

Candy Comes Back

Colin Greenland

Dr Colin Greenland ('our resident cyberpixie', The Face) is running out of shelfspace for awards following the success of Take Back Plenty, a rumbustious regearing of space opera tropes that won both the Arthur C. Clarke and British Science Fiction Association awards for best SF novel of the year. On 'Candy Comes Back' he offers the following: 'Reading Charlotte Greig's Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?, you are struck by how precarious everything was, working for a girlgroup in the '50s and early '60s. Songs like "Sweet Talkin' Guy" and "Then He Kissed Me" may have given voice to the aspirations of a generation of American women, but they didn't do much for the women who sang them. It was production line pop, performed by sweatshop quartets. If you didn't like your high-heeled shoes, there was always someone ready to step into them. A popular entertainer in Britain in the '90s can't help snaring a little of that insecurity.'

*Shoop shoop shoop, ba-ding-a-dang-ding, shang-a-lang,
shimmy-shimmy-ko-ko-bop . . .*

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Sammy is a salesman. He has a wife he doesn't see for weeks on end, which worries him sometimes but doesn't stop him fooling around a little. He doesn't worry much that he almost never sees his daughter; he has long ceased to understand her. When anything does worry him, he has another drink. Tonight Sammy is drinking with a guy from Seattle who supplies trade fairs for the garment industry. 'I can take as many as they got to get rid of,' he keeps saying. 'Come on, Sammy, how many they got to get rid of? You can trust me, Sammy.' The guy from Seattle paws Sammy's arm in alcoholic fraternal bonhomie. Sammy thinks he is a pain in the butt. Guy should know he can't commit to anything before he's talked to the boss.

In any case, just now Sammy wants to pay some attention to his other companion, who is forty-five if she's a day but is stacked. She is a bottle blonde in a purple sheath dress so tight Sammy wonders if it came out of a bottle too. She has a smoker's cough, a laugh like a crow, and legs that

could stop traffic. Right now she has a sour expression on her face. She wants the guy from Seattle to shut the fuck up, and so does Sammy. When the broad goes to the John, Sammy says, 'I hate to cut and run,' and takes out his billfold to settle up. In his billfold he sees the picture of his daughter, who is sixteen and cares more about Candy and the Bon-Bons than about him or her mother. Any boy who wants to feel his daughter's tits only has to buy her a Candy and the Bon-Bons record. Candy and the Bon-Bons have made four records already, and Sammy's daughter has them all.

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Candy and the Bon-Bons do record hops. They do radio, and residencies. Four shows a day at the Madrigal, five at St William Street; seventeen nights straight in Connecticut and New Jersey. On the road they lie in the back of the truck and stare at the streetlights flipping past through the skylight.

When they get to the theatre they find the dressing room full of dirty bottles. It is under the stage, damp and cold, or hot and airless as a bakehouse. 'I like guys called Rick and Rob and Ray,' says Rona, one night before the show. She cannot be sure that what she says is true, or that it even means anything, really. Then again, who knows?

Cora looks at Rona in the dressing-room mirror. Rona looks at Cora. 'The boy I marry will be called Gordon or Galen or Gus,' says Cora. She twists the cap off a stick of lipstick. Her lips, like Rona's, are already as red as poppies. 'He will have to have yellow hair and a wonderful smile. He will carry me in his strong arms. He will work for the record company.'

Cora purses her lips and redraws the top one.

'I want a fireman,' says Rona suddenly. 'Or a truck driver. Cora, I want a cowboy.' She hugs herself. Her arms are sleek, and completely hairless. She lets her head loll down. 'I want *somebody*,' she says.

'*Somebody who wants me*,' sings Cora.

'*Somebody who needs me*,' sings Rona, standing up at once.

'*She-do-lang-lang*,' sing the Bon-Bons, '*she-do-lang-lang-lang*.'

The door opens and Candy comes in.

'Hello, girls!' says Candy.

'Hello, Candy!' they say.

'How many kids do *you* want to have, Candy?' asks Rona.

'We think two would be just perfect,' says Cora.

'A boy and a girl,' they chorus.

'Heaven,' says Candy ecstatically, and she starts to clasp her hands together, but fails to complete the motion. Her hands twitch. The girls look at her, and for a moment nobody speaks.

George comes in, wiping his hands on a rag. 'What is it, Candy?' he says. 'Is it your timer again?'

Rona and Cora gaze at each other in apprehension. Timing is everything. Timing is the most important thing in the world. If your timer goes, you can't even make it as a mannequin, up and down the catwalk in white lace mini-dresses and nylon boas, never allowed to sing a note. And if you can't make it as a mannequin, you are scrap. No, the catwalk is your last hope. Beyond that Cora and Rona can imagine nothing, only deafening black silence.

