

SUGARING TIME

by

S. Frederic Liss

Mud layered Road No. 2631 as it ascended Mt. Proetid to where the horizon would have been on a sunny day. Mud clung to the paws of animals that crossed the road to forage for food and to the boots of Micah Gendron as he hiked toward the summit along the road's center crest. An abandoned logging road, the Vermont highway department had assigned it a four digit number and a two thousand pound weight limit, the lowest classification it recognized. The cold air burned Micah's lungs and fatigue made him heavy footed. The thin air stoked the fire in his lungs and made him lightheaded. His pulse beat against the back of his eyes.

Spread-eagled across his back and shoulders like a dead buck, his son Luke bled from a gun shot wound in the fleshy part of his thigh above his right knee. Under Luke's weight, Micah sank into the mud. His efforts to hoist his feet created a vacuum. With each step, breaking the vacuum made a sound like water being sucked from a well during the dry season. Micah had heard that sucking sound once before, twelve years earlier when he saw combat in Desert Storm. Eight men had followed him into an ambush. Only two followed him out. And the third, Pfc. Jamie Drayton who had volunteered for the Marines to escape the coal mines of eastern Kentucky, Micah had carried as he now carried Luke. That mud, a rainbow of browns and tans created by a burst water main in an Iraqi village whose name Micah did not remember, had slowed him down and Drayton had bled to death before Micah reached camp.

Patches of late winter snow on the decaying leaves created a calico effect. Bare trees colored the mountains gray or purple rather than green. Here and there, houses built with weathered wood and asphalt shingles and whatever odds and ends that could be scavenged emerged from clearings in the woods, obscured by the low slate sky of the season, the monochromatic light of late afternoon, fading in and out of view like a shadow at dusk. On sunny days, the sun might reflect off the sheet metal sides of a house trailer, but even then, it was difficult to tell the sparkle of sheet metal from the sparkle of snow and ice. Winter's first thaw flowed in drainage ditches on either side of the road. Sometime after sundown, certainly by midnight, the water would freeze, as would the mud.

The birch trees, their bark hanging down like the strips of wallpaper coming off the walls in the trailer where Micah lived with his wife Ruth, his son Luke, his daughter Hannah, beckoned him to cross the drainage ditch where it shallowed, to lean against a tree, to catch his breath, to knock the mud off his boots, dig it out of the ridges of his soles. Iraq had taught him that rest would not enable him to climb faster, to make up whatever time he may have lost. Jaime Drayton's widow had not seen it that way. Nor would Ruth if Luke died. Sixteen on his last birthday, Luke had started hunting with his father when he received a hand-me-down rifle as a present for his ninth birthday. They hunted for food, not sport.

The wind shifted out of the northeast and the stench of burning kerosene filled Micah's nose. He wiped the sweat off his face with his arm. The drops that had frozen on his cheeks felt like pebbles and he knew he'd tear away skin if he tried to rip them off. He breathed deeply, trying to synchronize the rhythm of his breathing with the pulsating

in his head. To track his progress, he checked the numbers stamped on metal plates tacked to each utility pole by Green Mountain Power Company. Three more poles. Micah's muscles ached and he wished the incline would flatten out, but it rose before him as straight as if it had been laid out by a surveyor. The mud in the distance was as murky as the slate gray of the sky.

The wind shifted again, carrying away the odor of the kerosene, and Micah studied the woods. He should know where he lived, but the colors of the season, the shadows of the late afternoon, deceived him into seeing things that weren't there, not seeing things that were. If his trailer was in those woods, it was as visible as an owl. Another shift of the wind and the smell of kerosene again surrounded him like a low early morning cloud, reminding him of the hot water he would need if Luke survived, so much hot water he would burn the propane budgeted for the rest of the month, perhaps for the rest of the heating season. And Luke would have to be kept warm as well so they would have to burn wood, hardwoods like maple, not soft, dirty wood like pine; but Micah wouldn't fell the trees he sugared and eventually resin would build up in the chimney, maybe catch fire. It happened every few winters in the mountains, often killing a sleeping child. The government didn't climb too high in these mountains and when it tried, the people built roadblocks to keep it at bay.

