

Short Story Editing Sample

Far, far, away, in the middle of a wildly overgrown field, there lived a young Birch Tree named Leaf who was quite a handsome little tree. He'd been named after the beautiful golden foliage that covered his branches and shone in the sun like newly minted coins.

Despite his beauty, Leaf was a lonely tree. He stood alone in the middle of an abandoned countryside, and his roots grew on a grassy knoll where he had only lilies and lilacs and daisies for company. Dandelions past their prime surrounded his roots, waving in the breeze, having gone to seed long ago.

A red farmhouse sat down the dusty, weed-strewn road that passed in front of Leaf's knoll; dingy and sad looking, its paint had long since faded from bright red to murky brown. The rafters of the barn, which had once housed energetic horses and squawking chickens, had since begun to crumble and collapse.

But Leaf had one friend. An Elder Tree, who lived two hills away and who was very old and wise. When the Elder Tree moved with the wind, his branches creaked from old age. Once a year, however, the Elder Tree flowered as beautifully as he had when he was a young sapling. Fresh buds blossomed year after year into tiny white flowers that smelled sweeter than honey.

The Elder Tree was so old, he had been alive when the horses had whinnied and the barn shone red with a fresh coat of paint. He had befriended the children who'd grown up on the farm. He often told Leaf stories about days spent with children hanging in his branches sharing whispered conversations of secret dreams and desires. Or of giggling youngsters swinging to and fro, plucking flowers from his limbs to use as a centerpiece for the supper table.

Leaf longed to have the wisdom of the Elder Tree. He'd never known what it felt like to have children playing in his branches or a farmhouse with windows glowing warm and yellow on a frigid winter's eve. He was jealous of the Elder Tree. Envious of the ability to blossom every spring despite the Elder Tree's age. Leaf complained often.

“Elder Tree,” Leaf said. “Why can’t I carry beautiful flowers? People never want to smell my leaves. Children don’t collect sprigs from my branches and carry them home proudly to their mothers.”

Leaf was much taller than the Elder Tree and very slender. His branches were supple and flexible and could bend and flail about in the strongest gusts of wind.

“But Leaf,” the Elder responded. “Look how tall you’ve grown. You’re nearly double my size already. You have strong branches and a sturdy base. Your bark is shiny and healthy, and your leaves glimmer under the sunlight. Why do you need flowers as well?”

“Who will ever love a tree without flowers?” Leaf cried into the afternoon sunlight. Leaf pointed his branches toward the sky and waved his arms in misery. “I am not as beautiful as you, Elder.”

“But you are,” said the Elder Tree. “And one day, somebody will come along and love you just the way you are. They will love the way your pure, white trunk stretches elegantly toward the sky. They’ll beg to know the stories behind the black scars that circle your trunk. And when they ask, you can describe the dangerous storms you’ve weathered and the shelter you’ve provided for homeless animals. The way your roots twist and wind in the soil providing stability and air for all of life to breathe. They will kiss your golden leaves that dance gaily in the wind and glitter under the sun’s rays. And they will appreciate you, Leaf, because you are a handsome Birch Tree.”

But the summers turned into fall and nobody came to love Leaf. His branches turned golden in autumn and the Elder Tree’s flowers wilted and fell away. The farmhouse stared vacantly back at the pair of trees, its windows dark, the door hinged lopsidedly in its frame, the barn whistling as the Wind wound through the cracked rafters.

The snow fell year after year, weighing the trees’ branches down until the spring sun lightened their load, and the birds rejoiced in song once more. The seasons meshed and flowed and morphed like the ocean—always different, always familiar.

Leaf moaned and complained to the Elder Tree that nobody would ever love him, and over and over again the Elder Tree soothed him with kind words and firm reassurances that the day would come

when Leaf would find love.

Then one day, when Leaf had grown into a full-sized tree, he noticed a particularly beautiful cloud floating by. The Elder Tree watched as Leaf stretched and flexed his branches and straightened his trunk to achieve his tallest, magnificent height.

“Go on,” the Elder Tree encouraged.

Leaf felt nervous and a bit silly, but he steadied himself and sucked in a deep breath.

“Hello, Cloud,” said Leaf. “You are quite lovely way up there in the blue sky.”

Indeed, the Cloud was whiter than the bark of Leaf’s tree and fluffier than freshly made cotton candy.

The Cloud giggled and slowed. “You are quite handsome, too.”

Leaf shivered as the breeze carrying the Cloud swept past him. His leaves twinkled.

“I love the way your leaves shine under the sun,” said the Cloud.

“Thank you,” said Leaf. He was surprised. Nobody had ever called him handsome before—at least, nobody besides the Elder Tree.

“I hope I see you again,” said the Cloud.

“Wait, why don’t you stay for a while?” Leaf asked. “We could lie around all day and tell stories. I imagine you’ve traveled some wonderful places.”

The Cloud stretched as long as she could as if gesturing to the horizon. “But of course I can’t stop. I go where the Wind blows.”

