

TALES OF THE STRANGE
presents
YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT
...CHILLING CANDY!
...FEARSOME FACTORIES!

Rule one of investigating the abandoned candy factory was that no one should know why Mercedes was there. Mrs. McGolly was really insistent on that point. If anyone asked, she was doing a project for school, and had never heard of Mrs. McGolly or her candy corporation. She certainly wasn't getting paid fifty dollars to take pictures of a rival company's abandoned factory.

Rule two was easy, take lots of pictures. Mercedes had a camera, done.

Rule three was weird. "While you're in there," McGolly said, poking a hoof right into Mercedes' face, "don't say 'candy!'"

"Uh, why?" Mercedes asked.

"Don't worry about it, just don't say 'candy'. It's my business, not yours." McGolly slapped a ten-dollar bill into Mercedes's hand and swept the bat right out of her office. "Remember—you weren't here," she said, and then ended the conversation by closing the door.

Later that day, Mercedes stood outside the run-down factory, with a camera in one hand and nothing else. She'd been trying to think of alibis for taking pictures, and she had hit on a good one by accident: She was doing a paper on, like, why McGolly's company had opened a brand-new candy factory, when Failtown already had an abandoned candy factory just sitting around.

Actually asking McGolly a question like that would lose her that fifty bucks, though.

The only obstacle between Mercedes and the door was a wrought-iron fence. She was skinny enough to slip through, even with her sweater

on—one of the perks of being a bat. She crossed an overgrown lawn and climbed the steps to the factory doors. In faded paint on chipping plastic, a big-bellied, smiling cartoon dragon waved, with a speech bubble coming out of her mouth that said 'Welcome to the Candy Dragon Candies factory!'

Mercedes snapped a picture of the mascot. After taking a moment to smooth her purple hair, Mercedes sided up next to the mascot and stuck her tongue out and took a picture of the two of them together.

Then, she grabbed the door handle and pulled. The door slid forward, then bounced back, like someone was pulling from the other side. Mercedes planted her feet against the ground and pulled on the doorknob as hard as she could. With a slow schlorry, the door pried open, then popped free.

A gust of air washed over Mercedes. It was humid, thick, and crushingly sweet. Ugh, she felt like she was huffing an aerosol can of Skittles. Mercedes stuck out her tongue and wrinkled her snout, but fifty bucks was fifty bucks. She was going in.

What Mercedes found inside was an overgrown candiescape. Huge stalks of pink and green grew from the floor and spread into huge, polka-dotted mushroom caps above her head. Bulbous pods clustered together; some were intact, some had popped open and drizzled colorful fluids from their insides. Shelf fungi grew on walls and tanks in candy-cane-striped colors. Thick strings of what might have been taffy hung like vines between catwalks and conveyor belts. And most of all, everything was coated in a dusting of squishy pink stuff, piled up like snow but with the color and consistency of chewed bubblegum.

Mercedes snapped a picture.

Right about now, she, like really wished she'd worn shoes. The ground wasn't sticky, but it was

wet and soft in a way that made it feel like walking on someone's tongue.

Half-coated in the pink goo, with a cluster of lollipop spores growing at its base, was another plastic stand-up of the factory's mascot. The sun hadn't faded the colors on this one, so Mercedes got to see the bright, pink, blue and yellow candy dragon in all her artificially-food-colored glory. 'Our factory's modern machinery allows us to keep creating new candies and stay one step ahead of the FDA!' read the speech bubble.

A short, squishy distance from that stand-up was another, with the same cheerful smile as the others, and a finger pointing down at the floor. 'Be sure to stay inside the blue lines for the factory tour! You're a lot less likely to fall into the machines inside the blue lines!'

Mercedes looked down at the floor. It was an undifferentiated, uniform pink. Oh well, she could just follow the signs, right?

Her camera flash lit up the factory floor as she walked around huge mixing vats covered in ivy-like licorice and under catwalks with candy-corn stalactites. The squelch that bubbled up between her toes (ugh) sounded different now, with a metal clang behind the sound of pink glop.