About one hundred feet beyond the third pole he trudged along a dirt path no wider than a small truck, ungraded except for the passage of pickups that had trampled the grass, the brambles, the bushes, over the years. By Easter, the path would be impassable and Micah would park his truck on the edge of the road, straddling the ditch

so he wouldn't block the way for the Hoags and the other families who lived up the mountain.

Entering the clearing where his trailer squatted on cement blocks, Micah stumbled on the wooden planks that led from the tree line to the trailer. He wondered if Luke would ever race across the clearing again as sure footed as the catamounts which had recently reclaimed their territory. At the door of the trailer, Micah explained to his wife that Luke had tripped and fell and his gun had gone off, wounding him in the leg. "I made a tourniquet, but it didn't stop the bleeding. He's shivering pretty fierce. Call Doc Soigner." The local veterinarian, Soigner treated people in emergencies because the nearest medical doctor was too many valleys away.

Micah settled Luke on the bed in the front bedroom and jury-rigged a pressure pack out of towels and pillows and rope to stop the bleeding, field medicine he had learned in the Marines. It hadn't saved Jamie Drayton, but Drayton had been shot in the abdomen, not the leg.

"Too much bleeding to be a flesh wound," Ruth told Soigner, her voice as calm and steady as if she were giving him the recipe for the pie she had baked for the church fair. "You better stop first at the Red Cross for some Type O."

Micah had seen Ruth take charge like this once before, the year the bear mauled her dad. Nursing him back to health, working his fields, sugaring his maples, she had done more than three or four sons could have. Micah thanked God Ruth never went hysterical like some women in the valley.

“I should call my brother,” Ruth said while they waited for Soigner. Her brother, Father Dominic, had fled the valley into the priesthood and was the pastor at The Church of the Holy Shepherd’s Flock in the city, a five or six hour drive away.

“If you call him, we’ll need him,” Micah said.

“Hannah,” Ruth said. “Go wait for Doc Soigner up by the road. He’ll miss us in the dark.” She dampened a cloth and bathed Luke’s forehead and cheeks. “It’s not like Luke to be walking with the safety unlocked. When he tripped, did he fall forward or back?”

“He was behind me.”

Ruth wiped Luke’s neck and Micah imagined what she was thinking. Falling forward, Luke would have thrown his arms out to break the fall. The rifle would be pointing up the trail. If anyone got shot, it would be Micah. Falling back, he’d shoot skyward. Even if he fell sideward, he’d still be shooting away from himself.

“I heard the shot,” Micah said, “turned around and seen him on the ground on top of the rifle. He must have pulled the trigger when he hit the ground.”

The moon had risen above the tree line by the time Hannah guided Soigner to the trailer’s door.

“He tripped and his gun went off,” Micah said. “Took a bullet in his right leg above the knee.”

“Get me lights,” Soigner said. “As many as you’ve got. And hot water. And an extension cord. And that coat rack. The hangars, too.” Soigner unpacked a portable sterilizer for his surgical knives and a bottle of disinfectant. He poured hot water over his hands and slipped into surgical gloves. With Soigner’s guidance, Ruth looped a pint of

blood on the hangar and hung it from the coat rack, then steadied the tubing while he began the transfusion. “Keep it vertical,” Soigner said. “I don’t want blood backing up.”

“He going to live?” Micah asked.

“If I can stabilize him. Elevate his blood pressure.”

“What about Recruitment Day?” Hannah asked. “He’s been counting down the days like it was Christmas.”

Every March, representatives of the armed services visited Thebesford Regional Consolidated High School to recruit seniors for the Marines, Army, Navy, Air Force, or Coast Guard. For those who wanted to escape the valley, it was the surest path out. At least during peace time.

“Soigner doesn’t need any distractions,” Micah said, taking the tubing from Ruth.

“It’s time for your Bible lesson, young lady,” Ruth said. “The story of baby Moses from the Hebrew Scriptures.”

“Luke may be dying and you want to give me a Bible lesson?”

“You disrespect the word of the Lord,” Ruth said, “and He’ll take Luke to spite you.”

