On The Second-Lowest Branch

Milada M.

A tree stood in the corner of a primary school playground. And on the second-lowest branch was a sticker. It was peeling slightly, and beaming out of the tiny sticker was a tiny smile. The sticker itself wasn't remarkable, but it was strangely bright yellow, for a sticker who'd been stuck on a tree for so long.

A girl walked by as the school bell rang. Her school uniform was untucked, and her hair was messy from a day of frolicking. She noticed the peeling sticker and smiled a smile that rivalled the sticker itself. She ran forward, peeled it off, and stuck it proudly to the front of her shirt, then ran off to the classroom. She boasted about her sticker in class to her friends and to her teachers, sticking her chest out proudly for all to see. The classroom's atmosphere was positively gleeful, students laughed and played and the teachers were amazed by the pure joyfulness of it all. Then when the bell rang for the end of school she showed it proudly to her mother, whose tired face stretched into a smile for the first time in weeks. Her older brother laughed when he saw it. And as they continued down the street the sticker slowly peeled off the girl's shirt and floated to the ground as if it were lighter than any sticker should be.

A man hurried past, his business suit grey, carrying a black briefcase. Although he was only in his forties, his face was creased with the wrinkles of a very old man, for work was demanding and his small son was ill and stuck in hospital. He paused when he saw the sticker, and without any reason, grinned, truly smiled, for the first time in longer than he would willingly admit. He picked it up and stuck it on the corner of his briefcase, and continued. When he got to the hospital and entered his son's room, his son smiled too. They drew together for hours, with the man's steady hands helping his son's weak ones. When they were done, they folded the drawings into colourful aeroplanes and shot them out of the window, but the son paused at the last one, thinking, then pulled the sticker off his father's briefcase and stuck it on the wing of the aeroplane. Together they threw it out the window, watching it spiral away on a perfectly timed gust until it was just a speck in the far distance.

A bird left her clifftop nest, ignoring the cheeps of her chicks behind her. Food was scarce in the winter, and to feed her chicks, the bird needed all she could find. She flew, feeling wind slide under her wings, holding her up like a pair of cool arms. She flew over the bay to a park, only stopping because she spotted something bright yellow hiding in the grass. Curious, she dove down for a closer look. Crumpled in a nook between roots was a paper aeroplane with a yellow sticker that was peeling slightly on one corner. Something about that innocent smile made the bird feel energised, and, even better, squirming underneath the plane were more grubs than she'd ever seen in one place. She pecked up as many of the squirming things as possible. But somewhere in the chaos the sticker was caught on her leg. And when she took off, it spiralled downward into the dark waves of the bay below.

And the waves carried it. They carried the sticker through dying reefs, into the foam of passing boats. They sent it swirling around in small banks and whirling through clouds of sand. It took some time for the sticker to wash up on shore, but it did. The waves pushed it onto the pebbles bit by bit. They nudged the sticker up onto the shore, pushing it gently until it laid to rest, nestled between two pebbles of the beach's rocky shore. It lay there for a while, long enough for it to dry, becoming light enough for the wind to whisk it away. It fluttered through the air. Going so far it flew over the primary school gates until it was dropped into a park nearby.

And there it lay. Years and seasons passed, and the sticker watched it all, still smiling its faithful smile. A tree grew where the sticker lay, and the sticker watched that too as it was lifted into the branches. It watched as the tree flowered in spring, showering tiny blossoms to the grass below. It watched as a bird flew by in summer – coming back with more twigs every day until a beautiful nest sat just below the sticker. It watched as autumn came and went with its rain showers, bringing mushrooms sprouting from the roots. It watched throughout winter, listening to the birds chirp from the nest above and watching snowflakes fall gently, getting tangled in branches and soaking the tree in fresh, cold water. It watched as spring came again, and it listened to the cheeps of newborn chicks from just below the branch where it lay.

A tree stood in the corner of a park. And on the second-highest branch was a sticker. It was peeling slightly, and beaming out of the tiny sticker was a tiny smile. The sticker itself wasn’t remarkable, but it was strangely bright yellow, for a sticker who’d been stuck on a tree for so long.

And the sticker watched. It watched as a woman walked past hand in hand with a man around her age. A toddler trotted in front of them, eager to explore the world. And it watched as they stopped to look at a bird's nest on the branch just below it, the father lifting his daughter up high so she could see the tiny chicks.

And that sticker was grateful. Grateful that the families it had healed had knitted together so intricately.