The signs had led her out along a catwalk, sticking out over a giant opening in the floor leading to the factory's lower levels. The dragon stand-up's speech bubble said, 'Candy Dragon Candies are made with a patented sugar by-product that tastes twice as sweet and is four times as addictive! Enjoy your free samples at the end of the tour!'

Mercedes looked over the railing. Big steel channels for ferrying raw candy ran from the vats on the factory floor down into the lower levels. The channels were full of pale, grayish-white candy slop, just straight sugary syrup before it had been dyed or mixed with flavoring.

If this factory was abandoned, why was it still running?

"Like, weird," Mercedes said to herself. She snapped a picture. Above her, there was a sharp ping as a suspension cable broke.

The catwalk suddenly tilted to one side. Mercedes grabbed for the railing, but the pink goo covering it made her hands slip off. Her feet lost traction and flung out from underneath her. She was a bat; her instincts told her to fly. But all she had were these lousy webbed hands. Since she was so thin, she slipped right through the railing. She was flailing, falling through the giant hole in the floor.

A taffy vine broke her fall, but she couldn't grab it fast enough. With a splot, she dropped into one of the channels of sugary goo flowing down to the lower levels.

The sticky stuff soaked into her sweater, it would totally ruin her leggings, and it was probably carrying her off to be baked into gummy bears or something. The channel twisted, and the force threw Mercedes to one side, then the other, leaving her dizzy and covered in syrup.

She gulped down big mouthfuls of the candy goo without meaning to. The glop splashed into her mouth despite her efforts to keep her head up. Every big gasp came with what felt like a whole candy bar's worth of pure sugar derivative.

A loud buzzer blared and a green light above her flashed red. The channel walls shifted. She was shunted out and fell to the squishy ground with a heavy splash of syrup. The walls slid back into place. Luminescent strawberry cream puff toadstools lit up the corridor she was now in, filled with smaller sugary fauna running alongside the channel.

A sign with the fat, smiling dragon on it reminded employees, 'Don't forget your safety equipment when working with our delicious sugar

derivative! Our insurance plan doesn't cover sugar addiction!'

Mercedes leaned one hand against the wall and rubbed her stomach through her sweater. She'd swallowed enough of that stuff to give her an uncomfortable bulge in her belly. Her top still covered her, but she looked like she was hiding a basketball under her sweater. She had to hope enough jazzercise would like, work it off. Her camera, though sticky, still hung around her wrist by its strap and still turned on when she pushed the power button.

Mercedes was so done with this factory. With her sticky camera, she snapped a picture of where she'd ended up. She was taking her pictures and marching right into Mrs. McGolly's office and demanding her fifty dollars. But she had to find a way out, first.

Mercedes took the first thing that looked like an exit to her. A circular hole in the concrete wall led to a tunnel beyond. The floor sloped up, so she hoped it led back toward the ground floor. The round tunnel walls were irregular and rippled. The sugar goo that clung to Mercedes' fur, clothes and hair was drying, and the more it dried, the more it clung to her skin and the tackier it got. She had to peel her feet off the squishy pink floor, but at least the sticky sugar gave her traction. She leaned from side to side as she moved, trying to avoid pressing her thighs against the underside of her swollen belly.

Sounds echoed from below and above. The air in the tunnel pulsated back and forth. It was the same humid, sugar-choked air as on the factory floor, but at least it was cooler. A pleasant breeze began to blow against Mercedes' back. It blew some wet, purple-dyed, sugar-coated locks into her face, which she swiped away with a grimace.

She was going to bathe when she got home, and use a whole bottle of shampoo to get this sugar

off, and toss her clothes in the wash right away, and swear off candy for a whole week. Even if she hadn't gulped down a big bellyful of sugar, which was now rolling around in her stomach like a lead weight, the omnipresence of the smell was turning her appetite.

Mercedes tried to take a big breath, but the air tasted like lemon-cherry gummy candy. The breeze from below whipped at her legs and slapped her ears. The walls rumbled and she felt it through her feet. Her ears curled back. The rumbling was getting louder.