George is out of the question, as far as potential husbands go. George is not like the girls. He is one of the people who make everything work, along with Sammy, and Spencer.

Spencer is their manager and producer. He has his hand on their master switches. '*Candy?*' says Spencer in the control booth. '*Candy, are you with us? You going to do this one for us, sweetheart? Jesus Christ Almi -*' they hear him mutter angrily, as he switches off his mike.

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Spencer works for the record company, Skyrocket Records. Days off he likes to watch demolition derbies and drag racing. When they go to the track his wife packs a lunch of Polish hot sausage and pickled gherkin. She puts mayo on the bread instead of margarine, and packs a Thermos of coffee beside the beer. He gets hot for her watching all that mayhem and destruction. Sometimes she gets drunk along with him. Once she blew him right there in back of the stands. 'C'mon, gang,' says Spencer, 'let's hustle it

up now. Got a hot weekend ahead.' He claps his hands and rubs them, grinning at his girls. He wonders if they have the first idea what the hell he's thinking about.

He bets that Candy does. Candy watches you, watches you like she knows you know something, and she wants to know it too. Like a suspicious child. She frets about stuff.

Only when she's singing is she completely at peace. She stands there now holding her hands clasped between her innocent young breasts and giving out like a gospel belter. *'And one day I'll see you,'* she promises, fervently. *'One day I'll see you.'*

Candy is fine today. Running sweet. George had patted Candy on the shoulder and flashed them all a grin. 'Just kidding, girls,' George said, loudly. 'Talking to myself. Don't want to pay *me* no mind.' Rona and Cora had smiled back. They could see George's grin did not reach his eyes. Now George is fiddling with the generator. Candy and the girls are starting to warm up.

'Running back into my arms,' sings Candy, with feeling. *'Running back into my heart,'* she sings, *'again.'*

'Again,' chorus the Bon-Bons.

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'We grew up together,' Cora and Rona tell the journalist. Their new record is in the charts, at number fifty-nine, and Spencer says somebody heard it on Radio WMCA. The journalist is interviewing the Bon-Bons for the local paper. 'We went to high school together,' says Cora.

'All of us,' says Rona. 'I was a cheerleader, Cora was an athlete, Candy was homecoming queen. Boys would buy us Cokes,' she says, smiling, and she clasps her hands around her knee, leaning back where she sits, on the table. 'They'd buy us Cokes and ask us to sing.'

She looks down at Cora, sitting in the chair. Cora looks up at her and they smile.

Candy is supposed to be the leader, the one who talks to journalists, but she is off somewhere. George has taken her off somewhere again.

'Who are your favourite bands?' the journalist asks. He touches his tie and monitors his smile. Never before has he been alone in a small room with two such gorgeous babes. They are almost too good to be true. The journalist is frightened and excited, which is why he is trying to be very professional and cool.

'Oh, we all like different bands,' says Cora.

Rona chimes in. 'Candy likes Dorian and Cora likes the Flapjacks,' she says. 'I like the British beat groups.' She holds her hand up with her fingers stiffly bent, as though she was drying nail polish. 'I think they're just so cute!'

'They have the cutest smiles,' says Cora.

'All the girls are *crazy* about them!' they chorus.

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Cora and Rona and Candy would like things one day to be like in the songs. Not the sad songs like 'Crazy Paving Heart' or 'Loving You', just an ordinary nice song like 'He's the One for Me'. Candy and the Bon-Bons imagine that all the girls who buy their records must live lives like that, which they never get to. Candy and the Bon-Bons don't really have lives, not of their own. They never meet anyone they aren't going to say goodbye to in a day or two. They are always working or sleeping and never at home.

Meanwhile they are completely devoted to Skyrocket Records, and to Sammy, and to each other. 'Honey, you're so natural!' says Rona to Cora, while they turn and run on for another bow. Candy smiles and lifts her hands above them both. They all love the audiences, of course, and the audiences love them too.

Onstage they shine, in their blonde bouffant wigs and candy-stripe party frocks over starched petticoats. Rona and Cora's stripes are pink and white, Candy's are tangerine and white. 'Skyrocket Records have been so good to us,' the girls tell everyone. 'Being on tour is good, you get to travel, see places.' The songs they sing are not about travelling. They are about being true, about knowing the right one and staying forever right by his side. When he goes away, they know they will be sad. But when he comes back, baby, then they will be glad.

