

# *The Soul of a Tree*



TREES WILL TELL YOU A STORY  
IF YOU LISTEN.

*David A Schneck*

*The mighty white oak stands tall and wide in a cemetery shading the residence and the visitors for over 600 years. She listens to and comforts everyone who seeks her shelter from the elements.*

## **The Soul of a Tree**

By David A Schneck

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This book is a work of historical fiction. Many names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, but used within the historical framework of the United States.

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## CHAPTER ONE



*May all I say and all I think be in harmony with thee, God  
within me, God beyond me, maker of the trees.*

*-- Native American Prayer of Harmony*

So, a wedding. A good surprise. But then, not a surprise. Their announcement was almost predictable. The couple hugged and kissed. The wedding was going to be in the fall. A beautiful time of year. The trees would be in full blaze.

Dan Gobin liked Peggy Weida and approved of the match. It was clear to anyone who had eyes, that Dan's son, Adam was happy. Happiest he'd been in years. Adam & Peggy spent so

much time together and had fallen in love right in front of Dan's eyes. And Adam and Peggy had eyes only for each other. They had known each other for only a year, but they were a great pair. *Just like me and...* but no, Dan wasn't going to go there.

Adam had been quiet and restless ever since his mother died. Recently, there was a light in his eyes and a steady tone in his voice. He laughed more, teased Dan more. At work, Adam was focused and determined. He was a man with a plan.

Peggy was good for Adam. Pulled him out of his cocoon of grief and into the world of the living. She needed him too. A super organized teacher, she had Adam to teach her to let her hair down and smell the roses. After she arranged them in alphabetical order by species.

Dan hugged Peggy and then Adam. "Go tell grandma." The two ran out the door and climbed into Adam's truck. They headed down the street to inform Dan's mother. Although she probably knew already, the courtesy of showing her the ring and talking about dates and venues needed to be done.

Dan watched the couple drive down the road. His gaze fell on the trees. It felt natural to compare everything (life, death, weddings, and funerals) to the life of the trees in the front yard. He planted the row of three when Adam was a baby, they were now sturdy, 15-foot leafy green oaks, full of life. Barring disease and invasive Gypsy Moth, they'd be around long after Adam buried him. Trees seem to outlive everyone in his family.

The phone rang. Dan answered the phone and smiled. It was his friend Ken on the other end of the line. "Well, hey

good to hear from you. What trees are you climbing these days?” Dan settled into a large chair by the window. “Wait a minute, what tree are you taking down? That thing’s massive!” He exclaimed. “Me? You want me to help?” Dan rubbed his head. “I don’t know. Let me think about it. That oak has got to be 500 years old.” He paused and listened to the voice on the other end that corrected him. “Wow, it’s over 600? This is not going to be easy.”

## 1487

The Ridge Oak Tree survived many seasons, endured hungry rabbits gnaws, buck antler rubs, ice storms, drought, hurricanes and the hands of man. The Navesink chief rubbed the sturdy tree’s bark. The tree loomed over him; long limbs stretched nearly as wide as it was tall. And it still had many seasons to grow. There was so much life in this oak.

He embraced the trunk, flattening his body along its rough surface. He placed his ear against its grayish brown wrinkled skin and listened. He listened for its song.

It was not unusual for large trees to be spied in the forest which were taller than many men. Yet, this tree had a special place a bit apart from the pine grove and close to the middle of a meadow. Chief Ockanickon had marked that two suns rose and set on his journey from the Hunting Grounds to the Great Swamp.

Yes, he had heard the song about the massive tree from his grandmother who had heard those songs from her grandmother. As long as the Navesink had circled the Great Swamp, the tree

was honored. It was one thing to hear about the tree, but it is another thing to be near the tree to see its size and to be touching such a great living thing. The bark felt warm under his hands. Days of summer sun heated the tree's tough outer skin.

Everything nature had thrown at the tree to destroy it only succeeded at making it stronger and hardier. As though the tree had learned its lesson and weathered catastrophes well. The chief looked up. The tree was not very tall but was wide. It avoided any negative encounter with strong, high winds by establishing a very wide and sturdy base.

He touched the bark and waited for the tree to speak its name to him. A breeze brushed by and teased the branches. It was then, the tree whispered its name. And sang its song to the man.

*I was here before you.*

*I will be here with you.*

*I will live here after you.*

Then Chief Ockanickon reached up and pinched off a leaf from one of the tree's low branches. He gathered acorns into his deer hide bag. He touched the bark again and blessed the tree. He sang the tree song once more with its name. He made sure to salute those who would touch the tree. He saluted those who would come from the south, the north, the east and the west.

Then raising his voice in prayer, he asked for protection for the tree so that it would see his grandchildren and their grandchildren. And he promised himself, he would tell his

people, if they came to touch the tree, and if they were of a good heart, they would be touched. Those who blessed the tree would bless themselves. Those who would do harm to the tree would do harm to themselves. This too, he vowed would be passed along to all in the Ockanickon's tribe. The great tree's song was to be respected. Because the tree - would give a small part of its soul to live on within the person who touched it.

Chief Ockanickon was anxious to be on his way. Rumors of the Tidewater People coming north were getting louder. It wasn't right that all the Lenape who were once one people, are now factions, fighting amongst themselves while the *Nanticokes* from many different lands were slowly but surely clinging to the coast and then moving westward into Ramapough lands.

He had heard from a great matriarch that she had watched the *hakihet* clear an entire forest within a season. From the sea to the first hill, said the old woman, it was all gone. Much was burned; the rest used for fencing and rafts.

Once more Chief Ockanickon embraced the tree. He sang his song into its bark. He gave the tree his blessing and obtained one in return. He sang the song of his tribe into its veins. He wanted to make sure that no hand would destroy the great tree before it was ready to pass away.

Stepping away he looked up and saw a flock of wintering geese fly above the great tree's branches. Time to go.

