

Pier One Promises

She was sitting on the counter in the girls' bathroom at the gym, her short, blond hair so sun-bleached that it matched the cigarette dangling from her mouth. To cope with the sweltering Louisiana heat, her faded maroon gym suit had been cut to a dangerously tight minimum. A long, slow drag gave her time to assess the stranger standing at the door before she said, "My name's Candy Cain. And who might you be?"

I'd just arrived from big-city Houston and been handed someone else's gym suit. It hung to my knees. I covered the inked-in name, which made it look as if I'd put my hand to my heart in some sort of salute. "Rena. I'm new here." It was a well-rehearsed response.

We became instant friends, which happens so often with fifteen-year-old girls. Young women in the throes of becoming the people we would be for the rest of our lives.

Once I got to know her family, I asked her mother Marilyn why she'd named her daughter Candy Cain. In what I affectionately call "Southern logic," she replied, "Well, I always knew I'd have a daughter named Candice, but how was I to know I'd marry Jimmie Cain?" And it was Candice she became. Years later, with her master's degree in hand, she sent letters to one and all declaring she would no longer be known as Candy.

I'd loved school in progressive Houston, but Baton Rouge was not that. I faltered academically while relishing everything else that rich culture afforded. Our cadre of friends would cross the river to hear Silas Hogan and Lightnin' Slim play swamp blues in a little bar that never carded us. We ate étouffée and red beans and rice on the levee, smoked pot and drank cheap wine, then skinny-dipped in

the bayou at midnight, hoping no alligators found us. Or cops. We had better luck with the alligators. We'd stomp and holler to *Exile on Main Street*, and when there was a band we wanted to see at the Warehouse in New Orleans, we'd steal Jimmie Cain's yellow Cadillac and cruise down Highway 10. All of this, not to mention magic mushrooms and Mardi Gras – it was a slice of heaven.

Of all the places I lived as a child, Baton Rouge was the first place that felt like home. I didn't stay for long, but longevity had little to do with depth of engagement. It must be said, however, that while Candice continued to party like there was no tomorrow, she also excelled scholastically. Cruising toward adulthood from a shaky family background, my own future looked sure to be one of ruin and damnation.

But as so often happens in life, the universe interceded in a mysterious way. I turned sixteen, dropped out of school, and was working full time. This granted me a push-button Plymouth, handed down from a recently deceased grandparent. With our own set of wheels, Candice and I pulled up to the newly opened citadel of retail splendor, which is what Pier One was before turning into a soulless retail giant. Located in a whitewashed Art Deco building that hugged a corner on Florida Boulevard, it had been an upscale nightclub in the 1950s. Now it was emblazoned with names of foreign countries we'd only ever dreamt of.

Dressed in our most cut-off cut-offs and skinny little tops fashioned from bandanas and bootlaces, Candice and I raced to the entrance and crossed that holy threshold into a new world.

Exotic smells and an upbeat instrumental greeted us. Our heads swiveled in every direction, taking in the densely packed imported furniture, colorful textiles, baskets, rugs, and other eclectic décor. Its distinctive bohemian vibe had a crowded bazaar-like feel. In less than a minute, we headed off in different directions. Candice marched straight for the earth colors and geometric patterns from Africa, while I sped right down the aisle toward India. It was 1970, and paisley flew from the hippies at

Trafalgar Square right into my bedroom. By the end of that weekend, my bedspread and matching curtains were screaming tones of yellow, orange, and of course, hot pink. That color Diana Vreeland famously called “the navy blue of India.”

For her part, Candice became the Mudcloth Princess, an albino from Mali. With her creativity newly awakened, she became so proficient at sewing that I would rush over in the afternoon with fabric and be sporting her latest creation by evening. My new direction was more intrusive. With a long career in interior design ahead of me, I’d begun adjusting household vignettes wherever I went. There wasn’t a room full of furniture that escaped my attention, and before long, people were afraid to ask me into their homes.

Taking off in different directions in Pier One that day had even more profound implications. Once she became a full-grown human, Candice settled permanently in Los Angeles, married a Brit, and adopted a baby as soon as she was born. A baby as dark as Candice was light. When I first saw them together, it was like looking at two extremes of a monochrome photograph. And as ever, she excelled, eventually becoming a well-known costume designer, while managing the wardrobe departments at the best theaters in L.A.

I also settled in California, but in a city known for its Asian influence, San Francisco. The second place that felt like home. That engagement had longevity. After struggling through four years of design school, my early days working in architectural firms were fun and exciting, and a great way to learn more about the world.

During those heady days of the mid-to-late 1980s, the Bay Area had also become a spiritual supermarket. It opened its arms to a fascinating array of teachers, trainers, mystics, and crackpots. I

investigated everything but continued to look toward India and later Tibet, beginning a lifelong journey into their wisdom traditions.

It was that day in Baton Rouge, that first seductive foray into the bastion of the foreign that shaped two young girls. Crossing that retail threshold was also crossing the threshold into a world of discovery that showed us our gifts and how best to use them. Pier One went bust with company-wide shutdowns in 2020, but Candice and I remain good friends, explorers till the end.

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