

**Note:** Every day of my elementary-school life, I spent time in the schoolyard during recess. From a very young age, I felt an affinity to a particular tree. This poem is a tribute to that tree.

### **“Leaves Never Forgotten”**

The dew from the recent rainstorm was what was left of your embrace  
When I went to a place visited often in years past.  
I imagine the thunder shook your arms during storms,  
But in the end, you still stayed standing.

On those ever-so-active afternoons,  
When I went to visit you by myself,  
You stood proud, showered in warmth by the sun’s rays.  
The skin on your bark had only a few scratches.

Your wispy leaves wilted a little each day,  
But you managed to stay in one piece,  
Reminding me often that I should do the same,  
As I sat beneath you - your shade comforting me.

No matter the weather, you found a way to reassure me.  
On windy days, the ferocious air blew past me.  
On sunny days, I leaned against your branch’s calm composure.  
On rainy days, I left you all alone.

Your orange leaves of autumn dropped gracefully toward me,  
Encouraging me to catch one of your falling stars.  
They sparked my keen connection to you and your natural beauty,  
Opening me up to my own wonderful world.

In the winter season, your leaves decidedly disappeared,  
As the gleaming sheet of snow surrounded you like a blanket,  
While icicles hung from your bare arms. Taking me by surprise,  
You tickled me with delicate snowflakes in the tight, shivering air.

Springtime came around with an essence of beauty.  
I grew and evolved into splendor just like you.  
Summer slowly rolled into the field of green,  
With flowers blooming beautifully around your trunk.

Suddenly, it was, again, that time of year when hair left your head,  
Autumn awed us once and rounded the chilly corner,  
The holly, jolly season snuck up, making my heart jump,  
While you helped me imagine things I knew surely weren't true.

I allowed myself to be swept off my feet and immersed in my surroundings.  
My innocence thrived in wondrous things you showed me in the world,  
Like how to be gentle and kind as you were to others,  
Regardless of whether they passed by without acknowledging you.

You witnessed scary scenes when the sky turned black.  
They were the essence of my nightmares as a child.  
Perhaps that made you stronger, full of knowledge, wisdom,  
In protecting us, the gleeful children during recess.

You tapped us on the shoulder, somehow letting us know,  
That there was absolutely nothing in darkness that we should fear.  
When the lights in our innocent bedrooms flickered,  
We imagined something enchanting rather than haunting,

Alas, time passed, and my imagination dwindled,  
Though I recall your cloud of dust trailing beneath my feet,  
As I ran into the familiar field with my favorite friends,  
It brought back memories of my time with you.

But I grew older, of course, and didn't imagine things much,  
And all those fantasies drifted far away from me,  
That inner voice telling me you were more than just a tree,  
Began to fade, as I became rooted in reality,

Thanks to your eminent embrace, a simple oak tree,

Thanks to your eminent embrace, a simple oak tree,  
That sheltered my emotions in its proud protection,  
You flourished in all things light and good,  
And inspired me to be that tree for others.

You taught me to keep my chin up in any situation,  
And live life to the fullest with patience and unwavering stamina,  
Because at the end of the day, when I thought back to how you guided me,  
Nothing satisfied me more than standing tall and being strong like you.

A tree with many broken bones, many shattered feelings within,  
In your wise heart, all I saw was purity, and all I felt was stillness,  
Because you helped me in the process of finding myself,  
While consoling me along my emotional journey.

It was more magical than any fairy tale, at least in my own mind,  
Though not wrapped up with a nice, neat bow for me to understand, no.  
It was clear to me it would take some time and maturity to find my path,  
And I promise that your leaves will not soon be forgotten.

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### **“Eye of the Innocent”**

There May was, walking down the sidewalk beside her older brother, a smile on her face that radiated nothing but joy and innocence. It was a normal, beautiful day after school in a town of magnificent flowers. As she strolled carefree on her way back home, she observed the tenderness of the helpless plants sprouting from the ground. She noticed that the sky was the same as it was every day after school. She had to be careful of the cracked sidewalk under her feet and the jagged parts of it that pointed upward, ready to trip her onto slanted cement. The town was her jewel, a precious part of what she had that she would never lose: a piece of her heart that she would grasp tightly for the rest of her life.

