

Soft Lines, Creamy Features

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Maura looks on both sides of the dairy case and stuffs the butter down the inside of her coat arm. She waddles swiftly down the aisles looking for cocoa and sugar. Her husband, Fred, needs these ingredients for brownies she promised he'd make for the church council elections on Sunday. He was not thrilled when she told him.

“Looks like winter didn't forget us after all,” Maura says, smiling at the cashier.

“You know it. Weird winter for these parts. Took me half an hour to clear the snow off my windshield this morning. Course that's lake effect off Onondaga. I could totally not believe it when I got to Syracuse. It like only sprinkled here!”

Maura hands her the money for the cocoa and sugar.

“Have a good day!” The cashier calls after her.

Maura runs to the car. Her sneakers press against swollen toes but she tells herself the shoes fit fine. She feels thighs bounce against her protruding middle which jiggles and sways like a stuffed beach ball. The elastic on her sweatpants pinches as she slides into the car. Up until two weeks ago, not many could tell Maura was six and a half months pregnant. She got away with wearing her formerly loose fitting clothes. Lisa, a friend from church, gave her a maternity shirt a week ago; it was the only one Maura owned.

She throws the cocoa and sugar on the car seat and backs out slowly. She sees a blue uniform in the rearview mirror. He taps on her window.

“Ma'am, Ma'am.”

She rolls down the window. Her palms are cold, wet. “Yes sir.”

“It's none of my affair, Ma'am, but do you think you ought to be running like that with child and all?”

“Oh sir. The baby is fine. It’s solid in there. Thank you for your concern.” She rolls up the window.

“Ma’am. I almost forgot. You dropped a glove when you were running.”

She opens the door. “Oh no sir, that’s not mine. I didn’t wear any gloves. Bare hands.”

“I don’t mean to pry or nothing but isn’t that careless of you? It’s cold today, Ma’am. The wife laid out long underwear for me.”

“Well, I don’t feel the cold much. The baby makes me hotter than toast. I have to get home now. Have a good day!”

He tips his hat as she backs out.

Hotter than toast? Maura chokes a laugh to herself. Anything’s hotter than toast and it sure as hell never stays that way for long after it pops up.

She’s gotten sloppy and she doesn’t like it. She used to be so good at saying the right thing, the convincing quip. Now everything seems to tumble out of the card catalogue for the inane and moronic come-back. What else will be forfeited thanks to the pregnancy? She waves her hand to bat back the idea out of her mind.

“Did you get the cocoa and sugar?” Fred asks.

She sets them on the counter.

“Is that everything? Maura? No extras this time?”

She shakes her coat arm and hands him the butter.

“Dammit, Maura. Put it in the refrigerator with the others. Do you realize you could go to jail? I’m going to have to take this back. We are.”

“Can we keep one, please? I love that creamy dream. It goes with everything. Pancakes,

toast, green beans, carrots, potatoes, rolls, popcorn, ice cream, even by itself. Please.” She makes a $\frac{3}{4}$ clunky turn, intending to twirl, as she loops through this list hoping a little that he’ll be amused and will therefore forgive her.

“Oh come off it. We are paying for the ones you’ve opened. Why don’t you just ask me for more money? I know you’re on leave without pay right now but I could indulge you and junior if this is something you have to have.”

He kisses her on the cheek. She takes the newest package of butter out of the refrigerator, slices it into pats, and puts one on her tongue. It crawls between her teeth and toward the back of her throat. Heaven.

At the park two weeks ago, Fred called out to Maura, “Slow down, will you?” He could see the outline of her body and bicycle vaguely through the low fog coming off the lake.

She leaned the bike against one leg. “You know, in 45 minutes the sun will be completely up. My photos won’t be anything unless I get there now. I don’t know why you said you wanted to come along if you weren’t going to get up in time.”

“I’m sorry if I’m not some speed queen, like you, Maura. You shouldn’t be riding that fast anyway. What if you took a spill? You’re still working forty hours a week and I don’t even like that.”

