

## **Once a mother, always a mother**

This forest is my Happy Place. Except it's no longer a forest, more the vestige of what was once; a spinney of thicket ringed elder and hornbeam, in the dip at its heart, a coven of sentinel beech trees, the last fragment of wildwood.

And happy? Well, not exactly. But, filtered through a caul of leaves, the sky is softer here, the earth, fungal and rich, freckled with bark mulch and light, the air dank with ripe rottenness and the scent of wild garlic. A secret place where I can escape the flat grey London pavements with their cranial fractures, the whine of traffic, the banal words of advice.

The trees have their secrets too. Underground, roots connect in a mycorrhizal network, exchanging water and nutrients. Older, mother, trees share sugar with their shaded saplings. Some will nurture fallen kin for centuries.

I find my spot, between a stump, fringed with moss and honey mould, and the queenly beech leaning over it.

*It's been two years. Time to move on, people say. But I can't.*

My back against the trunk, I relax into the concave between its gnarled stems, the Mother Tree, and I talk to her about Alfie.

Today, I told a colleague I have no children. Simpler than my backstory, but the words tasted bitter in my mouth, not so much betrayal, as another loss.

But what, I ask, am I without my child?

Beside me, umbilical roots reach out like ossified tentacles, leaves rustle in answer.