

THE RED MAPLE TREE

By Mark Cornell

When Kathy was a little girl she thought her father, Nicholas, was like a tree, tall and strong. The sun glistened on Nicholas's shoulders as he swung her in circles around him. Kathy adored her father, he was a gentle giant who never swore or raised his voice. Everywhere she went she wore his baseball cap, the Milwaukee Brewers, on the top of her long gold hair. Kathy was a Tom boy, preferring to roam the neighbourhood on her pushbike with the boys, rather than playing dolls with the girls. Long and lean, she had her father's body. Later on, as a young woman, she blended into Germany when she backpacked through Europe with her mates. Nicholas's ancestors came from South Western Germany and migrated to America after the Prussians took over.

Like his ancestors, Nicholas wasn't impressed with the way his country was heading. Nicholas worked for NASA and helped to design the guidance system that got man on the moon. He said NASA was America at its best. But when he was approached by IBM to work on intercontinental nuclear ballistic missiles Nicholas had second thoughts. Even though he'd been drafted into the army during the Korean War, Nicholas had no time for the US military. It seemed every Congressman was being lobbied to construct a base or build the latest lethal weapon. America lost its way during the sixties. He was forever turning off the T.V whenever the vicious images of Vietnam burst into the family's lounge. American cities burnt with racial hatred. You couldn't walk around the block without the fear of being mugged. Nicholas and his wife Pam searched for other countries to raise their two daughters, Kathy and Lucy in.

Pam was friends with an Australian war bride who lived down the street, she'd come to live in Milwaukee after World War. The more she told of her country, the more they liked. The girls remember the endless blue of the Pacific Ocean, the tropical vibrancy of Hawaii, the grey green of the Australian landscape. Kathy hugged her teddy close to her chest when they touched down at Tullamarine. They were struck by the unique blend of eucalyptus and petrol when they walked across the tarmac. Nicholas loved the slouching casualness of the Australian migration official at the airport. With his long cotton socks stretching up to his

knees and shorts, and his “ No worries,” as he stamped their paperwork, Nicholas smiled as he realized he’d come to the right country.

The family lived in an old Nissan Army hut in Springvale that Summer, Nicholas found a job in Kenworth Trucks, they rented for a few years with an old German battle-axe for a Landlady. Nicholas enjoyed the friendliness of the Australian workforce, where everyone was on a first name basis. Nobody stood on ceremony. If the boss was too pushy or formal the rest of the workplace saw him as an arsehole. The labour force was unionised back then, and if the boss made a decision that was unpopular, people downed tools. Whereas in the US, the boss could be a prick and get away with it. Nicholas became a good union man.

However, things weren’t as rosy for Kathy. With her tall, lean frame and baseball hat the local kids called her Big bird and made fun of her accent. “ Why don’t ya speak propa English like us Aussies? ”they’d ask. To this day Kathy still has an American twang to accent, perhaps it’s her way of saying she doesn’t want to blend in with the herd. For the first time in her life, she was threatened with physical violence in the schoolyard, although nothing happened, it spooked her. Nicholas and Pam were horrified that Australian schools still had corporal punishment, Pam rang the co-ordinator and told him if any of the teachers had a problem with her daughters they were to ring her first before deciding on any punishment.

Nicholas saved up enough to put a deposit on a brick veneer house in Donvale. Back then the suburb was semi-rural. Kathy spent many a weekend with her friends on their bikes exploring vacant land or farms, the main highways only had two lanes and were lined by ancient pine trees planted as wind breaks by the farmers. Sometimes they made it all the way out into the bush at Warrandyte. Other times they played along the banks of Andersons Creek. With it’s huge gum trees and man ferns it reminded Kathy of the Dinosaur movies she seen back in the US. The only rule Pam had with Kathy was to make sure she was home when the street lights came on. Lucy was a bookworm who studied inside all the time.

Nicholas planted an oak tree and a golden elm in the front garden, Kathy watched from her bedroom window as the trees transformed into giants. Her father planted Chinese

lantern bushes and diosmas in the garden beds. He'd collect seeds when they'd go for walks in the nearby forests then scatter them over his garden and the nearby school. To this day there are huge oak trees at Donvale High thanks to Nicholas. He found a mountain ash seed in Sherbrooke forest which took root in their nature strip. Pretty soon they had tree that was pushing sixty feet. The birds came, at first blackbirds and thrushes, then came the magpies and wattle birds. A magpie followed Nicholas around the garden every time he mowed the lawn. The wattle birds gargle growled and hung upside down in the Chinese lantern bushes outside their dining room.

Nicholas sat out on their back veranda at night during summer, sometimes Kath joined her father. Nicholas loved to talk about space. He'd met Neil Armstrong and told his daughter he was so meticulous, the astronaut always asked, "What does this thing do? How does it work?" He told his daughter the heroic story how Armstrong managed to land on the surface of the moon with only seconds of fuel left. The original landing site was strewn with boulder the size of cars, so Neil had to take over and guide the Lunar Module to a flatter surface. He explained to his daughter how they managed to get the Voyager to the outskirts of the Solar System when the planets were aligned, the satellite would head for a planet then skim over it to the next planet, like a stone skipping over water.