“And I need to work. It’s not like before. I’m six and a half months, remember?”

Maura sped to her usual spot in front of the lake. On the other side of the water was a forest. She liked to set up her tripod and get shots of the sun coming up through the trees. She could not wait to capture the varied illumination from the fog. Before she looked through the lens, Maura took out a carefully wrapped pat of butter and savored the creamy luxury.

“You still doing that?” Fred asked sharply.

“Of course. This stuff is the best. I don’t know why I never thought so before.”

“That can’t be good for the baby.”

“It won’t hurt it. I can eat what I want.”

Fred shook his head, and took out his pine tree book. “I’ll be back at 7:30.”

Later that day, Maura noticed light brown spots in her underwear. She called her doctor who said it was unusual to spot this late in the pregnancy but that it was nothing to worry about unless the spots turned bright red.

When Maura told Fred, he insisted she completely stop working, and absolutely no more bike rides. The sunrise would be there in two and half months.

“You do remember what I do, right? I can’t just get up and leave because of a little blood! Director, I’m the boss, dammit! They can’t get a temp for that! I’ve got the Quality Improvement initiatives, the Diversity Core and new-hires coming all next week. It’s easy for you. You get to keep your life going. Nothing is growing bigger and bigger out of your control inside of you. You...get... to keep sketching... your designs... and... meeting... with... clients.” Maura’s voice petered out. She didn’t care about winning this one. It was all inevitable and beyond her reach, now. Deflated, she wanted him to leave.

“You’re going to have to take time off eventually, paid or not!” He yelled, not recognizing that she had already surrendered.

Maura ran the kitchen faucet hard until Fred walked away. She then called Lisa to have coffee.

“I can’t not work. What am I going to do with myself?”

“Why don’t you start nesting? The baby’s going to be here in two months.”

“Two and a half. All that’s done. Crib, mobiles. Fred painted a long time ago. But damn him trying to tell me what I should be eating. I can eat what I want, right?”

“You don’t know how lucky you are. Jack and I keep trying. We’re both afraid to say it’s too late. If I’d known him when I was your age, if we didn’t feel obsessed about getting tenure first. Maura, you’re 35. Work will be there. Don’t push it. Just don’t, okay?” Lisa’s eyes wrinkled in perfect places, exactly like a worried mother. Maura mused about what a great surprise it would be to give Lisa her baby. She’d be better at it. Even Fred would admit that, if only to himself, Maura thought.

Maura stopped at the grocery store after meeting with Lisa. She didn’t notice the package of butter until she got home and reached in her coat pocket for her keys. That was the first time she had stolen. She didn’t know why she had taken it but decided she didn’t care. It had suddenly become something easy to do, a sleight of hand. And the comfort was worth the risk of getting caught.

Maura touches the top of a warm pan of brownies and inhales. Baked chocolate and pecans waft throughout their house.

“Have to wait chickadee. I made a special pan for you. Extra butter and bitter chocolate chunks. Your new favorite. But that hasn’t been baked yet. First, we’re going for a ride,” Fred says as he presses his palms against Maura’s hips from behind.

“Can’t you just go?” Maura turns to face him. She pushes out her lips and tries too hard to make her eyes look sad.

“Maura. You’ve stolen nine packages of butter in the last two weeks. You can’t possibly eat that much. God knows what else is in the house I haven’t discovered yet. It was funny the

first time, maybe even the second. I'm asking you to go with me...What has gotten into you? Cravings don't entitle you to stealing."

She pulls out a dining room chair and sinks her elbows into its mauve cushy back. Maura's fists push her cheeks into bulges under her eyes. Straight ahead hangs a framed photo from their trip to Niagara Falls last summer. Thin streaks of blush accent her high cheekbones. Cheekbones she has not seen in four months.

Maura feels the baby kicking. It loves afternoons, she thinks. Lilly or Matt will be a good dancer. Benji would have been two by now.

She stares at the photograph. The pink of her cheeks blurs into the silvery blue of the violent water.