“Wait!” Leaf cried out. But he was too late, she was already gone. She’d been carried by the Wind over the grassy field, over the hills in the far-off distance, over to the other side. To a world where Leaf had never been. A place he would never go.

The cycle of the sun continued and the seasons blurred into one another. The Earth turned on its axis, the sun and the moon traded places, and still Leaf thought about his beloved Cloud.

“Where has she gone?” Leaf cried at night.

The Elder Tree responded, “Beauty can be fleeting, my son.”

“But I want it to last forever,” Leaf said. “It’s not fair.”

To this, the Elder Tree had no response.

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Years and years later, after the world had rolled over many times—and Leaf was quite an old tree himself—a car rattled on the abandoned highway and turned onto the dusty dirt road in front of the forgotten farmhouse. Black smoke leaked from the exhaust pipe, and the Elder Tree began to cough.

“I’m not as young as I once was,” the Elder Tree joked.

Leaf smiled weakly. He’d noticed; the Elder Tree blossomed more slowly with each passing year, the flowers on his branches sparser and frail.

“Look, Elder Tree,” Leaf said. “I wonder what that means.”

Leaf gestured toward an ugly white post on which hung a sign decorated with red letters that spelled “SOLD.”

“It looks as if you’ll get the opportunity to feel the joy of children in your branches after all,” said the Elder Tree. A family of five stood around the sign as a man in an ill-fitting suit snapped a photo, the flash so bright Leaf thought maybe Lightning had joined them.

Three of the people were small—children, Leaf assumed. One of them ran over to the Elder Tree and plucked one of his last flowered branches. The child ran back to his mother and offered the branch. She smiled and patted the boy on the head. Then, she leaned to the father and said something in his ear while pointing to the Elder Tree.

Leaf was jealous now more than ever. The Elder Tree received all the attention, no matter what Leaf did. If only he could find a way to blossom flower buds, then maybe someone would love him.

The father walked over to the Elder Tree, touched his trunk, tugged on his branches, and examined his roots. He nodded to the mother and then took out a small device that he talked into with animated movements.

When he put the hunk of plastic away, he spoke to his wife once more. The family packed into the car like birds in a nest and drove off into the disappearing sunlight.

“Elder Tree—why do you steal all of the attention?” Leaf complained. “All I ever wanted was for a child to climb in my branches just once. And now you’ve ruined it. Haven’t you had enough love in your life, while I’ve had none?”

The Elder Tree looked older and frailer than usual. When he responded, his voice was a hoarse whisper. “I’m sorry, Leaf. But don’t worry. The children will be back, and they will play with you. Here, take this to remember me.”

“What do you mean? Can you understand them? What did they say?” Leaf asked.

But his friend didn’t respond. Instead, the Elder Tree winced as he plucked the last blossom from his branch and gave it to Leaf.

Leaf looked at it disgustedly. “What do I want with this? You don’t need to show off to me—I know you’re more beautiful than I. It’s unfair, and I despise you for it.”

Leaf tossed the blossom from his branches, and it landed on the grassy knoll a hill away. He looked away from the Elder Tree and cried himself to sleep. When the Elder Tree whispered across the dark night of his love for Leaf, the younger tree pretended to be dreaming, though it wasn’t until the orange glow of dawn that Leaf fell into an uncomfortable slumber.

As he slept, he had the most disturbing dream: the family came back and chopped the Elder Tree away, carting him off like common sawdust on the back of one of the large trucks that clunked across the countryside. Leaf’s heart felt like it had been ripped from him, and he stumbled into consciousness with fresh tears streaming down his face.

“I’m sorry, Elder Tree. I didn’t mean what I said. I love you, too, dear Elder Tree. You are beautiful and wonderful, and I’m truly sorry.”

Then Leaf opened his eyes and glanced at his friend hoping for the forgiveness that was sure to come.

Except this time, only silence met his desperate pleas.

For where the Elder Tree had stood, there was now nothing but a patch of freshly turned dirt, the knoll empty and desolate. The family stood near the despicable “SOLD” signpost, watching as black plumes of smoke from a truck as large as the barn trundled away.

As the truck chugged out of sight, the mother and father turned toward the house while the children remained outside. First, they dug in the newly turned dirt where the Elder Tree’s roots belonged.

“No,” Leaf cried out. “You don’t belong there. Leave him alone.”

As if the children had heard him, they turned their attention from the dirt to Leaf. One of the smaller ones toddled over near the place where the Elder Tree’s last blossom lay wilting and faded on the abandoned knoll. Quickly, Leaf swiped a branch down and rescued the blossom, holding it up as high as he possibly could.

The child giggled uncontrollably and waved his hands upward. One of the larger children noticed the blossom and rushed to Leaf’s trunk. He scrambled up through Leaf’s branches, cracking twigs and bending leaves this way and that.

And Leaf finally had the attention from the children he’d always desired.

But instead of feeling joy and love as he’d expected, he felt an uncomfortable angst as the child swung from his branches and bent his sprigs at awkward angles. Leaf did not have the patience of the Elder Tree.

He wept bitterly, clinging to the blossom as if it were life itself.

