

The Time Machine

by Richard Lewis

Arthur was never happier than when tending his garden in the sleepy Cotswold hamlet of Waterly Bottom, where he'd lived for more than thirty years. Now in his late seventies and hampered by arthritic joints, he walked with a stoop and his calloused hands resembled bark from one of the many apple trees in the orchard.

His deep affection for the trees had been passed down by his mother who admired them for what she saw as their silent contentment, never trying to be something they were not. Arthur had planted the orchard after moving all those years ago, alongside an existing Bramley apple tree. The old Bramley seemed to mimic him as it was also now badly bent over with age and struggled to hold its weight. Each year its limbs drooped ever closer to the ground, eventually becoming tangled in grass and weeds. It had also recently developed a blight which Arthur feared would spread to other trees.

The Bramley had produced many seasons of delicious fruit and Arthur, knowing it would have to go, struggled for weeks with his feelings about having to cut down such an old and loyal friend. It felt like removing a part of himself and made him acutely aware of his own mortality. Never the less, for the sake of the other trees it had to be done. He'd remove the Bramley and replace it with a variety more resistant to disease.

When the sad day arrived, Arthur, with tears in his eyes, expertly cut down the tree with his chain saw, setting the logs into neat piles for seasoning, which would later be used for fire wood. The smaller branches he stacked up to make a bonfire. He was a veteran of many a bonfire but this one would be different. The burning wood gave off a wonderfully sweet smelling smoke, yet as the fumes wafted into the air he sensed something strange happening to him, as if the Bramley was determined to have the last word.

Overcome by loss, his eyes became heavy and he drifted off into a deep reverie. The familiar smell transporting him back in time, his thoughts twisted with the smoke and crackled as if some mysterious time machine were being cranked into action; sending him tumbling down the years like falling leaves, into the embers of childhood. He found himself back in the garden of his youth.

Then a miraculous thing happened, his old bones became young again, enabling him to skip down the old garden path like a gambling lamb. Colours were impossibly bright, the grass greener than his wildest imaginings and the intense blue of the sky sang out as a benevolent sun smiled down from above. He marvelled at the wonder of it all; as if seeing everything for the first time.

At the bottom of the garden stood his mother, smoke curling around the skirts of her old gardening clothes, plaited hair tied neatly in a bun, feeding the bonfire with cuttings after the annual apple tree pruning.

“Mum,” he called out excitedly, as she piled more cuttings onto the fire. But his mother, focussing on the task, didn’t respond. He called again, “mum,” but still no response. ‘Perhaps she couldn’t hear because of the roar of the fire,’ he thought. Arthur ran over to give a tug at her skirt but when his hand went to touch the fabric, there was nothing to get hold of and the colours that had been so vibrant started to fade into shades of grey. Everything became insubstantial and a confusion washed through him.

Then, shaking him out of his reverie, he heard a voice calling, “Arthur, are you alright?”

For a moment he thought, ‘that’s not my mother’s voice.’ He could feel himself being hauled back through the years, the time machine now working in reverse, winding him back to the real world and the old man that he was.

“I was worried about you Arthur,” his wife said, “you seemed to be off in another world.”

“I don’t know what happened?” Arthur said, “I must have been dreaming I suppose.”

Yet he thought, ‘it had seemed all too real,’ and while he wouldn’t say it to his wife, he believed the sweet smelling smoke from the Bramley had provided a portal into the past.