

Salt and Sugar

SALT

Sugar

REBECCA CARVALHO

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For anyone wondering if they should follow a dream.
For my mom, who first encouraged me to pursue mine.
And for Michael, who never let me give it up.

1

FRIDAY, APRIL 22

Trust neither thin-bottomed frying pans nor Molinas, Grandma Julieta Ramires always said.

I watch the growing darkness stretch over my family's bakery. Our sign, Salt, written in Great-grandma Elisa's own handwriting, disappears in the twilight, this strange limbo hour before streetlights illuminate the Olinda hills.

I can't make myself go inside. Not yet. The bakery is quiet, as if lulled by the heavy breeze blowing from the ocean. And so I wait another minute. And another. I wait for the moment Salt will suddenly—I don't know—yawn.

"Wake up," I urge it under my breath.

But Salt doesn't startle awake just because I'm staring. And while Salt fades, the Molinas' bakery glows in comparison. They call it Sugar, but don't be fooled by the name. It's the sort of toxic sweetness you find in certain poisons.

While all the other neighbors have closed their shops in mourning, the Molinas kept Sugar's doors wide open like an

insult. The happy twinkle of the lights on their facade makes my stomach churn.

It's not like I was expecting Seu Romário Molina, who was Grandma's lifelong enemy, to send a flower wreath to the cemetery, but how *dare* they be this showy tonight? I feel like marching across the street to scream at them, but the headlights of Salt's fusquinha shining down the street stop me. Mom's getting home, and she must be worried about me. I took off from the cemetery without letting her know.

Mom gets out of the sunshine-yellow car, the same color as Salt's facade, but instead of taking the side door that leads up to our apartment, she hurries straight for the bakery's entrance without noticing me.

When Grandma was hospitalized one month ago, Mom had to close doors, so it's like Salt's been waiting for Grandma to come back home. But how can we reopen without her? There's no Salt without Grandma.

Mom hesitates to unlock the door.

The wind picks up, ruffling her hair and bringing down a slanted drizzle. The fluttering flags my neighbors have already fastened to celebrate St. John's Day in two months, multicolored like a rainbow, snap from strings above our heads.

I didn't realize I took a tentative step forward until Mom looks at me. And I see the hurt in her eyes.

I open my mouth to speak, but I don't know what to say.

Without a word, Mom turns the key and steps into Salt, immediately finding her apron just by reaching into the semi-darkness hiding the wall pegs. Muscle memory. Only then Mom switches the lights on. And the bakery reveals itself.

I take my first step into Salt, too. My first time in the bakery without Grandma.

And seeing all the things that have already changed without Grandma's care *hurts*. Everything seems so dull. The wooden surfaces lack a coating of the lustrous peroba oil Grandma loved to use, which gave the bakery a subtle woodsy smell. The silence, absent of Grandma's chatter with neighbors, is heavy. Even all the ingredients to Grandma's magic are gone, the glass jars that should have been filled with various flours—tapioca, wheat, corn, rice—sitting empty. Same as the display below the main counter.

My heart does a painful somersault, but I hold back tears. I don't want Mom to see.

She goes to stand in front of Great-grandma Elisa's fubá cake recipe like she's answering a summons. We keep the sheet of paper with the ingredients and instructions folded and protected behind a glass box on the wall like it's Salt's own beating heart.

My legs feel heavier than normal, but I go stand next to Mom.

I don't know what to say or do to comfort her.

She closes her eyes. Is she praying? So I close mine, too, and in my mind's eye, I try to revive Salt.

I picture the customers pressing their faces to the display window outside to look at quibes, pastéis, and codfish bolinhos. I listen for our old stereo alternating between static crackling and forró songs swelling with melancholy accordions. I search for the tangy scent of ground beef simmering in a clay pot ready to turn into coxinha filling. And all I find is...noth-

ing. Just this sense of unfamiliarity within my own home that is dizzying, painful, and so, so lonely.

“We’re reopening tonight,” Mom announces. “Your grandmother worked every day, until she couldn’t anymore.”

She’s still facing the recipe.

“I think you should rest,” I say.

I’ve dreamed and dreamed of the day we’d reopen. But Mom hasn’t slept in ages, and the dark circles under her eyes have deepened this past month.

