

Candy Overtime

By Kevin Gooden

I am cursed. Every October 31st I'm compelled to work late, performing horrid acts that haunt my dreams year-round. If the cops knew, that'd be it for me. Convicted and hung by the neck until dead. Or however they execute cons these days. I can't escape it. If I try, he'll murder my family. It all started Halloween night 20 years ago.

Me and Jimmy and Hooter were 10 years old when we started Candy Overtime. Hooter, a gawky, puny kid with thick, round glasses that made him look surprised—more like terrified, if I'm being honest—made up his own nickname 'cause his folks named him Horatio. We went along with it, 'cause who the hell names their kid Horatio? Besides, he picked well. Kid *looked* like an owl, and he was smart as heck.

Jimmy, he was our fast talker. Somethin' about his freckles and dimples made him trustworthy to people; cripes, he's *still* like that, selling cars next town over. Gets repeat customers, too. Everybody loves Jimmy. So, he convinced *all* our parents we were old enough to gather at one of our houses after trick-or-treating, and stay up later.

We called it Candy Overtime, 'cause that's what the workers in town used to call it when they got extra hours at the candy factory. Every year production ramped up before Halloween; everyone had extra money. Sweet times. Until the factory closed. Management blamed the multinationals, with their high-profit low-taste confections. Said they gobbled the profits, sucked the sweetness out of the business. Scuttlebutt with us kids was different, though. We heard accidents forced them to close; workers being hurt, crippled, and killed, and their families sued and won money. We weren't sure about that last part, but the widow Peterson sure drove a fancy car.

The first year during Candy Overtime, we hogged-out on our treats, got hopped up buzzing fine on so much sugar our blood must've been thick like strawberry syrup. We laughed and jumped and hollered and told spooky stories. Then the dares started. The first one fizzled, even in our sweet delirium, 'cause it was just too damn scary. Jimmy dared us to go break into the abandoned candy factory. No way we were doing that. The gigantic structure looked dark, foreboding, even in daylight. With its peeling paint, broken windows, and eerie noises, the building loomed over you like a pending punishment. *Just you wait till your Father gets home.* When I walked along the factory's fence on the way to school, the weed-choked grounds even *smelled* musty, rotten. *Go in, at night?* No way! Rumours whispered big kids went in—and never come out. We rescued our bravery with other dares, did them all year at school.

The best one was when Hooter up and kissed Camille Fernandez right on the mouth. We were out on the playground at lunchtime when Jimmy made the dare, and I'm sure he aimed it at me. But Hooter dashed over, called her name, and when she turned her head, he did it. He must have caught her by surprise because—for just a couple of seconds—she kissed him back. Then she clouted him so hard she broke his glasses. We laughed so hard we almost pissed ourselves. Hooter got suspended. Luckily it was before summer, so everyone forgot the incident before Halloween, except for me and Jimmy: we envied our little friend. Those couple seconds—we both wished it was us. And we knew that despite his size, Hooter was the bravest one of us all.

Our second Candy Overtime started the same, except for gathering at my house, and we ate so much sugar they should've hospitalized us, hooked us up to IV's dripping emergency insulin. But then it got different.

"Dare you to go in the candy factory, Deshawn."

I stared at Jimmy. We'd all grown enormously since last year. Even Hooter. Declining a dare, yeah, it seemed like a *little* boy response, when a dare resembled a joke, not a challenge.

"I dare *you*."

"Hey, you guys—" Hooter started, but it was too late. We were already donning jackets, headed for the door. Hooter scrambled to catch up. I still feel bad about that.

It was a frigid night. In minutes we'd marched down the street, squeezed through the loose part of the chain-link fence, and crossed the stinky grounds, aided by sporadic beams of skeleton-white moonlight escaping the oppressive clouds. We told ourselves we were hustling due to the cold, rather than fear of losing resolve.

The entrance was a metal door that had no knob. Mounted into the door, a large rusty ring bolt juxtaposed with a matching bolt in the frame. A rusty chain threaded the bolts, but the padlock that had joined the chain lay smashed on the ground; the chain ends dangled.

