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# "Candy"

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# Candy

BONNIE JO CAMPBELL

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WHEN THE NURSE PRACTITIONER advises me to wear only cotton underpants, I neglect to tell her that I don't wear underpants at all. If my not wearing underpants disturbs you as a woman, you should try to put it in perspective by placing me on a scale like a number line of all the things that disturb or frighten you—your list may include having people see your house dirty, your gaining twenty pounds, developing a bad toothache, or getting raped by gangbangers. Your worst nightmares, then, don't resemble me at all, with my slender figure and my hair curving around my triangle face. My face has a natural feminine beauty which does not require cosmetics, which would take time and care to apply and would cost money the way ladies' underwear and children's clothing costs money. Your worst nightmares may resemble the guys who hang around in the lot katty-corner from the Elm Street convenience store but probably not a woman like me who takes time to compare the quality, as well as the price, of various grocery items before making a purchase. Like you, I reflect on the fact that our mothers and grandmothers made from scratch many of the foods we buy ready to eat today, especially sweets.

There may be some of you who can't stop thinking that, without underpants, my female parts, which resemble your own folds and tender membranes, are unprotected or even rub against the seams of my jeans as I walk. If you were the student-looking person sitting across from me in the clinic waiting room reading a book, then I apologize for wearing such a short skirt and nodding off and letting my legs fall open before I was called inside and asked to undress and lie on the table. You might have assumed my crotch was flaming with venereal disease, though I could have been there just for a regular yearly check-up, same as you. The nurse practitioner gives me a ten-day dose of tetracycline as a precaution, but she has no proof of infection because, as she has already informed me, the results take several days to come back from the hospital lab.

I do tell the nurse practitioner right off that, despite what I said when I begged for an emergency appointment this morning, I was not raped by a gang. You would agree, unless you are Nancy VanderVeen, who owns my building and several others and who thinks that every group of three or more guys hanging around an empty lot, drinking, smoking, or shooting up, constitutes a gang. Those guys across from Elm Street Convenience do not have special jackets or tattoos, and sometimes after dark one of them will give a girl a beer to drink or else pass her a joint, asking nothing in exchange. Those guys all know and protect one another, so you can understand that if I file charges, I'll never get anything from them again, even in an emergency.

Imagine if you had an emergency need for something and you had no money, not even grocery money, and the guys told you they wouldn't be sharing unless you shared with them, and they looked at your slender figure and triangle face as though you were some kind of creamy, packaged treat. If this happened to you, and you'd been drinking already, you might want what they had so badly that you'd slur something like, "Okay, I'll fuck you guys." You'd figure it'd be over in a few minutes, and you'd be right.

But you would think that a man who probably had a sister like you who used to bake brownies or yellow cake which filled the kitchen with a delicious aroma would wait for you to get your panty hose all the way off before pushing you against the front panel of his car. It is hard to believe that a guy who remembered his grandmother or great-grandmother making small batches of candy using the simplest ingredients would cover your mouth when you started shouting that you had changed your mind, that you had to go home to your kids. The way they each in turn ignored your sobbing, you'd think these guys had never loved anything their mothers cooked for them, even though it is obvious their mothers over-fed them, and that is why they've grown tall and strong enough to hold you down. You'd think that if their mothers had cooked special dishes that were their favorites, then they would not laugh at you afterwards as you tried to straighten your skirt and when you shouted that they ruined your panty hose, which cost money. Even after they gave you an aluminum foil packet, as agreed, you wanted to shout at them and say: I am not your mother or your sister, but I am somebody's mother, somebody's sister.

There are things you should not say around children. For instance, you should not say that a man called you a bitch while he pushed your face down onto the car hood. Or that another seemed to be trying to shove his dick into your ass, which is surrounded by delicate skin which can tear. You should not talk about sex or swear around children at all, because children hear enough sex and swearing on television. And you need not teach your children to desire candy, because candy is broadcasted nonstop on every channel, so that when you call your son at night to tell him to go to sleep he begs you to bring home a particular sweet snack from the convenience store, and if you had any money, you would, because children, especially your own children, for whom you went through twelve and fifteen hours of labor, are hard to resist.