As the sun began to sink and the pinks and purples melded into an all-consuming black, the children were called to the house by their mother. Lights winked on in the farmhouse and sounds of dinner plates clattering carried across the barren knoll to Leaf.

That night, it was his sprig the children placed on the centerpiece.

Outside, Leaf tried to get comfortable, but the Wind swirled in a different path around the field now. Without the Elder Tree to block the chill, Leaf became very cold and miserable.

But as the Wind whirled, a sight on the horizon stopped Leaf's tears. It was her, his beloved Cloud.

"You're as beautiful as ever," said Leaf as she floated toward him.

"As are you," said the Cloud. She was older as well. Her fluffiness had diminished, and she was lean and thin. Her voice was quiet.

"I've missed you," Leaf said. "Please don't leave me. I am all alone, now."

"Why are you clinging to the Elder Tree's blossom?" The Cloud's voice tinkled. "I am sorry about your friend, but in order to move on you must let him go. Holding on to a remnant of him will do you no good. Bury him and say a final farewell. You will do better to hold onto your memories of him as an alive, glorious tree instead of a faded ghost of a blossom. After all, in a few days time the flower will crumble and blow away in the Wind, and you will have nothing."

Leaf remained quiet, but he did as the Cloud said. Gently, and ever so lovingly, he placed the dead blossom into the fresh dirt where the Elder Tree had once stood. He covered it carefully and packed it just firmly enough that the children would never unearth it with their careless digging.

The Cloud remained quiet as Leaf bowed his branches and focused on the beautiful memories he had of his wonderful friend, the Elder Tree. As he looked up, the Cloud dipped gently into his branches.

Together, they cried, and the tears of the Birch Tree and his beloved Cloud mixed in the freshly turned soil below.

A fresh gust of Wind pushed the Cloud through Leaf's outstretched branches.

As she floated away, she spoke again. "Remember, Leaf, you are never alone. I think of you often. The only difference between us is that you are made of roots, while I have none. Neither of us can change. But that's exactly why I love you."

"Stop!" Leaf yelled at the Wind. The air was pushing the Cloud farther and farther away. He reached his branches upward as far as he could. The Cloud stretched her wispy fingers toward him, and they managed to touch for the shortest of seconds. The moment passed too quickly, and they were pulled

apart.

“Don’t yell at the Wind,” the Cloud said. “It’s not her fault either. It is my destiny to explore the world, dear Leaf. And trust me. I will return again.”

With that last promise, she was swept beyond the horizon.

And Leaf wept once more until all of his tears were gone.

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The next morning, the sun dawned brightly and cheerily, though Leaf was devastated and miserable.

He stretched his branches and looked toward the sky for the Cloud once more. Of course, she wasn’t around.

The children were already out to play, and this time they built a fort in his branches. Despite Leaf’s sorrow for his lost loves, he began to understand the Elder Tree’s joyous tales from a long time ago. Though Leaf’s twigs still cracked and bent under the children’s weight, he felt warmth deep in his roots as the children giggled and played, including him in their fun. And when the children were called to dinner, Leaf was sad to see them go.

Alone once more, he looked at the horizon, hoping to see his beloved Cloud. Of course she was not there. Instead a new cloud drifted by in the sky.

This cloud was dark and stormy, but very gentle. As she floated by, she sprinkled raindrops on Leaf. The salty rain mixed with Leaf’s tears, and together the Dark Cloud and Tree watered the earth’s floor once more.

“You know,” the Dark Cloud said to Leaf. “Your friend, the Cloud, is my sister. We travel the world together. Even in the farthest corners of the earth she talks of you often. She misses you quite terribly when she can’t be near you.”

“I miss her, too,” said Leaf. “But I don’t know what to do. I can’t possibly follow her, and she can’t possibly stay here.”

And like clouds do, she drifted onward. As she slipped away, she called back to him, “Look down, Leaf. Down by your roots.”

Leaf did as he was told. He saw the soft, wet dirt from where the Elder Tree’s roots had been ripped. The earth was spongy and fresh, rejuvenated by Leaf and the Clouds. And there, young and hopeful and naïve, sprouted the first sprig of a new sapling.

“Elder Tree!” Leaf cried. “You’ve come back.”

And the Little Elder Tree raised its supple little trunk toward the sun, as the Dark Cloud made room for warm rays of light.

“You see, don’t you, Leaf?” The Dark Cloud was nearly over the hill. “Though we must leave you from time to time, you’re never really alone.”

And like clouds do, she drifted onward.

And the next day, the children rushed out to play and noticed the brand-new sapling. They built a small fence around him and watered the Little Elder Tree dutifully and carefully as Leaf watched, now grateful of the attention the children focused on the Little Elder Tree.

And as time passed, and the Clouds circled the world, and the Wind blew over the land. The children grew like weeds, and the Little Elder Tree flourished into a gorgeous young sapling. And Leaf aged happily, for now he knew that although beauty can be fleeting—and the time we’re gifted with our friends much too short—the love for his beloved Cloud and the Elder Tree. Even the rambunctious children could never be diminished by the circumference of the earth or the passing of time.