

SUGARMILK FALLS

by

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Listen. You can hear the snowflakes brushing against the windows. Outside the north wind is shifting softly in the branches. Some of us still call him Keewatin. Maybe you noticed too the dreamed ones enter and settle down in the corners of the room? They've come to listen. They know it will all be out in the open at last.

Come closer. Sit among us – here, in this chair by the fire. Take this knife, these small pieces of wood, and work with us while we talk. Just watch how I do it – it's easy – you'll soon get the idea. Eh bien. Tonight we will speak about the things that happened in this place. I expect you know already – you've read the police files? Anyway, it was in all the newspapers at the time. But they'd only interviewed those who said it all began when Grandmere Osweken, the worse for moonshine, lost the prime maple forest in a crap game. I guess they had their reasons for not telling the whole story. Don't get me wrong, now – it happened like they said, but there is a lot more to it.

How that old Ojibway came to own the sugarbush is still argued about these winter nights as we whittle sap spiles - they only cost a nickel at the store but here we don't buy anything we can make. In her youth, it's true, she'd struck lucky in the Chibougamau gold find, far to the north of the Sugarmilk country. Unusual for a woman to know about prospecting, but then she was a mide, a shaman. Some say her

menfolk used to disappear at regular intervals to work the claim. According to Sergeant Martello they were regularly put in jail. Me? I reckon the stake gave out long ago. The only gold I ever saw her with came in a bottle. But she always was one hell of a crap-shooter, that Grandmere, and the general view is she won or bought or was given the maple woods long before anyone can remember. The Indians say the bush has always been theirs, part of their ancestral lands. The way we saw it though, and that's what matters, was that most all the Sugarmilk country was owned by a sodden Ojibway squaw.

It's the kind of story that doesn't need fancy touches, so I'll just tell it how it was. Then you can make up your mind if you want to re-open the case. Or maybe you'll agree that after all this time it is better not to mess with sleeping wolves.

What isn't often mentioned now is that it all goes back to Miss Grochowska, the new schoolteacher hereabouts - they used to come from all around to sniff her tail - and the time she failed little Bobby Osweken in an arithmetic test though his answers were right enough. A small thing to make such big sparks. Anyway, she got upset by something he'd done and soon she was confessing to Father Souris when they met, as they had since the sap run, in the clearing beside the river above the falls. We've all gone up there along the old portage and thought we were alone, though Zack Guillem somehow always seemed to know. Zack told me much about what really happened here before he disappeared that time. Was he ever found?

No one knows where Zachariah Guillem came from, only that it was back from the war. I knew him in the war. He was the one who got us out when we were shot down

that winter in the mountains of western France. Only three of us made it back, Zack and Joe and me. How we did it, what we did has not been talked about since and we split up as soon as we could. And then he just turned up here one day with his bundles of pelts, one of the crowd of trappers that took over the town each spring. Those days the fur was everywhere, beaver piled high on the rooming house verandas, mink, marten, racoon, fox, cascading down the clapboard walls. Mostly these men just made their deals at the Hudson's Bay store, got drunk for a week and then went back to their traplines that always seemed farther north than they'd remembered. That year the sap-running winds, rowdy with homecoming Canada geese, blew soft and steady. The wooded hillsides thrummed with the strong spring pulse. Sunlight sparked off a million droplets trembling like diamonds on the tips of a million spiles, sometimes as many as ten to a tree, filling bucket after bucket after bucket with clear sweet water. The honeycombed snow refracted rainbows. Makeshift camps jangled with horses, laughter, conversation. Under blackened cauldrons the fires burned like rubies, and pearly steam, heady with the boiling sap, coiled through the web of branches.

