

Hard Candy

by Luisa Brenta

Kofi was a coffee grinder. Which doesn't help much when one has dreams of Adventure and Great Deeds. Kofi knew that, and often complained about the limitations imposed upon him by destiny. As a matter of fact, he complained about this *very* often, to all the other inhabitants of the Kitchen Cupboard. By now, they were getting really tired of listening to him. Especially Pamela Pepper, who was of course a pepper grinder, and quite satisfied with her life as it was. But she was also Kofi's closest friend, and as such, expected to take a bigger interest in his aspirations - and mumblings.

"What am I doing here?" Kofi Coffeegrinder would tell her. Sure, I grind coffee for people who want to taste it fresh, or even for people who just want to stay awake until late because they are having a birthday party. But even so. Where is the adventure in what I do? What if I wanted to bring a sweeping change into my life?

"Why should anyone want to change his life," Pamela Pepper would say. "I am perfectly happy with mine, for example". She looked down at her own curvy figure, and smiled.

"Well, good for you. I do understand that your days are more varied than mine: today with stake, tomorrow with pasta... And I know that everybody finds you hot. But don't you ever wish that you were more... I don't know, more involved in more important things?"

"More important than steak and pasta?" Pamela's eyelashes were fluttering in disbelief.

"OK, pasta and steak are also important. OK. But what I mean is... don't you want a challenge, something that you can be remembered for?"

"Remembered? I don't need to be remembered. I am here! "

"Yes, right you are. That is another thing. I don't know how much longer you'll see me around in the Cupboard. I heard Our Humans talking about ground coffee that you can now buy all ready to go. Ma' was saying that you don't need to grind coffee any time you want a cup anymore; you buy it, believe it or not, powdered already."

"Oh was she really saying that, that she doesn't want to grind coffee at home any more? I am surprised. She is usually so much of the perfect homemaker... Even to the detriment of taking a little better care of her looks, I must say. She's letting herself go, don't you think. " Pamela shook her pretty head — and her shiny black hair with it, of course.

"True," Kofi was sticking to his own train of thought, "Pa' did say that the flavour could not possibly be the same. And he is right, of course, just think of what gets left in my drawer sometimes, swooning away like potpourri out of its box. You cannot even tell the smell of coffee, the next day, not unless you stick your nose deep into my drawer".

" Oh yes, don't you hate it when perfume fades so fast. Same problem that Cissy Cinnamon has, up in the herbs section of our Cupboard. She was complaining to me just the other day - "

"... But Ma' has also said that there 's a lot of time to be saved - as if time were even ever the issue when the pleasure of a proper espresso is at stake. And then she also said that if you did want to grind your own coffee, you could buy one of those modern coffee grinders - electric, you know. Electric ! Where does the contact go? Where goes the feeling of toasted beads gently crushing under your hand as you turn the handle on my head?"

" Oh, I see.... "

Pamela did *not* quite see. But she was listening, now. She may have been a little vain, but she did have a warm heart and above all a prompt understanding for matters of sensual pleasure. As a matter of fact, she had always found that faint Brazilian smell on Kofi's back quite evocative. "I see how you should be worried, if they might not need you anymore for their espresso. She was quiet for a moment, thinking. Then she said something unheard of.

"What else could you grind?"

"Else? Grind?" Kofi was flabbergasted. "I am a *coffee* grinder, I grind *coffee* and always have; I do not grind "*what else*"!

"Well, you are a coffee grinder *because* you grind coffee. Not vice versa. If you did grind something else, you could take a new name. Something to do with what you have now chosen to grind in life."

"But Coffeegrinder is my family name! It's...it's... my destiny!"

"Well, I suppose so. That is, if you believe in destiny. Personally I believe in making the most of whatever comes."

Kofi Coffeegrinder did not have an answer to that. He found that he had to stop and think.

And stop and think he did. For a few days he was quite pensive. He carried on his usual tasks absentmindedly, not really taking part in the process of coffee making with the total devotion that he had given it in the past. He spent a lot of time thinking of Pamela's crazy suggestion. It did seem totally outlandish, still he couldn't get it out of his mind. He was still stuck thinking of Pamela's suggestion when, suddenly, life made a decision for him. Ma' actually bought an electrical coffee grinder and placed on the kitchen counter. It did not fit in the Cupboard.

However, Kofi was not thrown away, as he had been fearing; he was given to M'Boy, to play with. That was how Kofi left the Cupboard and ventured into the world of Our Humans.

Kofi had been sorry, of course, to leave all the other Cupboard Ones, after sharing so many years of familiar smells and softly clanking noises. But as it had to be, he hadn't minded being assigned to M'Boy. All the Cupboard Ones liked M'Boy; this little Human always politely announced himself before opening the Cupboard door. He would make a little warning noise by dragging a stool on the floor so that none of the Cupboard Ones would be startled by his sudden appearance. He would then look inside the Cupboard, and everybody could see that he was actually standing on the stool - trying to impress Pamela Pepper, most likely, by looking so much taller than he really was.

At the time of Kofi's arrival into the world of Our Humans, M'Boy had just started to go to school every morning. He placed Kofi on the

new writing desk that his parents had put in his room for him to do his homework. M'Boy would often get bored with homework and pick up Kofi for a good look. He would turn the handle on Kofi's head, place him next to his ear and shake him for any revealing noises, or look into Kofi's drawer.

