

The Craving by A. dot Ram

cw: miscarriage This could not wait till morning. The craving came on so sudden and intense that resisting never even crossed her mind. For some reason Claudia needed fudge. Maybe it was hormones. Maybe it was the fact that she finally had an appetite. But she needed fudge. Not the kind she usually made this time of year, melting chocolate chips in the microwave. Claudia needed the heavy, silky fudge her grandma used to make—the kind you made in a saucepan with a candy thermometer.

Did you need a double broiler? Claudia wasn't sure anymore. She closed her eyes and tried to picture it, her mom at the stove, swirling a big wooden spoon, round and round continuously like the second hand on a clock (*can't let it scorch*) stirring and lifting with such deft motion.

But Claudia could only observe this memory from outside the pan, from where she'd sat at the counter with a coloring book, or later on, a workbook or laptop. She did not know whether the pan contained a double broiler.

It was too late to call—10pm in Los Angeles and midnight in Sugar Run. Mom went to bed reliably at nine.

Google would know, Claudia consoled herself. She typed “*fudge recipe*” into the little white box and scrolled through too many microwaved chocolate chip recipes before typing “*fudge that you make with a candy thermometer.*” This was better. Condensed milk sounded familiar, but the more she read, the more Claudia doubted her own memory. Condensed milk or evaporated? Had it been sugar and cocoa powder, or some baker's chocolate? There were a hundred variations.

She was pretty sure that there was vanilla extract (that, she knew, was her family's power ingredient), and she was certain that all of these variables would matter when it came to getting the exact flavor and consistency she craved—something you could hold in your mouth savor as it slowly melted away. Like a good memory. The supple kind of fudge that wrinkled and cracked like leather. If she could lose herself in a mouthful, maybe it would smooth over the terrible week.

She tried to concentrate: Grandma Nora's kitchen. Yellow linoleum, dark brown cabinets with old brass knobs in the shapes of flowers. Claudia had usually been there when Grandma made her fudge. With the cousins, decorating felt ornaments with

puff paints, out of the way. Now she tried to reverse-engineer the smells. Butter. Vanilla.

By the time she was old enough to actually help, Claudia had found other interests—speech tournaments, volunteer projects, study groups. In the back of her mind, maybe Claudia had always thought there'd be more time.

Grandma Nora had stopped cooking after the stroke. Mom tried the fudge for a while, but lost momentum after a few years, after the cousins stopped gathering together for Christmas. After it turned out that Grandma was the sugar or condensed milk or whatever it was that held everyone together.

Claudia tried to remember. It was a family recipe—the kind that should never need to be written down. It was written in their mitochondrial DNA, Claudia suspected—the pieces of molecular coding passed unaltered from mother to daughter every generation. Moms and grandmas and daughters had been making this fudge since at least the 1800s, probably on temperamental stoves fueled by wood or coal.

“I remember when my Grandma Ira would make this fudge...” Grandma Nora would say sometimes, her brown eyes sucking up all of the light in the room and spinning it into something that sparkled in her mind.

Claudia pictured them, a chain of women living close together, gathering in dowdy blue-checkered kitchens, around wood block counters and formica-topped bars to make fudge and rum cakes and fingerprint cookies. And here she was, two time zones away, Googling recipes. Asking a computer.

Claudia had always considered herself a mold breaker, and had always considered that a good thing. Now, standing alone in her kitchen with cream-colored porcelain tile floor and sleek bar pulls on the cherry cabinets, she just felt broken. She was going to be the one to break this tradition.

Mom would remember. She could call in the morning. But the craving was so deep and immediate that the thought of waiting barely passed through Claudia's mind. That need consumed her as she rifled through her walk-in pantry. Sugar. Cocoa powder. Vanilla.

She had learned to cook, but always new recipes, her own discoveries. Claudia recalled her dad's perplexed eyebrows at Thanksgiving. "Why would you want to put apples in the stuffing?"

Why not? To be different. To take things up a notch. Back last month, when being different didn't quite mean being separate. Now the stakes had changed, and all Claudia wanted was a family recipe.

She had learned to cook, but never fudge. How many Christmases had she not even missed it, distracted by office parties and ski trips and neighborhood cookie exchanges in other people's European-inspired kitchens, where bakers showcased neatly flooded royal icing and sugar crystals that sparkled like snow on festive platters from Target and Michael's, while sipping Cabernet from wide-brimmed glasses? She decided to go with milk and butter, and no double boiler, recklessly mixing and matching from online recipes, guided by flashes of light and scent memory.

In a large and heavy saucepan, stir together the first three ingredients, then stir in milk, her phone screen instructed in frigid Helvetica. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until mixture comes to a full rolling boil. Boil to 234 degrees F or until syrup, when dropped in very cold water, forms a soft ball which flattens when removed from water.

