

Isaac My Son

Carl West and Katherine MacLean

Carl West and Katherine MacLean are married and live together in a handbuilt house on twenty acres of Maine woods surrounded by beautiful, tiny, granite swimming pools. They paint, sculpt and write, do carpentry, build greenhouses, cut trees and move the landscape around in wheel barrows, and occasionally they sell something.

The idea for the following story came from a Maine ex-Marine back from the Vietnam war with a job in Portland. He explained over coffee how he had returned home to a Micmak town in the north woods and found his girl and his best friend had married when he was listed missing in action. His parents had sold his clothes and guns and traps and trapping rights.

"He was rescued from murdering them by passing out drunk in the woods on top of spilled wine bottles," MacLean adds. "While unconscious, he talked with an old man who gave him fatherly advice and seemed totally real. The fatherly voice took all the pain and anger from him, and he woke up under a giant pine, under a pile of pine needles, feeling newly clean inside and changed forever. Later, he heard it was called a Grandfather Tree.

"Mycelium mat of the kind that feeds pine roots really seems to have some relation to neural fibers of the dendrites of the brain, and they die at 106 degrees," she explains. "More and more cellular life is being found to be a symbiotic fusion of originally separate beings. The mycelium-neuron suspicion is in scientific literature that was brought to our attention by Christopher Mason, my son. I worked it into a plot that Carl changed and wrote."

Katherine MacLean is the author of numerous short stories and novels that have been translated into twenty languages. She was the recipient of the 1971 Nebula Award for her novella "The Missing Man." The Diploids (1962), a collection of some of her stories from the 1950s—including the wonderful "A Pyramid In The Desert"—proved a major distraction to the editor of this book, then thirteen, when he should have been applying grammatical Band-Aids to splintered syntax. (My apologies and thanks, therefore, albeit belated, to Alan Jones, my long-suffering English master at Leeds Grammar School, who would often ask where I thought such behavior as reading paperbacks during lessons would get me. Here's the answer.)

Carl West has taught art and is a former police officer who lived and traveled through Central America and the South Pacific. He has co-authored one novel with MacLean—Dark Wing—and now divides his time between his farm and writing science fiction. Right now, they are both working on their own books as well as collaborating on a third science fiction novel.

Whoever thinks that only big is beautiful, begin here...

All day long they climbed, the boy lagging behind him, the two working higher and higher, past the houses, past the roads, through sloped meadows, circling brush and brambles, resting in thin forests. The boy lagged and wandered and asked the same questions over and over in a dull mumble.

The father remembered the happy, almost singing voice of his son before the fever, the clever words, now stopped. Tears stung his eyes. He stopped and shared soda and sandwiches with the boy, and watched him for signs of improvement.

It had been a long year of waiting and watching, the two away from schools, out of doors, the child, regaining health and grace, the father losing money, getting behind on his research. He had talked with old locals who remembered what medicine men had done for the brain damaged, the spirit-lost. Their stories had agreed.

Above, projecting from a distant white line of granite ledge towered the green-black spike of a huge hemlock evergreen, "Grandfather Tree." They were closer now, but the climb was steep. He turned aside to find an easier slope. The boy was tired. The whining repetition of the boy's voice was a dull pain in his

ears.

The late afternoon sun sent long lengthening shadows and pools of cooling dark. He turned back to one and took the boy's arm. "Let's rest, then I'll carry both packs if you collect some firewood on the way."

The boy looked up dully and mumbled, "Straps hurt," and did not take off his straps. The father had to repeat twice before the boy understood and dropped his pack.

Later, his father shouldered both packs and trudged more slowly up the trail, while his boy ran ahead, gathering wood, cracking dead branches off trees with a silent grace that was different from the enthusiasm and exclamations of discovery of the years before the fever.

"Healthy," his father said. "Animal," his silent observation added and he ground his teeth against anger. The city doctors had said there was no hope. On the trails through Maine and Canadian forests, collecting botanical specimens, bringing his son, old Indians had looked at the boy and remembered that the spirit lost to a fever or blow on the head could sometimes be brought back by offerings to a grandfather tree that seemed a bad dream.

