Old Man LaFlamme

He woke up slow, like a winter bird. Gone were the days when the alarm clock called him to a day filled with demands and duties.

The window stood open a crack to the crisp, dewy air. Through it, dawn snuck like old age, cold and merciless. The thrum and whine of early-morning traffic accompanied the nudging light: a truck with a flagging muffler, a compact car, sewing machine engine laboring uphill.

Still for a moment, then a trespassing breeze lent a whisper to the lacey yellowed curtains.

The house crowned a small rise, timeworn brick, shutters weathered gray, with patches of white. An aluminum-sided porch stared out at the road through big windows in loose metal frames. Come winter, the snow would blow through those frames and accumulate in fine drifts on the indoor-outdoor carpet.

Two ancient butternut trees watched over the front lawn. The grass had only recently turned brown. Gusts had gathered fallen leaves into ever-shifting piles.

The old man stirred, half aware in the retreating gloom. With eyes closed, he lay somewhere between waking and a dream.

He tried to forget, to wriggle free, but he knew the light brought a day he'd been dreading. He let his mind stray, escaping the awful events to come.

A cold rain had come in the night, and the scent of autumn leaves summoned a memory. As another year died, the old man lay in bed as the smells and sounds of a distant time returned vividly, a time when he was young and full of marvelous potential. Then, the air had borne a wet, earthy scent not unlike the one now chaperoning the dawn.

The year was 1933. He had been staying with his uncle and cousins on the farm in West Topsham. His uncle awoke the clan long before sunrise. Breakfast was biscuits and Canadian bacon, apple pie with cheddar cheese, and coffee from a huge pot that stayed on the stove all day, always full and always fresh. Old Man LaFlamme remembered that old pot and the aroma of coffee, steaming and strong. He let the smell come real, along with the memory. He was there.

The house was abuzz, everyone up and talking at once. After breakfast, all the men and boys trekked out to the barn.

“Come along, Emil.” Old Man LaFlamme heard his Uncle Arnold's voice calling to him as the recollection quickened: “Get those horses hitched up quick. Day's a-wastin'!”

He'd been only twelve at the time. His efforts to hitch the great Shire horses amounted to little more than bluster and blister. Ted and Ferdinand came first, then Alicia and Denise. The mares weighed more then fifteen-hundred pounds each, but the stallions were even bigger, weighing nearly a ton. Little Emil could barely reach their shoulders. The horses had known what awaited them that day, and they weren't eager. He struggled to strap on the yokes; in the end, his cousins had to help after they'd finished their own tasks.

Arnold Lumbre was Emil's uncle on his mother's side. He was a big man with strong, freckled hands. His cheeks always appeared ruddy, and his eyes beamed when he grinned. Old Man LaFlamme remembered his uncle's laugh, echoing through the dark woods, and he heard again the harness bells and the schuss-schuss of sled runners gliding over wet snow.

Old Man LaFlamme

They set out that morning a happy crew, if still a little sleepy and cold. Emil's cousins were Arnold Junior, Corey, and Robby. Then came Ted—Tederic when he was in trouble. Arnold Junior was the oldest. Corey and Robby were in their teens. Ted was Emil's age.

They marched across the mountain's incline. They hiked through pine, spruce, cedar, and birch trees to a stand of hardwood on the north side. As they trooped along an old logging road—now just a depression in the snow with bare saplings poking through—they recognized a few venerable granite foundations; high, bare stone showed through in places. Emil remembered an old cemetery in those woods—he'd been there with his cousins in the summertime—but just then, with snow all about, he wasn't sure where it was.

Finally, the band arrived. Set in the vale was the sugar shack. Leaving with a rowdy, "Let's get after it!" Uncle Arnold stomped downhill to kindle the fires while the boys gathered sap. The sugar bush stood among oaks and white birches, elm, and a few aged apple trees. Interspersed evergreens kept the early spring sun from melting all of winter's snow. It lay deep in places, thinly crusted over. As boots and hooves crushed through, the faint smell of musty autumn leaves wafted up.

The cousins snatched big buckets from the sled and made their way from maple tree to maple tree, emptying the pails that hung from the taps. When their buckets were full, they slogged to the sled and emptied them into the tank. Then back they tramped to gather more sap. It wasn't long before Emil was warm from the exertion, his breath puffing in great clouds. As they worked their way through the maples, they worked slowly but steadily down the mountain toward the sugar shack. The horses faithfully hauled the sled to Arnold Junior whenever he called, keeping it as handy as the trail would allow.

