

Sugaring Off

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LEANOR FIRST MET PAUL, the man with whom she thought she'd have an affair, in the library where she worked each weekday afternoon. She'd been married for twenty-eight years by then and had never been unhappy, at least not really, so at first the word "affair" never really crossed her mind. She just knew that she thought about this young man often and his strange twisted lips.

It was mid-March in Northern Vermont and outside the library snow continued to fall. Trees and bushes bowed their branches under the weight of it all and Eleanor could commiserate with their submission. She too felt broken down, as if her bones were crumbling. This year winter had been long and the cold continued to hold tight with an arctic fist. Three months earlier, when temperatures had fallen far below normal, Eleanor had had both breasts removed. The doctor said the cancer was only in the left breast, but he worried that the lump might metastasize. After many hours lying in bed and even more staring at herself in the mirror, Eleanor had decided to have the right breast removed as well.

At the time she had asked her husband, Sam, his opinion, but he just stared at her and then looked away.

"I don't know, Eleanor," he'd said, "I'm sorry, I don't have breasts. I wish I could be of more help."

Now, Eleanor sat at the reception desk e-mailing past-due notices and trying to stay warm. She had worked at the library for six years, since Belinda, her baby, had headed off to college and in that time Eleanor had dutifully learned how to use a computer, even if she did continue to jam the letter "T." (The "T" key had been sticky on the typewriter and she missed the old machine.) Hitting "send" Eleanor pulled her cardigan tight against her body, still not familiar with her own sharp angular planes. She glanced at her watch. She wasn't sure what she was waiting for but she bounced her knee impatiently and watched as a young man struggled against the wind to open the front door.

Stamping his feet on the rubber mat, the young man wiped his nose with the back of one raw red hand. He was tall and thin and wearing a red wool jacket with sleeves that were much too short. He wanted a book on maple syrup, he said, speaking with a heavy lisp, and Eleanor's knee stopped bouncing.

"Maple syrup?" she repeated, considering the man over the rims of her reading glasses. He couldn't have been over twenty-nine, just a few years younger than her son but still older than both the girls.

"Yes ma'am," the man said. Eleanor noticed that his auburn hair needed to be cut; it swirled about in an unruly cowlick on the right side of his head. His eyes were large and his cheekbones prominent, but it was his lips that Eleanor suddenly found arresting. They were mangled, caught up in a tangled knot of flesh riddled with scars just beneath his thin nose. Even with his mouth closed Eleanor could still see his tongue pressing at one crooked tooth. A harelip, Eleanor thought, that had not been well repaired. She stared, fascinated, until he put one hand to his mouth and she finally looked away.

"I'm sorry," she said, unexpectedly breathless. She could feel her heart beating in her chest. Fear, she supposed, of the unknown. It was exhilarating somehow and she smothered a smile.

In the first few days after her mastectomy Eleanor's husband reacted by keeping the thermostat up high and obsessively shoveling the walk. It was December, not yet Christmas, and the drifts had built up high against the house.

"I don't want you to catch a chill," Sam said, fiddling with the small plastic dial, "Or god forbid, take a fall."

"But I'm not sick anymore," Eleanor protested, raking both hands through her hair. Just weeks before she'd thought that it might all fall out, but the surgery had carved away all chances of cancer and there hadn't been any chemo. Her hair was as it had always been, worn in a blunt cut to her shoulders, but she noticed now that instead of brown all the roots were gray.

"I'm not an invalid," Eleanor insisted, but Sam didn't seem to hear. Instead he continued to pour her glass after glass of milk and escort her to the car; as if suddenly at fifty-five Eleanor were an old lady and a child at the same time.

