

THE GRAFFITI TREE

The tree hadn't always been known as the graffiti tree. It grew from a small seed into a strong beech sapling and was planted in the park. Its branches spread out like swirling antlers, the roots stretched out beneath the ground, digging into the soft soil. It was a proud presence of strength and shape, a king amongst the other trees.

One summer day a group of young men came into the park. They were about to leave school and start their working lives, in the pits and mills, factories and offices, in and around the town. They were full of cheer as the reins of youth were releasing them into a new-found freedom in which they could dream on how their futures might play out.

Henry, a rugged young man with a mass of dark hair, declared that he would work hard and with his first pay packet he would ask Beatrice, who had sat in front on him in the class for most of his school life, if she would care to accompany him to the dance at the Assembly Rooms. The others just laughed and said he had no chance; Beatrice was going to work for a bank, what would she want with an oik like Henry? Henry just shrugged and said 'we'll see'.

Sam, a slight lad with blond hair and wizard's feet when he had a football, said he had already asked Fleur to the dance and she had said yes.

Nick, who was tall and strong, said he was thinking of asking Tracy.

Robert was the quiet one, he said nothing.

"Rob" Henry asked "and what about you?"

"I don't know" Robert replied, "I am not sure who to ask."

Sam produced some apples and they all munched and laughed without a care in the world.

Henry looked at the Beech tree. "This has been the best day," he said. "Let's carve our initials into this tree, so that we can come back and remember this day." They all agreed and one by one they carved their initials into the tree.

When it came to Robert's turn he carved his full name, enclosing it in a heart and adding a "+" after his name.

Sam asked; "Robert plus who?"

"I don't know yet," Robert replied, "but when I do I will bring her here and carve her name underneath, so that I can not only remember this day, but also that day as well."

Nick called him a big softy as they all ran home to prepare for their last day at school. Only Robert turned back to take a look at the beech tree that had all their futures tattooed into its bark.

As the years passed the tree grew stronger and taller, its branches stretching out toward the sky as it reached out to fulfil the legends to bring renewal and stability into the park.

As time went on more young men noticed the tattoos carved into the bark and were enticed to add their own. A young man wanting to impress his girlfriend carved their names together in a heart one Valentine's Day. Years later seeing that heart another young man carved a cupid with his love's name.

But Robert's heart tattoo was still left with only his name.

And so, it went on. People passing the tree saw the names carved into the bark. Some just read them, others carved their own names or added words or dates of their own. Sometimes they left items tied to his branches. One tied his woolly hat round a branch. When her boyfriend scratched his name and her name and 'forever' on the tree, a girl propped a small mirror in the crook of his branches, laughing that it was so the tree could see what he looked like.

People came and went, couples came, families came, grandparents came, each sharing their memories of the tree and the days when they were young and carefree.





Then one day Robert returned and remembered the day when he and his pals were about to leave school and he had carved his name in a heart. He went to the place on the tree where he had carved his name. But it wasn't there, he searched around the tree but he could not find it. He turned and looked around the park to see if he had the right tree, but the more he looked, the more he realised this was the tree.

What was he to do, he was meeting someone to show them his name carved into the tree and now it was gone. It was as if the tree had given up on Robert coming back and had shed the bark with his name carved into it.

Robert sank down to his knees totally saddened; thoughts that his chance of true love may have passed flowed into his mind.

"Robert where are you?" the voice called.

Robert looked up and saw Hayley; she had her back to him. "I'm here," he replied.

She turned and saw him standing under the tree, she ran over to him.

"Is this it?" she asked. "Is this the tree?"

"Yes, but the carving isn't there anymore," he replied.

"Not there, but how?" Hayley asked as she looked towards the tree.

Robert moved next to the trunk. "It was here and now it's gone," he said, pointing to the tree.

Hayley came over and looked at the spot where Robert's hand was pointing. She looked around the tree and then she looked up into the branches.

"There it is," she said, "up there!"

Robert looked up and sure enough there was the heart with his name in it.

"But how did it get up there?" he asked.

"The tree grew, silly, and the carving moved up with it." Hayley laughed.

"Right" he said, "how stupid of me not to realise."

He began to climb up to the branch and he carefully carved Hayley's name under his. "There," he said, "it is done, just as I said it would be."

He jumped down from the tree and took Hayley in his arms and kissed her, then stood and looked up at the tree tattoo with both of their names until it was time to go home.

They left the park hand in hand and as they got to the gate, Robert turned back to take a look at the beech tree that had his and Hayley's new future tattooed into its bark.

Based upon the ideas from the workshop with the Tamworth Rangers.

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