The light was ash-gray and cloudy when they began gathering sap. As soon as Uncle Arnold set tack for the hollow, the woods awoke with the shouts of the boys and the crunchy cracking of tall winter boots through crusted snow. The light grew steadily as they worked, but no one noticed it until the tank was nearly full and it was time to empty it at the shack.

"You boys been havin' a little too much fun up there, I think!" Uncle Arnold teased as Emil and Ted burst into the shack. "They could probably hear the hoorah all the way in town, yellin' and laughing and fallin' in the snow!" Uncle Arnold's smirking face glowed in the firelight.

Old Man LaFlamme recalled clearly; his uncle had sported a thick-wool work shirt, brown and gray plaid, and dark gray wool pants. Arnold Junior, Corey, and Robby had stayed outside, pumping the sap into the bulky metal tank set on stilts outside the sugar shack. Inside, a rousing blaze crackled and popped under the big evaporator trough. Sap flowed slowly into the trough. After a few moments, mapley steam filled the shack, heavy and sweet. Uncle Arnold trotted outside and returned straightaway with a wooden crate. Packed carefully inside were eggs, a big loaf of fine white bread, and a pot of fresh butter. He cracked several eggs into the boiling sap and broke chunks of near-frozen butter onto thick slices of bread.

"You boys be needin' some lunch," he said, scooping the poached eggs onto the bread. Little Emil bit in, and his mouth filled with a marvelous and unforgettable flavor. The shack was warm and comforting.

Lying in bed, he returned, no longer little Emil, but once again achy and stiff Old Man LaFlamme. He smacked his mouth several times, running his tongue over his teeth. He could taste that poached egg sandwich and smell the maple steam as it rose from the sugar trough.

The wall-mounted phone on the first floor rang, metal ringer against metal bells. The old man opened his eyes. He waited a few moments, silent, clutching the blanket, then the cell phone his son had given him chimed in, electronic notes, When the Saints Come Marching In. After a few bars, it stopped as well.

With a sigh, Emil swung his thin, pale legs out from under the covers. He tucked his feet into slippers, gathered his off-white and timeworn terrycloth bathrobe, and shut the window. He had to jiggle it a little to get it to close right: The sills had been painted so many times the window fit too tight in spots, yet let the cold wind whistle through in others. He threw the latch and trudged down to the bathroom on the first floor.

At the stove, he turned the fire on under his stainless steel coffee pot and tossed in a couple of scoops of Maxwell House. While the coffee brewed, he worked his way back upstairs and selected his apparel for the day, brownish-gray cotton pants—tight at the waist and loose in the seat—and a red-and-black checked, flannel work shirt.

Downstairs once more, he relished the smell of coffee that filled the kitchen. Uncle Arnold and the sugaring trip lived again in his mind. Emil's grandfather used to tell how the colonies had relied upon maple sugar before anyone grew sugarcane in America. Emil shook his head, wondering at how well the land had supported his ancestors, and then he poured some coffee—no longer quite so fresh—into his favorite mug. He carried it onto the front porch, through the heavy front door that had once, before the porch had been added, opened directly onto simple concrete steps. He plunked himself into a cracked and creaking easy chair and looked down twenty or so mower-pushing yards, to old Route 110. The day hadn't warmed up much, with the sun yet to crest the hill of waste granite a couple of hundred feet up the road.

Old Man LaFlamme lived just south and east of Upper Graniteville, where Route 64 meets Route 110, Main Street, and South Road, respectively. Like its owner, the farmhouse was a local landmark, a fixture in the community. Twenty acres was all that was left of the original spread. Most of the land lay behind the house, with only three or four acres fronting the road. At regular intervals, temporary survey flags fluttered, tiny yellow triangles with red symbols. A flaky rusted barbwire fence surrounded most of the lot. Once, the LaFlammes had farmed the land. The old outbuildings endured: a gray barn sporting a few traces of red paint and a long, mostly yellow shed that had served as garage, milk house, chicken coop, and all-around storage area.