That same weekend Michael, Eleanor's oldest child, sent flowers from the small literary press where he worked in San Francisco. (When he turned eighteen, Eleanor had not been surprised to find out that he was gay.) It would be hard, he said when he called, for him to make the trip back to Vermont. In the background she could hear a telephone ringing. Someone

called Michael's name but was ignored. If she really needed him, Michael continued, and of course he knew she needed him, but if she really needed him *there*, well, he would come. But could she understand? And of course she could. Even though he was now thirty, Michael was still her little boy and she knew that he was with her in spirit. The girls, though, confused her. They came back to visit that weekend, dragging the accoutrements of a twenty-something life in New York City that she didn't understand: cell phones and BlackBerries, large suitcases filled with so many clothes all the same shade of black. And while Sam ran his Saturday shift at the post office the girls seemed content to sit next to her on the couch and watch daytime TV. Both girls worked for the same media giant. Jenny, the middle child, was in advertising sales, and Belinda, her baby, was an assistant account manager for clients like Kodak and Hanes. The girls volleyed words across her battered body, about press checks and photo shoots and Jeremy in finance. They were conversations that meant nothing to Eleanor and instead of finding satisfaction in her girls' youthful success she felt old and provincial in comparison and hardly spoke at all.

"Can I get you anything?" Jenny asked, resting one hand on Eleanor's arm. But her daughter's hand felt somehow demeaning and Eleanor had to fight the urge to shake it off. "You're sure?" Jenny said again, this time standing in the doorway. She was slightly turned, so that she was in profile, and Eleanor could see her perfect silhouette, the tight chin, smooth breasts and flat belly. Her daughter, the very picture of the person she used to be, and Eleanor shook her head, suddenly exhausted. She watched as her daughter bounced into the darkness of the hall and said to her youngest daughter, "I think I'll go lie down," and Belinda, the quieter of the two girls, had nodded, watching her mother's movements carefully.

"It hurts?" Belinda asked, when Eleanor faltered and pressed one hand against her flat chest. Eleanor nodded, looking down at her daughter through wet eyes, their roles somehow reversed.

Later, lying in bed on her back with her arms at her sides (she couldn't yet raise them over her head), she heard the quiet murmurs of the TV and an occasional burst of girlish laughter. It seemed to her then that her youth was impossibly far away and for the first time that she could remember she felt alone.

For two weeks Eleanor forgot about Paul until she was once again typing up past due notices. Paul Grimm. *From Sap to Syrup*. She typed up the notice and printed it out on the machine. Hardscrabble Road. Eleanor was familiar with this lonely stretch of dirt. It was an unpaved one-lane road, past the middle school and the other local library – strange that he hadn't gone there instead – to where the suburbs petered out and the fields and forests began. It made sense, she supposed, considering the address. For syrup you need a lot of trees.

And then almost without thinking she picked up the phone and dialed information, bouncing her knee as she waited to be connected. She was startled when she heard Paul's voice and then thankful that it was only his machine. She collected herself and sat up straighter in her chair.

"Hi Paul," she said, "Mr. Grimm. Just a friendly reminder that *From Sap to Syrup* is overdue. If you'd like to keep it longer, could you please stop by? I'll be here from..." and she gave him her hours even though anyone at the branch could issue an extension, even over the phone. "If you call ahead," Eleanor continued, "I'll know when to expect you." When Eleanor hung up her armpits felt clammy. She lifted her elbows and flapped her arms, looking around quickly to make sure that nobody else was around.

Two days later Luellen stopped by her desk. "A Mr. Grimm called," Luellen said, considering a piece of paper she held in her slender hands. "He's stopping by tomorrow," she said, "between three and four..." The young girl raised her eyebrows and her voice trailed off as if asking for further explanation.

"Thanks Lu," was all Eleanor said, and she plucked the paper from her hands. She couldn't help but notice that the blouse Luellen was wearing was silk and that it clung to the gentle curves of her breasts.

At home Eleanor had expected some reluctance in bed, but she wasn't prepared when it was Sam's and not her own. He had always reached for her. Even when she was four-weeks post-partum with their third child and the loose flesh around her middle could be grabbed up in handfuls. Now in the morning, instead of sharing the same bathroom as they had for almost thirty years, Sam showered in the kids' old bathroom down the hall. Eleanor knew that it wasn't her that he was afraid of, it was her scars, but still it hurt when he kept his eyes averted when she was getting dressed.