Fred knits his thin eyebrows. They are softer than Maura's even after she spends nearly an hour plucking her bushy caterpillars into shape. She used to trace his face from one brow around to the other. She would purposely ruffle the tiny hairs to make him appear more wolf-like. To no avail. He would take her hand after two complete revolutions and kiss each fingertip. They would kiss on the lips for a while and then make love. The last time was six weeks ago. She didn't know why it had been so long. Had she refused his advances, once, twice? And then of course the tiny bit of blood showed up. Fred was afraid of making things worse with "activity," as he put it. She misses his touch and lets herself feel sad.

Maura puts on her coat. She leaves it loose because it won't button.

"That's ridiculous. Time for some new clothes, a coat?" Fred asks, then smiles.

"For what? In two months, I won't need them," she retorts.

They stand in line at the customer service desk. The security guard walks toward them.

“Everything all right, Ma’am?”

“You know him?” Fred whispers in Maura’s ear.

She nods. “Yeah, yeah. Fine.”

“Got quite a load of butter there, eh? Did it spoil on you?”

“No. Ah silly me. Kept going to the store thinking we needed it, only to come home and realize we already had tons.”

“The wife does that. Go figure. Have a nice day.”

Fred talks to the woman at the counter. Her long black hair shields her eyes.

“We did not buy this butter. I am hoping you will forgive us. My wife is pregnant and gets these cravings. I think she doesn’t even realize what she does.” He laughs.

Maura reads the safety rules and notes tacked to the corkboard behind the woman. She plays connect-the-dots with the fluorescent pink, green, and yellow sticky notes. A lamp? Or tree with a pile of leaves at its trunk? Maura smirks. Fall. Tumble. Two and a half years ago, she twisted her ankle at the movie theater parking lot. Fred held out his arm to her but she was already on the ground.

Maura never expected the sharp pains. She gripped the fuzzy blue bath mat and wrung it. She held her stomach and screamed for an hour. Fred wasn’t home.

When she was through, three months of baby filled the toilet. Maura fished it out and held it. She washed the tiny being, wrapped it in a peach blanket she had knit and put it on their bed. She called Fred. He picked her up and they went to the hospital.

The doctor suctioned out the remainder of the tissue, as she called it. Maura would bleed for another week or so, but then have normal periods.

When they got home, Fred wept at the tiny bundle in the peach blanket. Maura curled up

against it and put it against her chest. Fred held her.

Before dinner, they dug a hole in the backyard. The ground was soft from early spring rains. The dahlias have come up bigger and brighter ever since.

The customer service clerk moves her hair out of her eyes and smiles at Maura.

“I’ve got three kids myself. Beef stroganoff and Snickers bars was what I had to have for my second baby. Didn’t want anything to eat with the third. And the first, salad! And that’s what those three love to eat now. Crazy, huh??” Her eyes glisten.

Maura smiles because she knows she should and then makes it genuine because this stranger has actually legitimized Maura’s thievery and given her a place to hide.

“We want to pay for these two. As you can see, they’ve already been opened,” Fred says.

Maura knows Fred wants the baby more than she does. He laughed and danced the night she showed him the plus sign on the home pregnancy test. She laughed too, but more because Fred hadn’t been happy since they buried Benji. After the danger zone of three months passed, she started to believe this one was for real.

At church on Sunday, Jack and Lisa compliment Fred on his brownies. Maura takes a foldout chair from a stack against the wall and sits down. She watches her friend Julie feed her three-year-old son, Ralph, nickel-size pieces of brownie. He hums as he chews. Ralph walks toward Maura and leans against her leg.

“You want to sit in Aunt Maura’s lap?” Julie lifts Ralph.

“Oh no. Don’t Julie. He’s too heavy.”

“Better get used to it, Maura. Pretty soon you won’t remember ever doing anything else...Are you going to run for president?” Julie asks.

“Haven’t made up my mind,” Maura says.

