

Meeting up with an old friend

Elizabeth Shove

They called her Ashley, I don't know why. I didn't know her at all until she was about three, maybe four. She used to find her way out of the back fence of the garden and come over to see me. I was thrilled. Sometimes she brought her friends along. She would spend hours hiding them amongst my roots and pretending these little plastic figures lived in the crevices at the bottom of my trunk.

A few years later, she would bring a book and climb up my lower limbs. I loved that feeling, a small human being nestling in my boughs. By chance two of my branches had grown together to make a seat just right for a small person to enjoy. We loved being together.

I've lived long enough to know that this would be a passing phase, and so it was. Some seasons later, Ashley had outgrown these childish pursuits. She had a boyfriend. She'd lead this tall willowy lad out the back of the garden, following the path she'd taken so many years before. Then, in the privacy of my shade (or so they thought), they'd kiss and cuddle. She showed him what she called the 'throne' where she used to sit and read, and she marvelled at how tiny she'd once been.

I'm not easily shocked, but I have to say I was surprised that he chose this place, my place, to propose to her. He got down on one knee (apparently that's how you do it) and handed her a ring, right here, right above my roots. She blushed. My Ashley, blushing – whatever next!

Well, that was that. Or so I thought. Ashley moved away. Once in a while, she'd come back to visit her parents who still lived in the house the other side of the garden fence. When she did so, she'd make a point of coming to see me, sometimes with her family in tow. There were long gaps between these trips, but she'd come and when she did, she'd stroke my bark. If she was alone, she'd talk to me in confidence.

I won't repeat everything she said. Some things are best kept secret, but I can tell you that the willowy lad turned into a thick set, middle aged man, boring as hell. In the end, Ashley left him, and when her parents died some years later, she moved back to be with me. She liked her own company, and so did I. We were perfectly matched.

In her later years, Ashley didn't walk so well, but still she came to visit. She'd lean her stick on me and rest against my thickening trunk. She spoke to me softly. 'Maybe it's you I love the most.' I stiffened with pride. 'You are my oldest and probably my best friend in the world – and you, a tree. Fancy that!'

I don't know when Ashley died, and in any case, I often lose track of time. I guess this is normal since I am already more than 800 years old. I was still expecting her to visit but then the special party arrived. 'Here, it's over here, this is the place' yelled a little girl. She came over and gave me a big hug.

I looked down. It wasn't Ashley, but it was definitely someone like her. A woman scooped the little girl up and sat her on the seat made by my branches. 'Sit here while I sort out mum's ashes'. My needles tingled. Ash's ashes. Ashes to ashes.

I sighed and rustled wistfully. Human lives are so short. But never mind, we'd mingle together in the soil. She'd be meeting up with an old friend, and so would I.

I'm not so easy to find. Never have been. But these days I get one or two strangers coming by. It seems that I am listed as a 'veteran'. I am famous. I have outlived many generations. I have

survived wars, changes of government, and a host of airborne pathogens, but there is one person – my best friend Ashley - from whom I will never be parted.