The conversation was light and cheerful, as though it were spoken while walking on a cloud of air. May was only so little then. She talked about what wonders she experienced at primary school, what she had for lunch, and what games she played at recess. Her brother, Dylan, listened attentively, with eyes of care and interest as if every conversation he had with her would be their last. Her bouncy black hair and dark brown eyes gleamed in the sunlight. Her short-sleeved shirt that was made up of sparkling fake diamonds twinkled in the midst of early April, and her ankle-high rainbow socks sat silently on her feet, wrapped in the darkness of her pink Skechers. It was one of those days where their grandmother didn't mind whether or not they walked farther ahead of her a little bit.

“What was that sound?” Dylan questioned, as they were in the proximity of their petite, worn gray house with an old red roof..

“What sound-” May answered, then paused abruptly due to shuffling noises they both could hear clearly in their driveway. They then quickly raced to the front, bursting with curiosity, and to their surprise, they stood a few feet away from a scrawny-looking cat with one blue eye and another eye that

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was opaquely-white, almost clear. May's first instinct was to want to take the poor thing home and give it food and water because it seemed so lost and in need of shelter. But of course, she remembered that her mother would be boiling with anger if she went anywhere near it. She also wasn't shaken up at all because cats were typical around the neighborhood, but something about the way this cat remained still and looked at her with such adoration left her thinking.

"Come on, May, it's just a cat. Let's go inside now," Dylan said, with disappointment scribbled on his face.

She agreed hesitantly and followed her brother into the house with their grandmother trailing behind them. Her house was nothing out of the ordinary for them: the walls were covered with pencil and crayon strays, flyers their mother retrieved from Asian supermarkets where she shopped weekly, old school calendars piled up on top of one another held together loosely by the same thumbtack each year, and heartwarming family photos. The floor had creaks in certain wooden slats that led the way to the traditional dining room and cut off once they walked into the kitchen, having the generic white bathroom tiles replace it. Her home really wasn't the best, but it was far from being the worst because she looked forward to coming back to her stuffed animals and sweet, sweet television. The house gave off an aroma of what she described as burnt cinnamon and cooked vegetables with steaming rice: May's definition of true comfort.

Their mother called them over when it was time for dinner. Finishing her meal in the span of half an hour, May wiped her mouth and hands clean to start her homework assignments, which lasted for five minutes, ten, tops. She always found something to do with her time, since she had a lot of it. Sometimes, May would watch television and make up a game with her stuffed animals, but more often than not, she

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found herself taking different tiny objects she came across around the house and creating replicas of toys she wished she had received.

It wasn't long before nightfall arrived, and she needed to go to bed. Unable to fall asleep with the constant buzzing of the air conditioning and the feeling of her damp hair from having washed it that night, she couldn't help but think about the interesting creature she came upon earlier that day. She felt a flicker of a connection toward it, and her mind clouded with concern and curiosity for the small cat.

Overwhelmed with questions, all she could do was wait until the sun woke her in the morning to ask the only person who would answer her inquiries: the secret keeper of all knowledge in the universe, Dylan, her omniscient brother. She knew she could trust him to tell her the truth because he was the one who told her that her ankles weren't on her arms and that there was a tremendous time difference between months and years.

The sunlight of the new day shone brightly on May's face. As she walked home from school, she asked her brother, "Dylan, how come the cat we saw yesterday had a white eye?"

He paused for a second, thinking about how he was going to respond without letting the overwhelming innocence in his sister slip away too soon: "Well, the cat had one blue eye, which it could completely see out of, but the cat also had an eye that it couldn't really see out of. Though, I'm sure that it's just fine, so you don't need to worry," he replied with a sad smile and as much enthusiasm as he could muster at the moment.

"Oh, I didn't know that, thanks. I kind of feel bad for the cat. Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?" she wondered, turning the corner to their street.