He couldn't resist gathering more acorns and tucking them into his pouch for planting. He also clipped a few more green sticks of the tree from the lower limbs to keep for grafting.



Though this tree was slow growing, he would plant them. He would also plant as many of the acorns as he could and give some as gifts. He would never see them mature into their magnificent adulthood. The Great Oak Tree and its saplings will outlive him. Its song can only be enjoyed while a man is alive.

Chief Ockanickon - travelled west and north from the tree and though no one impeded his travel, he felt he was being followed. A presence walked alongside of him. The spirit of the tree was with him in his hand that touched the sap and in the acorns that were in his pouch.

For one hundred years, Chief Ockanickon and the great white oak tree were sung about in the long houses of the Navesink, Kechemeché and Delaware tribes. And although many saplings grew to be substantial, they were prevented from becoming as large as the great oak. It was as though the Great Oak Tree overshadowed its rivals.

This proved to the descendants of Chief Ockanickon that he had found the sacred tree, the tree of trees. Many tribes made a pilgrimage to the Great Oak Tree to touch its bark, sing its great song and gather acorns which it shed generously.



## CHAPTER FIVE



*“How pleasing to stand near a rare or new tree! Few are so handsome as this...”*

*--Henry David Thoreau and the Language of Trees, Richard Higgins, 2017*

Driving to his mother’s house. He had to tell her the news, had to let her know that the tree on the postcard was going to be gone.

His mother was a bit taken aback and sighed “Isn’t there any way to spare it, save it?”

Dan went into explanation overdrive. He'd practiced the speech, prepared himself for the onslaught of questions and had tissues ready for maybe tears. His mother was a very pragmatic woman. If the tree was going to fall on a little kid's head, well she'd be the person out in front carrying a chainsaw. Ken and Gilly were already planning the logistics of how to take the Great Oak Tree down. Still, there was something unsettling about that stupid postcard. Adam told him that Gram Lillian was questioning all living relatives about great grandma's travels during the war and that she went to the Schuylkill County Courthouse to research deeds and marriages.

"Now Mom, listen, I told Ken and Gilly it's going to be a PR nightmare and logistically it's really a tough job. But the tree has to come down and yes, I'll be a part of the team."

"Could there be something in the tree?"

"In a tree? Like what?"

"I don't know, a dead body?"

"What!" Dan exploded. "No that's impossible, Mom what are you saying?"

"Okay, okay I know that's bizarre," admitted Lillian. "But I know we have a connection Dan. I just feel it in my bones."

"Tell you what, Mom, we'll get you to that tree and you'll see," Dan said. "They're doing surveys and maybe an ultrasound I think too."

"Oh, my goodness, like they do for a baby?"

"Sure, it's going to give Ken and Gilly an idea of the kind of decay they're dealing with," Dan explained. "The tree is compromised and it's going to be a delicate process to take it down."

“Why? Can’t they just saw it at the bottom?”

Dan laughed. “Uh no, you can’t even do that with young healthy trees.” He explained that according to Ken and Gilly, there was significant decay reported back in the 1900’s. “The church had records that a tree crew had to repair damage to the tree.”

Lillian’s eyes grew wide. “So, maybe they’ll find something inside.”

Dan sighed. “Sure, Mom, sure. Like a buried treasure.”

“Won’t you be embarrassed if there’s something inside that tree?”

“Mom, the only thing inside that tree is 7,000 pounds of cement.”

“With a dead body inside!” “Like maybe Jimmy Hoffa?”

“I doubt it, mom.”

## *1790*

When she first arrived on the island, the turquoise blue waters mesmerized Tilly. She couldn’t stop staring. White foam-edged turquois waves lapped the brilliant white sand. The slave ship that she was tossed on ran aground off the coast of Cotton Cay. Though it missed its destination of Cockburn Town, most of the slaves were herded onto row boats and delivered to their new owners. On her rowboat, two slaves strangled the rower, heaved him overboard and set out for the nearest spit of land. Only a few miles south, the shallow waters of Salt Cay with its gentle tides and smell of warming salt drew the slaves, who rowed with all their might.

Tilly squinted at the horizon. There was nothing but sunshine and soft breezes, day after day. She couldn't shake off her restlessness. Tilly searched the horizon for a rescue ship. On this island everything felt upside down. Here, what they called a rake, was no rake. It was a long pole with a flat rudder on its end. And a horse was a tiny mule that never grew over ten hands high. Only a few were tamed and used for work. The enormous bearded frogs that sunned themselves on small rocks, swam like fish and kept their tails. *Not like my home*, she sighed. *My real home with Sarah. Does she miss me? Does Jeremy Jr. even remember me?*

Two years after her arrival on Salt Cay, Tilly's first hurricane increased her desire for home exponentially. With every wave that crashed on the shore, she promised, *I will return home, I will return home.*

She missed the long-frozen winters, giving way to bright springs, seeping into oozing hot summers and gloriously crisp falls. *I will return home; I will return home.* The relentless wind blew until the palm trees bowed down to the sand begging for mercy. Rain slashed at the small huts. The salt pans were overflowing. Two days after the mighty storm, distraught islanders stood knee deep in water. They were trying to push out the excess water to aide in the evaporation process, leaving behind precious salt. The gold of the Caribbean.

Watching the laborious process and its inefficiency, Tilly pulled aside one of the pond's *sallio princeps*. "In my home, we dammed a stream to catch fish, kept them from swimmin' away," she told him. "Here, you need dam the water to keep the salt from swimmin' away."

He shook his head, not understanding. Paul was a smart man, but his despair outweighed his reason. He brushed off the tall woman, who insisted that he fix what was leaking. Tilly liked Paul. He was a tall thin man with a twinkle in his eye. He told Tilly that he served in the navy and loved the sea. He said that all ailments are cured by soaking in the sea. The people on the island used funny terms for things. In their native language “to rest it” meant “to sit it down” and counting was one, two, shree not one, two, three” and these sayings and words made Tilly silently smile.