A strange thought entered my head. *If Jimmy and I are the bolts, and Hooter is the chain that holds us together, what's gonna happen when we pull it out?*

I *almost* said it. But faster than a witch's black cat, Jimmy was sliding the chain out, clatters and clinks scaring a bat out of a broken window high above us.

It was colder inside. And darker. We used our phones to light our way. When the no-knob door clanged shut behind us, I'll admit it, we jumped a bit. It sounded... final, like when the door closes behind you at a funeral home.

We were ready for the screeching feral cat. We'd seen plenty of horror movies. It was dim and spooky, but disappointing in the office area. We climbed stairs that ended in a tiny landing, with a door on the left and one on the right. To the left was more office area. Boring.

Hooter pointed at the righthand glass door, "It says 'Production'. Might be better in there." We entered and found ourselves on a rickety metal catwalk, fatigued beams and tired struts creaking crankily at our candy-laden bulk. The putrid smell was back, worse than outside. The stench reminded me of the packrat we'd found on the railway tracks—only half the body but the whole spine laying on a tie, remaining flesh jerking like a zombie as a swirling mass of maggots devoured it. The temperature was colder than graves on winter nights; our breath steamed out, rode a downdraft, joined the eerie mist below. *How in hell is there FOG inside a building?* I shivered. This was getting scary.

We were overlooking the main factory area below. Sickly moonlight shone through dusty, cracked skylights. Shadowy shapes suggested machines of various sizes, conveyors, and roller tables. Then we saw it.

A machine was operating. It was chopping long chocolate bar lengths short, probably for wrapping. A worker stood by the moving pieces, adjusting them on the conveyor. It all looked weird, kind of wispy, transparent.

"Cool! Is that a *ghost*?" Hooter whooped, took off running, headed for another staircase ahead of us that went down to the factory floor.

"Hooter wait," I called, thinking if it *was* a ghost, maybe running *away* instead of *toward* it might be smarter. I started after him, but Jimmy grabbed my arm.

"Look!" Jimmy said.

A heavyset bald ghoul semi-materialized behind the ghost man at the chocolate chopper and bumped into him. The chopper man's hand went into the machine and came off lickety-split, and he lurched about clutching his handless arm, silently screaming, ghost blood spurting. The scene repeated like a short video, an auto-loop of terror.

"No, there!" Jimmy said.

I looked where he pointed. In another spectral spectacle, a man tumbled into an enormous vat, outstretched arms of the same heavyset ghoul confirming the fall wasn't an accident.

Hooter started screaming in terror. Chills ran through my nerves. We saw him. Somehow the killer ghost had grasped Hooter and was holding him high in the air above a large hopper that looked like it fed down into a grinding mechanism.

We turned from the railing to run for the stairs, but something seized our arms from behind in a rigid grip.

"It's too late for your friend," the unseen assailant's voice croaked, "better save yourselves boys."

We turned, saw the same ghoul that was holding Hooter down below.

Crazily, Jimmy whispered, "You *can't* be here... you're down there."

The ghost peered through transparent maniac's eyes, guffawed and said, "There are no *rules* here. If there was, you'd all be home in bed."

Hooter's screams nearly broke my brain when the ripping sound started, followed by sloshy wet cracking and crunching sounds. It might have been better to *see* what happened to him, because every year what I *imagine* from those macabre sounds makes my nightmares worse.

"You boys are lucky I need two workers. My ghostly coworkers can't go outside, load the trucks. Finish tonight's job and come back next year and I'll let you live. Otherwise... well, I *can* go outside, and I know where you and your families live."

The police eventually said aw-shucks-sorry to his parents, put Hooter's disappearance into their cold case file. Back then they interviewed us, of course, but some stories you just can't tell, unless you wanna end up in the looney bin. Now, every Halloween, me and Jimmy head down to the factory at midnight and help make Blood Bars. There're always some stupid young daredevils from out-of-town going in the hopper.

And first week of November a numbered company sends me a cheque. The paystub reads "Candy Overtime."

I'm cursed.