

Red Maple

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This doesn't make any sense. My head is buzzing. I am flat on my back, gazing up. What happened? I remember rushing down the dorm steps and then, BAM. What the hell? I tripped over the root of a tree that wasn't here this morning. Honest to God. It wasn't here this morning.

I pat my pockets and check my laptop. All good. I pull myself up, run my fingers over the tree trunk, and gaze up. It's gotta be two feet across, I think, with sturdy branches and a large canopy. "It's a maple," I say aloud. We had one like this one in my backyard when I was growing up. At home, the grass was always worn away around the trunk since it served as the foul pole when we played whiffle ball and because we scuffed the dirt where Dad hung a swing.

When I was a kid, my friends and I hammered boards into the trunk so we could climb up and shimmy out the limbs. We dared each other to go higher and higher and knew exactly how far we could crawl out on each limb before it began to sag. With an eight-year-old's understanding of safety, we tied pieces of twine through the belt loops of whichever kid was climbing, figuring that the rest of us could yank him back if the limb suddenly drooped or started to creak. Once, when Dave Wilkens scooted too far, we initiated our safety maneuvers, nearly pulling off his pants when we yanked on the cords. Everything turned out fine, though, and we were certain we had saved his life.

For years, that tree was the magnet that enticed the other neighborhood kids to come and play in my yard. Then, one day after the accident, Dad pulled down the boards and said we couldn't climb anymore. A few months later, he had the tree cut down and hauled away. "Just another tragic accident waiting to happen," he said. "That tree's too dangerous. Bad memories."

I was the only one who knew the accident was no accident. I hated being around Scott. Our moms had been friends in school, though, so when they came for their annual trip to visit her family, I had to play with Scott. One day when I was eleven, Mom announced they would arrive the next day. Every year, I hoped Scott would have changed but he never did. He called me "fatso" and "idiot." He poked me when the moms weren't looking. He threw things at me. He poured dirt on my head when I was climbing the tree behind him. Mom said he was lonely.

The next morning, their minivan arrived and, even while the moms were still in full hug mode, Scott pushed past me and ran out to the tree. "All right!" He climbed faster than any of the rest of us dared. "C'mon, you little chickenshit! Ya gonna join me?" He slid out a branch, grinning and laughing as he bounced up-and-down, waving his arms, pretending he was riding a horse. "You can't do this because you're too fat! See how easy it is? The tree

loves me and hates you!" He inched further and further. "I'm king of the forest!" He raised his arms up high and clapped his hands.

I sighed and put my foot on the first step. As I climbed, I looked up and noticed that Scott's limb was bending. Had it been one of my other friends up there – Dave, for instance – I would have yelled, and we would have pulled on the ropes. I pointed at the branch but couldn't think of what to say. I climbed back down to the ground and thought about getting my mom. "Hey! Dummy! Where ya going? I thought you were coming up!" I watched as he shimmied another couple of inches. "Too scared to join me? Gonna stay down there all day?" With each move, the limb bent a little more. I knew I should warn him but, just then, he extended his arm toward me and slowly raised his middle finger. As he laughed, I gritted my teeth and crossed my arms hard across my chest. I didn't even have to look up. I knew what was going to happen.

I heard him whoop as he bounced one last time. I raised my eyes just as the branch snapped.

Seven years later, I still have a clear image of Scott suspended in space, his eyes wide, his hands grasping at nothing, his legs churning. Even though his mouth is open, he makes no sound. In my memory, he hangs there perpetually flapping in silence.

Time resumed. Scott fell hard, smashing into one limb and then another and then another. He tumbled – spinning and bouncing – landing headfirst, his arms and legs flying out as he slammed into the big root which served as third base. *WHAM! CRACK!* A branch crashed onto him. Leaves and twigs rained down.

Silence. My muscles froze. *What should I do?* Scott moaned. I yelled for my mom and ran toward the house, banged on a window, and then ran back to where he was. "Mom! Oh, Jesus! Mom!" I pulled the branch away and rolled him onto his back. There was a big gash on his forehead and blood was pouring from his nose. His eyes wandered back and forth before finding mine. He said something I couldn't hear. Then he closed his eyes and whispered, "Help! Help me!"

My mom called 9-1-1. I remember Scott's mom wasn't wearing any shoes when she ran into the yard. She knelt down and held onto Scott, getting blood all over her clothes. Once the ambulance arrived, I half-hid behind the tree to watch. It took them a long time to get Scott strapped in and I remember high-pitched sound of the stretcher wheels as they rolled him down the driveway to the ambulance. I climbed up to the lowest branch to watch them pull away, sirens blaring and lights flashing.

The next day, Mom had me sign a get-well card for Scott. We sent another, weeks later, after he left the rehab center and went home. There was a photo in their Christmas letter. "Scotty's slowly improving. Fortunately, he has no memory of that day." The picture showed him in a motorized wheelchair. His smile was crooked, his arms and legs looked like pencils, and there were black braces strapped to his hands and wrists. A bag of pee was hanging at his side and a breathing tube was in his neck. I memorized every detail.

A few days later, my mom came to my room when I was looking at the picture. “Don’t you think it would be good for us to talk about what happened that day?” she asked.

The scene of him flailing in the air, the snapping branches, and the thud when he hit had been playing over-and-over in my head for months. It returned at unexpected moments, both day and night. I tucked the photo into my book and shook my head. “Nah,” I said. “I’m okay.” She never brought it up again.

I still wonder, *Why didn’t I warn him? Does he wish he had died? What did it feel like to fall like that?* I stared holes in that Christmas photograph until it no longer made me shiver. I never asked my mom if she talked to Scott’s mom. I refused to go with when Mom went to visit them.

I brush the dirt off my pants where I fell, sling the backpack over my shoulder, and head from the dorm toward my bike. When I look back, I see a series of small boards nailed into the trunk; a child’s hand- and footholds. I set down my bag and approach the tree while scrolling through selfies I took with my roommate a couple of weeks ago. *Nope. Weird. No tree then.* The root was not there, only a worn patch of grass next to a level section of sidewalk. Now, the sidewalk is buckled where the root, with its cracked and dented surface, has lifted the cement.

The boards appear secure enough. I rest my left foot on the lowest one as I gaze up the trunk, searching the surface for knots and small branches that mark potential routes to the large limbs above. My phone vibrates. “Call home when you have a chance, sweetie,” it reads. “I have some very sad news about Scotty.” I tuck the phone in my pocket and reach up, resting my full weight on the first board. It holds. I cling to the tree and reach up again, transferring my weight to the next step. I rise one board at a time, testing each one as I go. I climb into the welcoming canopy and reach the last board, then swing my leg over and sit astride the limb. The trunk is firm and cool against my back. Noises from campus fall away. Wind rustles the leaves near my cheek, raising the familiar scent of bark. I lean forward and grip the branch with both hands. I carefully examine the size and strength of the limb before me. I edge forward. My phone vibrates again. *I’m no chickenshit*, I say to myself. *I’m no chickenshit.*