Then one day, Kofi noticed that M'Boy had been staring at him longer than usual; sucking on his pen, not writing in his school notebook - obviously lost in thought. Still looking, he mumbled,

“Wonder what this thing could grind besides coffee”.

Kofi had an invisible jolt and started feeling nervous. “What, again?” he thought. “What is this? Why can't they leave my grinding to me?”

M'Boy was still mumbling. “What do I grind in it? What could be even better ground than not?”

He started sucking on his pencil again, obviously thinking of a number of alternatives, mumbling them out as if Kofi had not been there. “Paper. Eraser, cut into small pieces, first. This pencil - no, too difficult to cut. Chocolate - no, sticky.”.

As he looked around the room, pencil still hanging sideways from his lips, M'Boy's eyes came upon a box of candy that Uncle had brought for him last Christmas. Hard candy. The kind that sits in your mouth forever because it's too hard for you to crunch with your teeth. The kind that stays in your mouth and gives out just the amount of flavour that it decides to - usually too much or too little...

Hard candy. Right.

M'Boy opened the box and looked inside. He had taken the pencil out of his mouth, probably because his mouth was watering now - like Puppy's when she followed Ma' into the kitchen around four.

“Uhm.” He was mumbling, again. “Lemon. That's good to smuggle into school, hide it in your pocket and take it out when you are bored to death. Wakes you up. Uhm. Maybe I don't want to grind those, I still want to be able to put them in my pocket. ... Mint. ... Raspberry! Except, if I powder them, then they disappear even faster, in my mouth. And that is the one flavour that I always want to last forever. Uhm.”

M'Boy had picked up the box of candy and he was turning it around in his hands, smelling it from all sides.

Then he picked up Kofi, turned him in his hands. Turned the handle on his head, opened his drawer, pulled it out of his face, smelled it, put it back in.

Kofi was annoyed, now.

"Uhm. Smells like coffee. Only coffee - never tried anything else, have you?"

Kofi was suddenly very puzzled. Was M'Boy talking to *him*, now? What in the world was going on. Everybody knows that Humans never talk to the Cupboard Ones - they pick them up, use them, clean them, put them back. Never, talk to them.

"Aren't you bored, never trying anything other than coffee? I do realize that maybe you do *like* coffee. Grownups seem to, go figure. But are you really happy with having a lot of just one thing?"

Yes. M'Boy was definitely talking to him. And, Kofi thought, like most Humans, that M'Boy didn't know what he was talking about... Why would anyone have anything against 'always a lot of one thing'? How would one know what to expect if life brought one thing one day and another thing the next? Where would one's security go, even if one could be back in the Cupboard?

But M'Boy now stood up as if he had been struck by a sudden revelation. He picked up the candy box, took out one lemon, one mint, two raspberry, one butterscotch and even one coffee. Incredibly, he put them all - all *together* - in Kofi's grindingbelly. He grabbed the handle and started to grind.

Fumes of sugar rose to Kofi's brain - intense, foreign, disquieting. At every turn of the handle, Kofi wouldn't know which flavour would suddenly prevail, whether he would like it, or how long it would last

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Did M'Boy *have* to do that? There was lots of coffee in the house. If he wanted to grind, Kofi was gasping, the coffee was in the cupboard right next to the one where Kofi had lived so long with all the other Cupboard Ones. The smell of coffee was how the world should be, how the world had always been from even before Kofi

could do any grinding of his own. A quiet, familiar pleasure — manageable.

OK, M'Boy had now stopped grinding out his maddening fumes, thank God. He had actually picked up Kofi again and was turning him in his hands, smelling him from all different angles as he had done with the candy box before. Then M'Boy opened the drawer in Kofi's face and resolutely stuck a finger in that devilish mixture that he had made. He took the finger to his mouth, and tasted.

Right then, Younglady entered her little brother's room. Now, he would get it. Look what M'Boy had done. And was even eating it! Now, he would get it.

Younglady came to the desk and asked "What are you doing, Brother?"

M'Boy didn't even jolt, didn't even try to hide what he had done. Rather, he turned to her, eyes wide open, and showed the proudest smile the rest of his young face could manage.

"Taste this," he said, pulling out the drawer from Kofi's face. "I made it myself, with Uncle Gregory's candy from last Christmas. Go ahead, taste it!"

Younglady stuck a finger in The Mixture as M'Boy had done before. She tasted without even thinking twice. She lit up (she actually lit up!) and said "All flavours together!"

She stuck her finger in The Mixture again, and again.

"Hey, Brother, this is awesome! You never know what you are going to get. More raspberry rather than lemon, sometimes more mint than anything else... This is super, you little genius!"

She seemed... pleased, of all things. Kofi couldn't believe his ears. And M'Boy seemed as proud as if he had reproduced life itself. Brother and sister looked at each other in delight. Then, together as if they had gone ready-steady-go, they each stuck a finger in The Mixture, and tasted. They commented to each other on what they had found. And again and again they did it, congratulating each other on any discovery of a new flavour in The Mixture. They kept suggesting to each other new ways of exploring Kofi's drawer, in

case some unpredictable new flavour was to be found hiding in a corner.

No mistake about it, they were actually enjoying this.

Go figure, thought Kofi.

