

Amber Sánchez
Hunky-Doo

I figure I've always had visions of the end like some kind of prophet. The end will come the next time the slot opens. Then, I can see some semblance of another person. I can see the slight flash of a human hand as they slide the tray of food through. Typically, it's some kind of lettuce with raw vegetables, a meat patty, and sweet bread. But today, I know it will be different. It will be my final meal. It will be my last choice before a thousand volts of energy is shot into my head to fry my brain.

There is banging on the door, a baton against the thick metal. I'm not asleep, but it wakes me up. I sit straighter on the floor, and my faded red jumpsuit sticks to my back from sweat.

"Fernández," a faceless voice says from the other side. "Chow."

Hesitantly, I crawl towards the slot to wait like a dog at the door.

I don't know how long it's been, but I'm old now. I don't remember how I came to be old. I only seem to recall white concrete walls and a singular, stiff bed in the corner of this very room. And waiting. Thinking. Rolling my thoughts around like dice inside my skull. There's no past or present here, only the aching pull of the future, dragging and dragging you forward. There's only one destination, and I cannot avoid it. I can't beg, I can't plead. I can only wait.

There's no possibility. I will die today. This meal makes it certain.

The tray slot slides open to reveal light. A metal container slides through, and I accept. The metal is warm. I can feel the remains of human touch and savor it before the piece slides shut in one big clang, leaving the room dark again.

I walk to the bed and sit on the edge. The quiet of the room brings a ringing to my ears. My back is hunched like a half-moon as I stare at the container in my lap. They had asked me what I wanted a while ago, or maybe it wasn't very long ago— I don't know. I could have anything in the world, even from a specific restaurant or person. I wasn't used to options. I wasn't used to choice— I never was. Endless opportunity made choosing hard, but I settled on the last thing I wanted. When they end up dissecting my corpse to try and understand my brain, I want them to find this, like a memory inside of my belly that I can take with me wherever I'm going next.

I pull the cover off the container.

I am met with the shiny, scarlet wrapping of a *Hunky-Doo* chocolate bar there.

The casing strikes me. I don't remember it being so small. It was a lot bigger the last time I ate it, but everything else is the same. Its bright blue letters are printed sideways by a cartoonish Black Bear. I turn it over to hear the crinkle of the wrapper. When I open it, I behold the thick, honey-chocolate filled with nougat and a crispy wafer.

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I had my first chocolate bar in a refugee camp in 1980. I don't remember eating it, but there's a yellowed picture of my chocolate-covered mouth and big, presumptuous eyes gazing at whoever was behind the camera. It was some type of *Wunderbar* or *Snickers*, I don't know. From then on, my mother had become somewhat superstitious with all food due to my many allergies. We lived in the suburbs of Mississippi because my father worked as a translator for other Cubans in some government facility. We stayed small and normal. My mother wanted me to be normal.

That's how I ended up at the Grand Canyon with a sage vest and many hand-sewn patches from my endeavors with the Junior Rangers. We were meant to wear – always pressed – white button-downs and khaki shorts. Our shirts always were to be tucked in and belted, and our knee socks were always clean. It was for discipline, so park rangers would find us less threatening as children. I felt like a little soldier.

Most of the boys were from my neighborhood; some were from Arkansas. I was on the edge of twelve and smaller than the other boys, yet my uniform was growing too tight. I tugged at my collar while Mr. Earl went on and on about a fossil. He was kneeling on the ground, explaining as he moved his hand over the shape of a sea shell lodged in the orange rock.

"It's like looking back in time right in front of you," Mr. Earl explained. "These layers of rock reveal thousands of years of geological history. Hey! Robbie, get your hands off of him!"

Robbie Miller had been tugging at the back of Charlie Landry's baseball hat.

"I wasn't," Robbie said, holding his hands behind his back.

"You can't play near the edge, you hear? We have no guard rails." Mr. Earl stood to his feet and wiped his hands on his pants. "If you boys are gonna grow up to be park rangers, you gotta be conscious of safety. Safety is our number one priority."

Sometimes, I didn't listen to Mr. Earl. I would instead get trapped behind my eyes, imagining things. At that moment, I imagined the Grand Canyon flooded with water. I had imagined drowning. Then, I sucked in a breath when Mr. Earl's back turned, and Robbie shoved Charlie to the side. Charlie tripped over his feet and tumbled to his knees, a wave of dust flying up with the impact.

I didn't like being near Charlie because I feared his weakness was contagious. There was also the matter of the back of his neck. For some reason, I felt myself afflicted while looking at it. My throat would dry, and I would be forced to look away. With sweaty palms, I avoided him even when I felt him around.

Being near him would make me the source of more teasing. I already spoke with stretched symbols from a tongue accustomed to quickly switching in and out of Spanish. My clothes smelled of foods that the other boys weren't used to. I was born in a country that was polluting America – at least, in the repeated terms that they heard from their parents.

We camped at a distance that showed a large stretch of the canyon. Layers of red and orange rock stacked up like a game of Tetris. I could see

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the stars, but I didn't look at them. Instead, I stared into the fire through my kaleidoscope, beholding a shifting world.