“Do I not speak good English?” Tilly asked. “Here,” she said. “Watch me.” She began to pick up and stack rocks and shells to form a dam on the eastern side of one of the salt pans.

Paul halted her progress. “No, no, weez want the salt water.”

A frustrated Tilly yelled, “Not in this direction!” Even to her untrained eye, she could walk to the tallest point and see the island’s southern-most tip speared the Atlantic, leaving its broad eastern beaches to face little protection against any gale.

She showed him with mime gestures and her slowest and best English, how the storm had raged. It came from the east blowing water and flooding the low-lying ponds, ruining their salt capture. If walls could be built along the eastern side, ponds would be protected from complete devastation. She splashed in the pond, dancing about to demonstrate how the flooding waters could be pushed to the western edges. There, they’d be directed off into established slurries. Deeper ponds could retain the seawater. Though mixed with sand, some of

the escaped salt could be rescued after rocks were removed and the water drained.

Paul frowned. Tilly worked for several minutes stacking rocks and shells on the eastern side of the salt pans until other salt hauler and salt pan workers gathered close to observe. Word spread of her walls and her ideas. Tilly was brought to meet with the engineers of the salt pans. Desperate to avoid another disaster, they accepted Tilly's help to design a natural barrier, similar to the smaller wall she already erected. With Tilly hovering over their shoulders, the engineers devised a more complicated series of smaller salt pans where windmills could move water within the change of the tides, intricate canals and sluices to induce flooding waters to exit the salt pans. The windmills were constructed to utilize the Cay's breezes to move the sea water and salt brine from larger ponds to smaller salt pans. Tilly also suggested that the canvas on the windmills should be removed prior to any hurricane since tall structures were no match for gale force winds.

As far back as any living islander could remember, it was the only time a woman was sought for advice pertaining to matters of civil engineering. And when the next hurricane hit the island, the Salt Pans and windmills survived but sadly two babies lost their lives.

Their mothers mourned for a month and the entire island mourned with them. Thousands of miles away in their comfortable homes, the salt merchants had little concept of the misery hurricanes inflicted upon the salt workers.

The Cay had no outright established government. Without protection, it was at the mercy of pirates and worse, salt trade



ships. Pirates picked up a few lone islanders for slaves and the salt trader raided the island of as much of the salt as they could without recompense. Thus islanders were forced to protect their only form of currency, “White Gold”. Female inhabitants held small knife-like weapons carved from broken conch shells. They tucked one or two on their person, in their corsets or under their skirts. The male inhabitants made much larger hand-held weapons they openly carried on their belts. They posted a lookout on the bluff to watch for pirates and unwanted trade ships and should any unwanted pirates or sailors arrive, they were greeted at the dock with men waving shell machetes. In time Britain claimed the island and regularly sent ships to pick up salt. On one of the trips for salt, a British sailor, taking a moment to stretch his legs, took a shine to Tilly. He followed her out of the salt pan and to the nearby holding areas. Tilly, in an attempt to avoid him, dropped her rake and pushed her half-filled salt cart into the shed near the dock. “Hey lass,” he rasped. “Mind if I have a turn?”

She whirled around. Before she could cry out, the sailor cupped his hand over her mouth pinned her against one of the huge salt mounds and bit her neck. Unable to reach for her conch-knife, she responded by smearing a handful of sun-scalded salt into his eyes.

He roared in pain, and reeled back, releasing her. Tilly ran to the tiny commons at the point of Deane’s Dock. She confronted a British Royal Naval officer who barely listened to her pleas for help. He told her to, “Remove yourself from my presence.” He tried to walk away but an indignant Tilly blocked his path. The officer ordered his men to return to the

ship. He grabbed Tilly by her head covering, dragged her into the merchant's abandoned office and assaulted her.

Paul did his best to intervene. He pounded on the door and smashed the window pane, he heard Tilly screaming and fighting back. He cheered her efforts, when he heard the officer's shrieks of pain. Paul was pulled away from the door and beaten back by sailors who returned having heard the commotion. Islanders surrounded the sailors. As the officer emerged holding a bloodied cheek, he took in the situation. His Majesty's Navy Officer and sailors never retreated so fast to the safety of their ship.

"Never come back, all a ya!" yelled Paul. He and the islanders threw everything they could at the running sailors—stones, shells, rakes. They climbed aboard their ships with pieces of the island stuck in their skin.

Tilly was cared for by the women for two days. She didn't return to the salt pans until a week later. It took longer for her spirit to mend. She was sullen and silent. The islanders showed nothing but a gentle sweetness. Small flowers were tucked by her pallet at night. A small crock of aloe for her sore parts. And extra gull egg for lunch. At first, Tilly felt as though they pitied her, treated her like a hurt animal. When she finally did speak to the islanders, they told her it was by no means the first time a woman or a man was brutalized in such a way. They admired her strength and her courage to fight back.

When Paul came to visit. He shook his head. "So bad, so sorry."

Tilly sobbed. "This is a horrible place. Why do you not leave?"

“We are Belongers,” he said. “We belong to the island and it belongs to us. It takes care of us sometime an’ we take of dis an’ das. Best weez can.”

Much to her horror, Tilly began to grow a belly. Without symptoms of sickness or hunger—everyone was always hungry--her pregnancy was a secret. When her belly became obvious, the Cay’s “Bush Medicine Healer” suggested a tincture of rosary tea, salt water, and aloe. “To rid you of the *bâtarde*.”

Tilly couldn’t bring herself to drink it. Despite the child’s monstrous beginnings, it was now the only living thing she was close to, her only living relative, her nearest kin.