At first she had tried to show him that everything was ok. She traded in her habitual cotton t-shirt, the heather grey one that said Williams from when Michael was in school, for lurid satin camisoles with thin straps. 'See,' she'd say, 'You can hardly see the scars...' but Sam would only look away. Then, when she had been out of the hospital for four weeks and was feeling almost whole again she and Sam had gone for pizza at Lee Zachary's down the road. Afterwards she hadn't wanted to go home. Instead they went to see the movie *Chicago* that had just come out in theatres, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Renee Zellweger in fishnet hose and bustiers, and Eleanor had felt something inside her shift, like a fracture in the surface of a slowly melting pond.

"It's ok," she said that night while lying next to Sam in bed. But next to her Sam was strung so tight that he was rigid. Eleanor took his hand and pressed one finger to her flesh.

She knew what the scars would feel like. They were smooth and slick, but bumpy in ways that weren't normal. "You see," she whispered, "it's healed," but Sam's fist had shriveled in her hand.

When Paul came into the library for the second time Eleanor noticed that he had, well, coiffed his hair. It was carefully combed over to one side and slick with something that looked sticky. His flannel button-down was tucked tightly into his jeans, which were once again stiffly creased. Like his jacket they were also too short, Eleanor noticed. She could see his white tube socks over the tops of his battered construction boots and she couldn't help but find it endearing. He was like a little boy somehow, gangly and naïve. Everything about him was awkward, including the length of his neck and the pinched expression on his face, and Eleanor knew that most people would look away. They would feel pity for him and wouldn't want to stare. But Eleanor could not look away; she was fascinated with his lips. She wondered what they felt like; if they were still soft or maybe hard now with all those scars.

"I brought the book," Paul said and Eleanor nodded and removed her glasses, rubbing the bridge of her nose. The glasses were new, she'd just gotten them from one of those twirl-about racks at the pharmacy and she wasn't used to the way the thin rims of metal bit into her cheeks.

"I hope it was helpful," she said, looking out the window. "It seems the weather is turning." And it did seem that things were warming up. Lately the sun had begun to linger, promising a change, and during the day the icicles hanging from the roof of her garage melted some, sending narrow streams of water snaking across the black asphalt of the driveway. But at night the water froze again in slippery trails of black ice. It was the perfect weather for sugaring, warm days and cool nights.

"It was helpful," he said. "I'm going to have a real sugaring off this year."

"Really," Eleanor said, pushing her glasses up through her hair so that she could see him better. And like a dam had broken, Paul began to speak. He was not as well educated as Eleanor had first surmised, simple really in many ways, and sometimes it was hard to understand him through his lisp. But Eleanor just watched his lips move closely, and tried to cipher what it was he was trying to say. His mother had died, she found out, and left him the land. It was family land from when his mom had been a girl. But he wasn't used to Vermont and so much cold. "Texas," he said, "is where I've been lately." (He didn't say why or where he'd been before, but Eleanor figured that maybe he'd been training at Fort Bliss.)

Startled and amused, Eleanor listened as he described to her his recent days scouting trees and ordering supplies. They had sent him the wrong taps though, he said, the ones set up for hoses. Maybe, he continued, he'd do that next year, but he was ok with things the old fashioned way. Just a tap and hook, he

said, was all he needed. Besides, he said, his neighbor already had a bunch of buckets, and no point in those going to waste. So for now, he said, everything was on hold.

"Say," Paul said, suddenly reaching into his back pocket. "Have you had lunch?" Eleanor watched as he pulled out a battered wallet. He reached inside and pulled out a slip of yellow paper. "Because I've got this coupon here for a free bowl of tomato soup. Buy One, Get One Free. At Alverson's, you know? Just around the corner?"