The slow, sticky slog became a panicked scramble. Mercedes jogged as best she could with sticky feet and a belly that bounced every time she raised her legs too high. Without pausing, she looked over her shoulder.

Behind Mercedes, way down in the tunnel, something bright red and translucent was coming toward her. It filled the entire tunnel. The red, glossy skin pulsed and glistened. Its eyeless front yawned open and let out a sticky, screeching roar.

It was a gummy worm.

Sore stomachs and sticky feet were no match for the sudden adrenaline that shot through Mercedes. Her feet splashed across the pink goo like she was walking on water. The wind still pressed at her back. The gummy worm was outpacing her. She spared another moment to look back as it roared again. Mercedes got a glance down its shapeless, round maw, into its lemon-gummy gullet.

At some point, Mercedes started to scream. All that mattered was the space between the circle of light up ahead and the gaping gummy mouth behind her. If she could make it out of the tunnel—!

Her foot slipped out from beneath her. She caught herself on her knee and tried to claw

back up to her feet. The worm's roar was right behind her. Mercedes rose and managed two steps before she was knocked right off her feet.

She kicked and shouted as gummy candy pushed against her from all sides. Instead of darkness, she could see through the gummy worm's body. In distorted red tones, the tunnel rushed by around her.

The worm's body was pulling her deeper. If she'd had time to think, she might have hesitated, but this was no time to stick to diet plans. Mercedes bit down on the inside of the giant gummy worm, taking out a huge chunk of cherry-flavored candy. She smacked at the candy in her mouth twice, gulped uneasily, and took another bite. Then another.

This was disgusting in more ways than Mercedes could count, but she didn't stop eating. Even now that her sweater was popping up over her swollen belly, even now that her leggings were riding down along her thickened ass, surviving was more important than her figure.

Her next bite made a hole in the worm's candy flesh. Mercedes shoved her hands through, then her head, then came rolling out with a wet plop onto the squishy pink floor. She got to her feet, ready to run. The hole in the worm's side was already sealing up. It raised its head let out a roar of pain. Like, yeah, she was running. She plowed through the nearest door and slammed it shut from the other side.

There was another roar from behind her, then the sound of rumbling moving away slowly. She was more trouble than she was worth as prey. She stumbled away from the door and nearly fell over.

Mercedes slumped against a sign with the smiling dragon mascot on it. She smeared sugary syrup, now mixed with cherry flavoring from the worm's belly, across its face. Inadvertently, she put pressure on her stomach. Mercedes

flinched as a jolt of tight pain flashed through her.

The sign said, 'We catch our Candy Dragon Candies gummy worms live!'

Mercedes put a hand over her mouth, trying to hold back a sugary burp. Her belly hung free of her sweater now, almost sagging in front of her. It was way too big, and it was squishy, and it had large, scaly red plates stretched across it, like some sort of alligator belly.

"Oh my god," she snapped. Eating her way out of a giant gummy worm was bad enough, but this fat dragon stomach was the absolute limit. She'd had enough of this job. She was even beginning to think that McGolly expected something like this to happen to her.

"I'm sick of all this stupid candy!" Mercedes snapped. That broke McGolly's third rule—as if she cared about the rules any more.

'Candy' echoed out into the factory, like all the machines had stopped for a moment.

A reply echoed back to her. Like everything else here, the voice dripped with sugar. The echoes were so bad, it could have come from anywhere. It asked, "Did someone say...CANDY?"

Right now, Mercedes started caring about the rules again.

Mercedes had to get out. Where was the tour path? She was so turned around, she had no clue where in the factory she was. If there were any exit signs, they'd been since covered over with Technicolor candy flora. Someone else was here, and she didn't want to know what kind of person lived here on purpose.

"I've NEVER heard of ANYONE being sick of CANDY," the voice said. Maybe it was a recording? If so, how was it responding to her? And how was it getting closer?

Mercedes had just gotten eaten minutes ago. She wasn't taking any more risks. Her mad dash for the door lasted two steps, until her legs knocked into her belly and her belly bounced up against her chest. Everything ached. She stumbled to a wall for support, doubled over and groaning.

