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THE CARAMEL SAUCE INCIDENT

Trisha Bartle

My mom pushed our spare key into the lock and we stepped out of the musky corridor that smelled of moth balls and over-boiled Brussels sprouts into my grandparents' apartment. There was glass and gold in every corner, a monument to the modern 1990s aesthetic that Grandpa and Grandma so loved. The glass of the coffee table, knick-knack boxes and entertainment cabinet was beveled and etched with generic flowers. Each was trimmed in "gold" tubing that would flake off to reveal the cheap steel underneath if you were to take a knife to it. Beige, furry chairs with brown piping flanked their TV and entertainment center.

"Hello?" my mom called out, but of course she got no answer. This was our first visit into the winter season. My grandparents, John and Marge, were typical snowbirds. They escaped the intensely snowy and cold Minnesota winters for the comfort of their fifty-five-and-up trailer community in Scottsdale, Arizona, only to come back north after the thaw. Could you blame them? We even visited them down there on occasion. I'd take smutty erotica magazines from the free library in the elderly clubhouse and read them by the pool. Old, blue-haired ladies would drop them off on bingo nights. Oh, to be twelve.

While they were mostly retired, my grandma made extra money selling Luzier Cosmetics on the side. It was just like Mary Kay or Avon, but they didn't give her a pink Cadillac for being a good saleswoman. Instead, she got a pretty, metal tiara. You can't exactly sell makeup all the way in Arizona, though. Well, maybe you could, but rather than lugging a suitcase full of creams and eye shadows down to the Cactus State, she left the business in my mom's hands when they flew to Arizona. This year, I was thirteen and we'd gotten this thing down to a science. My mom would head into the office and listen to the answering machine filled with old ladies wanting their wrinkle serums and she'd fulfill orders from the well-stocked closet and cabinets. I had other ideas, though. I'd always head straight to the kitchen.

You know how, when you're heading out on a trip, you make sure you eat everything perishable in your kitchen? You fix yourself the last glass of milk or decide if the expiration date on the jar of Miracle Whip is just a suggestion, or if you really need to make a tuna sandwich right now despite needing to catch a plane in two hours. But you eat it, just in case, all because you don't want to come home a week later to a home reeking of spoiled food.

Yeah, my grandparents didn't do any of that. They left their kitchen just as it always was, even though they'd be gone for at least four months.

Why? Because they knew we'd eat it all, even the pantry foods that could theoretically withstand the long winter. Sure, my mom was getting paid with real non-Monopoly money for helping grandma with her cosmetics business, but our unspoken, under-the-table pay was also a kitchen full of food. The reasons were twofold: We were poor, and we were a family of eaters. What did a family of eaters do? We might stand in our kitchen and eat an entire bag of Doritos with cream cheese for dip. We'd go to McDonald's so often that I have a medium-sized plastic trash can full of McDonald's Happy Meal toys taking up residence in my storage closet to this day. So, my grandparents knew that when they'd eventually get back from Scottsdale, they wouldn't come home to the stench of death, but a nice empty kitchen. You're welcome.

While my mom punched the "Messages" button on the old-fashioned answering machine in the office, I made my preliminary walkthrough of the kitchen. I made a mental note every time I came upon something I knew we'd want to eat. Jiffy Chocolate Frosting mix? Hell yeah. A jar of black olives? Not for me, thanks, but my brother would be down for those salty treats. Plain Cheerios? Sure, beggars can't be choosers. Then, after working through all the cupboards, I ended my circuit by cracking open the refrigerator. My eyes lit on something that had never made an appearance in my grandparents' kitchen in the years we'd been doing this: a tub of caramel sauce. This was the stuff you'd typically find in the fruit section of the grocery store. It'd be in a white plastic tub next to the apples, making all the children who walked past think, "that's the only way you'll ever get me to eat something healthy, *Mom*."

I stopped everything I was doing. I only had eyes for this caramel sauce. I grabbed it and shouldered the refrigerator door shut. A quick trip to a drawer produced a hefty spoon and I settled on a chair at their kitchen table. I popped open the plastic tub and was only briefly disappointed. The container of golden goodness was only about a third full. Then I remembered: Some caramel sauce is better than no caramel sauce. Bolstered by this realization, I dipped the spoon in the caramel and brought it up to my mouth. Strings of the stuff connected from spoon to tub. Its sweet-yet-slightly-salty taste spread over my mouth and I let out a little moan.

Staring at me while I chowed down on caramel slop was a large portrait of my grandpa. He sat in front of a black backdrop and was surrounded by a thick, ornate gilt frame. The photographer must have had a magic touch, because my normally stoic and a little-unpleasant grandpa was actually smiling in that picture. He wore a dark suit and a red tie with his glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. This portrait was a little old at this point. When I was sitting there with that tub of caramel, he was warming up in the Arizona sunshine with very little stark-white hair left on his head. But, in this portrait, the halo of white extended almost halfway up his head. Perhaps that's why the portrait still hung on the wall—he likely missed that golden era when he was only partially bald.