Tilly’s engineering innovations extended to harvesting rain water. Without any springs or naturally occurring fresh water, islanders used cisterns and barrels to collect rain water. Unfortunately, rain barrels were no match for the forceful trade winds that blew. With her experience as a farmer, she was able to stabilize a barrel to capture the rain without tipping over and spilling its precious commodity by filling a fifth of the barrel with scoured salt-free shells and sand-filled linen bags, the weighted barrels rarely toppled. She then recommended that barrel be constructed with holes so that the water would flow into larger underground holding tanks. A small communal tank-cart was outfitted with wheels to bring water to the salt fields to help hydrate salt harvesters. It was better for uninterrupted work. It took time for workers to go in search of fresh water.

Control of the Cay passed into the hands of the Bahamians. Though still technically British, they were

influenced by more compassionate abolition-minded Americans. The salt import company in Philadelphia paid the Belonger's well. Setting up a small trading center at Deane's Dock, Salt Cay's primary export became the primary import of Brown & Harriet of Philadelphia.

Tilly's innovations along with more productive salt workers delighted the salt barons. Little Salt Cay harvested more salt than all the other islands combined. "As long as there is salt water, there will be salt," Tilly told them.

In a gesture of magnanimity, the proprietors of Brown & Harriet bestowed upon Tilly a writ to proclaim her a freed woman. Tilly took the news graciously, but explained that she was already a freed woman and had been abducted and sold to a slaver. This injustice was never addressed. As such, she only desired to buy a passage home to New Jersey. She wanted to be reunited with her family back on the Tilridge farm and introduce her son Oliver to them.

Each month, as Tilly waited for the funds to buy passage to the now United States, there were inevitable excuses. She hadn't understood their reluctance to take a mother and a newborn baby, still she waited for approval.

Brown & Harriet, unwilling to let this creative and productive woman go, dangled other carrots in front of Tilly's nose. *Why not a formal education?* The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary were excellent teachers having established excellent primary schools in Philadelphia. One or two could be dispatched to teach, not only Tilly, but all the Cay residents. *Why not a home of your own?* A house for Tilly,

constructed just so, to be the envy of all the others. *Perhaps a horse and cart?* Tilly's own personal transportation.

She rejected all their bribes. "I don't need an education. And I already have a home." She shook her head. "What are you thinking? What would I do with a horse and cart on an island that I can walk around in one day?" The Brown & Harriet communications office cringed. How to inform the proprietors that their beneficence had been rejected by a former slave with more common sense than their Board members?

Tilly stewed for days. "How stupid do they think I am, Paul?"

"They trying to catch fish with a palm leaf," he laughed. "Day don't know you."

Each month Tilly was more and more anxious to return home. Her memory was leaving her mind. In the middle of the night the baby cried for her. As she nursed the little boy, she dug deep and couldn't remember Sarah's face. She remembered her last day under a large tree, clinging to Jeremy Jr. for safety. She wept. *How could I forget my Sarah?* The last time Tilly asked for return passage to her home, she was told that it could not be so because the entire country—was in an enormous schism. It wasn't safe to enter the country unless one had papers. Tilly produced the declaration of her freedom. It was rejected. "You need the seal of the colonial governor," she was told by the dock man. "Unless you have a great deal of money or a boat, there's not a port that will allow you entrance." The rejection of her pleas to return home gathered in her heart like an enormous iron anchor. It thudded with an awful pain.

One year then another passed and soon Oliver was a boy needing a father. Tilly and Paul grew closer to each other. They worked together in the Salt Pans and in the evening after dinner, they enjoyed listening and playing music. Paul was a wonderful musician and played well. In time the two fell into a rhythm and soon fell in love. And although Tilly missed New Jersey, she couldn't leave Paul. He had become her rock on the Little Rock Island. They married and had three children making them a family of six with Tilly's son Oliver. The first of their children was a boy with eyes that shone brighter than his father's eyes and they named him Eros. After Eros, Tilly gave birth to twin girls. The first of the twins to be born was named Sandra and the second one was named Sonia. Eros grew up to be a very handsome and charismatic man which helped him to be very successful in a number of retail businesses on the island. Sandra grew up to be the "Bell of the Ball". She was tall, thin and curvy with olive skin and long black hair. But she was as rebellious as her mother in not being controlled by a man. Sandra wanted a boat of her own to enter the trade world and sail away on the wind which she eventually did. As for Sonia, she was as beautiful as her sister and more reserved like her father. She was content to stay with her mother and father and build a future on Salt Cay. She built a rental cottage on the South end of the island and named it "Sonia's Hideaway". She also became interested in island politics and was successful in becoming the first woman to hold a government position on the island. Tilly's first son Oliver was also handsome and strong. His skin was fair and his hair was light brown and his last name was different from his brother and sisters. When he

became of age, Tilly told him the little that she know about his father and lied about why she gave Oliver her last name and not his father's but avoided telling him how he raped her. Later as a young adult, he wanted to know his real father. So he got a job on a ship that was headed to England. After a few years of searching he learned that his father was thrown overboard during a violent storm off the coast of Virginia. His body was never found. Oliver returned to Salt Cay and related what he learned about his father to Tilly. Tilly was not unhappy to hear about the Officer's death but she hid her feelings from Oliver.

Oliver settled back into life on Salt Cay - fishing and working for the salt barons. He was enjoying the hard simple life of the cay until one day when a Merchant ship docked at the White House and a beautiful tall red haired woman stepped on hard ground for the first time in a year. She was breathtaking, Oliver looked like a stunned mullet standing there with his mouth gaping. She introduced herself as Kayleigh O'Reily from the Emerald Isle of Ireland. "Do you have a name, looking at Oliver?" she inquired. "Ol- Ol- Oliver, Oliver Tilridge," he finally managed to mutter. It was love at first sight for both of them and it wasn't long before they were married. Oliver and Kayleigh were very adventurous and they loved the ocean. Using a small portion of Kayleigh's inheritance, they purchased a sloop and sailed to all of the surrounding islands. They made a decent living by buying, selling and trading needed commodities as they traveled from island to island. They made enough money to purchase two tickets for a voyage from the Bahamas to Ireland. Kayleigh couldn't wait to see her family again. During the voyage

Kayleigh gave birth to a baby boy. They named him Tristan. The O'Reily family was thrilled to see a young Irish Blok and they convinced Oliver and Kayleigh to remain in Ireland until their little lad was five years old. During the ages of 4 and 5, Tristan heard the stories and legends of the Irish people and how a tree could speak through an instrument made from its wood. Tristan, like his parents, loved the ocean – even the cold waters of Ireland. Tristan's parents became restless and felt a great urge to return to Salt Cay.