If you live in a tiny upstairs apartment as I do, you would try to give your children enough candy that they wouldn't go downstairs to get it from Nancy VanderVeen's son, the man whose rooms are clean because he pays a neighbor girl who couldn't be more than eleven or twelve to dust, scour, vacuum, and sweep under the bed at least once a week. The man downstairs did not offer the cleaning job to me, although I learned from my mother and my grandmother to dust, to scrub walls and floors with rags and brushes, and to make bathroom chrome shine, probably just the way you did. You would especially not like this man if you fell down the stairs early this morning and he refused to help you up, and if he ignored your promises that you were going home to cook something healthful for your children's breakfasts, if he said to you, "Get your useless, whoring, stoned ass up by yourself," not taking into account that this morning had been an emergency situation.

But, as much as you don't like your eight-year-old son going downstairs to that man's apartment, you also don't want him out in the street asking people for candy, and especially you don't want him going to the Elm Street convenience store by himself. You've taught him safety and you've taught him not to steal, but the allure of candy, especially chocolate-coated nougat, nuts, or caramel, can overwhelm any child's better judgment.

Just as candy is all over the television, candy probably appears on the world wide web. The man downstairs invites your son to use his computer some evenings to play games on the internet, so that when you call your apartment on the bar phone to ask your son if he remembered to feed his little sister who, according to the

social worker, is behind in her speech and motor skills, you get no answer. The man's large first floor apartment features a gleaming enameled kitchen sink, shower curtains with no mold on them whatsoever, and a very large television screen. In front of the plush couch, dishes of candy rest on a low coffee table and are accessible to children of all ages. For example, you will find fruit flavored chews and chocolate toffees in foil wrappers, either of which can rot your teeth during the night. And if you ever have a toothache that wakes you from a dead sleep so that you have to go to the lot katty-corner from the convenience store at two-thirty a.m., and you don't have money for something to kill the pain, and you tell those guys you will do anything for it, then you will know candy can be your worst nightmare.

The nurse practitioner tells me she'll call with the results of the lab tests. When I explain about my toothache she tells me the county has no adult dental clinic, but that I should go down the hall and see if my son and daughter qualify for free dental care. Kids must learn good dental hygiene early, she says. As a mother I already know that, and next time I come here I will look into it, but you cannot expect me to stay in this building with these people who assume I have a venereal disease. The nurse practitioner says there is "evidence of trauma" and tells me to file a police report, but she gives me nothing but tylenol for my toothache. Though her face is sympathetic, she says over and over that I absolutely must finish this entire bottle of antibiotics even if I feel better after a few days, even if the pills upset my stomach, which they might do.

There may be some moments in your life, such as that moment walking out of the stifling, medicine-smelling county clinic into late afternoon sunshine, in which you think of what you could do to make your life better. You might try to explain your toothache to the man downstairs when you are as sober as you are now. Maybe he would turn out to have a sister who used to make him crispy cereal bars or peanut butter balls dipped in chocolate, and he would apologize for calling you a whore and he would explain why he always has neighborhood children in his apartment in a way that would make you think your son was safe with him. You think of calling your mother, whom you haven't talked to in a year since she moved to Indiana with her new husband, and you decide to start spending more time with your kids, starting tonight when you will cook something nice for them, a cake or a batch of cookies.



But as you walk home, past the convenience store, the pain in your tooth flares again, and you remember that your phone is blocked for making long distance calls and that you don't have any flour or baking powder.

Surely you would agree that now is not a good time to make big decisions.

You would also agree that, despite the danger that candy possesses, people do not hesitate to use candy against your family—and not just the man downstairs. Somebody puts rows of candy, hundreds of individually wrapped pieces, next to the cash register at the Elm Street Convenience Market, then focuses a surveillance camera on your hands. A large quantity of candy could arrive anonymously outside your own apartment or through the mail with no return address, and it would be difficult for you and your children to just throw it away. A person with computer skills, such as the man downstairs, might scan a bright candy wrapper into the computer and send it in a personal message to your son or even your daughter, who cannot speak but who can recognize certain colorful packaging and grabs at things she knows will taste sweet. The message on the computer screen could be a digital display that would simulate the seductive unwrapping of a new and exciting chocolate snack or even a traditional candy bar such as a Nestle's Crunch or a Snickers. Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers knew the allure of candy decades ago, before convenience stores and computers and aluminum foil, when they neglected important work in order to spend hours combining and heating simple ingredients in small batches. And as women like you and me are aware today, candy, despite the pain and damage it can cause, is nearly impossible to resist.