Sugar

He couldn’t stomach currants in his salad. She couldn’t stomach his not stomaching her currants. She’d already tried strawberries with kale, blackberries, raspberries, a drizzle of balsamic. He’d been polite but honest.

I can’t do savory with sweet, he said, pushing his plate away.

I can’t not do sweet, she muttered.

Though that wasn’t, ostensibly, the cause of their rift, that turned out to be the last exchange in their marriage. He moved back to Wisconsin, where he had an opportunity. She dug her heels in, stayed put in Seattle, moved to an efficiency unit above the market.

The bakery around the corner hired her for the morning shift, three to noon. It was grunt work, but there was the possibility of apprenticeship. No one was chatty in the early morning, and she liked that. She put out the butter, scrubbed crud off the equipment, cracked eggs, swept. Dusted the cardamom rolls with crystalline sugar, when she was lucky.

Back home after work, she tossed stale chunks of scones on neighboring rooftops and watched seagulls swoop to gobble them. Cherry almond, her favorite, turned out to be the seagulls’ favorite too, and she heard a difference in their cries: she could tell when they were sad or when they were happy.

He wrote. He’d taken over the family bank, a savings and loan. She folded the letter, put it in a drawer. He didn’t say what he wanted, just what he was doing. Maybe there was an implied invitation. He would have to write again and be explicit to warrant an answer.

Butter had bound them. A mutual love of butter. But how long can such a love bind?

After the separation, she dated a pickle monger, then a bread baker. Then he wrote again. I’m all set up, he said. There’s a dairy farm going under. You could be the butter queen. Wouldn’t that be a dream?

What would I do with butter all day, she wondered. She seriously considered it. Rent was too high, and $9.75 an hour wasn’t cutting it. She didn’t want a second job. But she found herself washing lunch dishes at the little French bistro hidden behind the fishmonger. The kitchen was tiny, but it opened onto part of the restaurant, so she could admire the bartenders pouring the occasional afternoon whiskey or cognac or fine wine. They were all slender and calm and ready with a warm quip and yet expert at keeping a distance. Once, the bistro was short a dessert chef. She got lucky, taking a blowtorch to the crème brûlée. You have no formal training, conceded the owner, but we’ll let you do that again sometime. A sheen of sugar crackled over her heart. Thank you, she said. I’d like that.

Still she thought about the comfort of butter, the security of his offer. Wisconsin was nice enough, but the proximity to the ocean was better. You had food from all directions. A fishmonger told her about the best way to cook halibut. She invited him over. He panfried it with lemon and butter, and it made her sad. Why are you crying, he asked. It’s just so good, she said. I love butter, I do. It’s just...After the fishmonger left, she looked over his letters again and thought very hard.

Maybe she’d spend her life in the market, moving from purveyor to purveyor. Maybe that wasn’t so bad. The following afternoon, she asked the butcher about the black pile of lambs’ tongues. She considered bitter melon pickles and shriveled black lemon, and her hands ran along the piles of brussels sprouts and jazz apples and respected the nectarines’ wishes not to be squeezed.

In the French patisserie, she admired fantastical wisps of meringue and row upon row of macarons. Her teeth sank into a pistache and a citron, a pleasant nut and a pleasant tang; the light and chewy texture buoyed her up. A cloud passed, darkening the bakery, then the room flooded with yolk-colored light. She took away a little waxed paper sack – one of each flavor she didn’t yet sample: framboise, noisette, café, chocolat, vanille.
Maybe she should marry the market, she thought, standing on its cobblestones. Why not? A woman had married another building in the city just the other day. In protest of its demolition, but still. It would be an informal arrangement. She laughed. But still.

She sprung up the stairs to her place and flung open the window. A scent of salt wafted in from the water, and then, she thought, a hint of dried hot peppers, and then, the nostril-widening scent of sizzling lardons. Her hand rifled in the sack of macarons, touched their cool smooth surfaces, their ruffled edges, their bit of seeping buttercream. Her nose lowered to them and took in one long whiff of variegated sugar.

The noisette, divine hazelnut, called out to her with its vaguely bridal coloring; she plucked it out, and kissed its lightly mottled dome, and hurled it over the market as an offering. The confectionary flew up in an arc until a seagull, with keen precision, swooped and snatched it in its beak. Chunks of it crumbled into the alley below, remnants of ground almond and hazelnut and egg whites and sugar, and the bird flew off toward the bay with much of the treasure, and she interpreted this moment into its only possible meaning: the market said yes. ☺