Tilly and Paul heard via the island grape vine that Oliver and his family were returning home. Tilly and Paul, Eros and his family and Sonia were waiting at Deane's dock when Oliver and his family arrived. Tilly took to young Tristan like a sponge to water.

Tilly was now up in years and she spent most of her time with Tristin and her other grandchildren. She told them all about New Jersey and her life on the Tilridge Farm. They learned about the beautiful trees that turned a vibrant color in the fall each year. She told them about the Great Oak Tree and the legends of its song and spirit. She explained how her namesakes (Jeremy and Sarah Tilridge and their sons Adam and Jeremy Jr. and his family) were buried under the Great Oak Tree.

Tristan and Tilly had a special bond between them. Both of them talked and dreamed about going to America and back to New Jersey to see the Tilridge Farm and the Great Oak Tree. Tilly gave Tristan her favorite Queen Conch Shell with the hope of him taking it back to Basking Ridge, New Jersey.

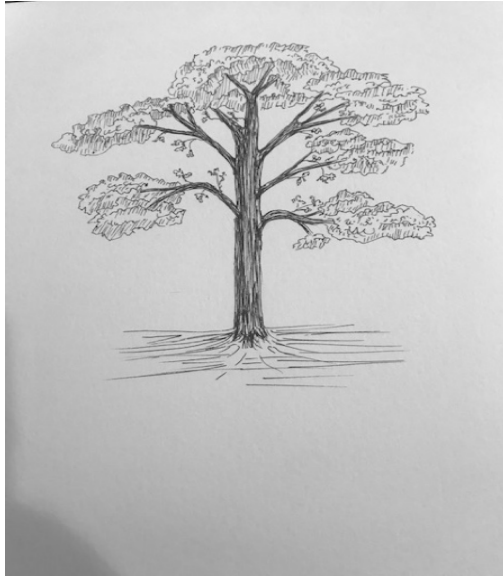


One night Tilly dreamed of the Great Oak Tree and standing under it with Jeremy Jr. They were clinging to each other as they did back in 1777 and this time he didn't let go of her. Tilly viewed the dream as an omen of her passing and joining the Spirit of the Great Oak Tree and her loved ones. Within two days of her dream, Tilly passed away quietly in her sleep. Tilly was 102 years old at the time of her passing which was a testament to having a long life on the quiet island of Salt Cay. Tilly's spirit would live on in her four children, her seven grandchildren and future generations.

Tristan was consumed by grief and he vowed that he would travel to America and find the Tilridge Farm. He would take his grandmother's Queen Conch Shell and bury it on Sarah Tilridge's grave under the Great Oak Tree.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



*“A man doesn’t plant a tree for himself.  
He plants it for posterity.”*

*– Alexander Smith, Scottish poet, 1861*

They decided to grab a late lunch at The Blue Bird. Pastor Tom had a phone call from a congregant that needed his undivided attention. Ken and Gilly were wrapping up at the tree. The silence in the car made Dan nervous.

“Come on Mom, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Uh, no, there’s definitely something,” Dan argued. “You’re too quiet.”

“Look, I respect everything you’ve gone through so far. But I don’t think you should take down that tree.”

“Technically I’m not the one with the saw,” Dan pointed out. “So, I’m not going to be—”

“Oh, you know what I mean,” Lillian snapped. “Don’t play games. “You know you’re going to be a part of it.”

“Yeah, I am and I think it’s the best thing for everyone,” Dan said. “For the tree’s sake and for the general public’s sake.”

“I don’t know.”

“Mom, the tree is dead,” Dan said. “And it was probably dying a hundred years ago. It’s not growing anymore and it just isn’t safe as it is now.”

“Can’t you just prune it a little?”

“No,” Dan was firm. “Listen Mom, Pastor Tom isn’t a dummy,” Dan said. “If he has a choice between his flock and an old hazardous tree, he’s going to pick people every time.”

Lillian sighed. “How can I make you understand how much that tree means to me now?”

“Mom I get it, it’s nostalgic.”

“No!” Lillian burst out. “It’s more than that. My DNA is there on the tree. Mom was pregnant with me when she and Dad met there. So, I was there. I know my parents too. They said some really important things to each other before he went off to war. There’s more to it than just nostalgia. I have a

postcard for nostalgia. I need for that tree to live. And I think our ancestors are buried under it”

“What? Do you have proof?”

“Almost, I have been doing some research on the family name Tilridge and I just need to make one or two connections.”

“Yes, Adam told me that you were at the Schuylkill County Courthouse searching marriage certificates and property deeds.”

“It’s kind of dead though.”

“Stop being a smart ass, will you please?”

“Mom, calm down. I think I have a way of helping you keep that tree.”

“You do? You’re joking.”

“Nope. I’m serious. I think I have a way to make that tree last, well, almost forever.”

“Oh, my goodness. How? Tell me now,” Lillian insisted.

“I will, but you have to buy me lunch first.”

## *April 1945*

After crossing the Rhine, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army moved east into central and southern Germany. Fighting seemed to be less intense to Harry. Then out the blue his unit was under fire.

“Get Down! Get Down!” yelled the Captain.

Pain seared through Harry’s gut.

He tried to stretch out but his body refused to let him straighten out.

“How you doing Mars?”

Harry tried to stand up. “I think I’m...” he paused and the world went black.