“Yes you have. We’ve talked about this, Maura,” Fred says.

Ralph finishes his brownie and runs outside to the playground.

“Did you always want Ralph, Jules?” Maura asks.

Julie takes a big bite of brownie and walks toward the bathroom.

“Maura. What’s gotten into you?” Fred asks.

Maura follows Julie into the bathroom. Lisa follows her.

The toilet flushes. Julie walks out blowing her nose.

“Jules, I didn’t mean to upset you. But. Are you happy?”

“That is none of your business, really...Ralphie *is* the best thing in my life. I wish he didn’t look so much like that face I’ll now never be able to forget.” Julie pushes her shoulders up and down. Her back sags. “You’ve got it made Maura. A husband who loves you, job waiting when you want it.”

“Maybe I had everything before. Enough anyway,” Maura snips.

The baby kicks. Maura wants to kick back. She leans against the wall.

“Just don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.” Julie’s arm brushes Maura’s protruding belly as she opens the door to go out.

Lisa pats Maura’s shoulders and looks into her eyes. Maura turns her head and sees nicked yellow paint on the stall door.

Maura walks past the circle of chairs formed for the church council meeting and hears Fred announce that her name should be crossed off for president. She walks to the playground. The ground is soft from melted snow. Small patches still remain in spite of the 65° day. Ralph plays tag with other children. His three-year-old legs trip over a stick. He gets up, laughs. The

bigger kids make him 'it'. They slow down for him so he can tag one of them.

The sun heats up Maura's back while she swings slowly. She forgets it is January. The kids pant and laugh. She stops. Lilly or Matt is awake again. Maura sees the vibration through her tight dress and hugs herself. Benji never got big enough to be like this. Maybe I should have never gotten pregnant again, she thinks. Some women aren't meant to be mothers. Will I love it? What if Fred and I fight all the time after it's here? What if it dies, too?

Ralph walks over and rests against her leg. He looks up and starts to climb on her knees.

"Oh no, buddy. Why don't you play some more?"

He sticks out his lower lip. "Tiwad."

"Tiwad. Oh, tired.....All right." She lifts him. He feels light to her. "You're not too much trouble, are you? See how my belly's moving? There's a baby in there. Just like how you used to be a baby. When you were itty bitty teeny tiny."

She puts his hand on her belly. His fingers are chubby and sweaty. Maura smells faint baby powder. She kisses each finger and he laughs.

At home, Maura shoves her freshly cleaned plate of lunch away from her and waits for Fred to look up.

"Fred. I'm scared. What if the baby isn't healthy? What if we're not right after it's here?"

He swallows as he picks up both of their plates and puts them in the dishwasher.

"The baby will be fine. We'll be okay, too. We just need to keep our heads and talk when we get angry." He walks back to her, crouches in front of her and smooths her hair behind one ear.

“What if I don’t like it? What if I’m not a good mother? What if it hates me? What if I have it too soon?” Maura takes Fred’s hand off her head.

“Honey. You’ve come this far. This is different than before. Things will work out.”

“How do you know though? How?”

“I don’t know. I can’t. I’m not going to say we lost Benji for a reason but we got a second chance and that’s where we are now. You will be a good mother. We will do the best we can. I’m going to be there with you, promise. I love you, Maura.” He kisses the top her head.

Fred walks into the baby’s room. He whistles as he winds up one of the mobiles.

Maura waddles to the kitchen sink and scratches at the elastic of her stretch pants. She breathes heavily and wants to rip them off. New clothes or no clothes, she demands silently. She takes out the butter, slices it into pats, and puts one on her tongue. It softens. The grease slides over her teeth. Globbs break off and move toward the back of her throat. Maybe it’s not good for the baby. Maybe it’s not good for me, she thinks. I’m smarter than this, bigger than it, too, aren’t I? I don’t have to be afraid.

She chokes, spits into the sink, and turns on the faucet hard. The baby kicks. Maura pats her belly and remembers the cool leather of her office chair as it contoured to fit her petite body.