

Pudding

By Julia Slavin

I made it from scratch. I melted the chocolate, beat in the egg, and stirred over low heat with a wooden spoon until it thickened, just how my mother would make it. What a lovely idea, I thought, homemade pudding for my family.

"It's got scum on the top," our son Phin says.

"I'll peel it off for you."

"It tastes a little weird, hon," my husband Dan says quietly.

Phin leaves the table, slouching defiantly over a frame that seems too small to hold up newly developed man's shoulders.

"What can't we have a normal dessert?" our daughter Miranda asks. "Like Pepperidge Farm cookies."

I tell her Pepperidge Farm cookies are expensive. And they get eaten too quickly.

"That's what cookies are for," Miranda says. "They're for eating."

"What about you, Anastasia?" I ask. "Do you like the pudding?" Anastasia is three with an advanced case of empathy. She is as concerned with not hurting anyone's feelings as she is with not taking sides and now I've put her on the spot. She holds her spoon tightly in her fist. Her eyebrows pucker. Her breathing quickens. "Well? Do you?"

"I don't like pudding," Dan says as we're cleaning up the kitchen. "Instant or regular. I never have." He wraps leftover tacos, one at a time, for the kids' lunches. "What have I done that's so wrong?" he asks. I take over making the lunches, polishing apples and dropping packs of raisins in each bag. Miranda will forget to take hers and have to borrow money and Phin won't be seen carrying a lunch bag. "It's a bowl of chocolate pudding for chrissakes." Dan is unable to get off the subject. "Who gives a good goddamn?" We crash into each other in the narrow part of the kitchen and I drop the bowl. The pudding hits the floor with a slap. We watch the viscid mixture quiver on the white linoleum. The bowl is still rattling under the center island as I leave the kitchen. "Who's going to clean up the pudding?" Dan calls after me. "If you think it's me, the answer's like hell I am." I head up the stairs. "Well?" I won't answer. "Fine, let it grow legs and walk out on its own." I close the door of the study. Dan goes out on the deck to smoke.