

Penny For Your Thoughts?

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Eleven pm. The cubicles were long since emptied, fluorescent lights humming in rows of sickly yellow. He was still at his desk, mindlessly click-clacking at a worn keyboard. Overtime for the fourth time this week. A sick escape from going home to loneliness. If it wasn't for the incessant grumbling of his gut, he might've stayed planted to that seat till daybreak.

He wandered out to satiate the clawing hunger, but the vending machines stood dark, unplugged, lifeless. Only a gumball machine remained in the corner, its plastic belly foggy with wear.

He turned a coin over into the slot. One penny. Enough.

The crank groaned when he twisted it, coughing out five measly candies into the rusty tray. They rolled into his palm: faded, chalky, tiny little things whose colours had washed almost to nothing. He popped one into his mouth, and the years cracked open.

Green. A park on a sweltering summer Sunday, the smell of grass and sweat clinging to his skin. A boy with a grin too wide for his body ran alongside him, their steps colliding as though their lives had always meant to tangle. Naivety carried that first meeting.

Yellow. The hum of fryers and a polyester uniform sticking to his teenage back. His first job. Payday had felt like a jackpot then, greasy notes folded into a jean pocket. He remembered grinning all the way home, feeling like he could buy the world.

Red. A cinema seat creaked, and his hand brushed hers by accident. The blush spread quicker than he could hide. They'd shared a kiss, nervous, clumsy, too sweet. Puppy love – brief, electrifying, aching, gone before the credits rolled in.

Blue. Rain, heavy and punishing. The boy from the park stood opposite him now, older, eyes narrowed. A decision was made that day. Choice over loyalty, ambition over friendship. One walked away, and the other didn't follow. The candy was bitter, like a promise broken.

White. The last one. It was purple when it came out of the machine, but the pigment had rubbed into his palm. Purple was the rarest colour, his favourite, and so the memories this time stung a little harder. Fingers stained with paint; studio walls plastered with half-finished canvases. Nights of art school laughter, mornings of exhaustion and dreams running richer than reality ever had. But the voices wouldn't stop – *It's useless, it won't put food on the table. Find something else.* He listened. He quit, and every day stuck in that corporate building was a painful reminder of a forsaken future. The candy in his palm was as blank as the shirt he wore, as lifeless as the hours chained to paper stacks. He raised it to his lips, but it slipped and rolled off into the worn-out carpet.

He stood still, hand empty. The gumball machine loomed, filled with miniature balls of stale sweetness and lost stories. Another penny, another buried thought, and this time his heart was the one that was hungry.