

Meal

by Kshiti Vaghela

When they tell you to choose your last meal, it probably hasn't dawned on you yet. One week puts on the cloak of a year when you're in that small white cube, almost floating, you think, in another universe. A space so clock-less you forget you have a heart beat anyway. So when they tell you to choose your last meal, you order pizza from Papa John's, root beers, a slab of peanut butter fudge from See's Candies. It has been years, maybe, you think, since you've thought of See's Candies. The last time you saw the label, it was stamped on a gold rectangular box with a bow, filled with truffles you had picked blindly at last minute to give to your then aging mother. It had been a waste though, since she was on the tube. You had forgotten, and resorted to eating the twenty pieces of overtly specialized chocolates in the last half hour before your mother died, a little relieved when the last one happened to be filled with peanut butter.

So you order peanut butter fudge from See's Candies. You do it because they let you. You do it because it's the last guarantee they allow you before you're dead. You never asked for it, you think, but hell, why not? This is how they humanize things, you think. This is how they make themselves not you. You, who put a bullet through a man's leg and then tied him to your truck to kill him, dragging against the earth, feeling so much anger that your blood didn't just boil. No, it evaporated. When you were done, you jumped into a pool and thought you could drown and never quench the thirst. That instant where you hit the water was after-sex bliss. But they found you swimming and found him dead and that was that, no mystery attached. You wonder for a bit what had been in his stomach the moment he died. Probably his mother's fried chicken. Mashed potatoes. Maybe a peach cobbler with cheap vanilla ice cream bubbling softly in its steam.

This has always fascinated you. The glorious-ness of heat and cold commingling. Texas never was the place for this. For the first seven years of your life, nothing of that sort existed for you. It was either Dallas muggy or Houston muggy and sometimes Austin muggy. Your mother was a whore, you found out after a while, and it was never something you cared to delve into. Her men never meant anything to you and she never offered explanations. So she toted you in her Asia-made truck from one Texas city to the next, falling asleep long before the bed next to yours beat rhythms into tattered wallpaper. Then one day, she took you to Maine and bought you a winter coat. That's when heat had made bursting bubbles in the cold air and you laughed like a child, finally. Your mother had jerked her head, unbelieving, and had to finally join you, laughter sprinkling it self into the pine trees, making them seem too alive.

Then she brought you back to Texas and you never left again. Instead you shaved your head at 15, the beautiful blond strands you thought would never see again only growing back when they put you in the white cube, stamped tattoos of belonging at 18, the needle pricks making the ink run almost too deep, raped a Chinese girl at 19 because your best friend bet you 50 bucks which you needed for gas to see your mother, and killed a black man at 21 when he called a bitch you liked, bitch. You look back on your life with a dazed distance. This is what the white cube is for, you think. This is how they tame you. Make your memory fuzzy and cold. Snow-like almost. With nothing warm to make things happen in the air. And then ask you to choose your last meal. You laugh, and in the middle of it, the cage opens. The plate is in front of you and you feel the cheese still going under effervescing sauce bubbles, the air molecules condensing helplessly against the root beer glass. You can't touch them. You won't. You don't.

Only the fudge is still, so you reach for it. But there, as your fingers pick it up, a bubble breaks and the fudge crumbles slightly.

Immediately you let go and shake your head. You don't want it. You never did want it. They just asked you to choose so you did. The guard picks up the plate and hesitates. You say you're sure and wave him away. Then he says, you know, you are the last dead man to get to choose a meal in Texas. They ain't gonna do this no more. You wonder why aloud and he tells you some senator didn't think it was necessary when people like you never thought about... but he stops there and lets you fill it in. You suddenly realize that this is it and laugh into the room. Devils for the devils, you shout. Devils for the devils. And when you are lying on your last bed, the pumps slowly sending cold chemicals up your solid arm, you imagine the bubbles building inside and grin, muttering, justice, finally.