"I'm sorry," Eleanor said, startled. She took a step back and immediately Paul ducked his head and pulled into himself. A reflex, Eleanor was sure, of an awkward and difficult childhood. Inadvertently she reached out to him, resting one hand on his arm, but he jerked away immediately as if he had been burned. "I'm sorry," Eleanor tried again, "I didn't hear what you said at first." Paul looked down at her, a deep furrow in his brow.

"Nothing to be sorry for," he said. He fingered the coupon in his hands.

"I've, well," Eleanor struggled for words. She didn't want to disappoint. "I've eaten already." Paul's lips twitched and Eleanor pressed one hand against the back of her neck. It was clammy and briefly she wondered if she was getting sick. "But how about tomorrow, Paul?" she said. "When would be a good time?"

Paul looked at her and shrugged, the snarl of his lips wrestling with a smile.

"Tomorrow," he said. "How 'bout noon?"

After Paul left and handed her the book, Eleanor braced herself against the counter and forced herself to count to ten. At five she heard the front door open and felt a chilling draft, but it was only Luellen, stomping off her boots on the rubber mat where Paul had stood only moments before.

"You're early," Eleanor said, staring at Lu's bright pink boots. They were ludicrous heels considering the weather, she thought. Lu tried too hard for such a beautiful girl.

Lu glanced up, untwining a hand-knit scarf from her neck. Her arm lifted, spinning 'round and 'round.

"Mikey dropped me off so that I wouldn't have to take the bus," she said, referring to her boyfriend. She bent down to unzip the bottom of her zipper where her coat ended just below her knees and for a moment Eleanor could see her perfect breasts, round and full like ripe fruit, in the deep V of her mohair sweater. Embarrassed, Eleanor looked away.

As Luellen walked past she tapped the book in Eleanor's hands.

"I see that Paul stopped by," she said, trailing cold air behind her, and for a moment Eleanor felt a ghostly tingling sensation where her own breasts used to be.

At home, Eleanor's own breasts, or lack of them, still continued to be an issue, or perhaps more accurately, a non-issue.

Her scar tissue was still avoided, her body still untouched, and her anger at the situation was beginning to manifest itself in strange ways. She had taken to slamming doors and watching too much TV. She watched with the volume up high, so that Sam would have to raise his voice when he spoke. And when he did, she would only say “WHAT?” while still staring at the TV. Last week she had come down to eat her breakfast without wearing a shirt.

“Eleanor,” Sam had said, putting down his cup of coffee. “Really.” And Eleanor had reached across the table for the box of shredded wheat, her thin pale arm spotted with freckles brushing underneath her husband’s nose. She poured milk into her bowl and shoveled up a bite.

“What?” she said. Chewing with an open mouth, she had looked down at her chest riddled with scars and stitches. “This?” Later, Eleanor waited until Sam’s car had pulled out of the drive before she collapsed onto the kitchen floor and cried, utterly exhausted. It took a lot of energy to be so belligerent and angry.

Yet Eleanor’s partial nudity continued. Most chores she did at home she now did topless, in spite of the fact that Sam had taken to spending his evenings in Bindy’s old room watching her ten-inch black and white television while lying on her single bed. It didn’t even get any good channels, Eleanor would think, ruthlessly dragging the vacuum back and forth over an already clean rug. She knew that the blinds were open and that the neighbors could see. She imagined what she must look like through the window, half naked in only an old pair of sweats and her chest mutilated with scars that looked like lesions.

Alverson’s was a deli around the corner from the library. Paul showed up precisely at twelve o’clock, which was fine because Eleanor already had her coat on and was waiting for him in the vestibule. She’d planned on telling Lu that she had some errands to run but when Lu found her in the bathroom applying a coat of lip-gloss Eleanor knew that wouldn’t work. She pressed her lips together and fanned at the air in front of her, trying to waft away the scent of perfume that she had spritzed on both wrists.

“Sam,” she said, “Wanted to do something special.” But Lu still looked suspicious.

