



Rich, Dark Chocolate

a short story

SAMANTHA R. UHRIG

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*M*artha Grey Berkshire's husband opened the car door for her, but she lingered in the supple leather seat. She adjusted her sweater around her stomach with one hand, and with the other, she clutched the crucifix on the chain around her neck.

Pierson's head appeared in the gap the door left. "The longer you wait, the more you're torturing yourself."

Martha sighed, her entire chest heaving. "Do you think she'll be angry?"

"My love, why would she be?"

"Because we didn't have a wedding," she squeaked to the polished windshield. "Do you think she'll wish we did it the traditional way? The ceremony, the flowers, the cake?"

Pierson's eyes softened the way they always did when she spoke to him. "If she *is* angry, I'll handle it. How's that?"

Martha tightened the ribbon around her hair until the strands tugged at her scalp. "What if she won't give us the money we need?"

Assurance of my next meal. The feeling of new clothes on my skin. Bright new bedrooms with bright new windows in a bright new house...

The promise of a comfortable life was more alluring to Martha than anything. For herself, for Pierson, and for their future children, she craved that stability her parents had never provided.

My children will have better than I did, she thought.

Pierson helped his wife out of the car, easing her onto the sidewalk. “You sure do worry.”

“These are real concerns,” Martha protested.

Pierson closed the car door. “Only teasing. I assure you, I will smooth over any wrinkle that occurs tonight.”

He planted a kiss on her cheek. Martha drew a deep breath and nodded. She knew his motives were not unlike hers. Like her, Pierson wanted a better life for their future children – but financial stability was not foreign to him. Rather than the security that Martha wanted, he had confided that he desired the luxury of freedom for his children. “I was unable to do anything I wanted to do as a child,” he had told her. “When I become a father, I will do things differently.”

Martha followed him up the flagstone path to the three-story house looming overhead. She cowered in the shadows of the columns on the front porch, and she found herself at the front doors. Of all the doors she had passed through in her life, these were the most frightening. Nearly twice her height, the entrance was painted a dark coffee color, emblazoned with black door knockers in the shape of an ambiguous animal’s head. From here, she could already smell dinner: some kind of meat, swimming in a sharp wine. She imagined a shelf full of long-necked bottles dating back to the 1920s or 1890s or 700 B.C. Martha clutched her stomach with freshly painted, smudged red fingernails.

SAMANTHA R. UHRIG

These would be the sort of folks to have a wine cellar, she thought bitterly, while my family chugs Schlitz from dirty glasses. Catching herself, she pointed her eyes upward and prayed silently, Forgive me for my discontentment, Lord.

Pierson touched her hand and snapped her to the present. “She’s going to love you.”

God, I hope that’s true.

He banged the knocker. Footsteps sounded on the other side of the door. The sound reminded Martha of her mother’s Sunday shoes on the kitchen tiles, and it felt as though each *click* of the heels inside the grand house hammered into her skull, deeper and deeper –

Click. The door swung open with the sort of slow, nonchalant grandeur that Martha would have expected from it, and on the other side stood a woman. She had narrow hips, narrow shoulders, narrow cheekbones. Narrow lips hung above a narrow chin framed by shiny silver hair.

The woman’s face lit up. “Oh, darling, it’s you!”

To Martha’s surprise, her mother-in-law didn’t embrace Pierson, but Martha. The woman’s hug was so tight that her pearls pressed coldly against Martha’s neck.

“Octavia Berkshire,” she said.

“Martha Grey.” Martha exchanged a glance with Pierson, who nodded encouragingly. “It’s a pleasure to meet Pierson’s mother. I have heard the loveliest things about you.”

Lord, forgive me for lying.

“You flatter me, Martha.” Octavia looked her up and down, and Martha felt like a science project on a school desk.

“It’s good to see you, Mother,” Pierson said, and Octavia hugged him, returning the sentiment. Martha watched Pierson’s shirt crumple under Octavia’s arms as she squeezed him. At last, she pulled away.

“Dinner will be late tonight, but I’ll prepare drinks for you.” Octavia stepped aside to let them inside. “Piers can show you to the sitting area.”

Feeling Pierson’s hand on hers, Martha was drawn into the home. She gasped at the interior design. The entryway spanned so far above her head, she felt like she was standing on the first floor of a skyscraper. A gold chandelier dangled from the ceiling miles away, and its warm bulbs hardly affected the dark paint that swallowed light in the room. Between ornate moldings in the wall hung pictures in golden frames: landscape paintings, mirrors, sepia photographs of stoic newlyweds and decorated men in war uniforms.

