

The silverleaf tree.

ONCE UPON a time there was a little boy named Codell who lived in a big yellow house in a big city called Detroit with his father, his mother and his baby brother Winston. One fall afternoon, under a sky blue as a robin's egg, when his father and mother were inside shouting, Codell went out to play in the sandbox under an ancient maple tree, its canopy an inferno of reds, oranges and yellows. Codell plowed Tonka truck roads in circles that led to where they started. He was in an idyllic reverie, freed from time. There was no past; there was no future. All of time was now.

Within his time-free bubble, Codell hummed motor noises and outside sounds faded - the steady, distant purr of the Lodge freeway, the occasional growls of nearby cars, his parents' fighting, his baby brother's crying. Simultaneously, his bubble amplified minute sounds near to him: enigmatic machinations of sand beetles echoed off the sides of the Tonka. Above him, a breeze crinkled the colorful maple leaves.

As the sun coasted east to west, the tree's shadow coasted away from Codell. Sunlight encroached on the sandbox, an eighth, a quarter, a half, three quarters until the sun drenched Codell with light and warmth. The breezes grew to gusts, and the gusts twisted together into a wind. The wind wound up and spun, picking up speed with each revolution. And then the maple leaves snapped off the branches.

Codell looked up. Maple leaves whirled around and above him, faster and faster in a centrifuge with him in the center. Their warm colors turned to silver.

As quickly as it picked up, the wind stopped. The silver leaves, instead of settling to the ground, rose and formed a ladder of steps, each step a broad pad of dozens of leaves, a shiny stairway leading up and out of sight, inviting him to climb to - to where?

Codell gingerly put a foot on the first silverleaf step and pushed. It was stiff. He stood on it with both feet and jumped. It was still stiff. He walked up a few steps and then, where the next step was farther off the ground than he was tall, and because there were no railings, he climbed on his hands and knees. The leaves were firm and shiny.

The sun inexorably westered, turning the silver leaves to gold. He focused on the end point of the golden stairs in the deepening blue sky above him. From the distance below him, he might have heard his parents. It might have been something else, the expressway traffic or the wind or his brother wailing. He did not look down and he did not look back.

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