*Waldkirchen, Germany*

Harry woke up with clenched teeth. The pain in his gut was driving him insane. It seemed to come in cycles. Every fifteen minutes or so it hit him hard. And then it was five minutes of teeth-gritting, harsh-grunting and then he’d be good to go. Until the next 15 minutes came. The faces over him were blurred. Some sounded male, some sounded female. They were talking about him.

“How many, doctor?”

“One Syrette this time, wait ‘til the quarter hour though. Too close together and we’ll kill him.”

Harry felt a cool hand on his forehead. He was oozing sweat and blood and pus and burning up with fever. That hand felt so good. Don’t take it away, he thought.

“He’s not doing well here,” the female voice said. “We may need to move him again.”

“Obviously we’re sending him home,” the male voice said. The voice sounded flustered.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. I only think he’s in need of something more ... intricate.”

“I know.”

“Is there anything we can—?”

“I’ll contact the USS Relief,” the male voice said. “Pack his bags I’ll see if we can get him out of here by tomorrow.”

“Yes, doctor.”

The cool hand left his forehead and the pain returned with a vengeance.

“Doctor, he’s ...”

“Give him the morphine.”

“But you said ...”

“Give it to him now!”

Harry floated up off the gurney and then blacked out.

The days melted into one and then two and then after a week, Harry felt dizzy. His whole world was rocking. It wasn’t a dizziness in his head, it was his whole body. What kind of meds were they giving me? This was too much. He tried to get out of bed. He needed to talk to someone in charge because nothing was making sense. He tried to stand up, a wave of nausea rolled over him. Like seasickness.

He was at sea.

In a coherent moment, Harry reached out a hand toward the attending physician who was close to his cot. “Hey, fella, where am I?” His throat felt like sandpaper.

“You’re at sea, soldier,” the doctor said. He was a young man, younger than Harry. But he had a good face and a good smile. Reassuring, not sappy. To Harry, he looked like a guy who would tell you the truth whether you liked it or not. “You’re on the Larkspur. And you’re heading home. Probably be there in about five or six days, depending on the weather. Do you have any folks in South Carolina?”

“No, why?”

“Because it’s our first port of call.”

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Mabel took up knitting. Lots of women were making hats and scarves for the soldiers. "It's the least we can do, there are so many guys freezing from the frigid cold weather over there," said Mitzie Rogan. "They don't get care packages over in France." Mitzie's brother wrote regularly to her and her mother. Mabel was jealous of the all the news Mitzie was getting. But Mabel knew Harry. He was no letter writer.

"My Joey says that no one has the right kind of hats," Kathleen Switzer said. "He wrote me a letter saying that some guys don't even have boots." Kathleen's son also wrote home. Rumor had it he wasn't coming home, having fallen in love with a French mademoiselle. He wanted to stay there.

Mabel laughed. "It's not very good." She held up the gray knitted wool cap. "I betcha this wool hat goes to the soldiers in Guadalcanal." Knitting was yet another way to keep her hands busy and it was the least she could do. So many women had gone to work in the cities because manpower and men were in such short supply. Judging by the loss of life from the war, Mabel figured the women would have to stay in those jobs.

Sometimes a postcard would come in from Harry and she'd see a picture of a landmark in France. The Eiffel Tower looked pretty impressive. How amazing you got to see it in person, Harry, thought Mabel. Harry would only write his name and the date on the card. The postcards arrived about three months after the date. Mabel knew getting any kind of mail was a small miracle. The postcard that came that day which her son handed to her made her drop her yarn. The fluffy ball rolled off her lap and bounced across the floor, over to the baby's playpen.



Mabel read the postcard again--

*Got sick. Coming home on a hospital ship.  
Will see you soon. Love Harry*

The post card was dated, October 6, Charleston, SC. Mabel looked at the Pine Grove National Bank calendar, it was October 13. She left the knitting on the floor. She climbed up on a chair and got the coffee can down from the cabinet. Ripping the lid open she heard the coins ring all over the floor. She gathered them up and ran out of the house. She rounded up the kids and begged her oldest to watch Lillian for a few minutes. Mabel ran down the road and asked for a ride to the telegraph office in Hunters Run. She needed to get word out to everyone. Harry was home!

Harry was home. On American soil. Banged up a bit, but still here. In one piece. Mabel nearly fainted from relief. She didn't want a gold star on her window. She wanted a husband. She remembered their meeting under the oak tree. She had kept the postcard of the Great Oak in her purse tucked in her top drawer. She pulled it out every now and then at night when the kids were in bed. Sometimes it made her feel closer to Harry. Other times it felt like a lifetime again or someone else's life, entirely. Most of all she remembered it was the day that she told God what to do. Well, it seemed that God was very good at listening.

Harry stayed in South Carolina for what seemed like only minutes. He awoke to hear he was going to undergo surgery. But not here. They moved him, roughly, onto an ambulance transport to a train. He was transported on an old freight train

that rocked as much as the ship did. In and out of consciousness, Harry was grateful for the morphine that seemed to make the intermittent pain bearable. It never went away. He felt like his teeth would break sometimes.

He arrived in upstate New York and was transported to Brentwood Military hospital.

“We’ll take good care of you soldier,” the attendant promised.

“Hope so,” said Harry.

“Looks like you’re slated for emergency surgery tomorrow,” he frowned. “For an appendectomy. As well as exploratory for shrapnel in the gut.”

“Just don’t take out any good parts,” Harry joked and then he passed out.

Once more Harry was on a train this time he was heading south. All he was told now was that the surgery went well, but he needed to be moved to a facility that specialized in rehabilitation. He was being sent to Valley Forge Hospital for final recuperation. The leaves in Pennsylvania were beautiful. He wrote to Mabel and told her he was getting closer and closer to home. The good news was that he was pretty sure they were done with his gut. The pain was gone but he had been on his back for so long, he needed to be taught how to walk again.