Pierson brought her through a glass-paneled door, down a hallway with the longest rug she had ever seen, and into a room with three sofas. Stepping inside, Martha tripped; the floor was half a foot below the rest of the house. But the moment her saddle shoes sank into two-inch thick carpet, she forgot about her stumble. Pierson pointed at the sofa closest to the fireplace. As she sat, Martha studied the photograph on the mantel of Octavia standing alone in front of the Eiffel Tower, with *June ’48* scribbled on the corner.

Octavia hurried after them so fast, her stilettos floated above the carpet as though she was walking on water. She set a tray on the glass-top table before Martha, and a chocolatey scent tickled her nose. Two porcelain mugs on the tray – one Easter yellow, the other candy blue – breathed steam into the air.

SAMANTHA R. UHRIG

“Hot chocolate. Better than wine.” Octavia sat on the sofa opposite them, folding her hands over her skirt. “You aren’t old enough to drink, are you, dear?”

Martha averted her eyes and shook her head.

Pierson spoke up. “Martha turned nineteen last month.”

Octavia pursed her lips. “Such a young lady. Where are you from, Martha?”

Martha cleared her throat. “I grew up in south Boston.”

A beat passed, as though Octavia waited for her to add something else. When she didn’t, Octavia said, “How did you manage that?”

“I’m sorry?” Martha said.

“Living in south Boston,” Octavia clarified. “What an awful place to live. What did your father do for work?”

Pierson’s shoulders tensed beside Martha. “What’s the matter with south Boston?”

Seeing an argument sprouting, Martha said at once, “My mother raised my sisters and me. She worked at a drug store during the days, and she waitressed on weekends.”

Octavia smiled in a way that didn’t touch her eyes. “Pierson, one day you ought to take Martha to one of the fashion houses we visited in France. She could find” – her gaze flitted up and down Martha’s body – “a fresh wardrobe.”

Martha felt herself shrink into her blouse, grasping her mug until her hands burned. She had felt so proud to don this outfit earlier today: red pleated skirt, ruffled cream blouse, hair tied back in a fresh-cut ribbon. Now she felt as though she was wearing potato sacks.

Octavia continued, “Every woman should have a fresh wardrobe after they move.”

Pierson took Martha’s hand and squeezed it. “Martha has lived in New York since the war ended.”

“And she still wears *this*? In New York City?” She chuckled, as though relishing in an inside joke with herself. “That *is* embarrassing.”

“Her wardrobe is fine,” Pierson snapped. “Let’s change the subject, shall we?”

An awkward silence followed. Martha felt as though her skin was shaking. To calm her nerves, she brought the trembling mug to her lips and took a sip. Bitter, like coffee. *This is not hot chocolate*. She smacked her lips set the cup back on the tray.

Octavia looked at her. “You don’t like it?”

Martha’s stomach twisted. “It’s very good.”

Octavia leaned back onto the sofa with a massive sigh. “It would have been easier to prepare if you were of age to drink, like Piers is. Our wine selection is the most marvelous thing you would ever behold.”

I’m sure that’s true, Martha thought.

Pierson set his palm on Martha’s thigh. “I wouldn’t be interested in drinking tonight regardless of Martha’s age, Mother. The hot chocolate is just fine.”

Martha’s breath stuttered coming out. *Breathe*. She clutched her catapulting stomach, rubbing her thumb along the space below her belly button. *God, why can’t I breathe?*

“It requires a refined taste, that’s all.” Octavia gestured at the cups on the tray. “It’s European. Straight from France. It’s made with nothing but rich, dark chocolate.”

SAMANTHA R. UHRIG

Martha met her mother-in-law's gaze, begging against all hope to find acceptance there, only to see a wall the same color as the rich, dark halls in the entryway and the rich, dark chocolate in her cup. Those cold eyes demanded truth. She couldn't resist them. Martha swallowed bile that rose in her throat.

"I'm pregnant."

The words hung in the air – she could practically see the letters forming in hot chocolate steam – but surely, they didn't come from her. Pierson stared at her with eyes wide as the rims of their mugs and she realized.

Oh no. I did say it.

Octavia whipped her head towards Pierson. "Pregnant, son? *Pregnant?*"

Pierson's eyes darted around their sockets, as if studying every cell on Martha's skin. When Martha had no response, he turned to his mother. "It's true. We got married, as well. This isn't how we wanted to tell you, but –"

"You didn't." Octavia shot to her feet, and to Martha she seemed nine feet tall. "Not without my knowledge. Not to *her*."

Pierson stood at once. "What does *that* mean?"

"She doesn't fit in with our kind of people." Octavia lowered her pitch, as though it would keep Martha from hearing her only a few feet away. "Look at her clothes, Piers."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Mother –"

"*South Boston?* Come now. She comes from nothing. You come from *everything*."