He described how America was full of UFO's during the fifties and sixties, he said you'd go for a walk to the local golf course at night and "there they were, we'd wave to them." Nicholas had a wide smile and laugh like a whinnying horse. His theory was they were secret craft being tested by the USAF. Although her Dad didn't discredit the theory that there must be life on other planets, as the Astronomer Carl Sagan said, there were more stars than grains on earth on our planet.

Nicholas said that everybody who worked for NASA was mad. There was one guy who used to walk around with a tin of sardines in his top pocket, whenever there was a crisis he'd open up his tin of sardines and eat them. There was another guy who never sat on a chair but lay sideways across the desk to work. It was these eccentrics who got man on the moon.

Her father was drafted into the US 101st Airborne during the Korean War. He contracted pneumonia and stayed behind in the US. This probably saved his life because the 101st were decimated when the Chinese invaded Korea. Nicholas was posted to Trieste after his recovery. The soldiers called this “The Champagne Campaign” because all it involved was patrolling a quiet border. But it wasn’t that quiet. One day the Communists decided to invade northern Italy. Nicholas said the Americans only had one tank. It was locked in a garage and nobody knew where the keys were. So, they all had to jump onto a train to skedaddle south.

Michael loved Nicholas’s stories. They clicked straight away. At family dos, as Pam held court, they’d have a beer or three, find a corner and yarn all night. Michael saw a lot of Nicholas in his partner. One winter the couple took Nicholas, and their toddler son, Tim, to Bright. The town is one of the prettiest in Australia. With its avenues lined with European trees, mostly red maple, as well as liquid amber, golden ash, maples, poplars and oaks. The nearby hills are carpeted in pine trees. Michael holidayed in Bright with his family when he was a teenager. When he travelled to Ireland he understood his love of Bright. The town was almost identical to some of the villages he travelled through in the Emerald Isle. Kathy fell in love with the town when Michael took her there for the first time. She told him it reminded of the surrounding countryside in her home state of Wisconsin. Nicholas and Michael once had a conversation at one of the family dos about ancestral memory, and how it was passed down through the generations. Not only do we inherit our ancestors physical and character traits, but perhaps we inherit their memories too. Both men fortified by beer, believed this to be so. Nicholas said the town reminded him of the Appalachians.

Nicholas grew up on a peach farm in West Virginia with his grandparents during The Depression because his parents couldn’t afford to look after him. Nicholas collected seeds as they walked through leafy Bright and placed them in his pockets. He told Michael he was so happy to hear they named their son Tim. Tim was Mark’s favourite Uncle. He used to accompany his Uncle Tim to deliver the family peaches in an old T Model truck. Uncle Timmy got drunk, then a fourteen-year-old Nicholas, had to drive the truck back at night through the wilds of the Appalachians while Uncle Timmy sang and snored. Nicholas’s

Grandfather was a fiddler who played traditional Appalachian tunes at family dos. This haunting music was brought to America by Scott Irish settlers.

Kath, Lucy, Michael and Tim were there for Nicholas when he died. He'd contracted pneumonia after looking after an increasingly erratic Pam. The girls placed her in a home when Nicholas requested they take her away from him. He seemed to recover, but then one afternoon their unconscious father struggled for breath. Kathy stroked her father's left hand, dark haired Lucy held his right, and kept kissing her father on his brow telling him to rest. Michael noticed the loving Madonna look in her eyes. The Doctor took them aside for a meeting to gently advise Nicholas wouldn't make it through the night and that they should take off his oxygen tube. This they did, not wanting to prolong the inevitable. Nicholas sighed like the wind through a forest, or the lapping of the tide. His breathing turned longer, until at dusk he slowly passed away.

Kathy and Lucy tended the family garden during an unusually dry summer. The Donvale home was sold in April. Kathy told Michael she'd like to buy a tree and plant it in their garden as a shrine to Nicholas. Kath watered her father's garden after the house was sold. To her amazement she found a tiny maple tree that had just sprouted. Kath was certain the tree hadn't been there before; the sapling had responded to her care. Kath got out a bucket, trowel and bag of soil that was still under Nicholas's house. She was convinced it was from a seed her father had brought back from Bright. It turned out to be a red maple tree. She mixed some of her father's ashes with the soil then sprinkled the hole Michael had dug. They gently placed the sapling into the ground and gave it a good water. Nicholas believed you couldn't destroy matter, it always transforms. And so this tree shall grow nurtured by Nicholas, just as he nurtured his children and grandchildren.

Bio

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favorite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing

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Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He took family leave for three years to look after his son Thomas. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.

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