The huge old shed housed many abandoned treasures. It was the last resting place of several pieces of once crucial machinery: chain saws, band saws, and circular saws; two huge freezers, long since unplugged; and four or five milkers, the kind that connected directly to the cow's teats with a small tank that hung just off the ground. The shed was two full stories. Upstairs was the chicken coop and more bric-a-brac. No chickens occupied the coop anymore. Boxes and barrels of dear objects—old clothes and sporting equipment, broken gadgets, and photo albums—hadn't been pawed over in years.

The barn had a little leftover hay, dry and dusty. The cow stalls were empty. Outside, a small area that had once fenced in ducks or geese appeared lonely.

Tall grass, weeds, and brush withered where once a large garden had grown. Where the driveway forked, a small triangle had been tilled, but only dead flower stalks and windblown leaves remained.

A car passed, heading north and east to Upper Graniteville. The old man waved. He didn't know who was driving the car, not this time, but he always waved, and—mostly—folks waved back.

He was a well-known character thereabouts—friendly, if often confused, Old Man LaFlamme.

Old Man LaFlamme

He finished his coffee, shuffled inside, and fixed a simple breakfast. No radio played; no television droned. A grandfather clock tick, tick, ticking in the living room was the only sound. That, and an occasional creak or pop as the house settled.

On the table lay the cell phone. Emil Junior had bought it, "In case of emergency," he'd said. The old man picked it up as though it were a dripping newspaper. Then, he pressed the button that would retrieve the message, just as his son had shown him. But he didn't pay attention as the voice prattled on. ". . . all packed and ready." It was one of his daughters. ". . . sometime after lunch." Old Man LaFlamme heard, but he wasn't listening. With the message still playing, he held the phone at arm's length for an instant, and then he turned the damned thing off, right in the middle of a sentence.

Outside again, he sipped reconstituted orange juice. Not wanting to dirty a dish without need, he rinsed out his coffee mug and used it again. He would eat his chicken noodle soup from that same mug at lunchtime—just as he had done yesterday and the day before.

He waved at a few more cars and sat thinking. A few leaves swirled in a gust. Gonna snow here 'fore long, he said to himself. He watched the leaves, settling in a pile for a moment, only to take off again. The old man remembered a similar pile of leaves, on a similar day, when the wind had kicked up just so.

It was 1942. He had enlisted to fight the Germans or the Japanese, he hadn't cared which. Before he left, he planned a deer hunt. Together with his cousin Ted and a friend named Chuck, Emil scouted all summer. They were sure they'd picked a likely spot. Emil had gotten a new rifle from his father and he was eager to put it to the test.

Before hunting season, they lugged lumber and tools up into Indian Wells, a piece of forest and meadowland in north Orange County. They built tree stands with rifle rests and room to stow their gear. It was Emil's last vacation before packing off to boot camp.

Hunting season blew in and with it, enough snow for easy tracking. The three young men had met the night before at Emil's house, it being the closest to Indians Wells. They awoke at three o'clock and rode the old farm truck until the roads ended, then hiked the rest of the way in. By 4:30 a.m., they were in their stands, waiting for the deer to withdraw from a night's feeding in the distant cornfields below. The stands were about twenty feet above the ground and more than a couple of hundred feet apart atop one of the wooded rolling hills. The platforms had been rough and rickety, but there was enough room to hunker. And they had added a place to stow their packs, which contained their lunches and other essentials. After constructing these rigs, they had thinned the branches to open up shooting lanes.

It was gloaming, morning dismissing the night, and Emil couldn't see much. The clouds roiled in low and dark, the hiding sun just kissing their edges. Looking down at the meadow through the shooting lane, he was sure he saw four-legged shapes meandering their way uphill—right toward his stand.

They had hunted for more than sport back then. Because of the war, meat was precious. A hundred pounds of venison would be welcome at home, and Emil wanted to collect on the time and effort that he had invested over the summer and autumn in scouting and preparing the stands.

As he watched the deer coming up through the meadow, his heart sped. The deer traipsed closer. First three does, then two more followed by at least one big buck. Emil squinted: four, no five, points on a side, a ten-pointer, and a big one at that. He knew more would come; deer travel in small bands. If his partners could just wait, they all might "tag out" right then!

His breathing quickened. He snuggled his rifle to his shoulder and eased the safety off. Sure enough, behind the first group, another straggled into the meadow. He could see better now, as the day inevitably, if slowly, brightened. Four does followed by two more bucks. One was a spike horn. Probably a yearling, he thought. But the other looks to be good-sized. Figuring that one or both of his partners would target the first buck, Emil sighted in on the larger of the other two, still at least two hundred yards away, about a quarter of the way into the meadow.

