



5-15-2015

## The Scent of Maple

Angela Shupe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Shupe, Angela (2015) "The Scent of Maple," *Westview*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol31/iss2/2>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



# The Scent of Maple

by Angela Shupe

**The phone rang**, waking her from a dead sleep. With her heart racing, Annie Filigren stumbled out of bed, feeling her way through the dark to the kitchen. Anything to make that blasted ringing stop, she thought, racing down the hall. Her left foot twisted on something in the center of the hallway floor. She was angry as she muttered things she'd never say in the light of day. *Who could be calling? And at this hour?*

Adam was always leaving things laying around when he got in from a midnight shift. *Should've been more careful*, she scolded herself, kicking at the towel now wrapped around her foot. She hopped into the kitchen just in time to grab the phone before it blared again.

"Annie?" said a flustered voice on the other end.

"Yeah, it's me." Annie stifled a yawn. "Callie, what are you doing calling so early? It's not even six."

"I'm so sorry, Annie. I really hate to do this, but John just left to go downtown. He got a call late last night for an early interview, and he'll be gone all day. My shift starts in half an hour, and I don't have anyone to watch Ben. Is there any way you could help?" Annie's stomach twisted, tightening into knots.

"You know my mom would always help..." Callie's voice quivered, and the phone went silent. Annie sat rubbing her aching foot, hating this decision, this interruption in her life. She knew it would happen sometime, just not yet. *It's the last thing I want to do. I just can't*, she decided.

"Please, Annie. I know we've not talked a lot lately..."

*Lately? There's an understatement. More like two years*, Annie mullied. Years ago, there'd have been no hesitation, but not now. When she first met Callie, they were both six-months pregnant and learning breathing techniques at the local birthing center. Annie had laughed when the instructor in the neon yellow dress began barking orders like a drill sergeant. Callie was the only other one to laugh, and their friendship began instantly. Both were first-time moms. Even though Annie was twenty-eight and two years older, Callie seemed more at ease with becoming a mom. Her confidence encouraged and empowered Annie.

Once the babies were born, Callie and Annie met off and on to get coffee and swap stories. When Callie moved to the next town, distance made getting together difficult. They'd tried and were successful a handful of times, until the babies became toddlers.

Then, it happened, and Annie pulled away from the friendship. Seeing Callie was only a painful reminder, so she stopped answering phone calls and didn't return messages. Soon, Callie stopped trying. Deep down though, she wouldn't admit it. Annie had hoped Callie would keep trying, maybe just give her more time. But now, it all seemed so long ago.

"Annie, I really don't have anyone else who can help."

Annie's heart tugged. She knew what it was like to lose someone. It was still too raw. The

knots twisted tighter. It was like her stomach was rebelling, and her body was at war with itself. Her heart almost wanted to go one way, but the rest of her was battling it out to stop her mouth from forming the words already escaping her lips. "Yeah, it's okay. What time?" Annie sighed.

"We'll be right over. And thanks, Annie. You're a godsend." There was a click, then nothing but dial tone.

*How could she ask me this? Of all things, she had to know this would be the most painful. Well, there's my good deed for the day.* Annie hobbled off to get dressed. Passing the mirror in the hall, she glimpsed the face of a woman—hollow and tired. Not giving it a thought, she closed the bathroom door behind her.

\*\*\*

In the foyer, Callie hugged the mop-topped boy good-bye before turning to leave for the day. *What am I going to do for an entire day with this child?* Annie wondered. Staring up at her was a young boy with a curly brown mess on top of his head. He had to be about five. At that thought, her stomach started up again. *Will you give me any peace today?* She scolded it silently.

"I suppose we should get you something to eat." Dark eyes stared back at her, made even bigger from the long dark lashes standing guard over them like the Queen's Guard at Windsor Palace—unrelenting and alert. She'd seen them on her honeymoon years ago. She and Adam had laughed. They were amazed by the guards, who never once flinched. She looked at Ben. Still no response, so she motioned for him to follow her into the kitchen. "I could make some eggs," she offered. "What about cereal or toast?" No reply. "I have oatmeal." *What five-year-old wants oatmeal for breakfast,* she thought, opening the pantry to search for more suitable options.

