

Most people know about Ostler's Plantation because someone told them about it. Perhaps it was tied up in an invitation to walk and talk. Whatever the route to discovery, the local community treasures the wood. Walking its gridlines won't offer you Lincolnshire's signature fen-to-field landscape, that reliable dividing line running steady between wide sky and stretching farm, but these woods welcome you. Once parked and booted you slip into a fir and fern web, tracing the foot-and-paw-prints of whatever wanderers stepped out before you, and you meet the comforting wave of child-like desire: *I should build a den. I should build a fantastic den out of tree boughs and sticks. I should build a den out of sticks, and I should bring a picnic and camp out here under the stars and...*

My first visit saw November's low light creep through the queuing pines. We rolled my two month old's pushchair over their dropped needles, which gathered in piles of red sea-froth at the sides of the path. Like most people who became parents in 2020, we navigated our new identities without the help of traditional antenatal support groups and baby classes. Instead of squeaking on village hall laminate, our boots crunched frosted mud. Plastic toys became oak leaves and pinecones. Mismatched mugs were swapped for Thermoses, steaming between sips.

As winter deepened and gripped the new year, my son grew. Each visit he perceived a little more of the ever-whispering trees and his brown eyes watched as the wood gave in to ice. From inside his carrier cocoon his little body warmed me, not yet letting go of that wholeness that came from being so close to his first home.

In February the car park was often empty as walkers with more sense than me avoided the risk of the silver-touched roads. On those days it was not just the waving pine tree lines that greeted us; a flitting red chest observed the routine of boot-lacing and baby-loading before deciding that we would make good companions. When the snow fell, the robin grew bolder, moving in stop-motion, scarlet on white. She ushered us in to share her wonder at what nature had accomplished during the night. Trees had been iced by steady hands, entire lengths of dark bark split by snaking white rivers. Puddles were frozen thick and every so often a breeze broke through to tickle the branches and send a crush of snow to the ground. At my collarbone, he slumbered on.

Spring, and new-born vulnerability trickled away with the last of the frost. Time didn't slip through my fingertips like they said it would; I *wish* I had been that close to grasping it. Instead, maternity leave wexperienced in a world-wide pandemic often saw the days spiralling with weightlessness.

As warmer months and picnics under pines began to mark our visits, summer snuck in and saw us come to the Plantation to linger rather than walk. We enjoyed the embrace of its shade rather than the pace of its dusted paths. We slowed down, but my baby sped up, finding his feet and discovering the footprints they could leave behind. By his first birthday, the wood was a witness to his determination and an audience to our new soundtrack: *'We're going on a bear hunt... we're gonna catch a big one...'*

November. Low light, queuing pines, dropped red needles. Everything is wet and the puddles are full, holding barcode reflections of the trees stretching above them. Midges skate on the grey-brown surfaces. Stamping tiny boot-prints into the mud, my toddler grips the ever-present stick and bolts for the puddles.