Those were the hardest days for him. Mabel wanted to visit. She’d ask her brother Tom to drive her to see him. But Harry said no. It killed him to say it. But he had to be stronger. His first step out of bed and he fell flat on his face. He wouldn’t be humiliated like that in front of his wife. He

grunted and groaned through two hours of walking “lessons” with crutches and then hopping around without them. He then was winded for almost the same amount of time. He felt exhausted. It also seemed to him, that he had to use the crapper for an abnormal length of time. Sometimes there was blood in the pot but other days it was all normal. Somewhere between Germany and the United States, Harry lost a bit of himself.

When he finally saw Mabel, he had a little ray of hope maybe things would be okay. She kissed him all over and asked a million questions, none of which she waited for the answer to. Tom helped him into the back of his car and took him home. Mabel waited on Harry hand and foot. Until one day he told her enough, he was going back to work.

He was not the same man. Harry worked harder than he ever did before. But he rarely enjoyed life. His concertina, miraculously spared harm during the war, was collecting dust in the attic. He acknowledged a few people but he had lost his sense of humor and maybe his sense of who he was.

While never cruel to his children, he found it hard to look at them. Small version of himself that he couldn't quite remember. Almost ignored them. He barely spoke. Only orders now and then. Take out the trash, help your mother. Gas up the tractor. The children sensed the difference and the mood in the house shifted from one of jubilation to somber silence.

One night, Mabel pulled him aside.

“Harry, Harry, we...we gotta talk,” she stuttered. “You can't be a stone for the rest of your life.”

Harry was quiet for a long while.

“Mabel, I want to talk but I just can’t,” he said finally. “Some of it’s too horrible. I wake up in the middle of the night—”

“I know,” Mabel interrupted him. “I can’t sleep when you can’t sleep. Maybe you just need to talk to me.”

“I don’t want to tell you Mabel,” Harry said.

“Look, I’m tough, I can handle it.”

“No, no you can’t!” Harry snapped and walked out to the lawn. “I’m going to get the Chevy off the blocks. Going to ask Tom for some help.”

Then he started to drink—at first it was just a beer here and there. Seemed okay on a Friday night after a long work week. Then he needed one to get through the weekend. It evolved into a routine. After work to where he knew the beer was always cold. Around the corner from the Farm & Fed, Harry walked to VFW Post 3432. He felt compelled to be there with men who shared much of his own experience. Those who were the forgotten ones. The ones that the war didn’t destroy but were injured were given parts of their skin and body parts back to them in order to return home and walk among the living. It was cruel but an effective way for soldiers to pretend to be normal.

But there was nothing normal about them. There was nothing normal about Bobby Fogerty’s withered hand. He was feeding a cartridge belt into a Madsen, “And the damn thing ate my hand!”

Nothing normal about Jack Yudishak who was left with half his face. Too close to a grenade and not enough skin to

properly stitch it together. His wife left him because it was just too hard to look at him.

And nothing normal about the demons that crept into Harry's dreams. The monsters of his damaged interior where a ricocheted bullet tore up his insides so badly, appeared as soon as he closed his eyes. The surgeons took his spleen and a yard or so of his intestines. They left him with pain and meager meds to heal. But the infection ruined him even further, the sulfa drugs gave him headaches, fatigue and nightmares that he couldn't escape. Nothing normal about the soldiers—the former residents of the town of Pine Grove.

The area CCC camp was abandoned. Having served their purpose, the camps where the men worked, before they joined the war. And then those workers died or returned home to jobs at the lumber mill or the steel mill or the mines. Part of the camp was returned to nature by the forest service. Another part was bought by the Boy Scouts to use to train them in the manly arts of outdoor life. It will never train them for anything like trying to build a fire amongst the ice-coated trees of the Ardennes. How to bury dead soldiers who were alive and talking to you one second and blasted through the head, the next. Or how to re-enter life without any preparation for how much the world changed while you were hunkered down in a trench. Harry needed to return to something normal.

And that normal was farming.

The farms always need extra hands but machinery and technology shortened a man's day. Tractors, combines, harvesters and even silos had been upgraded and improved.

The only thing that was a constant for Harry was the smells. The farm still stank of manure in summer, smelled like burning leaves in fall, smelled of smoky wood fires and mince pie in winter and smelled of fresh mowed grass in spring. The smell of dirty muddy dogs, soiled diapers, Mabel's butter cakes and even Mabel; these smells reoriented him to the life he remembered and dreamed about.

Mabel still nagged him to spend more time with the kids. "Harry, they're growing up so fast," she said. "You'll turn around one day and they'll be gone off and married."

She was right. Their oldest Susan was driving their tractors and begging for the old Chevy to come off the blocks. Their son Eddie was in love with the girl next door, the next in line, Dana, was mooning over boys in her school and younger sister, Karen, teased Dana mercilessly about her flirting and baby, Lillian wasn't a baby any more. Lillian was walking, done with breast feeding and saying "Daddy" and "Mama". Lillian was even sitting at the table feeding herself, no more sitting in a high chair. This morning Mabel reminded him of the Great Oak Tree they stood under before he was deployed. "Remember that big old tree? It put down roots Harry, we're putting down roots, too. But you gotta go water your roots, you know?" She nodded towards the children. *A man's gotta water the roots of his dynasty or it'll die out*, he thought.

Time to get out of his rut. Time to drive the Chevy. Time to move on.

Slowly but surely things returned to a rhythm. The earth never let Harry forget who he was. No matter how much innocence he or the world lost, he still had children to raise, a

farm to run, and coal to dig. The world could speed by but the clouds always drifted slowly. The rain always came, the snow always blew in the windows and sun always came out after the storm. Some things never changed and thank God for that.