Privately, when they have been left switched on and forgotten in the

dressing room all afternoon, Candy and the Bon-Bons feel less secure about the prospect of eternal love and happiness. They often feel afraid, abandoned, left out. Sometimes they think about what can happen to a girl if she gets married and is off on the road the whole time. While you're going from town to town singing 'My Wonderful You', your marriage could be breaking in pieces. The Bon-Bons can't remember anyone special, but they know Spencer always likes them to say they are married, or have boyfriends waiting for them back home.

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Candy and the Bon-Bons do four shows a day, fourth on the bill. Dorian is the star, the headline. The Flapjacks are second. 'Back home everyone loves the Flapjacks,' Rona is telling the motel manager.

Candy is suddenly there, leaning in listening to the conversation. 'Where?' she says.

'Back home,' says Cora.

'Where we come from,' says Rona.

They stare at her with eyes like headlights on the highway.

'All our schoolfriends think the Flapjacks are really cool,' says Cora.

'What *schoolfriends*,' says Candy suddenly, in a voice of bitterness and scorn. 'We never went to school.' And she starts to cry.

Rona and Cora start to coo. They pat Candy feebly, in distress. What is wrong with her? Has she been drinking or taking some drugs? It upsets them to see her standing there with her battery lead in her hand. The lead goes up her skirt and she is just standing there in the lobby in front of everyone, crying.

Spencer is on the phone. 'Where the hell is George?' he says, craning over his shoulder to watch Candy. 'I don't like what I'm seeing here in this motel lobby, Sammy, old buddy.' He listens a moment, then shakes his head. 'You get out here now, Sammy, then tell me they don't have tear ducts.'

His voice is high and fast. They would almost think he sounded scared if he wasn't so strong, so responsible. Spencer is one of the people who makes everything work. He puts down the phone and goes back to the

desk. The motel manager stands there with his mouth in a straight line and his eyes going backwards and forwards, side to side. Spencer passes him a ten.

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Candy sits in the corner of the room in her stage frock reading poetry. Her head seems to hang low between her beautiful defeated shoulders. She is making the other two edgy, just sitting there. They keep keening quietly, off-key, and pulling their hair with their fingernails. One will start and then it will set the other one off. As for Candy, these days you never know what she's going to do next. Onstage she is fine, never sounded better, storming them with eyes and teeth shining fit to dazzle the front row. Onstage Candy is pure flair, spin, sway, motion. It is during rehearsals and after hours that she'll suddenly throw a tambourine across the room or try to open her wrists with a screwdriver. Or she gets out, and they find her in the parking lot at mid-night, her face pressed against the windows of Impalas and Caddies, shading her eyes with her hands. She spies on the couples necking in the back seat, watching them with hollow, haunted eyes like some vampire of the freeways. One night somebody sees her and calls the cops, but the company takes care of it.

Someone has given Candy a record called 'The Times They Are A-Changin'. Tonight in the motel she demands a record player and plays the thing until everyone's just about distracted. 'Can't you *hear* what he's *saying?*' she demands.

'He's a wonderful talent,' says Rona.

'Like some kind of poet,' says Cora.

They nod solemnly and turn back to the TV.

Candy snatches the arm off the record with a horrible ripping, scratching sound. She throws the record player on the floor and starts kicking it. George has to come running and cool her down again.

The next day, the Bon-Bons are up and ready for rehearsal at ten. By eleven Candy still isn't there. No one is.

Rona pulls a wisp out from her hair, twisting it between her finger and thumb. 'She's run out on us,' she says.

Cora agrees. 'She's gone to the West Coast,' she says.

'To San Francisco.'

'Hollywood.'

'She'll never last on her own.' They know you can't go more than twelve hours without a recharge. They've always known that. That is the rule.

'They'll split us up.'

'Maybe they'll send us to Seattle.'

Cora and Rona cling to each other in a stiff clashing froth of rayon and terylene.

The studio clock ticks, and ticks again. Each time it ticks the minute hand jumps, a whole minute all at once, as if the seconds in between didn't count for anything.

Rona says: 'We can go on as a duo.'

Cora says: 'She would want us to.'

Rona says: 'They would want us to.'

But Cora shakes her head. 'No they wouldn't.'

Rona looks at her.

'They wouldn't,' Cora says again.

'How do you know?'

Cora shrugs her shoulders. 'I just know, that's all. If they did want us to carry on, we'd know, wouldn't we?'

'I guess,' Rona says unhappily. She looks up at the empty glass booth. 'I don't know, Cora.'

'They'll be here soon, honey,' says Cora, gazing around at the empty studio.