Why had she not remembered before, her grandma keeping a glass of ice water by the stove? The way she'd watch the fudge mixture (what was the sign she was looking for?), dropping just a bit of mixture in the glass, reaching in for it with her hand. The memory hit Claudia like a wave. That had been the shocking part—Grandma Nora sticking her hand in the water, after all of her admonishments at the dinner table. *Keep your hands out of your water...*

"It's okay; it's different," Grandma had said. Was it with an actual wink? Or had that wink only been in her voice? "Table rules don't apply in the kitchen." And she had pressed the ball of fudge in her fingers and given it to Claudia to sample. Claudia, out of all the cousins, because she was the one who wandered into the kitchen.

Why had it taken an internet recipe to jog this memory? Maybe because Mom used a candy thermometer. She didn't have Grandma's eyeballing abilities. She relied on science, not art, Claudia thought as she pulled a long bar handle and searched the gadget drawer for her own candy thermometer. It had been a wedding gift, and she couldn't remember using it.

For most things, boiling was boiling. You looked for the bubbles. Not here. Somehow it made a difference. She could remember mom throwing out a batch of fudge once, slinging it with the wooden spoon from the pan into the trash can with a vehemence that had kept Claudia from asking *what's the matter*.

Claudia watched her ingredients pool and melt into a sticky liquid. The scent of warm sugar and cream melted something inside of her, and her stream of consciousness swelled with a glut of melted memory run-off. It ran wild and overflowed the banks of Claudia's self-control as images flooded her mind unbidden: Grandma Nora, her right hand withered and hanging useless at her side; Mom flinging grainy fudge into the trash; the doctor's office, the empty black screen.

She felt tears well in her eyes and ooze like blood. *I'm leaking*, Claudia thought, but still she stirred, consistent like the second hand on a clock. She blinked her eyes, clearing the opaque wall of tears that obscured the numbers on the candy thermometer. 157.

It would thicken, Claudia assured herself. She had a Viking range. If her foremothers could do this on a wood-burning stove, she could do it on a Viking range. Or had it not been the fire at all—the secret to their success? Maybe it was the consistency of the hands. Maybe it was having someone there to stir for you while you greased the pan or grabbed the butter.

Empty kitchen notwithstanding, Claudia would master the fudge and join her foremothers, creators of fudge. She would extend her wooden spoon across space and time and they would grab on and welcome her, tell her never mind, you're one of us. All of those women, all those years, different personalities joined by fudge. Imagine! Fudge and daughters.

No. They would not welcome Claudia. She was not a good daughter. She had no daughter of her own.

Sometimes you could follow all the directions and things still didn't turn out. Claudia had choked down lentils, kale, eggs, fighting the nausea that formed a tight lump in her throat. She needed something sweet. So she stirred, letting tears leak like blood. The thermometer climbed, the red mercury stretching and blooming. 210, 217. Then what? Why hadn't she read ahead? And from which recipe? Claudia didn't want to stop stirring for long enough to check. She didn't want the fudge to burn and crumble. She was already leaking; she couldn't afford to crumble.

The mercury drifted up to 225 and Claudia gripped her wooden spoon. She didn't want to do this, but she had a wooden spoon and the craving was strong. She needed this fudge, needed to taste the thick, buttery chocolate, but mostly she needed it to turn out. She needed a win. She needed that connection.

She had a wooden spoon. She picked up her phone and extended her spoon across space and time. Would anyone grab the other end? It was 10:58 in Los Angeles and 12:58 in Sugar Run.

Claudia stirred as she listened to the hollow dial tone. One ring, two, three.

"Hello," a heavy voice answered.

"Mom, what do I do when the fudge gets to 234 degrees?" Claudia asked in a rush.

She heard a cough in response, then silence. Finally, "You stop. You take it off the heat. Add your butter and vanilla and let it cool without touching it." It was a monotone recitation, a steady stream. Mom could do this in her sleep. Literally.

"Okay, thanks," Claudia said with a sniff that she hoped was not audible on the other end of her call. "Sorry. You can go back to sleep now."

"No, I can't." Mom's voice was coming to life now, with more highs and lows animating her words. "It's late. Are you okay?"

The thermometer drooped, wilting down from its peak. Claudia could feel her stomach sinking, almost like the nausea that had dissipated days ago. Sometimes she could hold it in; sometimes she could not.

This time she could not. The words spilled out, bitter and acidic like bile. “I lost the baby.”

Silence, and then, “That hurts. I’m sorry, Honey.”

“Yeah,” Claudia sighed. “Sorry. I know you were looking forward to being a grandma—”

“No, it’s not about that,” Mom interrupted. “I just mean... I remember.”

The realization dawned on Claudia slowly as the thermometer drooped down to 225.

“You?”

“Three.” Mom said. “It happens. If you only knew.”

Claudia wondered how many invisible links there were in the chain of her foremothers. She wondered at the invisible link that clipped her into this chain.

Kitchens and fudge and daughters, and the daughters and sons that might have been.

Crowded kitchens, nonetheless—people to share the bitter and sweet family recipes.

It was 11:28 in Los Angeles and 1:28 in Sugar Run, but Claudia kept Mom on the phone until the candy thermometer dropped to 110 degrees. Then she picked up the wooden spoon and started to stir again.