## 1946

The funeral was well-attended. There were two types of attendees, those who were genuinely sorry that Jan Herrstadt drowned in the mining accident. And those who were just curiosity seekers. But everyone wanted to look like they cared, thought Harry. Until last week no one even knew you could drown in a mine. All you heard about were collapses or falls. But now the mines were going deeper. Richer veins of coal seemed to be hidden thousands of feet below the surface. Unfortunately, for every ton of coal, there had to be almost 30 tons of water pumped out of the mine. Whole lakes were formed from the forced evacuation of the water from pumps. Jan's death occurred on the day the pump gave out. The water back-flowed with such force, it knocked him back against the wall of the tunnel. He was most likely dead before he was submerged, the coroner told the family. "Oh, I think his number was up," said his father. "It's never where you're going to die, it's just when."

Harry felt Jan's death to his core. The Mars family had dirty fingernails coming out of the womb. They were farmers or miners. They dug the soil every day of their lives and there wasn't shame in it. After the mine strikes, pay increased and there was some lip service to safety protocols, but nothing got

safer. Technology was available, but never utilized. There was a whole new Bureau of Mining established. All sorts of permits and forms now had to be filled out, regulations followed, hearings to attend and public notices to be read by the miners. All these things slowed mining down but not much safer. But the regulations sure made bureaucrats fat and happy.

There was talk about a Conowingo Tunnel that was to be the underground water way they would divert all the water into the Conowingo River in Maryland. They had planned it for a while. But right now, the blueprints were just sitting on someone's desk. And some kid like Jan was going to drown tomorrow. And there would be more funerals. And no one would care.

After the funeral, Mabel and the kids went home. Harry found himself with his brother-in-law Tom having a beer at the Tuplehocken Rod & Gun Club.

“Don't worry,” Tom consoled Harry. “The world is going get better.”

“Oh yeah? From what I see things are getting worse,” Harry said. He looked around the room. The men in the room were war alumni and members of the club. The mood was somber. I'm not the only one with demons, thought Harry.

“No, no,” Tom insisted. “There's a lot of good things coming our way. Here's what I think—” Tom was interrupted by a chair being knocked over. Karl Delliker was staggering over towards them.

“Hey! Hey you,” Karl yelled pointing at Tom. “Where the hell were you?”



“Whaddya mean?” Tom was confused. “I was at the funeral. But I was—”

“No!” Karl yelled, now in front of Harry and Tom. “The war, you idiot! You were never deployed, were you?”

“The hell I wasn’t,” Tom responded, anger growing. “I was stationed in Hawaii.”

“After the bombin’ I heard,” Karl was breathing heavily on both men. He was swaying, his body infused with alcohol. “You coward! Comin’ in after the fights over!”

“Hey, Karl, that’s enough,” Harry stood up and put his hands on the man’s shoulder and moved him back a few feet away from Tom. “Time to go home.”

Karl pushed back and staggered towards Tom. “Fight’s not with you Harry. It’s with your yellow coward of a brother-in-law.”

“Hey, shut up!” Tom yelled. He reached for Karl, but Harry stood in his way.

Harry kept his voice low. “Don’t you ever call my brother-in-law a coward, got it, Karl?”

“Ah, you shut up, too,” Karl said and made a clumsy swing at Harry. “You’re a...a...jackass anyways.”

Harry shoved Tom aside and said, “Apologize, Karl.”

“Not on your life,” Karl sneered.

Harry planted his feet and launched his left fist at Karl’s mouth. The blow jerked Karl backwards, but he remained standing.

“Apologize,” Harry repeated.

Karl’s answer was to swing wildly in Harry’s general direction. He landed a few fists on Harry’s arm, but nothing to

slow Harry down in the least. Harry pummeled Karl until the man sunk to the ground. Blood seeped from Karl's right eye, mouth and left ear. His eyes rolled back in his head and sputtered, "Nuff, nuff."

Tom pulled Harry away. "Apologize Karl."

"Sorry," gasped Karl. "Sorry."

The patrons and bartenders who held their collective breaths during the bloody exchange sighed in relief. "Prop him up," the bar tender ordered. Karl's drinking buddy doused him with cold water.

Harry and Tom left without paying for their drinks. There was no need. Their table had a stack of ones nestled by their empty mugs, donated by a grateful brotherhood, who never tolerated disrespectful jackasses. It was the brotherhood of servicemen who respected each other no matter in which arena (Europe or Pacific) they fought. A few GIs like Karl tried to make one arena a deeper hell than the other. Germany had surrendered on May 7, 1945, the war in the Pacific had continued until after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 and Nagasaki August 9, 1945 and the world waited for Japan to surrender. Then on September 2, 1945 aboard the USS Missouri, Japan signed the official surrender.

In bed that night, Mabel stroked Harry's abdomen and ran her hand along the long vertical scar. She burst into tears.

"Stop Mabel," Harry said. "I'm okay, that fight didn't hurt me none. Plus, I'm healed up and stitched up, thanks to Uncle Sam. It's not like they took my soul or anything like that."

"What did they take?" Mabel asked. "It's an awfully big scar."

“Well, let’s see, they took my spleen, and I think a few feet of gut,” he paused, “and I think they took out a lung, a kidney, part of my liver and some of my bladder.” He paused again. “But I saved my heart for you,” he laughed.

“Stop it,” she reprimanded him. “But did they really take all that?”

“No, no, Mabel, I was pulling your leg,” he said holding her tight. “I’m all here; whatever they took out, so help me, I don’t need it.” He kissed her forehead. “Come on, let’s work on baby number six.”

The true fact is that Harry was very lucky to be alive. The surgeons never saw a person with Harry’s condition survive. A good portion of his small intestines was ischemic and had to be removed. The army surgeons cut and removed a few feet of his small intestines and performed one of the first anastomosis of the small intestines. Harry’s prognosis was grim and if he did survive, he probably would not be able to work or live long.

# *The Soul of a Tree*



TREES WILL TELL YOU A STORY  
IF YOU LISTEN.

*David A Schneck*

*The mighty white oak stands tall and wide in a cemetery shading the residence and the visitors for over 600 years. She listens to and comforts everyone who seeks her shelter from the elements.*

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