Just then, he heard a loud snap, like a large limb breaking, then an ear-splitting shot. Like rapid fire, he heard more limbs breaking, then someone groaning. He'd snapped his head to the right at the first sound, but as he looked back down the hill, he caught the not-so-distant shapes of the deer dashing away to his left.

"Damn!" he cursed aloud. Then, "Tederic, was that you?"

"Yeah, oh God! Get down here."

Emil put his rifle on safety, opened the bolt, and plucked out the shell. Then he slung the rifle and clambered down the makeshift ladder.

Emil's friend, Chuck, had heard the same commotion. It wasn't long before the two young men were standing at the foot of the tree that Ted had chosen for the day.

Tederic lay on the ground, one leg bent unnaturally beneath him.

"What happened?" Emil asked.

"I saw them deer comin'," Ted answered between clenched teeth. He didn't want his friends to know that he was in pain, or at least he didn't want them to think he couldn't bear it. "Three doe—and a big buck followin' 'em. I had a good shot—uh, that smarts!—and I laid my left hand on the butt, you know, just to kind-a steady the rifle as I squeezed. The gun rest broke, the rifle went off, and I fell out of the damn tree. I think my leg's broke." Ted chuckled, tears glistening in his eyes. Emil and Chuck laughed then as well, despite Ted's difficulty. They half carried him down out of the woods and carted him off to the hospital.

The old man smiled to himself, staring out at the road. He saw Ted's grimace as clearly as if it were in front of him. Despite the cold fall morning, sweat had formed on Ted's forehead, by then lacking its orange hunting tuque. "Must-a hurt like a bas-tahd," the old man said aloud. "Old Ted was hard put to keep from wailin' or cryin' out—but I guess folks was just tougher in those days." He remembered, Ted had to wait to enlist because of his broken leg.

They hadn't gotten any deer that season.

Reluctantly, Emil surfaced. Ted had passed away—a few years ago was it? Frustrated for a second, the old man looked down at his feet. Maybe it had been more than a few years—but he was sure that Chuck had died fighting in Italy that following year.

Of the big war, Old Man LaFlamme remembered little. He still had his medals: a Distinguished Service Cross for exceptional heroism and a Purple Heart. He didn't think much about those days, what he'd done, what had happened. When he did, he usually struggled to remember anything at all. It was all so distant, so remote, as if it had happened to someone else, someone in a half-forgotten book or movie.

A wayward gust rattled the windows. Emil shivered, looked around for a moment, a little disoriented, and then scuffed his way inside. The afternoon was growing old, and the sun was "westering," as his dad used to say.

He should be packing a bag, he knew, but it was time for a snack. Besides, he had not made up his mind just yet, no matter what his grown-up kids said. Suddenly alert, awake to the time and place, he spared a glance for the kitchen he'd known all his life. Every square inch held a memory.

Old Man LaFlamme

There, that corner, his grandmother had sat and shucked peas, gathering the peas in her starched apron while she watched over Emil and the other children who were too young to help with the outdoor chores. How old had Emil been when she died? Nine? Maybe ten?

He remained transfixed for a moment, then two. His stomach muttered, and he pushed on.

Past the sink, a door led to the cellar. The stairs were uneven, set against the flagstone foundation. He teetered down to the shelves set at the bottom of the landing and selected a jar of plum jam put up years back. Among dust-laden cobwebs, other preserves bided, as did bottles of chokecherry wine he'd made many, many years ago. He glanced only briefly around the cellar, lit with a single, exposed bulb, and then he painfully climbed the creaking wooden stairs again to the kitchen. He put another pot of coffee on and plopped at the kitchen table to eat bread with plum jam.

His mother used to make jam, apple butter, and many other things. His father had sold milk, eggs, hay, and whatever else was in excess or demand at the time. When times had gotten hard, his father had worked off the farm as well, just to make ends meet: lumbering, quarrying granite, or even doing a little carpentry work. People could do all kinds of things in those days, the old man thought. Everyone pitched in. Even when they were too old to lift and toss bales of hay, they were given chores to do that helped them feel productive and useful.