“Please, Mom.”

“Pray Jesus He’s distracted watching over President Bush.”

An hour later, the story of baby Moses read and discussed by Ruth and Hannah in the back bedroom shared by brother and sister, Luke’s blood pressure stabilized, the bullet removed from his thigh, his wound stitched and bandaged, Luke rested, drifting in

and out of consciousness, babbling about Recruitment Day, garbling the pronunciation of 'Tripoli' and 'Montezuma' as he tried to sing the Marine hymn.

"Will you report this to the Health?" Ruth asked.

Vermont law required medical personnel to report hunting accidents in which children were injured to the Board of Health which had the power to investigate, prosecute, place children in foster homes. Ruth lowered her eyes. She accepted what she had not because she didn't know better, but because she loved her husband, loved her children, shared Micah's pain that his labor didn't produce a better life for them. With the children older now, she earned a few dollars working as a housekeeper in the Borrean Pass Inn, an inn that catered to tourists, flatlanders in the lingo of the valley, making beds, vacuuming, cleaning bathrooms, cleaning the kitchen, never during school vacations though, whether summer or school year. Her income helped them keep up with the cost of living.

"I don't see what good the Health would do," Soigner replied. "Take his temp every half hour. If it spikes, call me." Soigner gathered his instruments. "My jeep's out on the road, Micah. Guide me through the woods, please."

The pale light of the moon illuminated the jeep in a ghostly white haze that looked like the ground fog that devoured snow cover during the transition from winter to spring.

"Don't forget your bill this time, Doc. When the weather breaks, maybe I can pay more."

Micah still owed him for treating Hannah's pneumonia, a bill Soigner didn't want to send, a bill Soigner didn't want to collect, until Caleb Hoag, Micah's neighbor up the

mountain, explained to Soigner that Micah would be shamed if he didn't pay for his daughter's healing. On the first of each month, Micah went to Soigner's office with a few dollars, usually in coins, the amount varying from month to month. After six months, Soigner tried to convince Micah the bill had been paid, but Micah persisted, explaining that plenty of people were worse off than him. "I'll stop," Micah said, "when I figure you've been paid fair."

Micah hated to think how long he would be paying off his debt to Soigner between Hannah and now Luke; years, because the two full time jobs he worked, molding maple sugar candy for flatlanders during the day, branding names on hockey sticks at night, didn't pay much more than minimum wage and the maples he sugared up the mountain behind his trailer produced only enough to sell a few pails of syrup to one of the collectives. He hunted for whatever meat the family ate. After paying the land rent, the heat, gas for the truck, other essentials, he barely earned enough to treat the family to out-food on a Saturday night, a large cheese pizza divided four ways and four sodas without ice, a tip for the waitress.

"You said Luke tripped and fell?"

"Gun went off."

"Bullet entered the leg horizontal. It would have angled if he tripped and fell."

"They was both lying on the ground, him and the gun."

"If you say so, Micah."

Four roads converged on the town common of Thebesford Center, each traversing a different mountain pass between the mountains that surrounded the town to connect the

valley to the outside world, west through the Borraean Pass to Burlington, south through the Neistan Pass to Montpelier, north through the Proetid Pass into Canada, east through the Electran Pass into New Hampshire. The names had been imposed on the valley prior to the Revolutionary War by one of Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys who had studied Greek at Harvard and self-published his own translations of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus before volunteering to fight with Ethan Allen. After American independence, he returned to the valley to teach school and preach sermons at the First Church of Thebesford. Most residents of the valley assumed the names originated with the Abenaki or another tribe of Native Americans.

At the northern end of the town common, the early settlers built the First Church of Thebesford, one of the oldest in Vermont, older than the state and the nation of which the state was a part. The church's founders had sited the sanctuary so that the sun, as it cleared the mountains on the day of the summer solstice, shined through the great double entrance and down the center aisle to illuminate the crucifix hanging over the altar. Four times the church had been rebuilt over the centuries, first when the Huron destroyed it during the French and Indian Wars, the last when lightning struck the steeple in 1952 the day before a scheduled campaign stop by Adlai Stevenson. Enlarged and modernized each time, but always sited to gather in the sun on the morning of the summer solstice, the church still welcomed man's ancient gods.