On the walk to Alverson’s there wasn’t much to say. As they crunched across the rock salt and melting ice Paul offered Eleanor his arm, but she kept her hands thrust firmly in her pockets. The tension between them was tangible and confusing. To a casual observer Eleanor could be Paul’s mother, aunt or lover. Eleanor didn’t know what he wanted, and her own intentions were unclear.

At Alverson’s they waited in line quietly.

“Tomato?” Paul asked.

“Yes, please,” Eleanor said, and she added a bag of chips to the order, reaching for her purse. But Paul shook his head.

“I want to,” he said. For a moment Eleanor felt like she was dating again and her cheeks began to glow.

They sat at a table in the back of the deli, underneath a high-up window that cast down shadows onto the floor. Eleanor opened her chips and spilled them on a napkin in the middle of the table.

“Have some,” she said, and she popped one in her mouth. The grease and salt bit her tongue and her mouth began to water. She watched as Paul did the same, staring with fascination at his mangled lip.

“I’ve tapped probably a hundred and fifty trees,” Paul said, when both soup bowls were nearly empty and Eleanor’s belly was full, her body warm and relaxed as it hadn’t been in some time. Paul furrowed his brow as he worked out the numbers in his mind. “Yep,” he said, “just about.”

“That’s great, Paul,” Eleanor said, shifting towards him in her seat.

“It is, ma’am,” he said, and Eleanor cringed at the formal address. “It is,” Paul continued. “Got a cord of wood delivered this morning and the pans are all set. I’m just waiting two more days before I start the boilin’. Say,” he said, “you could come see it if you’d like.”

Eleanor smiled and looked down at her hands in her lap. She softened.

“I’d like that,” she said, “I really would.”

That night on her way home Eleanor stopped at the grocery store for some potatoes and a pound of ground beef. She hadn’t cooked Sam dinner in a while and meatloaf was his favorite. When she got home she heard the TV already on in Bindy’s room and leaving the plastic bag of groceries unpacked on the table she walked down the hall. She felt lighter, as if the tomato soup had filled her with some sort of happy gas, and she was smiling. She began to unwrap her scarf, thinking of Luellen and the many ways in bed that she could be a good wife, but when she walked into Bindy’s room she found Sam reading one of the girls’ Victoria’s Secret catalogs with one hand down his pants.

“Hi,” she said, suddenly deflated, and Sam scrambled to toss the magazine away. He pulled a pillow to his lap and sat up straighter.

“Hi,” he said. “I didn’t know that you were home.”

“I’m home,” she said, collapsing against the doorjamb. “I’m here.” She looked down at her hands and tugged at the limp scarf. “I was going to make meatloaf,” she said, “but I think I’m kinda tired.” Sam nodded. “Tomorrow maybe?” Eleanor said, crinkling up one side of her face. There was a bubble in her chest. It pushed its way up but she forced it back down, too tired for a showy display of emotion.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam said, his head bobbing on a rubberneck. “That sounds good.” And with heavy feet Eleanor climbed the long flight of stairs up to their cold dark bedroom.

Hardscrabble Road was just as Eleanor remembered. Her old Volvo wagon groaned in protest as it lumbered over frost heaves and fought its way through drifting snow. She had checked out *From Sap to Syrup* and over the past two days she had brought it with her to read in bed. She liked the sepia photos of the large horses and sleds, the men in worn plaid coats just like Paul's. She stared long and hard at the images of boiling syrup and so much steam, and wondered what it would be like in that cramped space with so much heat. For fleeting moments she wondered what it would be like to touch Paul's skin, to feel his lips on hers. It was a juvenile fantasy, she knew, and she tried to force it away. Besides, she was married, she reminded herself, and old enough to be the young man's mother. But each night with one hand balled up in a fist and pressed in between her legs, she read the words and thought of Paul and tried to pay attention.

Eleanor had never ridden a snowmobile before and Paul was dismayed and astounded.