"Mama always puts syrup in my oatmeal. And nuts, too," said a whisper of a voice behind her.

"All right, I think I can do that," Annie replied, relieved the silence had finally been broken. *This little guy isn't such a tough one, after all.*

"Be careful, it's hot." She handed Ben the bowl of steaming oatmeal. The bowl was the blue ceramic one, with a tiny chip on the top of the daisy on the side. *Could never bring myself to get rid of it,* she thought. *Something about it reminds me of him. Doesn't make any sense; it's not like he gave me the bowl. Goodness, he was only three.* She decided it was there when he was, and for that reason alone, she'd never get rid of it.

"Can I have more syrup?" Ben's voice interrupted her thoughts. Hunched over the warm bowl, he was finishing the last of his oatmeal. "Please," he added, remembering his mom's words to mind his manners. He looked like a scared puppy with those big, unassuming eyes.

Grabbing the bottle, she drizzled syrup over the remaining clump in the bowl. For the first time since walking through her front door, he smiled. "Don't you like the smell of maple syrup, Miss Annie?" He inhaled the bit of steam still rising from the bowl.

"Hmmm," she mumbled, trying to remember the last time she enjoyed the smell of syrup or if she ever had. "Guess I just don't really think about it." She screwed the top back on

the bottle.

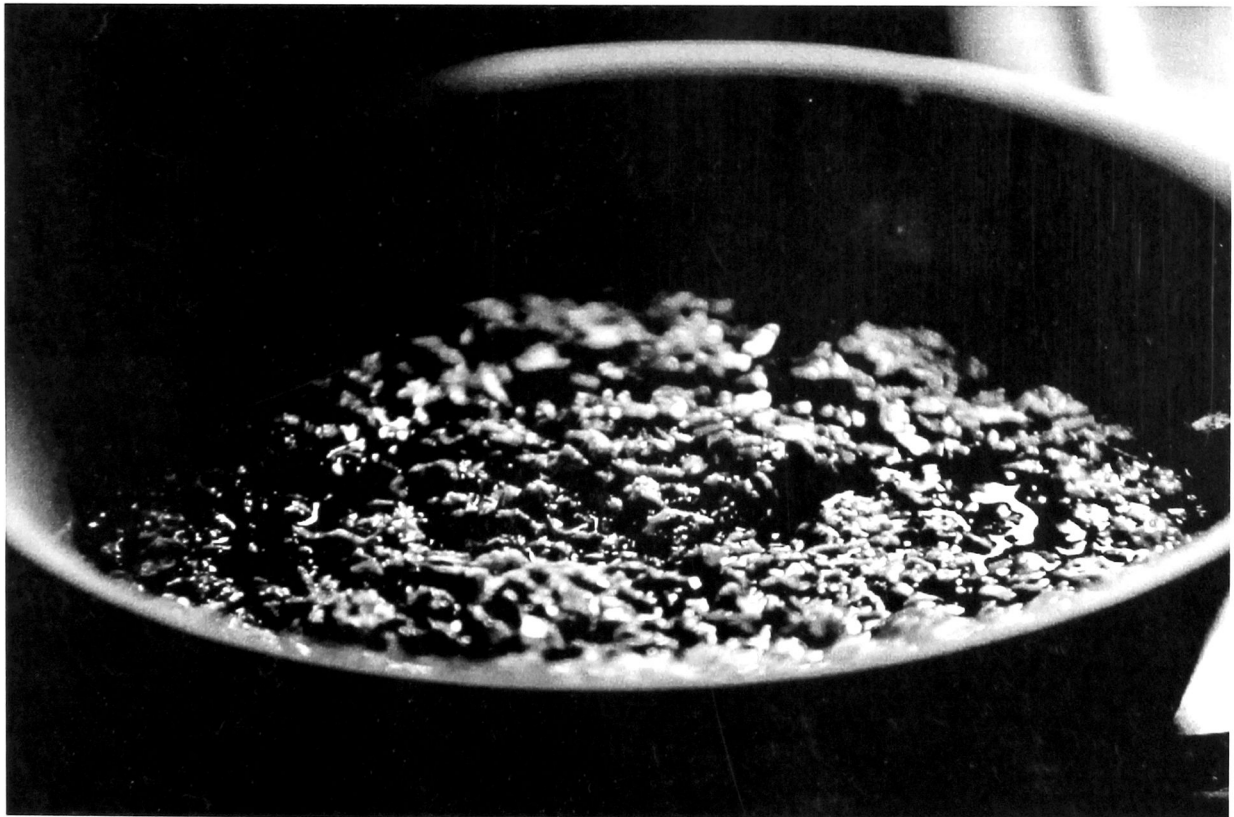
“Really?” Ben looked shocked. “It smells so good. Here, smell.” Before Annie could say anything, he pushed the bowl up so close that syrup on the edge rubbed onto the tip of her nose. “Don’t you smell it?” he asked. His eyes opened wider than the cup’s matching saucer, he looked almost desperate for her to share his love of maple.