Saturday night. The Gendron family celebrated Luke's return to school with outfood at Natili's Pizza located on the last level curve in the Electran Pass Road before it started its climb toward New Hampshire. Steam from a large pizza, sausage, mushroom

and onion because a guest at the Inn had left a tip for Ruth on the dresser, rose around their bowed heads as Micah said grace. "May God grant the sap run free."

"Micah," Ruth whispered.

"And may Luke heal in time for Recruitment Day."

"Thinking of breaking trail tomorrow, Dad?" Luke asked as Ruth divided the pizza into fourths.

"Mud's freezing at midnight, melting at noon," Micah said. "Hannah and me'll take your taps this year, Luke."

"Aw, Dad. I'm healed enough."

"Your wound's still draining," Ruth said.

"Dad. Please."

"Your Ma knows best, Luke."

"I'm okay enough to go to school."

"You can sit there as well as home." Micah turned to Hannah. "With only two of us we need an early start."

"After church," Ruth said.

Micah twisted around to face the other tables. "Anyone know if Reverend's on sugaring schedule yet?"

During sugaring time in the late winter and early spring and harvest season in late summer and through the fall, Reverend Thomas Charnock, pastor of the First Church of Thebesford, scheduled an extra Sunday service at 6:00 AM for those forced to labor on the Lord's Day by the vagaries of nature. Reverend Charnock also adjusted for the

various hunting seasons by adding a Saturday evening service. In the valley and in the mountains, hunting was but another form of the harvest.

“I’ll call,” Sam Perley shouted from the kitchen.

Sam Perley descended from Jefferson Perley who started a factory to manufacture sugaring equipment where Ruth Gendron's great great grandfather, Noah Soule, apprenticed himself as a tinsmith cutting patterns to flue-bottom sap pans and then to the tin pitchers that held the hydrometers. Ruth still had a Perley hydrometer that Jefferson had given Noah when the bank, a bank from Boston whose auditors still worried about the money it lost financing the New Bedford and Nantucket whaling fleets after oil was discovered in Pennsylvania, closed the factory one season when the cold lasted into early May and the sap didn’t run. May you choke on cane syrup, Jefferson cursed the bankers as they dismantled the factory and sold the tin for scrap. Old timers in the valley still used Jefferson's epithet as a curse.

Micah never used the Perley hydrometer. He didn't believe in mixing science and sugaring. He had tasted the maple syrup produced by flatlanders with their hydrometers or hydrotherms and it tasted no better than his. While they measured against the Brix Scale, he preferred to watch how the syrup aproned off a wooden paddle. He envied men like Jefferson Perley and Noah Soule who, according to legend, could identify by taste the stand of maples from which the syrup had come, whether the trees were young or old, whether the sugarbush was in a valley or on the southern side of the mountain. Micah had tried to instruct Luke in the old ways, but the lessons passed through him like lemonade on a hot August day. Since World War II, teenage boys like Luke saw military service as the best way out of the valley. Most enlisted in the army because it was the

least selective, but Luke, enchanted by white gloves, silver sabers, and a slogan that promised he'd be one of the few and the proud, had set his heart on the Marines. Someday, Micah hoped, wherever Luke might live, whatever he might do, he would understand the value of the old ways. If more people did, Sam Perley would be running Jefferson's factory rather than tending Tony Natili's pizza oven.

Sam leaned into the opening from the kitchen to the dining room. "Reverend reads the weather same as you, Micah. He's breaking trail tomorrow."

The next morning, Hannah Gendron blew rings with her frozen breath as her cross-country skis skimmed across early spring's corn snow. Her father had rented two dray horses from Caleb Hoag and had gone ahead to break trail to the sugar house. She followed beside the hoof prints. Back at the trailer, Ruth boiled water to sterilize the tomato cans they hung from their taps to collect sap. Many of their neighbors used sap buckets of galvanized steel, fifteen or eighteen quart capacity; some preferred polyethylene buckets; and a few, usually people whose valley homes were second homes, sap bags. Micah used twenty pound tomato cans salvaged from Tony Natili's by Sam Perley and bartered to him for a gallon of sap tea.

