest gas prices around but there was no one to compete with. He stopped the car and went inside. One dirty bathroom, a pockmarked clerk, and a Dr. Pepper later and he was nearly ready to go. As he walked back out to the car, he checked to make sure Candy was still asleep. She was.

There was no question that Candy was lovely. When Jimmy had first met her, he was sitting at the bar doing nothing with his life. He was fresh out of college, with no solid job prospects and couldn't think of any direction he wanted to take. The bartender had just cracked open another beer when he saw her from behind the kitchen door. He only saw the side of her face at first, but when the door swung open and she rushed out to get to her table, he knew she was someone he needed to know. Jimmy barely even touched his beer he was so caught up in watching her.

Jimmy hung around that bar for two weeks before he got the nerve to ask Candy out. Remembering it now, he couldn't even recall what he had said to her. Something stupid probably. It might've been that he asked for fries and a date all in one breath. Or

maybe it was a burger? He must have done something right because the next night they were sitting on the swings at the park eating ice cream cones watching the sun set over the lake.

He looked over at her rocking back and forth, smiling wide and looking at the sky. "Let's go swimming," she had said. Candy said it so matter-of-factly and before he knew it she was racing down the park toward the dock. For a moment, Jimmy sat alone listening to the squeak of the swing's chain and wondered who this strange, beautiful girl was. Nothing was off limits to her. Candy was spontaneous, ambitious, smart and utterly fascinating. He ran after her, but she had already thrown her clothes aside and had jumped in. For what felt like hours, Jimmy and Candy floated side by side in the lake, holding hands and looking at the stars. There was nothing more magical in the world than this moment, he remembered thinking to himself at the time.

She stayed asleep for the next hour, lulled into a deep sleep by the hum of the car engine. Jimmy raced by at 70 miles per hour, passing ever-so-familiar pine trees and bushes, watching the exit numbers ascend one by one. He gently cradled her hand, careful still not to wake her, and breathed a silent deep sigh.

Nurse Patty had given him a sedative to crush into her drink, because she knew Candy wouldn't take her medicine. Oh, she knew about Candy's trips to the bathroom all right and had found alternate methods for administering the drugs. For the last month, Candy had talked about nothing except for her fiancée Jimmy and becoming a princess. In fact, Candy had virtually mapped out her whole plan to the entire ward so that all the shift nurses and security guards and doctors called her Princess and made jokes about going to this weirdo's version of Disney World on their next vacation. The closest Candy would get would be the dirty old QuikiMart Jimmy just left.

It pained him to see Candy like this, but he couldn't play into it anymore. He tried, but he couldn't do it. Jimmy often played the "What if?" game after he started to realize that Candy's behavior was more than acts of whimsy. What if they had never went out on that date? What if, instead of jumping in the lake with her, he had walked away? What if he had recognized something was wrong sooner?



She used to be so sweet and caring but something inside her just snapped like a twig under his foot. He blamed himself partly because he should have done something. He noticed that one day her eyes lost their brightness and something almost sinister was hiding behind the hazel flecks in her irises. Candy didn't laugh loud and boisterously liked she used to; her chuckles were more calculated and half-heartedly amused than genuine. Her occasional outbursts used to be harmless and silly but now there was a rage that accompanied her fits that, to be quite frank, scared the shit out of him. He should have seen it. He couldn't let go of the guilt over not protecting Millie when he had the chance. Candy's demeanor toward her had always been jovial but suddenly out of nowhere it became biting and snide, then it turned hostile. Jimmy couldn't understand why. Candy said it was because Millie was trying to steal him away from her, but that was insane; Millie was Jimmy's sister.

After the Millie Incident, Jimmy realized that Candy was sick. Everyone around her told her she was crazy and, eventually, her parents sent her to the Harold Palmer Institute for evaluation and care. Any attachment Candy had to Jimmy escalated to something uncontrollable. He didn't visit for the first few

weeks, but Nurse Patty had called him and convinced him that it might help Candy calm down if he came by; maybe he could help her in a way, persuade her to take her meds and cooperate with the doctors. That worked for a short while before her notions became more elaborate and fantastical. They were engaged, Candy told everybody, and he was going to take her to Candy Land, where they'd live forever and ever.