"Hi there!" said the voice. It was right above her head. Mercedes turned, slowly. She was looking at a pink-scaled chest. Her neck tilted back, looking up, and up, trailing up a long neck to a tight-cheeked smile and wide eyes with layers of color like two halves of a jawbreaker.

It was the dragon mascot. In two dimensions, on a sign, she looked cute and perky. In person, eight feet tall, and looming in the shadows, she looked unreal. She could talk without breaking her smile, and she didn't blink.

"I'm Lollie Pop!" the dragon said. She grabbed Mercedes' hand and shook it sharply. Her voice had a deliberately goofy bounce to it. Again—cute on Saturday morning TV, worryingly eager in person. "I'm the official candy dragon spokesdragon of Candy Dragon Candies. I'm here to make sure that everyone loves candy!"

Mercedes edged along the wall. Maybe she could like, sneak away? Her foot came off the floor with a loud splup of sugar syrup.

Lollie Pop leaned down toward Mercedes, moving out of the shadows. Her glossy pink hair looked like it was made of taffy, and her yellow horns looked like hard candy. Yellow spots dotted the blue of her cheeks, while her underbelly from her neck down was pink. The rest of her body was blue with yellow spots, from her thick arms down to her fat thighs and round tail. She had the broad hips and reptilian stance of a cartoon dragon.

The dragon's nose almost touched Mercedes. Her voice was now a whisper, but still packed with all the energy of a sugar rush. "Did you say you were sick of candy?" Lollie Pop asked.

Mercedes gulped. Her mouth hung open as she tried to imagine how to appease a living cartoon candy beast. Lie to her? Promise to always go trick-or-treating? All Mercedes could think about was how the dragon smelled like blueberry, bubblegum and marshmallow.

"...because no one can ever get sick of candy!" the dragon said, her voice bright and booming again. Lollie Pop threw her arms up in the air in excitement and balled her hands into fists. When she brought her hands down, her fists were crammed full of chewy candy: peach rings and gummy bears and strawberry puffs.

One of Lollie's hands went straight for Mercedes' open mouth. She didn't have time to duck. The large dragon's entire fist fit in her mouth without a problem. Lollie literally shoved the candy down Mercedes' throat, and then pulled her hand back. The poor bat shuddered and groaned, which gave Lollie the perfect opportunity to unload her other fist.

Mercedes squinted against the assault of sugar in her mouth. Not even eating her way out of the gummy worm was this saccharine. All the flavors clashed to create a miasma of artificial and natural flavoring, more disgusting than trying to swallow a wad of concentrated sugar. As Mercedes forced it down her throat, her neck shot out about six inches longer, with big cherry-red scales across its front.

"Nnguh," Mercedes groaned. Through all of this, her camera was still hanging from her wrist. She grabbed it and mashed the power button. It gave a sad chirp as it struggled to turn on.

The sugar hit Mercedes' stomach with a sound like a medicine ball hitting the ground. Her swollen, draconic belly puffed up like it was filling with marshmallow. Her bare feet sprouted large, blunted purple claws. It didn't take a genius to see that something unnatural and fetishy was happening to her.

Mercedes had to do it now before it was too late. She lifted the camera right into the dragon's face and let the flash go off. A rainbow of colors danced in Lollie Pop's eyes and the candy dragon stumbled back a step.. Mercedes wobbled from one foot to another, fleeing in the fastest waddle she could muster.

Mercedes made it ten feet before the dragon bounded up in front of her and stopped her by sticking out her own big belly. In Mercedes' heavy puffing and panting, she was defenseless against the mouth-filling wad of saltwater taffies the candy dragon summoned out of thin air.

"Anyone who's not supposed to be here gets the super-deluxe-extra-special tour!" Lollie Pop said, clapping her hands together happily. "Which means you get all the candy we can physically fit inside you."

Mercedes' eyes rolled back as she gulped down big throatfuls of clingy taffy. Her belly pressed against her thighs and tiny horns popped out of her forehead and her webbed fingers sprouted colorful claws at the end to match her purple talons.