After Micah completed one loop from the trailer to the sugar house and back, he figured he would harness the horses to a sled and make another loop to cut runner marks into the trail. If the horses cooperated, he could break both the lower trail and upper trail in one day and save a day's rental.

Sugaring was hard work, as hard as any chores Micah or Ruth assigned to Hannah and Luke, but they knew it would provide their children some of the sweetest memories

of their childhoods, especially the sugar-on-snow parties that celebrated the boiling off of the season's first quart of maple syrup. Ruth would heat the syrup until it foamed to thicken it, then carry a quart to a corner of the meadow where the snow was still pure. Hannah followed with a jug of last fall's apple cider and Luke with donuts, plain rather than sugared or powdered or cinnamon because all the sweetness they would need came from the syrup. With the flat of their hands, Hannah and Luke smoothed a patch of snow, flattened it and packed it into a receptacle for the hot maple syrup. Pouring, Ruth created golden designs in the white snow, circles and stars and suns with rays radiating from the center. The longest time of childhood, longer than waiting for everyone to awaken on Christmas morning, was the few seconds it took for the syrup to cool so Hannah and Luke could twist it around their fingers, sucking them as if they were maple lollipops.

Hannah caught up to her father at the sugar house where he was stacking firewood for boiling off the sap. "With Luke laid up," Micah said, "maybe we should break trail as we haul."

Hannah patted the horses and offered them some sugar cubes.

"I wouldn't if I thought they couldn't, Hannah."

"I know, Dad." Hannah draped her arm around a black gelding Hoag had named Ruby Tuesday. "Dad. Is Luke going to have to go to war?"

Micah paused, a split of firewood in each hand. "Because of his wound, the Marines won't take him."

"Soigner said he'll heal up."

"Except for his limp."

“You were a Marine.” Hannah spoke softly as if she were trying to calm a skittish horse. “Mom showed me and Luke your medals. You were a hero.”

Only in the newspapers, Micah thought; but the loved ones of six dead Marines knew better. He had made a point of telling them. “Saved two, lost six, Hannah. That makes me a hero with a losing record.”

Hannah removed her gloves and combed Ruby Tuesday’s mane with her fingers, tugging gently to untangle the snarls and knots. “I don’t remember Luke not wanting to be a Marine,” she said as she braided Ruby Tuesday’s mane.

“Since he learned how to spell the word.”

“Luke doesn’t recall the gun going off when he fell.”

“He should thank God he don’t. Otherwise, he’d be blaming himself.”

“He said he was standing, sighting a squirrel, when he was shot.”

Micah nudged Hannah away from Ruby Tuesday. “We can’t slow down the sun.”

“Standing still, Dad.”

“I was up the trail, Hannah. I heard a shot and saw Luke sprawled over his gun. His mind’s helping him forget so he won’t be afraid to go hunting again. Please, Hannah. We have a lot to do before dark.”

Micah watched her beside the hoof prints of the horses until her bright orange vest disappeared from sight. Maybe Ruth was right. Maybe they should send Hannah to live with Uncle Dom in the city, accept the scholarship to the parochial high school where he taught. Hannah would thrive outside the valley because she would be wise enough to take the valley with her. She understood the truth of the changing of the seasons, the truth of sugaring time, the truth of the meadow grass dying so the deer may live, the deer

dying so the hunter may live, the hunter dying so the mountain may live. Uncle Dom had invited Luke as well. Luke would struggle there because he would flee the valley, reject it rather than take it with him. Micah patted Ruby Tuesday on her haunches. He didn't realize it, but he was not thinking these words. He was talking them, talking to the horses as if they were confidants. Or confessors. As if they could absolve him. His voice calmed the horses and they rested, at ease, eyeing him with the serenity a horse feels in the presence of a man who posed no danger.