Annie snapped back, “Yes! Yes, I do.” She hoped her answer satisfied him. *Who gets this excited over syrup?* She was annoyed. Feeling ridiculous, she jumped up to get something to wipe the syrup off her nose.

*Really, Annie, getting mad at a five-year-old?* She scolded herself, wishing her stomach would stop with the knots. Turning to face him, she softened her voice. “What would you like to do today, Ben? We could go to the park.”

“You got syrup on your nose.” He giggled, hiccuping through sips of milk. *I will not be undone by a five-year-old*, Annie determined. Looking straight at him, she repeated her question. He was still smiling, amused by the hiccups. He looked a bit sheepish, but pleased. His smile was warm and disarming, which made her heart sink. She could feel the old ache, pulsing grief.

*Why does this have to be so difficult? It’s been two years. Two years since it happened—since the day Noah was gone forever. It happened so quickly. He was there one moment, and then he was gone. He’d be about Ben’s age now.* The image of his dimpled cheeks, crowned with golden ringlets, wallpapered every memory she had over the last two years.



It was always there, a backdrop descending on the present, a constant fog blocking clarity. "Can we ride the merry-go-round?" Ben interrupted her thoughts. "And see the sailboats?" "We'll see," Annie replied, not willing to commit to a plan just yet.

"Lots to do there, Miss Annie," Ben assured her. Annie placed the dishes in the sink, thinking about what they needed for a day at the park.

They arrived just as a man with mustard yellow trousers was opening the gates to the merry-go-round. "Miss Annie, look!" Ben pointed at the lights now blinking. There was an odd halo illuminating the vintage ride. Circus horses, elephants, and lions came to life, cast in golden light, as if the circus master had just yelled for the circus to begin. Ben appeared to be entranced. Music began playing in perfect time with the jerking movements of the animals. Startled by the music, Annie jumped. "Can we ride it, Miss Annie?" He looked at her and back at the animals, not willing to take his eyes off them, as if they'd gallop away along with any hopes of riding.

Annie paid the man two dollars, one for each of them. The man stopped the ride for them to climb on. She propped herself up on a pink elephant. With mammoth head raised, the elephant seemed to be showing off the gleaming gemstones rimming her crown, which sat between two enormous rosy ears flapping in the wind. Ben jumped up next to Annie on a lion, then changed his mind, opting for the pearly white horse opposite her. Up on its hind legs, the horse looked ready for battle, as if it were about to charge the unsuspecting hippo directly in front of it. Ben grabbed imaginary reins, yelling "Yah!



Yah!" just as the ride lurched and started to move in circles.

"Hold on," Annie said. "Ben, hold on," she repeated as Ben grabbed the handles protruding from both sides of the horse's head. Around and around they went.

Annie felt like a top being spun, hobbling a bit to either side. The animals slowed, and the park stopped spinning. "Okay, time to get off." Annie stepped down off of the uncomfortable elephant.

Ben looked at her with saucer eyes, "Again? Please?" he asked. Annie sighed.

"All right. One more time, but this time I'm going to watch. You hold on. Got it?" She looked at him sternly. Ben nodded his head, eager to get moving. He hopped off the horse, his

eyes darting between the lion and a dark brown bear with a red and white cap on its head. Choosing the lion, he climbed on. Arms wrapped around the rusty mane, he laughed as the lion jumped forward, and the ride began its circular dance.

