

Ours To Discover

by Robert J. Sawyer

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Old man Withers was crazy. Everybody said so, everybody but that boy Eric. "Mr. Withers is an archeologist," Eric would say -- whatever an archeologist might be. Remember that funny blue-and-white sweater Withers found? He claimed he could look at the markings on it and hear the words "Toronto Maple Leafs" in his head. Toronto was the name of our steel-domed city, of course, so I believed that much, but I'd never heard of a maple leaf before. The same maple leaf symbol was in the centre of all those old flags people kept finding in the ruins. Some thought a maple leaf must have been a horrendous beast like a moose or a beaver or a trudeau. Others thought it was a kind of crystal. But crystals make people think of rocks and uranium and bombs and, well, those are hardly topics for polite conversation.

Eric wanted to know for sure. He came around to the museum and said, "Please, Mr. Curator, help me find out what a maple leaf is."

Truth to tell, I wasn't the real curator. I'd moved into the museum, or rom (as some called it), because it was such a nice building. No one ever used it, after all, and with so few of us under the Dome you could live just about anywhere you chose. Well, we looked, but Eric and I didn't have any luck finding a real maple leaf among the few intact exhibits. "It must have been something very special," Eric said. "It must have meant something to our ancestors, back When Times Were Good." He looked up at me with innocent eyes. "If we could find out what a maple leaf was, maybe times would be good again."

Who was I to tell him he was dreaming? "You've looked everywhere there is to look."

"We haven't looked outside of the Dome."

"Outside? There's nothing outside, lad."

"There has to be."

"Why?" I'd never heard such nonsense.

"There just has to be, that's all."

Well, you can't argue with that kind of logic. "Even if there is," I said, "there's no way to go outside, so that's that."

"Yes there is," said Eric. "Mr. Withers found a door, way up in North York. It's all rusted shut. If we took some of the tools from here we might be able to open it."

Well, the boy insisted on going, and I couldn't let him hike all that way alone, could I? We set out the next day. It'd been years since I'd been to Dome's edge. They called it Steels Avenue up there, which seemed an appropriate name for where the iron Dome touched the ground. Sure enough, there was a door. I felt sure somebody would have had the good sense to jam it closed, so I didn't worry when I gave it a healthy pry with a crowbar. Damned if the thing didn't pop right open. We stepped cautiously through.

There was magic out there. A huge ball of light hung up over our heads. Tall and proud brown columns stretched as far as the eye could see. On top they were like frozen fire: orange and red and yellow. Little things were flying to and fro -- and they were singing! Suddenly Eric fell to his knees. "Look, Mr. Curator! Maple leafs!" There were millions of them, covering the ground. More fluttered down from above, thin and veined and beautiful. Eric looked up at me. "This must have been what it was like When Times Were Good: people living outside with the maple leafs. I think we should live out here, Mr. Curator." I laughed and cried and hugged the boy. We turned our backs on the dome and marched forward.

When it came time to fly a flag over our new town everyone agreed it should be the maple leaf, forever.

THE END