Zack Guillem was caught up by the long sweetening and he just stayed on. With the woodsmoke sting in his eyes and the harsh sweet maple taste in his mouth, his pockets fat with new green dollars, he was seduced by the great glacial valley of the Sugarmilk River, dressed up as she was like a rich widow in all her springtime furs and jewels. He worked where he could, guiding city-bred deer hunters through her quaking muskeg swamps or fire-ranging along the water trails that linked her five hundred and eighty named lakes. And for a long time he was content, until the new school teacher arrived with her old world sophistication and something he could not

put into words, an uneasiness that evoked best forgotten things – his Metis friend, Joe Naiscoot, whose traps along the Wanapitei failed. He'd taken to stealing for a living and died in prison, of a heart attack they said. And Rachelle Osweken, coming up fifteen, raped, they said by a lumber gang. And the war. Sometimes Zack would look at Grandmere and the same feeling came over him. Her eyes were beaver dark. Her face was creased and lined like the intricate river routes on an old prospectors' map. He remembered that when he first came to the Sugarmilk country, wolves still sang the northern lights.

But these things happened long ago. There are no trappers now, in the spring. The sugaring is a tourist attraction, like the colours of the leaves in the fall. When the chainsaws close in these too will be gone. Rachelle later took up with a car factory worker and moved south. No one hears from her anymore. As for Miss Grochowska, well you've seen the photographs. You've read the files, you say. There are stories that she went out west but they can't be true after what happened here.

That's good. You're really getting the hang of it. It's staghorn sumac - don't confuse it with the poison kind - much better than cedar for making spiles. It's a pretty wood - hard, with a large pithy middle. We carve away all winter but come the sweet water weather there are never enough. Our collecting buckets too are made of wood. None of that tin or plastic for us. You can always tell if the sap's been handled carefully. We sugar out in the open, over wood fires. Feux d'enfer we call them, the fires of hell. You won't find any of those new-fangled evaporators round here. Some maple stands nowadays are nothing but a tangle of tubes, from the trees straight into the machinery. No sir, we have nothing to do with suction pumping or reverse osmosis,

whatever they say about increased yields. That technological stuff is okay for the hotshot suceries of Beauce County. Sugarmilk syrup might be harder to come by but, the maple connoisseurs all agree, it sets the standard to judge the others by.

Time was we all went round on snowshoes tapping each tree by hand, real back-twisting work. I can remember when the Indians used hatchets – such skill they had to make those perfect cuts. We use power drills now. We let our trees mature at least forty years before they're worked. We don't suck them dry. The Ojibway believe the sap is the blood of the forest Manitou, his gift to them. No such thing as owning a maple lot. In the old days they sugared off with hot stones thrown into buckets made from hollowed out logs. The world must have turned more slowly then. It takes near fifty gallons of sap and a stack of wood as big as a man to make just one gallon of good maple syrup.

You begin to think winter is going to last forever but then you come across fresh racoon tracks in the snow. The first crow gabbles in the branches. We see to our pails and Father Souris blesses the maple groves. Maybe you've already talked with Father Souris? No? He'll give the usual version of what happened here, though he knows the facts well enough. Him and Sergeant Martello both. They're thick as thieves. I've heard tell that Sergeant Martello brews the communion wine from the grapes he has sent up from Niagara. It's probably true. Between freeze-up and snow-melt, when there is no way in or out of the valley, they are the law hereabouts, temporal and divine.

Mathieu Souris felt, as always, the tickle of pleasure when the doors of his garage

opened automatically to receive his car. He smiled the prayer of gratitude at the plastic Virgin mounted on the dashboard by means of a rubber suction cup - pretty Virgin, he thought, in her white dress and blue veil and her uncanny resemblance to Marina Grochowska.

Today he had gone round the sugar camps to bless the spring harvest. All week the party lines had hummed, "Sap's running.....Sap's running strong..." whenever he lifted the telephone receiver to make a call. He prayed daily that he might be vouchsafed a private number. Sugarmilk phone conversations were very public affairs. But he did his own share of listening in on the party line. That's how he kept his sermons topical. That's how he found out about the schoolteacher and that bushwhacker Guillem.

"I just don't know what to think," the telephone cackled one summer morning, "There they were. Well. I guess she's no better than she should be. What's she doing here anyway? Damned commie D.P. Send them all back where they belong." Other voices joined in the censure and arrived by a convoluted route that included the declining moral standards of the valley, at a general condemnation of foreigners, half breeds and Indians, "those filthy Oswekens" in particular, about whom something had to be done and fast.