When Hannah gets older, Micah told the horses, becomes a mother herself, then a grandmother, she still won't understand. Unless she has her own Jamie Drayton. Maybe, then, she'll appreciate how the Jamie Draytons stick with you no matter how many years pass. Maybe then she'll understand the lesson of baby Moses. Maybe then she will forgive him. Ruby Tuesday nuzzled Micah and the horse's hot breath warmed his cheek. The maples were beginning to weep their sap. It would be a good sugaring season. The war would pass. Luke would heal. There were other ways out of the valley.

When Micah returned to the trailer, Ruth was in the yard washing the metal filters. Set in the gathering tank, the cone-shaped filters strained out the bark and leaves and other debris that dropped into the buckets as they hung from the taps. Ruth cleaned them twice yearly, once at the beginning of sugaring time, again at the end.

"I can taste the sap tea already," Micah said.

During the hours of sap boiling, marking time tending the fire, watching and waiting, talking and sniffing, Ruth would scoop cups of boiling sap and steep tea bags in the maple broth to make sap tea. They would sit on logs outside the sugar house, Micah,

Ruth, the children, any of the neighbors up or down the mountain who dropped by, using upside-down buckets as tea tables, drinking the tea and passing the time with story telling contests, the most outrageous story teller getting first dibs at pouring the season's syrup on a stack of hotcakes. Caleb Hoag, as predictable as the vernal equinox, would be there suffering from his annual change of season cold. Caleb didn't believe in aspirins or cold pills, but swore that the pungent steam rising from the boiling maple sap cleared his sinuses and drove the cold from his system. Maple steam didn't work for Micah, but then his grandmother's recipe for fresh ground horseradish didn't work for Caleb.

"Luke says you shot him," Ruth said, hugging a filter to her chest.

"It's a truth of war, Ruth. Young men fight. Young men die."

"You came back from Desert Storm. Your dad from Vietnam. My grandfather from Korea. Yours from the Bastogne."

"There's a stone on the town common full of the names of boys who didn't. I don't want them reading Luke's name off that stone every Memorial Day."

"So you shot him?"

Micah took the filter from Ruth and set it aside. The wind had reddened her cheeks, dried her lips, made her eyes tear. He adjusted her stocking cap to cover her ears, then put his arms around her and rubbed her back. "Now I understand," she said, "how Jochebed felt when she put baby Moses in the basket and set him afloat on the Nile."

The night after Recruitment Day was dark and starless. In the sugar house, the only light was the orange glow of the fire, too dim to read or play cards. There was no bed for sleeping, no radio for listening, nothing to do but think and dream and tend to the

fire, stoking it through the arch's grate, and watch over the evaporators, monitoring the float valves so the pans would not overflow, keeping the drain-off point open so boiled sap would not back up. Luke had healed enough to balance himself beside the evaporator pan and skim the foam off the boiling sap with a long-handled skimmer. The curve of the skimmer had a sieve, its holes large enough to let boiling sap pass but small enough to catch the sugar sand that rose to the top of the boil. Luke maneuvered the skimmer along the surface of the boiling sap as if it were an oar, flinging the foam into a washtub set beside the pan. Every hour or so, he tossed a dab of butter into the sap, breaking the surface tension to prevent a boil-over. When he was twelve, Luke had suffered a boil-over when the foam suddenly surged as if a volcano had erupted from the bottom of the evaporator and waves of sap overflowed the pan, scalding him through his clothes. Luke still had burn scars on his arms and chest. Micah handled the other chores.

The boiling sap bubbled, not as violently as boiling water, but just as hypnotizing. Its gurgling was muted, its aroma intoxicating. Thebesford Regional Consolidated High School taught the history of sugaring in the ninth grade, the only course Micah had aced. Years before the birth of Christ, Virgil had written of a sweet syrup that emerged from the trees of the forest. In 1521, Peter Martyr wrote about honey found in the trees. The Algonquin Indians named maple sugar *Sinzibuckwud*, 'drawn from the wood', the Ojibways spoke of *Sheesheegummawis*, 'sap flows fast', the Cree of *Sisibaskwatattik* and *Sisibaskwat*, words that existed in Indian languages before the first Europeans visited the new world. Early settlers spoke of 'Indian melasses' and 'Indian sugar'. According to Walt Whitman, Indians referred to sugaring season as the month of the maple moon. Micah immersed himself in this history, as did Ruth, as did Hannah, but for Luke it was

just another of the many classes that wasted his time when he should have been learning things useful to a United States Marine.