“That is *enough*,” Pierson shouted. Martha startled on the sofa behind him; she had never heard him raise his voice before.

Octavia didn’t bother to hush her tone anymore. “Pierson, you were destined for so much more than marrying the first lowdown dame you got pregnant.”

Pierson reeled. “Lowdown –”

Octavia’s voice rose higher. “Marrying her doesn’t cover your sins.”

A pause, then: “Martha, please leave us for a moment.”

Martha, gripping her crucifix necklace until the lines imprinted in purple on her fingertips, looked up at her husband. His face flushed with anger, but she knew that gleam in his eye to be genuine. He would take care of this, like he promised. *But perhaps I can, too.*

She touched her belly, where her bean-sized baby floated deep inside, and she rose to her feet. “I am *not*,” she said, trembling with the adrenaline of every word, “a lowdown dame.”

Octavia planted her hands on her protruding hips. “Are you Christian, Martha?”

She blinked a couple of times at the unexpected question. “I was raised Catholic.”

“Do you still hold to that belief?”

“Very much so.”

Octavia turned to Pierson with true sorrow in her face. “She isn’t even protestant?”

“I’ll have you know,” Pierson retorted, “Her parish required that I convert to marry her, and you know what? I did. I became Catholic. What do you think of *that*, Mother?”

Octavia set her jaw so hard that her lower lip disappeared. “No wonder you’ve been sleeping around. You’ve fallen under the influence of this little Catholic girl, whoring herself out to any good Christian boy with change to spare.”

“Shut the hell up,” Pierson shouted.

Martha’s face seemed to rise twenty degrees in temperature: the only warning sign she received before her anxiety made way for anger. “You can’t call me evil names and expect me to stay here.”

Octavia’s eyes blazed. “Then leave!”

Pierson grabbed Martha’s hand in a white-knuckled grip. “Let’s go, Martha. We aren’t welcome here.”

“Damn right,” Octavia roared.

Pierson swept toward the doorway, bringing Martha along. Martha stopped him just before the step to the hallway. She glanced back at Octavia, standing with her fists at her sides, looking simultaneously like a toddler and a motion picture villain. Martha squeezed Pierson’s hand until it relaxed, gave him a reassuring nod, and walked back to Octavia.

“I wanted to thank you for your hospitality,” Martha said, putting so much syrup in her words that Octavia cringed.

“You ruined my son.” Octavia’s brown eyes, so close to Martha’s now, hardened into river stones. “You’re a sinful vagabond, and you should expect Pierson to realize it soon.”

Familiar guilt slithered up Martha’s throat like a snake, and she swallowed it hard. “We misstepped.”

“You’re a disgrace to the family name,” Octavia spat under her breath, eyes darting behind Martha as if trying to keep Pierson from overhearing, “and a disgrace to the God you claim to worship. Your child

is a bastard, and until Pierson realizes the error of his decision, I will have no part in it.”

Visions of financial comfort slipped through Martha’s fingertips and shattered on the plush carpet around her feet. But she recalled something else her childhood lacked: a father. She and her sisters had lived without a father in their lives, but her baby could have a better fate. Her baby *would* have a better fate.

Composing herself, she drew a deep breath. “I love Pierson. And he loves me.”

Octavia’s forehead crinkled. “You don’t expect me to believe that my son married you for any reason outside of obligation.”

“We got married because of the baby,” Martha admitted. “But we’ll remain married because of love. I can assure you that Pierson isn’t going anywhere.” She glanced over her shoulder at her husband, watching from the doorway with a look that said he was willing to step in if the conversation grew too heated. “You raised him better than to abandon his wife and child.”

“Flattery won’t get you far.”

Martha chuckled. “Clearly not.”

Octavia’s jaw tensed. She raised her voice now to address both Martha and Pierson. “How do you expect to raise a child without help?”

Martha returned to Pierson and wrapped her arm around his, and he placed his hand lovingly on hers. “I think we’ll manage,” she said.

Without waiting for a response, Martha and Pierson swept out of the living room, through the vast hallway and out the massive front door. Outside, snow had begun to gently fall on the path leading to Pierson’s

SAMANTHA R. UHRIG

car, consolidating in white freckles on the flagstones. Martha tightened her sweater around her torso to fight the chill.

At the car, Pierson opened the passenger door for Martha once again. And this time, she didn't hesitate.

End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha R. Uhrig is an author and blogger whose goal is to inspire writers at every stage of their journey. When she isn't writing historical short stories and novels, you can find Sam reading classics, desperately trying to keep her plants alive, or watching movies with her film buff husband, Logan.

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