

“The Lote Tree”

By Graham Nicholson

Mark was an average young man, now in his early thirties. He had had an average upbringing and attained average marks at school. He had had a few girl friends but none whom he felt that strongly about to marry. So he still lived with his parents in their suburban house of average dimensions. He had left school at the age of 17 to get a reasonable clerical job in the city, and was now earning a modest but respectable salary with the same company. He now had his own small office on the fourth floor. He liked his job, it suited him. Even more so, he liked his weekends. He had saved up to buy a four-wheel drive, and he enjoyed getting out into the bush with his mates for the weekends whenever he could. His mates were not of the “loud” kind, but nice blokes who shared his interest in the bush. He loved the bush, the trees, the peacefulness amongst the music of the natural surrounds, supplemented by his own brand of musical taste, usually taken in through earphones. It was his own “sacred” space. Apart from that, he didn’t take life too seriously.

It was a Friday. Work had been somewhat hectic that week and there was a bit of paperwork to catch up on. Mark rang his Mum to say he might be a little late home for dinner. He kept plugging away at his office computer, saying “goodnight”, “have a good one” and “see ya!” as appropriate to those departing the office. He declined an invitation to have a drink with one of the other employees, saying he just wanted to finish the pile of paperwork on his desk before he went home. In his concentration, he didn’t really take much notice of the sun setting outside of the office window. He was a fairly conscientious worker.

He kept poring over the papers, trying to tidy them up into some sort of order before he left for home. The glare of the office lights was beginning to affect his eyes. He rubbed them. “Just a bit more to do and I’m off”, he said to himself. He didn’t particularly notice that no one else now seemed to be around. He was anxious to get away, so he bundled up the pile fairly neatly, grabbed his personal things and made for the office lift. He had a mental picture of being out in the bush, all alone, sitting in one of those folding armchairs that are quite common, with a hole for a cold drink can in the arm, and looking out on a serene scene of trees in the native landscape. He noticed one particular gum tree some way off; it seemed to have very silvery, luminescent leaves, like some kind of ghost gum or something of

that nature. It looked surreal. It fascinated his mind in a strange kind of way. He kept moving, entered the lift and pressed the down button to descend.

Somewhere between the third and second floors, the lift came to a sudden, jarring stop. “Good God!”, Mark spurted out, not knowing what was going on. “That’s all I need”, he added to himself after he had realized what had happened. He stood there for a moment, and then pushed a few buttons. Nothing happened, except that a bell rang. He tried again. Nothing! No response! He shouted out “IS THERE ANYONE THERE?”. No response, all was quiet in the building. He kept shouting for a few minutes, but there was nothing. Everyone else had left the building, it seemed. His wristwatch showed to his surprise that it was quite late, after 8 pm. “What to do?”, he thought. He tried opening the door of the lift, but it was located between floors and wouldn’t budge.

There was a lift telephone. That was the only option left. He had just picked up the mouth piece, when suddenly all the power and lights failed, and he was pitched into near total darkness. He dropped the hand piece in surprise, and it dangled there on its line, now a useless piece of equipment. When he had verified that it had gone dead, he knew he was in a serious predicament. Unless someone happened to come in to the office on the weekend, he might be stuck there until Monday morning, in the dark, with no food or drink. “Hell!”. What a position! Mark had read of someone who had been stuck in a lift for days like this, a very unpleasant experience. They had sued or something. “Blast!” he thought. Then he said to himself that he must stay calm, no sense in getting up tight, something might happen. He sat down on the floor of the lift, with his back to the wall.

His mind wandered a bit, first of all thinking about the dinner he was meant to be at with his Mum at home, then drifting to thoughts about the planned weekend out in the bush with his four-wheel drive and his mates, and then on to his office and whether anyone might be likely to come in to the office on the weekend. He felt sure someone would miss him before too long and would come looking. But would they look in the office? They might think he simply diverted to somewhere else instead of coming home on the bus as he usually did, maybe to briefly visit a girlfriend or a mate. Or maybe he just got a lift from a friend and had stayed for a drink or two, that had happened before. He was not the sort of bloke just to knick off for any extended period of time and not tell anyone.

His thinking flashed back to that strange, illuminated tree in the bush. He could see it quite clearly now, even though it was some distance away. It stood out against the other vegetation, quite transcendent. “Strange”, he thought. “Perhaps I’m just missing my weekend away”. But that didn’t make enough sense. He was a little puzzled but liked what he saw, it was beautiful. It momentarily took his mind off the reality of his situation, his unsatisfactory physical position in the world at that particular moment in time. As he mentally surveyed the scene, the strains of a chant from one of his favorite artists floated into his inner ear, that of Cat Stevens. It was from the Album “Mountain of Light”, and the chant was called “Lote Tree”. He sat there, on the floor of the lift, quite transported away by his internal senses.

What did this fascinating tree mean? He knew Cat Stevens had become a Muslim, and that the song was something about that Faith. But his knowledge of spiritual subjects was limited. He had never had cause before to look deeply into such matters, although he did not have a strong anti-religious bent. He was not particularly prejudiced by nature. It was just that this was not a topic that had previously entered his life before in any meaningful, fulfilling way. He was your average guy, not too hung-up about anything in particular, enjoying life and friends in his own, characteristically friendly manner. This was a new situation that Mark was now in, one not enhanced by the serenity of the native bush, supplemented by the comforts of modern human conveniences, and all that those had to offer. That was great. By comparison, sitting there on the floor of the lift, in the dark, in an artificial environment with no direct contact with nature or other humans, and with no available escape route, was definitely not great. He suddenly broke the trance and sprang back to reality with a shock.