“I looked for you everywhere,” she says, finally addressing my disappearing act earlier. “At the ceremony.”

Her voice is a little hoarse and it holds so much disappointment, guilt shoots through my chest like a knife.

I should apologize, and I *want* to apologize, but how do I tell her that it hurt more than anything to see Grandma in that coffin? That I hardly recognized the person I loved—*love*—the most? My brain kept telling me, yes, it’s her. She’s nestled in a bed of sunflowers, so that’s her. These are her favorite flowers, so that’s her. But my heart kept shouting, *That’s not Grandma. That can’t be Grandma.* And before I knew it, I’d already left. I just turned around. I crossed the cemetery gates and kept going, hopping on the first bus home.

How do I tell her that?

I can’t.

So there’s just...silence between us.

Mom doesn’t ask again. She turns and heads into the kitchen, leaving me alone in the bakery.

I want to run upstairs and lock myself in my bedroom. I should change into black clothes. I went to the cemetery straight from school and there wasn’t time to change out of

my uniform. The red-and-white-striped shirt and sweatpants feel wrong. Too happy.

But, if I'm honest, if I go, I'm not coming back downstairs. I've done enough running away for today.

Instead, I pick up the stools off the counter and put them down on the floor to distract myself. When I'm done preparing Salt for customers, Mom's cooking in full force.

The first smells of caramelized onions fried with garlic and ground cumin travel to me. They'd have been heavenly any other day. But, tonight, they only bring more heartache.

The bells above Salt's door jingle, startling me. I turn to see neighbors poking their heads in. Just for a moment, I can imagine that the smell of Grandma's cooking is what brought them inside. Any minute now, Grandma will come out of the kitchen and greet them, and this whole day—the whole *year*—would have been just a freaking nightmare.

But the neighbors wear sorrowful faces and offer condolences. As hard as I try, I never know what to say back. I feel pulled in all directions, my nerves stretched thin, until Mom steps out of the kitchen and rescues me.

"Go sit down. Dinner will be ready soon," she whispers to me. She's tied her hair into a tight bun—her "ready for work" style.

Mom shakes hands, offers hugs, and says encouraging words. It's painful to see the way people are mesmerized by her, like they're searching for Grandma's eyes when they look at hers, checking to see if they are the same shade of brown.

Grandma's closest friends are beginning to arrive, too. Dona Clara. Seu Floriano. They burst into tears at the sight of Salt's open doors, and Mom promptly comforts them.

I worry this is too much for her. But I'm paralyzed. I don't know how to be there for anyone when I feel adrift myself.

The gathering at Salt becomes a wake, with people sharing stories and happy memories, like when Grandma climbed up a tree to dislodge a kite and got stuck up there herself. Some just listen solemnly, taking slow sips of café com leite, because, sometimes, when it's too hard to talk, it's easier to just eat and drink.

After a while, plates of buttered couscous covered in beef jerky, caramelized onions, and fried chunks of squeaky coalho cheese get passed around. Mom brings me a plate, too.

"Eat," she tells me, before slipping back into the kitchen. But despite the deliciously savory smell, my throat is tied in too many knots to eat.

The bells above our door chime again. I look over my shoulder to see Dona Selma making her way inside. Grandma's best friend, who is like a grandmother to me and a second mother to Mom. Seeing her now in these black clothes instead of her usual bright, festive colors makes everything seem more...real.

When Dona Selma spots me, I must look as lost as I feel, because she comes straight over, pushing past people trying to speak with her. She pulls me into a tight hug. *I'll never hug Grandma again.* The pain is like a shock through my ribs.

"Lari, I need you to remember one thing," she says in my ear. "You are loved. And you aren't alone. You aren't alone. Do you know this?"

Her dark brown eyes scan my face. I try to smile to show her she doesn't need to worry, even though I know Dona Selma doesn't expect me to act brave. But then she tears up, and it makes it harder to keep my own from bubbling up.

She gives me another hug. When she steps back, she looks around the room with concerned eyes like she's searching for someone.

"I think Mom is in the kitchen," I say, assuming Dona Selma is looking for her.

