

## TIME OUT OF MIND

'Your garden's so big, grandad. I can see squirrels and magpies in the trees. What a strange noise magpies make – it's as if they're choking.'

I laughed. Daniel is eight years old and rather adult for his age. He is often serious, pondering deeply about issues that interest him, and asking me interminable questions.

'How long have you lived here, grandad?'

'I was born here, son, eighty long years ago - ten times your age, in fact. The house belonged to my mother and father before me. I was their only child, so I inherited it when they died.'

'And these trees? How long have they been here?'

'Well, son, this used to be a huge estate with a manor house at the head of it, owned by Lord somebody or other. His family fell on hard times and had to leave. They knocked the manor house down, because it was falling apart. Some of the trees were planted at the same time the manor was built. According to the deeds to the house and what I've discovered from my research in the local library, the manor was built in the reign of James I.'

'Coo, grandad, when was he king?'

'1603.'

Daniel did a swift calculation, using his fingers.

'Grandad, that makes some of these trees over four hundred years old. How come they live so long?'

'Dunno, son, but see that huge oak near the boundary wall?'

'Yes.'

'That oak might still be around six hundred years from now. Some yew trees are believed to be older than Jesus Christ himself.'

'That's unbelievable. Why don't we live as long as trees, grandad?'

I smiled.

'Because we're made up of skin, bone and organs which decay in time. Seeing as you're so good with computers and the like, Daniel, I suppose we're programmed at birth to die. Look at me, all leather skin, bald head and varicose veins. I'm not long for this world.'

'Don't say that, grandad.'

I changed the subject.

'In a way, Daniel, trees mirror our own lives. They germinate, grow into saplings, mature, age, then die, just like us. See that hornbeam over there?'

'Yes.'

'I planted that forty years ago. Look at it now. In tree years it's only a teenager.'

'I've been up close to it, grandad. It's got yours and grandma's initials carved on the trunk.'

'That's right, son. I did that on the very day your grandma and I, God rest her soul, were married. We were very much in love and we wanted to do something to remind us of our love as we grew old together and the tree matured.'

'Are any of the trees in your garden dying?'

'Yes, son. That big ash over in the corner. It's caught a disease - they call it ash dieback.'

'So trees are like us - they catch diseases and they can die from them?'

'Yes, Daniel. Nothing that lives and breathes is infallible. God sees to that.'

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