The ride slowed, and Ben jumped off. "I'm hungry," he said. He passed through the open gate toward Annie with his eyes focused on the food stand behind her. It was almost eleven. They'd eaten breakfast so early, even Annie's stomach was growling. She led the way to the stand.

"Hot dog?" She looked down at Ben for an answer, and he nodded his head. "Two hot dogs and two Cokes, please," she told the man behind the counter. After paying, they sat down at a picnic table under an old oak tree, colors already starting to turn. Ben was staring up at the leaves. Yellow and red splashes resembled a watercolor painting with vibrant colors splattered on a canvas of green. Annie didn't look up. She never noticed things like that anymore.

"My favorite color's red," Ben said, still looking at the leaves. "What's yours?" he asked.

"What?" Annie was focused on peeling off a fleck of napkin stuck to the bun before chewing her last bite of hot dog.

"What's your favorite color? Mine's red," Ben repeated, head arched, staring at the puzzle of leaves, branches and sky above them.

"Blue." She'd always loved the color. As a girl, everything had to be blue. Teal, royal, indigo... didn't matter the shade, as long as it was blue. When she was eight, her dad decided to repaint her bedroom. She wanted it blue, and her dad obliged. Her mom laughed when she insisted on a blue comforter, curtains, and a rug.

"Does it all have to be blue?" her mom had asked, wishing she'd pick the white comforter with tiny blue flowers and green leaves.

"Not enough blue," Annie replied. They settled on a sky blue comforter with tiny white polka dots.

"The sky's a pretty blue," Ben said. He pointed at the sky beyond the tree.

"Yeah, guess it is." Annie looked up for the first time since they sat down. It reminded her of her old room. *Wonder whatever happened to that comforter*, she mused. Looking over at Ben, she followed his gaze to the leaves above. "Wow. The leaves are already changing," she said, surprised by the vibrant colors. "I like the red," she added.

"Me too," Ben agreed. He stood, taking his eyes off the leaves for the first time since sitting.

Annie was about to suggest taking a walk through the park when Ben turned abruptly to the left. "Do you smell that, Miss Annie?" She hadn't noticed anything but turned in the direction Ben was facing. Over to the left, opposite the food stand, was a cotton candy vendor. She must've just started the machine. Annie still didn't smell anything, but Ben's nose was directing his feet toward the blue and cherry red fluff. "Can we, Miss Annie?" he asked.

Annie weighed the decision. *He did have oatmeal for breakfast. That was healthy.* "All right," she agreed. "You can get one."

"Don't you want one, too?" Ben asked. Annie shook her head no. "But it smells so good,"

he said. He looked at her, amazed she'd pass up the opportunity.

She could smell it now, the faint scent of warm sugar rising from the deep metal bowl spinning behind the glass case. It did smell good—he was right. “A red one, please,” she told the girl waiting with a slim paper cone in her hand.

“No, a blue one, Miss Annie.” Ben tapped her on the arm, “I want a blue one.”

Puzzled, Annie looked down at him. “Are you sure?”

He looked up at her quietly. Then, with a slight nod of his head said, “Yep. A blue one.” He'd made up his mind, and there was no changing it.

“All right. A blue one, please.” Annie handed the money to the girl, who handed Ben an enormous blue fuzzy cotton ball perched on a long, slim cone.

They turned down the winding sidewalk under the maze of trees. “Miss Annie, you have some.” Ben held the cone up close to her face, careful to not touch her nose like earlier with the oatmeal.

“I don't need any, Ben. It's for you.”

“We can share it. It's blue,” he said. He looked so innocent and genuinely eager for her to enjoy the blue fuzz. A smile drew across his lips, off-center to the left, capped off by a tiny dimple. Looking at him, she remembered how Noah's cheeks would always dimple when he smiled. She could see her son's face clearly. Her heart hurt, and she turned away, shoulders hunched, heavy with pain.

Angry at the pain and angry with herself for still feeling it, she squinted back tears. She knew it wasn't Ben's fault. Turning back, she tore off a piece of the fuzz, feeling its stickiness on her fingers. Bringing it close to her lips, the scent of vanilla sugar filled her nostrils. “Smells good,” she said, forcing a smile.