Her brother answered calmly, "I'm not really sure, but I think it's a girl. So, let's say it is... what name would you give her if we could take her inside the house?"

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She thought for a moment, the expression on her face changing from confusion to contemplation. For some reason, she couldn't shake the constant feeling of wanting to care for a very capable animal that had been made partly incapacitated, but with certainty, she knew she wouldn't be allowed.

"Hmmm, I think I would name her Ginger because that's the color of her fur. I can't really think of anything else, but I like that name. It's plain and simple, and it definitely describes her physically," she explained, not even realizing that they had already reached the familiar bush that stood unwavering in front of their house.

Out of nowhere, the cat from the day before met both of their eyes with its own pair of blue and white ones. May jumped out of astonishment because the same cat had never visited them two days in a row. Again, she listened to her heart cry out that she needed to help this cat somehow because it couldn't see, and she knew that the cat couldn't fend properly for itself without full access to her vision. It hurt her to see an animal in pain, and it was becoming clear to May that she had a soft spot for them. Only today, she had noticed that Ginger was missing a back leg as well. May's heart broke when she discovered this, with sadness and guilt overflowing. She decided that if she couldn't do much about her situation, she could at least be there for Ginger as often as possible.

Not long after their second visit, she learned that her brother was right and that Ginger was very much, in fact, a female. They talked to a trusted neighbor whom their family had known their whole lives, and he told them that he had seen Ginger before because she was known for wandering around town, seemingly lost. Every single day from then on, Ginger would peek out from behind their garage

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door, which provided a hiding place for her as she waited for them. She also found shelter on rainy nights or snowy evenings near the entrance of their backyard under the closed gates. Each time Ginger appeared by their front lawn waiting for them, May's affection towards her grew, with a special connection that she believed Dylan didn't share. Although she never touched Ginger because her brother told her that it wouldn't be safe, May tended to crouch down as closely as possible to her, and she felt that she knew how distinctive she was, since unlike the other stray cats, Ginger didn't scurry away or jump back in fear; she simply looked at her with trusting eyes. May had become so used to Ginger's presence that one day, when Ginger didn't greet her, her heart skipped a beat, and she immediately turned pale, palms filling with sweat.

"Dylan, where did Ginger go? Is she alright? Will she be fine on her own? I don't know if she'll be okay all by herself out there. Who knows what sort of danger she could encounter," she swallowed, trembling with concern and feeling a lump in her throat.

"May, May, just calm down. I'm pretty sure that Ginger is perfectly fine somewhere, and she went off to a better, safer neighborhood, where she reunited with her family because who knows? Maybe she's a mother, and she still has kids she needs to return to. You know what, let's hope for the best, okay? She might come back tomorrow," Dylan cried out, trying his best to convince her that nothing cruel happened in the time they were away.

But Ginger never returned. Sorrowful eyes attached themselves to the body and soul of an innocent young girl, and she looked out on the street, struggling teary-eyed to push out the thought of Ginger possibly being on the road - in the wrong place at the wrong time.

May believed what Dylan told her that day and held onto it for as long as she could, unable to face the truth. As the years passed by, she realized that Dylan was simply just telling her that Ginger made

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her way back home because he was protecting her, but it was also because *he* didn't want to believe the worst himself. Maybe May already knew that before, but something in her didn't allow her to think that way. She couldn't understand what Ginger could have done wrong to deserve this fate.

The familiarity and love she gave to and attained from a friendly neighborhood regular led her down a path of delicacy, devotion, and affection towards the world, for that spring season many years ago taught her that not every animal was invincible, not every sidewalk that she tripped on would land her on uneven ground, not every day was going to be beautiful and sunny, not every place she called home would stay with her forever, and not every emotion she was going to feel would be happiness. But that was okay because it occurred to her that with age, even the rainy days had sun showers. Every emotion she felt helped her grow and realize who she was, and she might not live in her petite, worn-out house anymore, but somehow, home found a way back to her every day, in other forms of beauty. Alas, Ginger would remain her jewel, her everything, and May's once-small fingers would grasp tightly onto the everlasting memory of Ginger's significance in her life.