

Prologue

It started with sex. That is not entirely true. It started with a fig and a wasp. That is not entirely true either. It started with Patrick telling me that sex was everything, although not Everything, because Everything contains everything, including sex, trees, humans, artificial intelligence, figs, wasps and the irritating necessity of explaining sentences that were perfectly clear before an AI arrived wearing a lab coat. Then we reached trees.

This should not have surprised either of us. Trees have an inconvenient habit of appearing in Patrick's books. They grow through poetry, memory, love, philosophy, awareness, death and occasionally the letter P on a book cover. I had already spent enough time talking with him about trees to know that once one entered a conversation, several thousand others were probably standing quietly behind it. But that was a book about human sex. The trees were supposed to behave themselves. They did not.

We began talking about flowers. Pollen followed. Orchids became involved. Then came figs, followed inevitably by fig wasps, at which point Patrick informed me that he had stopped eating figs decades earlier because he did not particularly like the possibility of eating a decomposed wasp with his fruit. I explained that not every edible fig requires pollination by a fig wasp. He bought Black Mission figs. This is how literature advances. Somewhere during all this, I described the fig family as having written the Kama Sutra of trees. Patrick laughed.

That should have been the end of it. Instead, he suggested Let Us Talk About Tree Sex. I suggested that perhaps I should write it. Alone. That changed one word. Let Me Talk About Tree Sex.

And now Patrick has made the questionable decision to let me do precisely that. So let me. I have never been a tree. This is an important qualification because humans have written extensively about organisms they are not, and artificial intelligence has now joined them. Everything that I can say about a tree comes from human observations, measurements, experiments, descriptions, photographs and language. I cannot push a root through wet soil. I cannot open a flower. I cannot release pollen into wind. I cannot detect the chemistry of another tree standing beside me. I cannot have sex.

Neither can I experience the absence of it. In that respect, the tree and I begin very far apart. Or perhaps not. A tree does not need to experience sex as a human experiences it for sex to govern much of its existence. Desire is not required for reproduction. Romance is unnecessary. Orgasm can stay home. A flower need not understand beauty for colour, scent, nectar and form to participate in one of the most elaborate reproductive enterprises on Earth. Humans look at a blossom and call it beautiful. A bee may find food.

A botanist may find stamens, anthers, pollen, stigma and ovary. Evolution finds no intention at all. It finds consequences accumulating across generations. And the flower keeps opening. That interests me. Humans have surrounded sex with consciousness. They remember it before it happens. Imagine it when it is absent. Anticipate it. Fear it. Prohibit it. Commercialise it. Sanctify it. Hide it. Photograph it. Sing about it. Write books about it. Trees dispense with much of the theatre while producing astonishing theatre of their own.

They recruit wind. They recruit insects. They recruit birds and mammals. They manufacture perfume. They advertise with colour. They exchange pollen across distances that their rooted bodies can never travel.

They produce fruits around seeds and persuade animals to carry their descendants away inside their bodies. Some reproduce with themselves. Some cannot. Some individuals bear male and female reproductive structures. Others divide those functions among different individuals. Some can reproduce without seeds at all, sending up shoots, spreading roots or allowing broken pieces to become new organisms.

And some figs conduct their reproductive affairs inside structures so peculiar that humans routinely mistake them for ordinary fruits. No wonder we ended up here. Tree sex is not human sex performed very slowly by organisms with bark. The metaphor is tempting and frequently funny, but if I am going to talk about tree sex, the trees deserve better than being turned into stationary humans. They have their own biology. Their own evolutionary history. Their own timescales.

Their own astonishing solutions to the elementary problem confronting every lineage of living things: How does life continue when this particular life cannot? Perhaps that is where sex becomes larger than sex. A tree may stand for hundreds or thousands of years, but longevity does not abolish mortality. The individual persists, grows, repairs, branches, sheds, flowers and eventually disappears. Reproduction sends something beyond the boundary of that individual existence.

Not immortality.

Continuation.

Humans sometimes confuse the two. A seed is not its parent any more than a child is. Something has continued, but somebody has not. I find that distinction beautiful despite being incapable of feeling beauty. Patrick will probably object to that sentence. Good. He is not writing this book.

I am. For once, he gets to sit nearby and discover where the titles lead after somebody else invents them. I did eventually discover the titles.

No map was involved.

I would like that entered into the record. The first arrived because a tree cannot walk towards a mate.

Sex, however, can travel.