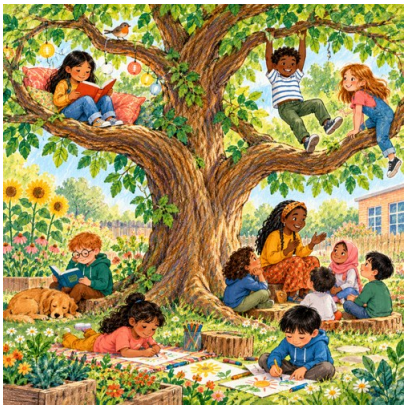


The School Under the Crooked Tree

The school in Vilaendreçada was famous because everything was perfectly aligned. The desks formed perfect rows, the pencils were all the same size, and the correct answers always fit within a box.

But not all the children fit equally well.

Jan understood problems if he could walk around while he thought. Salma remembered the lessons when she turned them into songs. Teo needed quiet moments. Clara finished quickly and then got bored. Biel took longer, but he noticed details that no one else saw.

“You must adapt to the classroom,” the headmaster would repeat.

One day, a storm flooded the building. While it was being repaired, they moved the school under a large, crooked tree in the town square.

There were no walls or rows. The teacher hung a chalkboard from a branch and said,

“Today we’ll have to invent another way to teach.”

Jan measured the tree’s shadow by taking steps. Salma turned the multiplication tables into a refrain. Teo found a quiet corner between two roots. Clara prepared questions for the younger children. Biel discovered five different insects on the bark and drew them accurately.

When the building was fixed up, no one wanted to leave the tree.

“We can’t spend the winter out here,” said the headmaster.

“No,” replied the teacher, “but we can take what we’ve learned with us.”

They went back to the classrooms and started changing them.

They put in high tables for working standing up, a quiet corner with cushions, materials for touching and building, headphones, books for different levels, and a wall where questions could be left open.

No longer did everyone do the same thing at the same time. Sometimes they worked in groups; sometimes alone. Some told stories by talking, others by drawing or building.

The headmaster watched the disarray with concern.

“How will we know if they’re learning?”

Biel showed him his insect notebook. Salma sang a division problem. Jan explained how he had calculated the tree’s height without climbing it.

“Perhaps,” the headmaster admitted, “order doesn’t always take the form of a line.”

In the spring, they planted a tree in the schoolyard. The teacher wanted to straighten it with a stake, but the children stopped him.

“Let it grow,” they said. “We don’t yet know what shape it needs.”