

# Branching Out

By: Joanna Barcelona

My appearance may change from month to month, but my position has always been this way and it always will. I am always right beside the schoolyard gate. Every morning I watch the kids pass me as they enter the school. Most don't acknowledge me, why should they? They pass me every day. You would be surprised at how long I've been here.

But the kids I see come and go are always changing. I have watched tiny first-graders grow into sixth-graders before they leave school. I have seen kids deal with problems during recess and at the end and beginning of the school day. I have seen it all. And I have forgotten nothing. Every event, and every child I have witnessed will stay in my memory as clear as day. Sometimes I spend my empty hours wondering what's happening to that girl who always played alone, or if the boys I watched meet by the edge of the schoolyard at the end of every day are still friends. I remember that every day for six years, the same girl would sit next to me and draw in her sketchbook. I remember how she mumbled to herself as she drew scenes of nature. I recall all boys that a large group of popular girls discussed when they walked by me during recess.

But I do more than just watch. I talk to them, and give them advice. They never answer, but they listen. However, I am never thanked for my advice. Everything I say is perceived in the children's minds as something that came out of their own head. They will always think that my ideas are really their own. And I can't blame them. They don't know that I speak to them. They can't know.

One spring day, I watched a boy walk into the schoolyard without his cast for the first time in months. He had been a very athletic boy with lots of friends that played kickball in the grass every recess. After he hurt himself and had to wear a cast, he could not play kickball for a

long time. His friendships had grown weak over that time and his reputation went downhill. His friends had continued to play kickball every day while watched. Now that he had recovered, maybe he could pick up where he left off with kickball and his friends?

This thought pestered me as I waited for recess. The bell finally rang to life and I intensely watched the boy. Would he even join the kickball game? I was glad to see him run over to the grass to meet up with his old friends. But nobody greeted him, expressed joy to see him without his cast, or even acknowledged his presence, other than the few kids who smiled at him awkwardly as if to say *Um, what do you think you're doing here?* The boy smiled, waving around at all of them, but got no reaction.

The boy lined up for kickball. He was picked for a team close to last. In the past, he had usually always been picked first or second when he wasn't the team picker. I was a bit worried now, but it was probably nothing. I paid close attention to the game until it was the boy's turn to kick. He made it to first base, but was tagged while trying to make it to second. He looked disappointed in himself as he walked to the back of the line. On his second turn he didn't make it to first base. Now I was afraid he had lost his skill in the months he had been injured. That wouldn't be good for his happiness, his friendships, or his reputation. Then, a little while before the bell rang, his third turn came.

He missed the ball and fell flat on his back. That was awful, especially for someone who had previously been one of the most athletic kids in his grade! One of the other athletic kids, Kevin, who had replaced the boy in his position as one of the best kickball players, pulled him aside.

"Look, I don't think kickball is really your thing anymore," Kevin folded his arms.

“I was hurt, but I can get back into it!” the other boy protested.

“Listen, you’ll just be hurting whatever team you’re on. You’re making a fool of yourself. It’s not cool,” Kevin retorted, shooting him a glare. The other boy opened his mouth to respond but the awful bell began to scream and Kevin used it as an opportunity to take off running.

I observed the boy as he sulkily made his way back inside, and I worried about him all the way through the afternoon until school ended. The boy rushed out of the schoolyard, not wanting to stay, and then sat down beside me, crying.

*Why are you upset?* I asked him. I knew he would take in my question as a question from his own mind.

“Why should I *not* be upset?” he said to himself. “If I hadn’t gone and fractured my stupid arm then I would still have my *friends*, and my *skill*. But now it’s all *gone*. I didn’t practice kickball for *three* months and *everything is gone!* And I can’t get any of it back because I’ll never be skilled again! I *stink* at kickball now!”

*If your friendships dissolved because you lost your skill, were those kids even your friends? Your athleticism and ability to play kickball shouldn’t be the only reason they wanted to be your friend.*

“Well...” the boy sniffed. “*Were* they really my friends? Did they only hang out with me because they wanted to be on my team? Did they only think I was cool because I was a good player? Now I’m not and they don’t like me.”

*If that’s true, then maybe you shouldn’t be so sad about it. Maybe a lost friendship isn’t worth mourning over if the roots of your friendship were unstable. Friends who abandon you for*

*such reasons were never friends in the first place, were they? You should branch out to other, better friends, and leave those who don't want you for you.*

“I mean...maybe...maybe it isn't worth mourning. Maybe I'm better without them. It's their loss if they don't want me,” his voice grew louder and more confident now.

“You...you know what? I'm happier now. I'll make new friends. Friends who want me for me.” The boy suddenly stood up, and grabbed his bag. He turned to look at me. “One more thing. Thanks.”

I was confused as my gaze followed the boy, who was now running down the sidewalk, away from the school, confident. Why had he said thanks? All of my questions were perceived as questions from his own mind, right? He couldn't have known it was me who was telling him those things. Could he?

I never really understood why he thanked me, but from then on I observed him, and as he grew happier, I grew happier. He made new friends, explored new sides of himself, and he did get better at kickball again. He would practice by himself after school, or with his new friends. But he didn't play kickball recess games anymore. He didn't need those kids. He even sat beside me sometimes, and he called me one of his friends.

He grew up and left the school many years ago, but I'm still here. Heh, you're probably wondering why, though, who am I? Why do I stand outside of a schoolyard and never move? Why do I speak with kids through their minds? Well, it might seem strange to your small human brain, but there are other beings out there who are wiser than you. Beings like me. What am I? I'm a hundred year old oak tree by the schoolyard, of course.