'I wish Candy was here,' says Rona.

'Let's sing,' says Cora.

'What shall we sing?'

'Let's sing one of the new ones. Let's sing "Teen Supreme",' says Cora.

'With no music?'

'Sure.'

Rona puts her head on one side. 'Well who's going to sing lead?'

'Both of us,' says Cora. 'We'll sing it both together, all the way through, like the people will when they hear it. We'll make believe we're singing along with Candy.'

Outside the recording studio cars drive in and out of the parking lot. The studio is right in the middle of downtown, above a shoe store. Thousands and thousands of people walk past the building never knowing they're right next to a place where chart recordings are being made.

The Bon-Bons sing:

*'You're my king
I'm your queen
And forever in my dreams
We rule the world of lovers
Teen Supreme.'*

Next day, Candy comes back, just in time for the Eldorado show. She walks in the door with Sammy. 'Hello, girls!' she calls, with a wave.

'Candy!' they cry happily. They stare at her. Her hair is different. Different from the way it always was before; different from theirs. Candy's hair is brown and straight. It hangs halfway down her back.

'We like your hair, Candy,' says the Bon-Bons.

'Look what I've got for you,' says Candy. She opens a brown paper sack and takes out three fresh, warm donuts.

The girls don't say anything.

‘One for Cora, one for Rona, and one for me. Mmm!’

‘But Candy,’ says Cora. ‘We mustn’t.’

Candy lays a hand on her flat stomach. ‘Just this once,’ she says.

‘But Candy,’ says Rona. ‘We can’t.’

Boldly Candy brings a donut to her mouth, but her mouth refuses to know what to do with it. ‘Oh well,’ says Candy brightly, and throws the donut in the trashcan.

The Bon-Bons laugh and turning, throw their donuts in the trashcan too. They wipe their fingers on the paper napkins.

‘I’ve had such a time, girls, you can’t imagine,’ says Candy, holding up one hand.

Lovingly, Rona and Cora take hold of her arms, one each. ‘We’re just so happy to see you, Candy,’ they say. ‘We missed you!’

Together they hurry into the rehearsal studio. ‘Why don’t we start with one of the new ones?’ Candy asks them, while she waves to Spencer. ‘How about “Teen Supreme”?’

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Spencer watches from the control booth. The mike is off. ‘Didn’t she used to be with the Cherry-Tops?’ he says, not taking his eyes off the girls.

Sammy turns his head away, sharply. ‘It’s Candy,’ he says.

Spencer puts his hand to his chin. It’s Candy’s face; or at least that’s the shape of her head. They’re all much the same size. What does it matter anyhow? She’s got the moves. This is 1964, girl groups are a dime a dozen, there are scores of them working in New York alone.

George comes in and changes Candy’s wig. He twists her long brown hair up at the back and puts her old blonde wig back on her head. ‘That’s better,’ says Spencer. He opens the mike. ‘Is that better now, ladies?’ he asks.

‘Much better, thank you, Spencer!’ chirp the Bon-Bons from the box

speaker on the wall. George gives them the thumbs-up. Candy beams at Spencer and Sammy, at everyone.

Spencer flicks off the mike and flops back in his producer's chair. He reaches inside his sports coat for a cigarette. 'Thank Christ for that,' he mutters.

Sammy bounces in his seat, laughing, plucking the creases of his slacks. 'I swear you really care for these girls,' he says.

'I do,' says Spencer, lighting his cigarette. 'I do care for them. So do you.'

Sammy grimaces, raising his eyebrows. He looks down at the floor. 'Damn it,' he growls, and punches Spencer on the arm. 'You're right.'

'She-do-lang-lang,' sing Candy and the Bon-Bons,
'she-do-lang-lang-lang.'

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Sammy sits in the office at the factory. He sits hunched forward, his hat on his head, his chair pulled tight in to the desk. He is on the phone. 'Put her in the truck with the others,' he says. 'Seattle, yup. What? What say?' Sammy twirls his cigarette between his thumb and his broad, hard forefinger. 'Stack 'em sideways,' he says, scowling. 'Get more in that way.' He feels gloomy this afternoon. He has a headache coming on. Maybe he drank a little too much lunch time.

While the guy on the other end is talking, Sammy stares out of the window, frowning vacantly. Over behind the factory he can see someone standing by the highway with their thumb out. Long brown hair, a girl, he reckons. Young girls hitching rides all over the country these days. He sees them, all-over; never picked one up, though he's been tempted. Sometimes it seems like half the young women of America are up and out and on their way to somewhere else. Sammy wonders what the hell has got into them.

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