Again there were shouts for help and an attempt to open the lift door. But to no avail. Nothing was going right, might as well just wait and keep calm, Mark thought after a few minutes. Time to sit and make the best of it. Time to mentally escape again. The enticement to contemplate the inner world was inescapable and compelling. It provided an unexpected sense of comfort that Mark had not experienced before. Out in the bush, you had your comfortable folding armchair, your cold drink, your esky, your CD player, discs and ear piece, your friends, and your trusty vehicle to make your escape when you decided that you had had enough. Everything was at your fingertips. Everything was accessible when you wanted it. Mark had

made sure of this in the past as he planned each weekend carefully. But the situation now confronting Mark could not have been planned, and it was not convenient or comfortable. Modern suburban life does not normally throw up such situations, Mark thought, it is usually much more dependable and predictable. Sure, you can have your difficulties and tests, which have to be worked through. But these can be seen as challenges that are generally amenable to solutions with personal effort, and Mark was not too bad at taking on your average challenges of life and meeting them. As long as you did not expect too much, things would work out reasonably ok. However, this situation in the lift was new and unexpected, and there was nothing that Mark could do to rectify it at that time. He was stuck.

His thoughts drifted back to thinking about that distant, brilliant tree. His mind's eye could picture it again, quite clearly. If anything, it was now more luminescent than before. He thought he could also now smell a musk flavour. "Was this the Lote Tree referred to in that Cat Stevens chant?" Mark asked himself. "And what was the meaning of that Lote Tree anyway?" The coincidence of seeing that tree in his mind, and of remembering the music on that Cat Stevens album, seemed too great. They had to be connected. The words translated into English on that album came back to him. He recalled the succulent words "*The Lote Tree of the utmost boundary*". Trees had often been used to mark boundaries, but Mark was convinced that this was not some ordinary tree. His inner vision was too struck by the tree as it shone out with some radiant, overwhelming force of light. He was convinced that it must be some deeply spiritual concept, otherwise Cat Stevens, now a devout Muslim, would not chant so melodiously and earnestly about it. This Tree seemed like some mystic point beyond which the human mind could not travel, the boundary tree marking the entry point into the next world.

Suddenly another thought flashed into Mark's mind. This was clearly no ordinary experience he was having. Might this not be some very deep, spiritual happening, perhaps one that he was very privileged to have? He had never had anything remotely resembling this type of experience before. His life had been pretty ordinary up to this time. Of course he had heard of other people undergoing spiritual experiences. One of his mates had gone through something like that after an accident and had talked to his close friends about it in no uncertain terms. But, he thought, that doesn't mean much unless and until you undergo it yourself. Spirituality must be a very personal thing. Mark never really connected meaningfully with his mate on

that previous occasion, whereas this present experience was something very real to him, it was compelling, he couldn't have just made it up, no way!

His mind was now working double-time. Mark recalled that the chant about the Lote Tree had something to do with Muhammad's fabled night journey to Jerusalem. And yet here he was, closeted in the darkness of the lift, on a similar metaphorical night journey, experiencing a profound encounter with the next world as he was attracted towards a radiating, inner light. He focused mentally again on that distant Tree, and noticing that it was growing in luminescent intensity, pulsating with light. Its leaves were glowing, one by one, each with a shining golden centre surrounded by a fringe of brilliant silver. He could now see each leaf clearly. The complete foliage was circular in shape, as if like a globe of leaves. And within that globe the different clumps of foliage appeared to form the shape of the continents of the earth, with slightly darker areas where the oceans might be. The Tree had become the planet, splendid, effulgent, glorious. He thought he could see the varied faces of humanity in each leaf, each one unique, each one smiling, but all as a single race inhabiting one planetary tree. He heard some words clearly and prominently voiced from deep within the Tree – "*So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth!*". Mark was captivated. It was stunning!

There was a sudden jolt. The lift moved slightly. Mark awoke from his reverie. Then there was another movement downwards, just as the lights of the office building came on. It was glaring, garish, invasive. The Tree had disappeared, to be replaced by the harshness of materiality. Mark was on his feet. The lift continued downwards to the ground floor. Mark exited the lift and the building, to find that it was early morning. The whole night had passed as if in an instant, as if time was irrelevant. Still a little shaken, Mark found his way home. He explained to his parents that he had been caught up on something. All he could think of now was to get in his four-wheel drive and head for the bush on his own. He needed time to think. He headed off and drove for some hours inland.

He was now on a remote bush track, surrounded by native trees and shrubs. He came to a tree that had been burnt out quite recently by bushfires, its trunk and remaining branches charred and blackened. There were half-burnt dry leaves on the ground, and some smoldering remains of the fire not far away. He parked the vehicle, got out his folding armchair and a cold drink from the esky, and sat down near the tree. He was now more relaxed. The

tree looked rather forbidding, strange, lifeless. It gave out no light. But the fire had only burnt some of the land nearby. In the background to the tree there were some rolling hills still covered in nice, fresh, native vegetation among some golden-brown rocks. No other person was to be seen. It was a very pleasant background, a beautiful, natural scene. Mark found it very soothing and pleasant. It was what he really liked. He sat back and felt whole again. "What a night!", he thought to himself. But then he had another thought. Looking out over the natural beauty, he suddenly realized that what he was viewing was ephemeral, transient, a façade to some much greater and permanent reality. The natural bush was there one moment, and gone the next. It was as a veil to something that was infinitely more glorious, more tangible. He began to grasp the significance of his night journey to the Lote Tree.

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