Father Souris had a private word with Miss Grochowska. "Why Mathieu," she replied, "Have you been listening in to the gossip?"

He blushed. "We are all sinners, Marina."

“I appreciate your concern.” she said frostily.

Sergeant Martello too made a point of greeting the school teacher on Main Street. “If anyone’s been bothering you, ma’am, we can deal with him. That’s what we’re here for.”

“There is only one of you, Frank.”

The party lines continued their insinuations throughout the summer and fall. Father Souris preached at length about tolerance and the casting of stones. Miss Grochowska tested her first graders’ understanding of arithmetic. The priest and the school teacher met, as usual, in the clearing by the waterfall.

Beside them the Sugarmilk River cascaded into the forest. Ochre leaves flurried into the glittering eddies. Flinty branches swayed across the cobalt sky and the cold wind hissed through twisted jack pines, primeval as malachite. Miss Grochowska shivered as Father Souris placed his arm around her shoulder. “Marina?” he prompted gently.

Her hand churned in the white water surging over the rocks, shattering in their faces like splinters of ice. “It was a stupid and unforgivable thing to do, Matt.” Brittle emotion laboured in her voice as she explained. Bobby Osweken’s six year old brain had encompassed the concept of numbers and understood precisely the quantities of objects indicated by the symbols. He had complied with her instructions; she could not fault his grasp of the principles. “Draw whatever you want.” she had encouraged

her class. Miss Grochowska considered it essential to first construct the intellectual trellis around which sprouting imaginations would twine. She was careful not to inhibit either, at this early vulnerable stage, by confining the expanding universe of mathematics between dusty clichés such as fruit and domestic animals. To tell the truth, she said with a humourless laugh, the sheaf of test papers included far more dogs and apples than she'd hoped to see. She had needed to remind herself that six-year-old minds approach everything with the same profound wonder.

Father Souris smiled, but Miss Grotchowska blinked back tears. At the end of the allotted time Bobby handed in his childish military drawings: one bomb, two helmets, three machine guns, four tanks, five submarines and so on. Each armament was decorated with black and red swastikas. He had drawn nine rifles aimed at ten stick people wearing bright yellow stars. Technically his answers were correct, but for his innocent chafing of old deep wounds she deducted marks. Bobby Osweken's eager face crumpled with incomprehension and Miss Grotchowska bled.

"He doesn't mean anything," Father Souris told her, "It's just those war comic books the kids buy at the store. You shouldn't let it bother you."

Marina Grotchowska shook the water from her hand and blew on icicle fingers. On the inside of her arm, above the wrist, the tattooed numbers flashed darkly. "You were over there, Matt. You saw. How can you say that to me?"

After Toussaint Mass the presbytery telephone rang three times – the call was for Father Souris. “Can you come over please, Matt?” Miss Grochowska sounded distressed. Sugarmilk ears were suddenly alert and Sugarmilk tongues clicked. He drove the short distance across town and parked in front of her trim little house. Crude red swastikas had been daubed on the white clapboard walls and blue front door.

“A Halloween trick, Matt?”

“Do you know who might have done it?”

“I haven’t seen Bobby since he failed the test, but you know what these Oswekens are like, always off to set traps or bait fishing lines, or do whatever they feel like doing.”

Sergeant Martello investigated. “Has Bobby Osweken been to school this week? Have you seen Zack Guillem around this week?”

Winter hardened and the incidents continued. Snowfalls often brought fresh swastikas marked out on Miss Grochowska’s lawn. Yellow stars were frequently chalked on the blackboard when she arrived in her classroom in the morning. And the party lines shrieked, “Disgrace! That D.P. woman! That no-good Guillem! Those vile Oswekens! Something’s gotta be done to clean up the valley!”

In February, at the beginning of Lent, all the incidents stopped. There seemed to be no explanation. Father Souris’ garage opened and closed its doors. The dashboard

Virgin trembled on her rubber mount.