My grandma didn't have any portraits on the wall, but her energy was bigger than his could ever be. She was a boisterous extrovert with a jovial smile and loud laughter that could clatter through the whole room. Back when they still had Christmas in Minnesota, they'd plug their Christmas

tree lights into one of those old-school as-seen-on-TV Clappers that you'd turn on and off with a clap of your hands. Every year, she'd have a Christmas party for all her best Luzier customers and my mom and I would get to come. I didn't mind, I always got to walk away with a new Christmas ornament.

Grandma would be entertaining her guests and letting out peals of laughter at even the slightest jokes. Every time she laughed, the Christmas tree would blink off, which would only incite more laughter. Eventually, because she'd undoubtedly have a cocktail glass in one hand, she'd slap the side of her ass to clap the tree back on again.

For the entire time I knew her, my grandma always looked the same. She was short, squat, and wore matching shirt-and-pants combos in shades of coral or turquoise. She'd even get her shoes and chunky plastic jewelry to match. Just like Grandpa, she'd gone gray well before I'd met her. But, unlike him, she wasn't prepared to walk around with bright white hair. Instead, she attempted to color it red. As any hairdresser will tell you, it's damn-near impossible to turn gray-white hair the color it looks like on the box of dye. So, instead of a natural red, she'd have bright fire-orange hair, short and coiffed like a traditional kind of grandmother you'd see in a Lifetime movie, giving sage advice to the protagonist just before passing away right before the credits rolled.

So, while it was only a large portrait of my white-haired Grandpa gazing at me from the wall as I ate their caramel, I could also feel my grandma's vibrancy in the way he smiled out at me. I sat there, munching caramel, when my mom came in from the other room. Since my grandparents had only been gone for a few days, there wasn't much work for her in there. She stepped into the kitchen, saw me hunched over the tub of caramel sauce, walked over to the drawer, grabbed a spoon and joined me. We smiled at each other as we experienced the unique joy of eating caramel when we thought we'd just be finishing off cereal or old boxes of mac and cheese. We worked our magic in silence, the crest of the caramel getting lower and lower in that classic white tub.

We were very near the bottom when I noticed two things at once.

First, I saw that there were thin, old drizzle marks all over the inside and outside of the tub of caramel. It looked like it had been drizzled many times while in the care of my grandparents. They used it sparingly over the occasional slice of pie, perhaps? The drizzles on the inside led me to believe that maybe, if they had poured out too much caramel, they poured the leftovers back into the tub. It's common knowledge that the elderly like to scrimp and save to stretch out that pension money for as long as possible. Maybe that explains it?

But at the same time I noticed those drizzles of old caramel, I also noticed what was stuck to them. On the inside and outside of the plastic tub of caramel sauce were short, kinky dark hairs. I repeat: stuck inside the tub of my white-haired and orange-haired grandparents' caramel sauce were *short, kinky dark hairs*.

I dropped my spoon in horror and it clanged onto the tile floor. My eyes were wide and my mouth was twisted in disgust. My mom paused, having just slid an empty spoon from her mouth.

“What? What’s wrong?” She looked worried.

I couldn’t speak. I could only point, horrified, at the tub. Her eyes followed my finger and alighted on the offending drizzles and hairs. There was a pause...and then we both screamed.

We spat in the sink. We ran around the room as if we could hide from the realization that had slapped us both across the face, but there was nowhere to hide. We shook our hands in the air as if flicking off water from our fingers, yet the dirtiness couldn’t be flung. We didn’t have to discuss what happened, nor would we have wanted to. Sure, I was thirteen, but I was a smart, worldly thirteen. I knew what those drizzles and those hairs meant.

After we settled down just a bit—though how could you ever truly recover from something like this?—my mom turned to me and said, “We have to call Shawn.”

My brother benefited from the annual Feasting that happened every time my grandparents went out of town, though only peripherally. He was six years older than me, a substantial nineteen at this time, and was too cool to come over to our grandparents’ to raid the kitchen. He’d just wait until we brought home a paper bag full of goods before tucking into the score.

Even though my mom was done with the Luzier side of the night’s events and we only lived five minutes away from our grandparents’ fifty-five-and-up apartment, we had to share this story with him right that very second. The story seeped from our pores just as the caramel made its slow way through our now-queasy digestive systems. The story needed to be purged. Not in five minutes. Now. So, my mom picked up the landline and dialed our place. After a few rings, Shawn picked up.

“Hello?” he asked, slightly annoyed. Shawn was always at least a little put-out about anything that could be happening at any given time.

“Shawn,” my mom said with her Serious Voice activated.

“Uh oh, what?” he said.

My mom relayed what happened. She told it in slow detail, working her way through the happenings, one spoonful of caramel sauce at a time. When she got to the climax, as it were, and described the drizzles, the hair, I could hear my brother’s scream spike out from the receiver.

“No! Noooooo!”

Some stories just stick with you. This sticky story of creamy, dirty caramel sauce has clung to me, my mom and my brother for decades now. It sits with us, it rides in the recesses of our memories. And, whenever I’m at the grocery store with my mom and I spot a tub of caramel sauce on a little shelf next to the apples, I point at it and we both scream.

Just like that day when we called my brother, this story isn’t one I can keep to myself. If ever there’s a story that can horrify a listener, it’s the one about the time I ate my grandparents’ sex caramel.