Luke leaned the skimmer against the side of the evaporator pan. “You were wrong what you did.”

Micah added several splits of wood to the fire, igniting them with a bellows. In the flame’s flare, he saw that Luke held a rifle rather than the skimmer.

“Put it down, son.”

“The Marines won’t take me. Army neither. I never had the eyes for the Air Force or the stomach for the Navy or Coast Guard.”

“You can go live with Uncle Dom in the city. You and Hannah. Go to school where he teaches.”

“It’s not the Marines.” Luke gestured at the door of the sugar house and ordered Micah to open it. “To the tree line.” When Micah reached the edge of the clearing, Luke retreated into the sugar house, kicking the door shut and barring it with the barrel of the rifle. Micah rushed the door, beating on it, kicking it, butting it with his shoulder. The corners of the door gave slightly, opening enough so the aroma of boiling sap sweetened the air, but Micah could not break down the door or dislodge the rifle. His grandfather had built the sugar house right, reinforcing the walls and roof with crossbeams, using milled planks rather than odd scraps of wood. Micah scouted the clearing searching for a rock and spied a large one at the edge of the tree line. He brushed off the snow and dug it out. It was heavy, but not so heavy that he could not lift it over his head and smash the door with it. By the time he reached the sugar house, the wood, hot to the touch, was beginning to blacken. Tongues of fire erupted from the fissures between the planks.

Micah tried to smother the flames with his jacket, douse them with snow, but the fire outlasted him.

On the night of Luke Gendron 's funeral, thick mud rutted by the passage of pick-up trucks, four wheel drive vehicles, and horse drawn wagons, one of them serving as Luke's hearse, layered each of the four roads that converged on the town common. As the people of the valley gathered in the vestibule of the First Church of Thebesford to clean their boots before entering the sanctuary, they talked of Luke's death, speculating on whether it was accidental or not; then, when the Gendrons arrived, changing the subject to the coming planting season, calves born over the winter, storm damage to barns, erosion from the early spring melts. Micah, Ruth and Hannah sat in their customary pew waiting for Reverend Charnock to begin the service. Ruth's brother, Father Dominic, sat in Luke's place. The other seats in the pew remained vacant and Micah knew without turning around that the people who usually occupied them, Rexford Castleton, his wife Joanne, their three children, Joanne's mother Serita Klarner, Rexford's father Wiley, now sat in the rear of the church. He felt the eyes of the congregation on the back of his neck and wished the church were empty.

The congregation hushed as Reverend Charnock approached the lectern and climbed atop the box he used so he could see the congregation over the reading light. His white hair glowed against the dark pewter color of the church's pipe organ. He made the sign of the cross over Luke 's coffin.

"Let us pray for the soul of Luke Gendron."

Words that had been so comforting to Micah when they buried his parents, when they buried Ruth's parents, words praising God, words of resurrection and heavenly paradise, words of the immortality of the soul, now mocked him.

As the funeral service continued, a cold front from Canada descended on Thebesford County, blanketing the mountains and settling into the valley. The cold froze solid the ruts of early evening and the ride home would be slow, hard. Axels would break, front ends misalign. A horse would shatter an ankle and have to be put to rest. Bitter and unseasonable, the cold would linger beyond the time allotted to it by the calendar. It would freeze the sap inside the trees and stop the maples' weeping. Because of the cold, the plumes of smoke rising from the ashes of the sugar house would rise as still and straight as frozen ropes hanging down from heaven.

After Hannah had moved out of the valley, returning only at Christmas to visit her parents, then, finally, to bury them, the grandsons of Caleb Hoag and the other old valley clans, now grandfathers themselves, would gather at sugaring time in one sugar house or another to sip mugs of sap tea. As the sap boiled off in the evaporators, someone would reminisce, a different person every year, how in the sugaring season of the year of Luke Gendron's death the valley had choked on cane syrup, and the men, staring into their mugs or at their feet, would nod in agreement.

The End

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