"I need you and Alice to take better care of yourselves." Even the way she says Mom's name reminds me of Grandma. The same accent. Ah-lee-see. "Why is Salt open tonight?"

"Mom wanted to."

Dona Selma finally spots Mom in the crowd.

"I'll go check in on her," she says, giving my shoulder a comforting squeeze before leaving.

Isabel, who's Dona Clara's assistant at the market, approaches me.

"I think there's something burning," she says.

Isabel has a habit of letting the cooking oil to deep-fry pastéis burn, so she's become a bit of a walking smoke detector.

I wrinkle my nose at the faint burnt smell in the air.

Across the room, Mom is still talking with Dona Selma. I should go tell her about the food burning, but I don't want to interrupt that conversation. I know Mom needs Dona Selma's words as much as I needed that hug a moment ago.

"Was your mom frying eggs?" Isabel asks, antsy. "You better hurry up."

"Me?"

I get a jolt of fear. Mom never lets me cook.

"Yes, *you*. You don't want the kitchen to burn down, do you?"

I've already disappointed Mom at the funeral today, and I can't just sit around when there's food burning. But the mo-

ment I cross the threshold into the kitchen, my heart beats even faster.

Walking into Salt was hard. But walking into Salt's *kitchen* knowing I won't find Grandma behind the counter is even more painful. The red brick walls feel like they're closing in.

There's a frying pan on the stove, the contents—scrambled eggs with tomatoes and cilantro?—already sticking to the pan with an angry hiss. Smoke swirls up, leaving the area near the stove hazy.

I try to open the foggy glass window in the back, but it's stuck. I turn around frantically looking for a spoon to salvage Mom's cooking, but there are so many types. Wooden, metal, plastic spoons of all sizes. Which one am I supposed to use? I can feel my pulse in my ears.

I grab the nearest one. A metal spoon. And I start scraping at the bottom of the pan as best I can, but I'm not sure I'm doing this right.

The warmth of the stove seeps through my clothes. The smells are all around me like a net—oregano, black pepper, and cheese coming from another frying pan, and the savory smell of sweet potatoes boiling in a pot behind.

This is nerve-racking.

Deliciously nerve-racking.

Usually, my anxiety is fully aware of every way I could mess up Mom's cooking. But this time, I'm filled with excited butterflies.

The sizzling grows louder. Like a volcanic eruption. The other frying pan is beginning to smoke, too. The hot bubbles in the boiling pot filled with potatoes burst too close to my hand. Dangerous, I know. And yet I let my eyes fall closed,

my ears picking up on the full symphony of cooking sounds all around me.

The metal spoon is getting hotter in my hand. Heat travels into my bloodstream. Fast. It feels electrified, like it's forming a connection, and suddenly—

I'm not so alone anymore.

There's a warm feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I understand that the women in my life, past and present, are here with me.

Grandma isn't truly gone. Not while Salt stands.

There's a sudden pop, and my eyes shoot open.

Sizzling oil splashes at my wrist and stinging pain replaces my musing. I jump back in surprise and accidentally hit the pan's handle. It all seems to happen in slow motion. I watch as the frying pan with the eggs goes flying off the stove, food splattering everywhere.

Mom's screech pierces the air.

2

FRIDAY, APRIL 22

You'd think a girl like me would have had the best cooking training, right? But, like we say around here, *casa de ferreiro, espeto de pau*. *The shoemaker's children always go barefoot*. Or, in my case, the baker's child can't bake...or cook...at all.

When I was a toddler, I used to wander into the kitchen to explore on my own. I was drawn to this magical world where Grandma seemed the happiest. While everyone slept, I would climb up a chair and perch on the counter, my legs tucked underneath me. An hour later, Grandma would wake up to find bed-haired, entranced baby-me busily scooping sugar or manioc farinha out of the bowl and pouring it on a spot by my side. Despite the mess, she'd never get mad.

Grandma would pick me up every time and whisper:

“You and I have a secret, *minha pequena*.”

In second grade, I got into gathering flowers and leaves so I could crush them with the mortar and pestle I'd taken from the kitchen. I'd add water and pretend I was making the most lavish soup, trying my best to emulate Grandma's

cooking. It was the best game I'd ever invented, until a bunch of kids saw me.