A smile stretched wide across Ben's face. “Told you,” he said. He was so pleased with himself, or maybe he was just happy to see her happy.

They walked the length of the park. The sidewalk looped around, and now they were on the far end, near the pond. Wanting to rest before heading back, Annie sat down on the patchy grass, worn through like an old, misshapen sweater stretched over the dark earth. From where they were, she could see the fountain in the center of the pond. The pond was just over the hill in front of them. Ben started to sit, then he saw it. “The pond!” he shouted. He jumped up, racing toward the water.

“Wait, Ben!” Annie yelled, but he kept running full speed toward the pond. Then, he disappeared over the hill. Annie jumped up and ran as fast as she could to catch him. *I can't see him*, her mind began to race. *He should be in the clearing beyond the hill. Where is he?* “Ben!” she screamed, frantically racing toward where she last saw him. *My God, this can't be happening*, her mind swirled. “Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay,” she muttered, breathless from running.

Then she saw him, curled up on the grass, clutching his knee. He was sobbing. “Ben!” She finally reached him. Scooping him into her arms, she held him close.

“I want my mama. Mama! I want Mama.” His voice was garbled between sobs. Looking down, Annie could see blood on his knee. Fear gripped her heart, wrenching the knots in

her stomach tighter. *It's just a scraped knee, she repeated to herself. He's okay. This isn't Noah. He's okay.*

"It'll be okay, Ben. It's okay. It's just a scrape." She rocked back and forth, cradling him in her arms, tears forming in her eyes. "You'll be okay," she reassured him. His little body stopped shaking. He calmed down, able to breathe normally again, no longer sobbing. "I know you want your mama, Ben, but you'll see her soon." He was quiet. Annie could hear the water rippling in the pond. "Let's get you cleaned up. I'll bet I can find a pretty cool band-aid for your knee. What do you—"

"You're a good mama," Ben said quietly. He was looking straight at her with the kind of tenderness only a small child can have. "You're a good mama, Miss Annie." He nodded, as if, in agreement with himself.

Sitting still on the ground, Annie felt her mind go numb. Looking around, she could see birds nibbling seeds in the grass, now chirping in silence. The rippling water fell silent. Everything around her hushed, as if creation were paying its respects to a grieving mother. She couldn't feel anything but the rush of tears exploding from somewhere deep inside. The ache in her heart burst like an overfilled balloon. Terrified of the pain she knew was coming, she bowed her head low, waiting. She waited for the pain, but the pain didn't come. There was something else, something different. Something she'd not felt in a long time—release.

Realizing Ben was still watching her, she clutched him closer to hide her face. Not wanting to scare him, she took a deep breath to steady herself. "It's just a scrape, Miss Annie." Ben was puzzled. "I'm okay," he reassured her. She looked down at him and gazed into his dark eyes.

"You're right, Ben," she said,





choking back tears. "It's going to be just fine. You're okay."

Standing slowly, she helped him to his feet. She pulled a tissue out of her purse and gently wiped his knee clean. "Can we still see the boats?" Ben asked, wiping a tear off his cheek. Annie nodded. They walked in silence to the pond. Ben pointed out his favorite ship, the tall blue sailboat with red stripes on the sails.

\*\*\*

"Thanks, Annie," Callie said for the third time, opening the door to leave. Ben had jumped up when she rang the doorbell only a few moments before. He'd fallen asleep soon after getting back to the house. Annie watched him breathing softly, curled up on the couch, warmed by the dusky sunlight glowing in the front room. The house was quiet because Adam was working another late shift. Still sleepy, Ben held Callie's hand, stepping outside onto the front porch, not looking back. Then, he stopped.

He turned and ran to Annie, giving her a quick hug that only reached to her thighs. He smiled, then walked back to Callie. Annie watched them wind down the sloping sidewalk to their car. She sighed and shut the door.

She walked to the bathroom, her face still grimy from her tears earlier in the day. She stared at the face in the mirror. It looked different somehow, gentler. Pouring a dot of soap into her hand, she lathered it into suds. Bringing soapy hands to face, she remembered the syrup on her nose from the morning. Taking a deep breath, she thought she smelled a hint of maple. She laughed, making a mental note to have oatmeal with syrup and nuts for breakfast.

\*\*\*