

## Straight To The Heart



Keep back! Go on! Keep away with your hideous human feet, spreading diseases!

Oh, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude. It's this ash dieback disease. It's making me very jumpy. Okay, jumpy is perhaps the wrong word. We can't really jump, or move much. Well apart from sway from side to side in the wind and shake our branches to warn you about the witches. But us trees can be nervous just like you humans. Pity the poor ones starring as extras in all those scary movies. They're not paid, you know. Just expected to stand there and not shake even though they're terrified.

Anyway, where was I? Ash dieback. We ashes stare death in the face every day. What's that? No, I don't have it yet but it's only a matter of time, especially if you and your hands and feet get too close. Go on! Move back! You see, it's spread by infected ash logs and leaves. You haven't been in another wood recently, have you? Picked up any of that...you know....you know, *it*. I find it hard to say. Not ash dieback as such but the thing that the disease produces.

Fun. Gus. There you go. Horrible word. There's nothing fun about something that invades your body and rots your heart. It enters any little scrapes or wounds in our bark and gorges its way through our tissues, rotting our heartwood — that's the wood at the centre of our trunks and branches — making us weaker and weaker until we fall apart and...well, die.



*Illustration by Megan Metcalf*

It's a very slow death too. You could die of boredom waiting for it to finish you off, to be honest. It slowly eats away at you, anything between six to eight centimeters a year. Meanwhile, our leaves become all black as if we've been bitten by the frost, our shoots shrivel up into blackened stumps, the veins on our leaves turn brown, and sometimes we get these revolting white lumps on our leaf stalks. They look a little bit like fruit but don't you dare eat them! They'll give you a funny tummy and we don't want that, what with the lack of toilet facilities around here.

Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, the dreaded disease. You may have seen the signs on other trees. The dark diamond-shaped lesions to our trunks? And that's about the time when our glorious crown gives up and dies. Imagine all your hair falling out? That's what it's like for us.

It's the young ones I worry for. Us oldies can withstand multiple infections and still not catch it but not so with the saplings. No chance to live their lives. Here one minute, gone the next. You see, the disease takes them quickly a bit like your little humans I suppose.

It's heart-rotting and heart-breaking to think this disease, this no-fun-at-all-fun-gus is killing us all. Scientists discovered it a few years ago, 2012 I think, on the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, where they noticed it spreading like wildfire. I don't want to make you panic but what are you going to do without us? If all 150 million of us die across the UK? Who is going to stop the land flooding and keep the air clean? We are the 'tree of life', the Venus of the woods. Oh, yes. That's us. In Norse mythology they believed the tree of life to be an immense and mythical tree that connects the nine worlds. Closer to home, your ancestors believed we had healing and protective powers. Did you know they used to give newborn babies a teaspoon of our sap to protect them from disease? And sometimes they – the parents, not the babies – used to come along and make a cleft in one of our branches, and then pass children with weak limbs or wounds through the gap to heal them. Some of the sights we saw! I wouldn't have minded, but they just used to come along without even asking. Painful! But to be fair, they did bind the two parts back together afterwards, to heal as the child healed.

Oh yes, those were the days when people used to hold us in very high regard. Your ancestors were in fact very protective of us ashes. So, if we were hurt, they thought they'd get hurt too. It was like having your own personal bodyguard.

But all that was a long time ago. Nowadays you just want us for our bodies. Our wood. Most of you have forgotten about all our other qualities. Craftsmen have known about our strength for centuries. If you want a wood that withstands hard knocks without splintering, then that's us. We're the handles on your hammers and axes, your hockey sticks and oars. And that table and those chairs in your kitchen or dining room from a certain Swedish furniture store. That's us! We're very pale, interesting and rather beautiful inside, even though I say it myself.

And if anyone dyes their hair around here..., not looking at anyone in particular, apart from you Madam. Next time you pop into the chemist, check out the hair dyes and you'll see the colour 'ash blonde'. That's named after yours truly. Polish us up and we turn golden. Oh yes, and not

forgetting we make excellent firewood and charcoal but let's keep that to ourselves, shall we. We don't want to encourage any wannabe firestarters to add to the death toll.

But it's not just our lovely selves that you'll miss when we're gone. Think of all the creatures that live off us. There's over one thousand of them using us to nest in and feed off. You may not have heard of them all, but I bet you've seen some of them. I'm guessing you may have heard of the beautiful privet hawk moth? That's right... it's the one that looks like it's wearing a pink and black stripy jumper. Very fashion-conscious. Shame it doesn't look so good as a caterpillar. Almost looks like a snake to me, wriggling all over our leaves munching away in its bright green body suit, its flashes of mauve giving us a hint of what it's going to be wearing in a few weeks time. And don't get me started on their droppings! Leaves them everywhere. Disgusting. I wouldn't mind but they're massive. And whatever you do DON'T mistake them for liquorice like one visitor did a few years ago. Serves him right for being so greedy but still...

Oh, and what about the rowan trees? How are they going to protect themselves from the witches? Because we're the tallest trees around, you know, some of us growing up to 35 metres. I was tall once. Honest. Not any more now that I've been pollarded. For my own good apparently. But we're the looker-outers. The night watchers of the wood. Those shorty rowans aren't up the job. They're all going to have to learn to be brave, I suppose, or invest in some ladders or perhaps the kind people who look after the wood could build them some watchtowers.

Anyway, they're just going to have to learn to look after themselves because scientists reckon ash dieback's going to kill at least 98% of us on the Kent Downs. 98%! Then in the same breath, they tell us not to panic! That they're carrying out breeding resistance trials so us ash trees can live long into the future. Apparently, some of us are resistant to the disease. Branches and fingers crossed!

But just in case the resistance doesn't work, I thought it best to pass on the stories of Cromers Wood before it's too late and...I die. Gone from this world and into the great forest in the sky.

Oh, save your pity! I've had a good innings. Seen my fair share of life. I was *the* ancient marker for a byway for nearly 400 years before all your fancy satellite technology put an end to that. The things I saw!

What did you say? I'm looking pretty good for 400 years-old? Well, thank you. I don't like to boast but I'm actually the oldest tree here. And, it goes without saying, the most knowledgeable. A custodian of the stories of Cromers Wood. And have I got some stories for you.

Come then my friends. Gather closer...that's CLOSE ENOUGH!

Long time ago, there be witches in these woods. One friendly. One...let's just say, not so friendly. Trouble is they was identical twins. So you could never tell which witch was which.

Oh, come on, who has written this nonsense? (*Sighs*)

All you need to know is that one witch was good and the other, rotten as anything, though

not as rotten as the rottenest circus witch that ever lived and who just happens to make an appearance in this tale.

Farewell then my friends, and be gone with you to listen to the tale of the *Will You Marry Me Tree*.

The End

*Story written by Michele Sheldon*

**HAND OF DOOM  
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