"What's that nasty thing?" they asked me.

"It's soup," I said. "And it's not nasty."

Pedro Molina, Seu Romário's grandson, looked at my flower mixture like he was the biggest authority in soups. Even though he was my age, he was already helping in his family's kitchen. He pushed a hand through his curly bangs, clearly flaunting the bandage wrapped around his finger.

"What happened to you?" one of his friends asked.

"I was cutting slices of guava paste with my grandfather to make bolo de rolo," he said with a pleased grin. "It didn't even hurt."

All the neighborhood kids looked at Pedro in awe.

But I had seen Pedro after the injury and knew the truth. "I heard you crying earlier," I contradicted accusingly.

The other kids began whispering behind him, and Pedro seethed.

All knobby knees and elbows, he took one step toward me, wrinkled his nose at my cooking, and said, "If this is soup, then let me see you drink it."

I held the mixture up to my mouth. The sweet smell of decaying leaves and chlorophyll turned my stomach. The color was a dangerous reddish brown. I *had* to drink it. Pedro had challenged me in front of everyone.

I was ready to take the first gulp—

But I chickened out.

"Is this the kind of disgusting food that your family serves at Salt?" he mocked me.

Everywhere I went, his friends made sure I heard varia-

tions of the same accusation. I even caught them warning each other not to come to Salt, because of how terrible my soup looked. Things were getting out of control and I had to do something to defend Salt's reputation.

My list of failed cooking attempts only stacked up, though:

I brought Mom's leftover soup to school, but accidentally dumped too much salt in it. That's why people call me Salty to this day.

I brought lollipops I'd secretly made with a recipe I found online, but they were so hard they chipped my classmate's tooth.

I then tried boiling water on the stove at Salt to make *real* soup, but I accidentally burned Grandma's hand when she found me. She let out a cry of pain that scared me so much I wanted her to go see a doctor, but she said it was nothing.

Mom learned then that I'd been sneaking into Salt's kitchen. That it had been my fault Grandma was hurt. She grounded me and made me promise I'd never again cook behind her back. And she didn't have to ask. I finally realized cooking wasn't for me, that every time I stepped into the kitchen, something really wrong happened.

Like I was cursed.

When people are born with a gift for cooking, that special ability to turn meals into magical experiences, we say they were born with fairy hands. The women in my family all have it. But, when my turn came, I guess the fairy was on vacation at Fernando de Noronha Island, because I got the exact opposite.

I got an impish thumb for disaster.

3

FRIDAY, APRIL 22

Mom cradles my wrist under cold water, but my skin is still turning an angry shade of red where hot oil splashed on me.

“It doesn’t hurt that bad,” I lie, but Mom still looks shaken.

“What business did you have poking at a frying pan with a metal spoon?” she shouts, reaching to fish a wooden spoon out of a drawer. “That’s what you should have used!”

Our neighbors crane their necks from behind the counter, and I feel like I’m in second grade again, causing trouble in Salt’s kitchen. My face gets hot with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” I say in a low voice.

Mom looks like I just committed a crime. I might as well have. I am the daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of famous bakers, and yet I can’t even figure out how to fry an egg without setting it off like a grenade all over the kitchen floor. *What a disaster.*

She lets out a heavy sigh. “Go upstairs.”

“Let me at least help you clean,” I say, reaching for a mop.

“You’ve done enough already.” She takes the mop from me. “Go.”

I drag my feet toward the stairs, avoiding eye contact with anyone who witnessed Mom scolding me. I’m halfway to my room when I hear honking outside. I turn around, crouching down on the step to see who’s pulling up in front of Salt.

Mom goes to peer into the street from behind our empty window display. Dona Selma joins her and I catch the look they exchange.

Mom’s thin lips have gone pale, her eyes wide and shining like there’s a storm brewing behind them. She looks almost unrecognizable.

I race down the stairs two steps at a time.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Dona Selma puts a hand on Mom’s shoulder, but that doesn’t stop her from darting outside. And that’s when I see a big white van clumsily maneuvering down our narrow street to try to park in front of Salt.

“You should go to your room, love. Don’t worry,” Dona Selma says to me before heading out after Mom.