He remembered the night his mother died. Folks had been coming over—dropping off food and helping out around the house—for weeks. They'd said "consumption" at the time, although it was obviously not tuberculosis, but cancer, that had taken his mother. She had grown tired, and even the little tasks had become exhausting. Emil remembered distinctly; she never complained much. Chores piled up, and he and his sisters had done the best they could. More and more, his mother had stayed in bed, getting up later and retiring earlier. The doctor called often at the house, but he didn't know what to do. He tried, and other doctors came as well, but Emil's mother had died in her bed. That had been right after the war.

His father had never gotten over it. Emil inherited the house and the farm after his father had passed away.

A rap came at the back door. Old Man LaFlamme had been looking at the kitchen fireplace. For a moment, his father and sisters had been with him at the kitchen table, but they faded away as the knock came again.

The door opened, and a man in his mid-forties entered.

"Dad? Why didn't you answer the door?"

The old man sat at the table, facing the newcomer, a piece of bread and jam still in one hand.

"Huh? What the hell?"

No light of recognition touched the old man's eyes. Emil Junior tarried for a moment in the small entranceway, what they called the mudroom.

"Dad, it's Emil, your son. I was coming to get you today. Don't you remember? Didn't Jeanette call you? You're coming to live with me and Martha, in Williston—"

"I'm not going anywhere." Old Man LaFlamme remembered well enough. Some weeks ago, his son had come around, saying something about moving out of the old house. He'd said he was Emil Junior then, too—but when he thought of his son, the old man pictured only a boy of about twelve, with a great tousle of curly brown hair. This balding man with a slight paunch was not that boy.

"Dad, we've been through all of this." The younger man shut the door and took a seat at the table, big as life, as if he'd been there a thousand times before. Old Man LaFlamme was confused for a moment. The man's bearing was so confidant, so familiar. Maybe this was his son. What time is it? he wondered, just for a moment, and then the younger man continued. "I've been working all summer and fall putting an addition on the house. You'll have your own room. A new kitchenette. A private bathroom with a shower and tub. There's even a little porch. You can sit and watch the sun set over Lake Champlain. Remember? We talked about this."

The old man didn't reply. He remembered, but he didn't want to.

"Martha is home all the time now. She'll be around to lend a hand when you want, and I don't have to travel as much as before. We'll be a family again. Jeannette and Mary can come over; they're just up in St. Albans. It'll be great, and I won't have to worry about you anymore."

"Can't leave the house. Who's gonna take care of the place?"

"Don't worry about the house, Dad; it'll be fine."

Yes, the old man remembered. He looked around the kitchen. The wind whistled outside. He couldn't say why, but he felt anxious, afraid.

He'd put many a conversation out of his mind. His daughters and his son had come several times during the summer. They were going to sell the old place to some developer! The house his children had been born in, where he'd been born himself, and his father, and his father before him. Sold so they could put up prefabs on the land that had supported the LaFlammes for generations.

He saw again the face of his wife, gone now for more than five years. He remembered his wedding day and the Christmases they'd had under this roof when his children had been small. Why was the past so vivid and the present so vague, so uncertain and unpleasant?

His son kept talking, first pouring them cups of coffee—to the old man's chagrin, he selected a fresh mug from the cupboard for his father. Then Emil Junior walked around the house, picking objects up and setting them back down.

"Look. I know you don't want to leave the old place," Emil Junior mumbled, returning to the table. "God knows you taught us to respect the past and our traditions, but you can't stay alone anymore. You're not taking good care of yourself." To the old man, his son seemed distressed, as if he were fighting off tears. "It's not as though we're sending you to a nursing home—" the younger man trailed off. Emil Junior continued to pace about, thinking that his choices were few, none of them good. After a while, he went upstairs to pack his father a bag.

Old Man LaFlamme rested his elbows on the kitchen table. His eyes sought comfort at the fireplace, at the dirty dishes in the familiar sink, and out the small kitchen window at the failing autumn light. What could he do? He'd have to go and live with his son in the new addition. While the younger man was still rattling around upstairs, the old man wondered who would keep the house and lands up. Who would keep the memories alive? What would happen to all his things? Who would do the dishes?

"Emil," he heard his wife's sweet voice, clear as day. "Aren't you coming to bed? It's been a long day."

"I'll be along soon, Honey," he said under his breath. His gnarled hand absently rubbed his stubbly checks and the tick, ticking of the clock in the living room seemed loud in his ears. "Just got a few more chores to do. . . . Then I'll be right along."