Under the great tree there was a wide spread of rounded ground, like a thick rug cushioned with fallen pine needles two feet deep. While the boy built a fireplace on the windswept granite ledge, his father carried one of his flakes of white granite up to the shade of the great tree and dug a groove. He lifted the bedding of pine needles and folded it back like layers of blankets until it turned damp and dark and showed magic silver threads.

He was reassured by the sight of the mold. Trying not to break any of the silver web, he dug deeper until small tree roots stopped his fingers. It was deep enough. He smoothed it neatly into a body-sized trench, picked up the rock and called his son.

Afterward, he replaced the brown, damp layers with their silken white threads, tucking them in around the damaged bloody head and over the kerchief he draped over the blank child's face, covering the motionless body, hoarsely singing the old native chants, and mixing it with calling on a god he no longer believed.

He sat beside the grave and remembered. He taught botany. A young native American studying at his college had come to his office and asked him about "ghost trees." He had confessed he had been blessed with advice and peace from a ghost tree after drunkenly trying to commit suicide beneath it, puking and spilling wine and drinking and leaking blood from crashing through brush and trying to cut his veins with a broken wine bottle, howling his rage against an unjust world until he passed out. He woke two days later under a huge old pine, feeling at peace, clearly remembering long talks with an old man who was a pine tree. The new peace of mind had lasted and become permanent. Afterward, the old men of his village had told him the tree was called Grandfather.

The botanist had tried to find the biggest hemlock hanging over the Indian student's home village. It was dark under the great old tree. He felt a presence over him and looked up, but it was not an old man, it was the dark branches of the tree. The last purple clouds of sunset were fading in the west and he could no longer see his son's grave.

In the dark he stumbled and crashed downhill toward the ghostly glimmer of white rock ledge and fell by the two backpacks and the unused pile of firewood and lay waiting. After many hours he turned on an electric lamp and opened a book on growing spruce trees. It opened to a folded page.

"The long threads of mycelium mesh substitute for the shorter root threads of the tree and bring nourishment to an evergreen from a much wider expanse, often from a radius of fifty feet around an old isolated tree. In exchange for sugar and possibly aromatic terpenes in the sap sent down from the green top, the mat interfaces with the tree root and sends up minerals and dissolved nitrogen nutrients. The mat also recognizes the taste of certain diseases and virus infections that strike trees and provides appropriate antibiotics such as the mold provides for itself. It is notable that Larch, Pines, Spruce and Hemlock growing on almost pure rock but with a thick mycelium mat inhabiting the surrounding mulch are conspicuously taller and straighter, and have often lived and grown well beyond the lifespan of evergreens rooted in the normal soil of bottomland.

"We recommend that researchers look for the best mycelium samples below the fastest-growing

pinus in the most barren ground. It is worth noting that the samples of white mycelium threads collected must be kept in a cool damp medium in the dark and never exposed to a temperature higher than 105.5 Fahrenheit. It has been pointed out that 105.5 to 106 is the critical death or dysfunction temperature of the neurons of the human brain and this coincidence has launched speculation among the proponents of the chimeric theory of evolution that cells are symbiotic associations of different organisms, that a case can be argued that nerves had originally been mycelia...."

He stopped reading. This book had misled him into this terrifying act. He put his head in his hands. Thoughts whispered: If the silver threads insert themselves into tree roots to feed and heal the tree in exchange for sugar water with terpenes and aromatics... Exchange...aromatics...alcohol...wine. Greeks...libations. The story of the student's leaking blood and bottles of spilled wine lying around him as he slept....

The father rose and carried bottles and cans up through the dark and poured all the remaining wine and all the boy's sodas around the brown earth blanket of his grave, and dissolved sugar in water and poured that too.

In the late morning he returned down the mountains, praying loudly and incoherently and not looking behind him. The boy followed, carrying both their packs and asking often, in a clear educated voice, "What's the matter, Dad? Tell me, what's the matter?"

But his father was afraid.