Don’t worry? Well, now I am worried.

There’s no way I’m leaving Mom to deal with this alone. I step outside.

An accordion-heavy song, the type that’s popular this time of the year, blasts from the van. The driver, a guy probably in his early twenties, is distracted, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, mumbling along to the lyrics.

Mom knocks on his window, which he quickly rolls down to speak with her.

“Too much traffic getting here, senhora,” he says. “I’ve come to pick up the catering order for the wedding.”

I would have known if we’d rented a catering van. And it’s not like we have a gig lined up with everything going on.

Mom’s about to say something, but then Sugar’s door opens from directly across the street, and Dona Eulalia Molina—Seu Romário’s only daughter and Pedro’s mom—rushes out.

Dona Eulalia waves her arms at the driver, a white apron fastened around her waist.

“I hope this isn’t another of their pranks,” Mom says to the driver like a warning. She’s in no mood to be messed with tonight.

And I begin to understand the situation. The reason why Mom is so on edge.

She thinks the Molinas are up to something.

That family loves coming up with ridiculous ways to attack us. Some are mild and uncreative, like sending fake customers to come berate our dishes in front of real paying customers. Other times it can get *bad*.

Is it possible they sent this van here, today of all days, as a way to show off?! No wonder Mom is having a hard time containing her anger. Now *my* blood is boiling, too.

The driver just stares at Mom, waiting for instructions, totally oblivious to the fact that Dona Eulalia is trying to get his attention from her side of the street.

“You got the wrong bakery,” Mom says, sharply.

The driver glances from our sign to Sugar’s. He finally notices Dona Eulalia.

“Too many bakeries on this street,” he says as an apology and Mom raises an eyebrow at him.

The Molinas' entourage of bakers streams through Sugar's doors with trays brimming with lavender-colored *surpresas de uva*, *brigadeiros*, and *bem-casados* under protective plastic films, which they load into the back of the van.

And then they bring out a full tray of *empadinhas*! Even from my spot across the street, I see the dough flaky and golden like Grandma's recipe.

The thing is, everyone knows that only Salt makes *empadinhas* on our street. That's the deal our families made generations ago, when our great-grandmothers drew the battle lines:

Ramires only prepare savory foods.

Molinas only prepare sweets.

Sugar crossed the line baking *empadinhas*, and they know it. Those shameless, dishonest, garbage snakes!

"They're doing this on purpose," Mom says, gritting her teeth.

"Alice, ignore them," Dona Selma urges. "Come back inside."

But Mom's frozen to the spot, watching the catering procession across the street.

Dona Clara and Seu Floriano step out of Salt to join us, both looking indignant.

"Tell me this isn't for the wedding Julieta got fired from!" Dona Clara brandishes her cane at the van.

Salt had been booked to cater a small wedding reception, but the Molinas spread rumors in the neighborhood that we had a rat infestation in our kitchen. The rumors got to the client, who then fired us. It broke Grandma's heart, and shortly after that, she went to the hospital.

Sugar *is* showing off. Excitement is plastered on their faces like they just saw the Brazilian soccer team score seven to one against Germany. Only they're the ones who scored. This catering gig was supposed to be ours! They stole it from us!

"They're a villainous lot capable of anything," Mom says, rushing past us like an arrow back into Salt, Grandma's friends on her heels.

I *hate* the Molinas.

I can't hold back my tears anymore. They roll down my cheeks hot with anger. Instead of returning to Salt, I march across the street toward the group of junior bakers bringing out the catering trays.

How dare you sabotage my family? I'll say to them. How dare you spread lies and steal our client? How dare you rub your treacherous victory in now, knowing we're in mourning? How dare you laugh tonight?

"How dare—!"

I don't get any other words out because just then my foot strikes something unmoving and one second, I'm vertical. And then—

I'm not.

"Watch out!" Dona Eulalia shouts, and I realize soon enough that it's not for my sake.

I spread my arms to catch myself just as someone carrying a giant three-tier wedding cake steps out of Sugar. The cake is so tall I can't even see the person carrying it, just a mountain of white glaze. My hands sink into it, reaching the golden brown inside. I topple forward, taking the cake and the person carrying it down with me in one big, sugary crash.