On the last visit, today's visit, Nurse Patty had informed him of Candy's plan and encouraged him to play along with it for the afternoon. It was a risky bet, but he agreed. She slipped him the crushed-up sedative, which he added to the soda he grabbed from the vending machine before he left the hospital. He knew she'd be in the car and, while it frightened him that she'd go to such lengths to convince herself of this reality, he indeed acted out his role. As soon as she was asleep, Nurse Patty said, she'd stay asleep for a good few hours. That would be the opportunity to turn around and take her back. Nurse Patty believed that Candy was acting out and, even though sick, should be subject to consequences just like everyone else. The plan might be unorthodox, Jimmy thought, but what other choice did he have? Things weren't getting better by doing nothing. When Candy

discovered herself back in her room the next morning, she'd have a heavy dose of reality. One, Nurse Patty said, that would surely awaken her from this nonsense.

As he drove up the long driveway, past the boxy hedges and glistening lawn, he felt his chest tighten in regret. She looked so peaceful. He wished so hard for her to come to her senses, to be better again, but he wasn't sure that was ever going to happen. The car came to a stop and the lump resting in Jimmy's throat got bigger and then sank into the depths of his heart.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "I'm so so sorry."

Nurse Patty was waiting at the entrance, along with two male nurses. Jimmy got out of the car and slowly shut the door.

"How was she?" Nurse Patty asked.

"She was fine. She... I don't know, she was Candy. Sometimes I think she's getting better, sometimes not. For a minute, it was like she was her old self again."

"I know, honey, I know. It's like this sometimes, but we both know she needs help. Until she cooperates, it's going to be very difficult."

Jimmy nodded and gently opened the passenger door. The male nurse stepped forward but Jimmy held up his hand. "Do you mind if I... you know, bring her in?"

He reached over to unbuckle her seatbelt and positioned her arm around his shoulder. He slipped his arm underneath her legs and carefully lifted her out of the car, making sure not to jostle her too much. Her face fell toward his chest and he could feel warm puffs of breath against him.

Their shoes made barely audible squeaks on the tile as they walked down the hall. Jimmy trailed behind Nurse Patty, purposely taking care not to rustle Candy too much. The lights in the ladies' wing were off except for two fluorescents that buzzed overhead. Nurse Patty unlocked the door to Candy's room and turned down the sheets. Jimmy laid her down on the bed and softly removed his arms from under her body. Her red hair made a

curtain over her face and he brushed it back. She looked like an angel and he was glad that's how he'd see her before he left.

On her bedside table there was a framed picture of them at his uncle's July 4<sup>th</sup> cookout last year. In it, Candy and Jimmy are both wet from swimming and smiling from ear to ear. There's a lake in the background and, if you look closely, you can see his cousin's legs poke out from behind Candy's ear when the camera caught him flipping into the water. At the time the picture was taken, Candy's behavior hadn't changed too much. Her outbursts were small, occasionally comical, and didn't last very long. Although he did remember that Candy nearly cried when someone ate the last hot dog and all that was left were hamburgers. Looking back it still seemed trivial, but now he guessed it probably heralded other, more emotional episodes.

He set the picture down and leaned over to kiss her forehead. He wouldn't be back for a while, if at all. There was nothing he could do to help her. Her exaggerations were only more likely to escalate the longer he kept coming to visit, he was cautioned. There was an attempt to dissuade Nurse Patty from her decision but it was a relief. He wouldn't say that out loud but, if he

allowed himself to be honest, it was true. Even thinking it hurt.

"We'll take it from here, James. Thank you."

"How long do you think she'll be in here?" he whispered. It had already been six months.

"Hard to say. Could be a few more months. Could be years. Things like this don't get better overnight."

He nodded. Nurse Patty patted his shoulder. "You're doing a good thing, James. Candice needs to focus on getting better. She needs to be free of distractions, particularly ones that exacerbate her delusions. I know it's hard, but she'll be better off for it."

Jimmy's throat tightened as he looked between Candy and the picture and a spot on the wall above the headboard. He'd go home and wake up in his own bed, have coffee, and do whatever he wanted. Candy'd wake up betrayed and alone. Was he doing the right thing? He hoped he was.

He left the Nurse Patty and her aides to take care of her. Maybe she was dreaming about the Ferris wheel and carousel, her own wonderful Candy Land, where cotton candy clouds float in the sky and wishes are as plentiful as fairy dust. He couldn't give that to her but he hoped she at least had that for the night. She'd be angry in the morning but sooner or later she'd come to realize he did good by her. Right now, Candy needed time to get better and, at the hospital, Candy had all the time in the world.