Some of the boys had already gone to sleep, though they said they were going to stay up. Other boys set up their bags for the next day when we would be kayaking down the Colorado River. Still, it was quiet where I sat—even quieter with Charlie on the other side of the fire, tossing twigs into the flames.

He kept glancing at me as if he wanted to say something. I only noticed because I, too, was glancing at him.

"That a kaleidoscope?" Charlie asked into the quiet.

Hesitantly, I moved it away from my eyes. I looked around to see if he was talking to me.

"Yeah," I said.

"Can I see?"

I nodded.

He got up from the log where he sat and made his way by my side. I hoped that no one else was around. I didn't want them to see me with him.

"Have you read the *Skyfire* comics?" Charlie accepted the kaleidoscope and looked through it. "The style is super cool. Looks somethin' like a kaleidoscope."

I'd loved those comics about that girl who could shoot stars from her hands. My father said they were for sissies, so I stopped a short while after that.

"No. I don't like those ones," I said. "I take extra math classes because I'm better at it than reading. So I don't got much time for comics anyhow."

"Must be nice. I'm shit at math," Charlie said. "Can't ever imagine takin' more than I got to."

He was blond like Dolly Parton, that type of blond that looks like it came from a box. He had one eye closed as he observed through the kaleidoscope—somehow, that made him easier to look at. I didn't like looking at him when he could see me. His green vest was off by now, and it somehow made him more exposed in my perception. I decided it best to look at the fire and focus on the feeling of its heat, like burning my skin to bubble.

"I could help you," I said.

Charlie lowered the kaleidoscope and looked at me. I looked away.

"I'm all the way in Bentonville."

"Yeah, but like... when we're on ranger trips," I said. "If you wanted. I don't know."

When he smiled, he looked down. "Thanks, Ray."

"It's Raymond, not Ray," I corrected him.

"Oh, sorry," Charlie said. "Everyone calls you Ray."

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"Yeah, well... it's just Raymond."

I could feel him staring at me; it was warmer than the fire I stared into. We went on like that for a good while. He told me about things I had never been too keen to ask until that moment. His favorite movie was *Beetlejuice*, although his mother wouldn't let him watch it for its mention of demons. He'd have to sneak the VHS stolen from the video rental and watch it when she was at work. *It was stupid*. Everything to Charlie was *absolutely* stupid.

I told him I liked *Scarface* and *Poltergeist III*, but I didn't favor the other two. We agreed. We both liked ghosts. We liked being haunted, being half-stuck somewhere else. We liked our mothers but not our fathers. Breaking through the silence I had previously forced myself into, I understood more about how my brain worked.

The fire died down, and we sat dimly lit. I saw him then. There was a slight gleam on his face from sweat. The heat was persistent even at night.

"Yeah, my brother's at Arkansas State. He played baseball, so now I hafta play baseball. It's *absolutely* stupid," Charlie explained. "You wanna go to college?"

I shrugged with a smile, one I had worked up over our conversation. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, 'I don't know'?"

"Means just that," I said. "I don't know. I wanna be rich, though."

"I wanna be rich too," he explained. "Have a big old house in New York. But I'd be okay without it, I think. I wanna write those choose-your-own-adventure books. My teacher said it don't make any money, but I don't care."

"What's the point of doin' something when you're not gonna make anything?"

"Lots of rich folks can be sad."

"I wouldn't. And if I *was* sad, at least I'd be sad with a million dollars."

He looked down and laughed. I wished he would look at me when he did, but he didn't. He only moved on and grabbed his backpack to pull out a Walkman with a Belinda Carlisle tape in it. It reminded me of what those other kids said about him, what they called him when he wasn't around.

"Charlie," I started, "do you know what they sayin' about you?"

He reached back into his bag and pulled out a chocolate bar.

"You hungry?" he asked me.

I didn't respond because he didn't answer my first question. He only peeled open the Hunky-Doo bar and pulled a chunk off, offering it to me as it melted on his fingers. I stared at him a moment before accepting.

He grabbed the small headphones and put them over his head before stretching them to me. I had to lean close to listen, practically pushing my ear against his. The headphones connected us there, and I couldn't think

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of anything else to say, and he didn't speak either. He merely pressed a button and allowed the music to play.

And I bit into the chocolate, the piece where his fingers had been. It had left a mark. He had left a mark. I chewed through the thin wafer in a series of tiny crunches that couldn't be heard over Belinda Carlisle's voice. The warmth of his ear on mine gave way to all of my senses. I suddenly could taste every fiber of the honey-chocolate, of the nougat. It tasted like s'more. The world was in front of me, just over the edge of a cliff. I saw the night sky. And for some reason, all that made my throat tighten and my eyes water. I was overcome with an emotion that brought my lip to quiver.

It was cut short by my allergic reaction to the peanut oil in the wafer. When Charlie noticed I struggled for air, he tore the headphones from our heads and shouted something I couldn't fully process. Mr. Earl had to rush over to the fire with my medication to shove into my thigh. For a moment, I had been afraid. But then I remembered the warmth of his ear and the imprint of his finger in the chocolate bar moments prior.

Now, I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at the Hunky-Doo in my hands. As I open it up and slowly bring it to my mouth, familiar music plays. I wish I had told him I liked the comic, too. I relish the feeling of warmth— all-consuming and suffocating— even just for a moment.