"Never?" he said for the second time as she climbed on the back of the seat behind him. She struggled to find a place for her feet and grinned.

"Never," she said, "I swear."

"Well here," Paul said, and he thrust her a helmet. "Hold on tight, Ms. Dixon," he said and she wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him close and holding on tightly.

It was exhilarating to be on the back of such a powerful machine. The air brushed across Eleanor's cheeks biting and cold and trees flashed by in a blur. Paul maneuvered the snowmobile into the middle of a thick stand of trees, cutting the engine, and in an instant they were completely alone. Insulated from the outside world by sun, snow, ice and silence, Paul crunched through a wet snow bank, heading for a tree.

"Come 'ere," he beckoned, and Eleanor clambered off the sled suddenly very warm. "See," he said, "This one's been tapped before." He pulled off his glove and ran his hand down the trunk of the tree, fingering the spot where the bark had split and then healed. With both hands in her pockets Eleanor stared, unsure of what she was feeling. She watched Paul's gentle finger trail across the scarred bark and she could not move.

In the sugar shack, Paul took Eleanor's helmet and then went outside to bring in more wood. Eleanor rubbed her hands together to get warm, staring at the flames already licking the door of the wood stove. On the surface her mind was calm, but somehow she felt unglued. As if the snowmobile had jostled something loose.

When Paul came back into the sugar shack, Eleanor was topless. She stood awkwardly with her hands at her sides, still in snow pants and heavy boots. The sap had started to boil and the steam condensed on her skin, rendering it pink and

wet, and her hair was plastered to her forehead. For a moment Eleanor expected Paul to run away, but instead he dropped the wood that had been in his arms and closed the door behind him. (For privacy or so that she would not get cold, Eleanor could not know.)

"Ms. Dixon!" Paul cried, and Eleanor didn't know what to say. All she could do was stand there and grope for understanding.

"I wanted to show you," she said, as Paul stood backed up against the wall. But the sugar shack was small and he couldn't go very far. Eleanor took a step forward, walking through the steam and she saw Paul staring at her chest. The scars felt vibrant, highly sensitized. He took one more step backward and knocked over a stack of pails; the noise was loud and bawdy. In the pan the sap still boiled and Eleanor watched as a lock of hair fell into Paul's eyes. She reached out to push it away and saw that her hand trembled. Surprisingly, Paul did not flinch at her touch and she rested the back of her hand against his cheek. She took up his hand and pressed it to her sewn-up skin, over her thundering heart. He did not pull away. She touched his torn-up lips and felt his heavy breath against her skin. He traced her scar, filling Eleanor with lust and then with shame. She thought of her daughters, of her son and of Luellen's pink boots and when Paul opened his eyes and stepped closer, Eleanor stepped away. She pressed one hand against his chest.

"There's another library closer to you than mine," she said, walking over to where her shirt lay on a littered desk nearby. "It's on Durmont, but go east instead of west," she said, buttoning up and pulling on her coat, "Away from town." She looked at him as she pulled on her gloves and he nodded, as if accepting an order.

"I understand," he said. Eleanor had one hand on the door.

"You should be proud of yourself, Paul," she said, "This is a nice setup that you have here." Paul nodded and they both looked at the boiling pan of sap, resting with the knowledge that they had seen each other in the most intimate way.

That night Eleanor got home just as the sun was setting. When she got out of the car she felt immediately that it was much colder than it had been only hours before. Good weather for sugaring. Melting snow that would freeze tonight into icicles just to melt again tomorrow was dripping from the eaves. It splashed against the top of Eleanor's head, bracing and cold, as she walked through the garage door. She took off her boots and hung up her jacket. She could hear the television coming from Bindy's room. She was tired, her bones hurt and she had caught a chill. Paul had given her a pint of maple syrup. She set it on the counter and then climbed upstairs, holding on to the rail. In the twilight of her bedroom she changed out of her clothes. She pulled on Michael's old Williams t-shirt, a pair of wool socks and then she climbed into bed.