"And you'll get to be a candy dragon, which is so much fun. All you can ever eat is candy!" Her chubby-cheeked smile only grew more intense. "And candy dragons can't die. I should know, I've tried! We're gonna be best friends, permanently."

She had to stop this.

"Wait!" Mercedes shouted. Lollie Pop froze for a moment, with a pile of gummy worms slowly growing on top of her palm.

There was no way she could escape the dragon, especially when she was wobbling on her transformed feet and close to falling over on her distended belly. The best she could do was stall her and try to think of something to save herself.

Think. Like, think!

"There's someone who'd make a better friend!" Mercedes said.

Lollie laughed. "All my friends are my best friends. That's why they've all gotta be candy dragons, so we can be best friends forever and eat candy all day and talk about how much candy we like to eat!"

"She's the CEO of a candy company," Mercedes added. "I'll tell you where she is if you let me go home... to, uh, get more candy."

Lollie squealed, patting her cheeks and dancing from foot to foot.

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Mrs. McGolly's intercom chirped with the receptionist's voice. "Mrs. McGolly?" She didn't answer it, as she was deep in expository thought.

There were secrets hidden in the Candy Dragon Candies factory, secrets that could made her company unstoppable. It was too dangerous to send anyone important in to investigate without knowing exactly what they were looking for. Anyone intelligent would have taken one look at the situation and walked the other way. But offer an unimportant idiot fifty dollars...

"Mrs. McGolly, it's urgent. There's a giant worm here to see you."

...what?

She tapped the talk button with her hoof. "What?"

The far wall of her office bulged out toward her. The wall was like a bubble ready to pop, and then it burst. The drywall tore open and the doorframe toppled onto the floor. A giant, green-yellow gummy worm wriggled through the hole in the wall. It reared back, roaring as it thrashed its head. And up on top of the worm,

straddling it like it was a horse and wearing a pink cowboy hat, was Lollie Pop.

“Yee-haw!” the candy dragon squealed. Above her head, she swung a red licorice lasso.

McGolly dove for the panic button under her desk. Her hooves missed it by an inch. She dropped to the ground hard, with her legs lassoed together at the waist. She grabbed at the carpet, at her chair, her desk, but Lollie Pop was deceptively strong. She hoisted McGolly across the carpet and up into the air, until she was nose-to-nose, candy dragon and cow CEO.

“You’re gonna be my new best friend,” Lollie said. McGolly opened her mouth to scream, but only got a solid block of caramel shoved into her mouth.

“Hi-yo, Wiggles, away!” Lollie Pop shouted. The giant gummy worm lurched forward. With Lollie and McGolly on its back, it plowed straight through the windows behind McGolly’s desk, making a beeline for the abandoned factory. All the while, McGolly thrashed and gurgled around the caramel blocking her mouth.

Mercedes was relieved to find that she could reverse the process of becoming a candy dragon. She wasn’t so happy with the actual method she had to use, though.

“Trick or treat!” shouted a cluster of three kids, with some parents lurking behind. Mercedes looked down at them and felt a lump rising in her throat—which took a lot longer with her extended dragon neck.

They all looked expectantly up at her as she bent over and opened her mouth. A glob of individually-wrapped taffies rose out of her throat and fell into the kid’s bag with a splat.

“Ew, gross!” one of the kids said, but that didn’t stop them from keeping their bags held out, de-

mandingly, until she’d horked up candy for each of them.

Mercedes shut the door, chugged some pep-to-bismol, and slumped into a chair, legs spread for her swollen dragon stomach. She was still stuck halfway between bat and dragon, with big talons, elongated neck, and cartoonishly heavy belly. At least tonight’s work so far had worked off some of the heavy weight in front, bringing her back down to a manageable beachball-sized bulge. Everyone who came by just figured she was dressed in a dragon costume. That didn’t explain how she’d gotten her neck to grow so long or her legs to get all reptilian and crouching, but it kept awkward explanations to a minimum, at least.

The doorbell rang again.

Ughhh.