

A Trip to the Sugarhouse by Amy S. White

Uncle Donald is, as always, wearing a blue-and-white-pinstriped engineer's cap and a plaid flannel jacket like the farmer that he is. When five-year-old me asks, "Is it a very far walk?" he smiles down at me and in a heavy Vermont accent gives his usual reply, "Yep. Nope. Dunno. Whutevah." I'm not satisfied, but I grab his hand anyway and we head outside.

Since it is sugaring season, my parents have brought me and my little sister, Katy, to visit "The Farm" for the weekend. My mother and Katy, who is only two, will stay in the cozy farmhouse with Aunt Madeline, helping to prepare supper. The rest of us are gathered just outside wearing hats, gloves and snow boots. The calendar says early spring but it's Greensboro, a town too small to be on the map, situated near Lake Champlain in the Northeast Kingdom. It's still very cold and a mix of deep snow and mud covers the hard ground.

The sugarhouse is a decent ways away, but a path has been trodden through the thick woods, and we have decided to hike. I'm snuggled into my parka and I have on red rubber boots, which my father calls "rubbers." They have an elastic that connects two buttons which keep the boots tight around my calf, but they are too tight and keep pinching me. I complain to my father, but he wants me to be tough, so he encourages me to keep walking. As I do, I count the dull gray metal buckets that hang on the countless sugar maples and look for sap dripping into them from the tap. It doesn't take long for me to lose track. My nose is running and my cheeks are numb with cold, but my mittened hand is warm inside Uncle Donald's. Still, the boots are creating button-shaped marks on my legs, and eventually I ask Uncle Donald to carry me. He's a softie, and scoops me up, happily carting me the rest of the way.

The tang of burning wood mingled with the scent of something sweet intensifies as we walk, and I catch sight of steam and chimney smoke clouding the sky well before I can see the building itself. Uncle Donald's two sons are all grown up and following in their father's footsteps; they've been here working since early morning. Chilled to the bone, we finally reach the small log shack. As we open the door, a wall of hot maple-scented steam immediately leaves a layer of wetness on my ruddy cheeks and slickens the concrete floor. The smell reminds me of breakfast and makes my belly growl with longing.

There are large rectangular vats made of stainless steel that are pumping this steam into the air as the sap boils inside them and begins to evaporate. Uncle Donald places a stool near one of these vats so I can see the bubbling brown liquid inside. He tries to explain how forty gallons of sap turns into one gallon of syrup by telling me that, as the water evaporates, the sap darkens and thickens from something he calls "caramelization." I can't quite comprehend the numbers, but since I know what caramels are, I think I understand what's happening. He asks if I want a taste. I nod and exclaim, "Yes, please!" as if I've never tried it before. He pours a dainty amount into a tasting cup and hands it to me. I take it in both hands, sip the sweet warm amber syrup just freshly made, and think I've never tasted anything so wonderful.