

Sugaring Time!

- Beth Sutton

Old Maple stood tall in the last rays of the setting sun. With her leafless branches stretched wide to the winter sky, she drank in the gold and pink and blazing red lights of dusk. This she had done at the end of each short winter day, but today something was different. Old Maple listened closely.

Old Maple listened to the creaky barn doors pulled open. She listened to the clip clop of the horses being led back into the barn. She listened to the polishing and oiling of harnesses and hauling sleds, readying for tomorrow's work.

Old Maple listened closely.

Soon she heard the whispered song of East Wind as he played hide and seek through the wood. She felt his warm breath brush lightly around her trunk and glide under each bare branch. He came with a whisper and stayed only for a moment, but Old Maple felt him. Old Maple heard his song. For more than forty winters Old Maple had listened to these sounds. Yes, Old Maple knew what lay ahead: sweet-water time was near.

Old Maple sighed deeply. Old Maple held very still. Old Maple listened closely. In the distance she heard North Wind, with his icy breath, begin to howl and roar toward her. All around her the forest creatures ran to their burrows; small trees shivered and held tight with their roots. But Old Maple stood tall. She stretched wide and whispered to the Frost Children who lay in their white blankets along her every limb, "Hold tight little ones, North Wind blows hard tonight. He, too, has heard the East Wind whisper down the lane, and he knows the root children will need their rest tonight. They must awaken bright and shiny and begin their work. So tonight North Wind will howl loud and cold to keep the root children safely in their beds."

She looked down and whispered to the Root Children, "Sleep tight, little ones, for your rest is almost over. North Wind howls his song now, but East Wind has whispered of what lies ahead." And the Root Children snuggled tight, safe and warm in their maple-root beds, below the earth. Old Maple sang to them:

*"Sleep, Root Children, 'neath North Wind's roar,
And rest your weary eyes.
Frost Children at the dawn will play,
And then you must arise."*

Old Maple tucked everyone in tight and readied herself for North Wind's icy visit. Over the years she had seen that it was North Wind who brought the Frost Children to snuggle tightly around her boughs. And it was North Wind who sent the Root

Children to their winter rest, that they might awaken with the sweetness of a long night's sleep. And it was North Wind who blew the snow clouds away and let the bright winter stars shine clear in the night sky. Yes, forty years had taught Old Maple a lot. Old Maple settled back to rest as North Wind's wild songs and the brightly shining stars eased her to sleep. All night long under the crisp, clear, black, starry sky, Old Maple listened to the deep howling and wailing tones of North Wind's song.

The Root Children slept in their maple-root beds. And the Frost Children held tightly to each bough. Old Maple sang softly to her little ones:

*"Sleep, Root Children, 'neath North Wind's roar,
And rest your weary eyes.
Frost Children at the dawn will play,
And then you must arise."*

Before she knew it, Old Maple was awakened by a soft silence filling the wood, and the sweet scent of East Wind's dance. North Wind was nowhere to be heard, but East Wind sang freely as he danced through the wood. Old Maple stretched her limbs to the colors of dawn. She drank in the golds and pinks and blazing reds. And then she called out to the Frost Children along her limbs, "Wake up! Wake up! East Wind is in the wood. Slip and slide, dance and play, East Wind is in the wood!" The Frost Children woke up and sparkled in the colored lights of dawn. They began to slip and slide and dance and play, until they left every branch of Old Maple standing bare, drinking in the early morning light.

Now Old Maple called to the Root Children, "Arise! Arise! East Wind is in the wood. Leap and jump! Leap and jump! East Wind is in the wood!" The Root Children, who had been sleeping for so many months now, yawned and stretched in their tight little root beds. They listened to East Wind's song and they knew their time had come. Sleepily, each root child picked up her hand-carved bucket and filled it with sweet-water from deep inside the roots.

"Hurry, hurry!" called the Frost Children as they skipped and danced and sparkled across the snow-covered land. "Your time is short, Root Children. Haul the sweet-water up Old Maple and the festival may begin."

No sooner had the Root Children begun to haul the sweet-water up Old Maple's trunk, than Old Maple heard the creaky wooden doors of the barn swing open. She heard the people, her people, call out to the horses, "Step quickly. Step light. It's sugaring time. Yes, it's sugaring time." The people loaded their great buckets onto the sled. The horses pulled it, creaking and squeaking over the icy sugar snow. As they rode out across the snow they, too, sang out to the Root Children: