TITLE : UNDER THE MANGO TREE

SUBTITLE : A FRIENDSHIP THAT EVEN DEATH COULD NOT ERASE

AUTHOR : NGO NTET ROSE

DEDICATION

To every friendship that has ever felt like family, to every heart that has waited for someone who never came home, and to everyone who has learned that love does not always end when a life does.

This book is dedicated to those who carry childhood memories like precious treasures, to those who still remember the voice of a friend they have not seen in years, and to those who have discovered that certain people leave footprints on our souls that time can never erase.

To the children who once sat beneath a tree and made promises they believed would last forever; to the friends who shared their dreams, their laughter, their fears, and their secrets; and to those whose lives were forever changed by an unexpected goodbye.

To all the Luciens of this world, who continue to love even when hope becomes painful, who hold on to memories when answers remain beyond their reach, and who find the courage to live without allowing the past to disappear.

And to all the Ethans, whose presence has made another person's life brighter, whose absence has left an unfillable space, and whose memory continues to breathe in the hearts of those who loved them.

May every letter written in longing remind us that love deserves to be expressed while we still have the opportunity to do so. May every childhood friendship teach us to cherish the ordinary moments that one day become our most extraordinary memories.

Above all, may we never take for granted the people who walk beside us today.

For beneath the mango tree, two boys once shared a world that belonged only to them. They could not have known how fragile those precious years would prove to be, nor how deeply the future would test the promises they made.

Yet some bonds are not measured by the years two people spend together, but by the love that remains when those years are taken away.

To every friendship that death cannot erase, this story belongs to you.

PREFACE

Some stories begin with a meeting. Others begin with a promise. And some begin long before we understand the meaning of either.

Under the Mango Tree is a story about two boys whose lives became inseparable long before they understood how cruel the world could sometimes be. Ethan and Lucien were not brothers by blood, yet their friendship possessed the intimacy, loyalty, and tenderness that many people spend a lifetime searching for. From their earliest childhood, they shared a

bond that grew quietly through ordinary days, whispered confidences, innocent adventures, and dreams that seemed too beautiful ever to end.

For them, happiness did not require wealth, extraordinary possessions, or distant journeys. It could be found in a familiar path, a shared secret, a conversation that lasted longer than expected, or the comforting shade of a mango tree.

That tree became their refuge. Beneath its branches, childhood seemed endless. They spoke about the future as though it were a place waiting patiently for them, a place they would enter together. They made promises with the confidence of children who had not yet discovered that life sometimes follows a path no one could have imagined.

Neither boy could have foreseen that the world they knew would one day collapse around a single, devastating absence.

When Ethan is abducted during adolescence, at an age when friendship is becoming an essential part of identity and the future is beginning to take shape, Lucien is confronted with a pain for which he has no words. One moment, his friend belongs to the familiar world they have always shared. The next, that world is shattered by unanswered questions, desperate searches, and a silence that refuses to explain itself.

Ethan's disappearance does more than separate two friends. It divides Lucien's life into two distinct periods: the years when Ethan was beside him, and all the years that follow.

What happens when someone who has been part of your every memory suddenly becomes a question without an answer? How does a young heart learn to live with uncertainty? How can a person move forward when a part of the past remains unfinished?

These questions lie at the heart of this novel.

As time passes, Lucien discovers that absence has its own language. It speaks through familiar places, through birthdays that arrive without celebration, through memories that return unexpectedly, and through the smallest details that others might overlook. A childhood song, a particular afternoon, a familiar expression, or the sight of the mango tree can bring Ethan back into his thoughts with a vividness that makes the intervening years seem to disappear.

Yet Lucien's story is not simply one of grief. It is also a story of endurance.

Through letters written to the friend he cannot find, Lucien creates a fragile bridge between the life he once knew and the uncertain future he must learn to inhabit. Each letter carries something he cannot bear to leave unspoken. Some preserve memories. Others express anger, longing, regret, or hope. Still others contain the quiet details of a life that continues to unfold, even when the person with whom he once expected to share it is no longer there.

In these pages, the letters become more than messages addressed to an absent friend. They become a testament to the extraordinary power of human attachment. They reveal how words can preserve what time threatens to diminish, and how the act of writing can become a way of surviving what the heart cannot yet accept.

But life does not remain frozen around a single loss. Childhood gives way to adulthood. Responsibilities emerge. New relationships develop. Happiness, in its imperfect and unexpected forms, begins to find a place beside sorrow.

Lucien must eventually confront one of life's most difficult lessons: continuing to live does not mean betraying those we have lost.

The mystery surrounding Ethan's disappearance also carries this story beyond the boundaries of personal grief. As fragments of the past gradually emerge, the search for truth becomes an essential part of the journey. The distance between hope and reality grows increasingly painful, and the possibility of an answer raises questions that no amount of preparation can make easy to face.

Some truths bring relief. Others arrive with a weight that changes everything.

At the centre of this journey stands the mango tree, silent and enduring. It witnesses the passage of years without forgetting the childhood that once flourished beneath its branches. While people change, while families endure uncertainty, and while memories become intertwined with sorrow, the tree remains a powerful symbol of the bond that shaped two young lives.

It represents a place where promises were made, where friendship became family, and where the past continues to speak to the present.

I wanted this novel to explore the delicate relationship between memory and hope, between the desire to know the truth and the fear of what that truth might reveal. I also wanted to honour the friendships that shape us so profoundly that, even when circumstances separate us, something essential remains.

We often imagine that the most important moments in our lives will announce themselves. We expect great happiness to arrive with celebration and great sorrow to give us some warning. Yet life frequently changes in the space between one ordinary moment and the next. A farewell that seems temporary may become permanent. A familiar voice may suddenly become a memory. A promise made without hesitation may become the one thing we spend years trying to understand.

That is why the smallest moments matter.

The laughter we share today may become the memory that sustains us tomorrow. The conversation we postpone may become the one we wish we had never left unfinished. The person sitting beside us may be carrying a place in our heart that we have not yet learned how to describe.

Through Ethan and Lucien, I invite readers to look more carefully at the people who give meaning to their lives. I invite them to remember the friends who stood beside them during childhood, the promises they once made, and the relationships that have shaped the people they have become.

This story also asks us to consider what it means to keep loving someone when circumstances have taken away the possibility of an ordinary reunion. Love cannot always prevent tragedy, and loyalty cannot always change the course of events. Nevertheless, the human heart possesses a remarkable capacity to preserve what has mattered most.

Sometimes, that preservation takes the form of a letter.

Sometimes, it lives in a name passed on to another generation.

And sometimes, it survives in the shade of a tree where two children once believed that nothing could ever separate them.

As you turn these pages, I hope you will not see Ethan and Lucien merely as characters in a novel. I hope you will recognize something familiar in their friendship: the innocence of childhood, the courage to trust another person completely, the pain of uncertainty, and the longing to recover what life has taken away.

Perhaps you will remember someone of your own. Perhaps a forgotten moment will return to you. Perhaps you will find yourself wishing that you had spoken a little more, listened a little longer, or held on a little more tightly to a person who once occupied an important place in your life.

If this story encourages you to cherish a friendship, to express an unspoken affection, or to understand the silent suffering of someone living with loss, then its message will have reached beyond the printed page.

Because *Under the Mango Tree* is ultimately about more than disappearance. It is about the enduring imprint of love, the courage required to face the truth, and the possibility of carrying a precious bond forward even when life no longer unfolds as we had imagined.

The years may pass. Childhood may become a distant memory. Letters may grow old, and the world beneath the mango tree may no longer look the same.

But some promises continue to live within us long after the voices that made them have fallen silent.

And some friendships, no matter how cruelly tested, remain beyond the reach of time.

May this story remind you that the people we truly love never become insignificant simply because they are no longer within our reach.

CHAPTER ONE : The Secret Beneath the Old Mango Tree

Some friendships begin with a simple encounter. Others grow so deeply into our lives that we cannot imagine who we would be without them.

1. The Two Boys Who Shared Everything

Long before sorrow entered their lives, before unanswered questions became a part of their everyday existence, and before the name Ethan would one day bring tears to Lucien's eyes,

there were simply two boys who believed that the world was a beautiful place to discover together.

Their names were Ethan Moreau and Lucien Laurent.

They were both born into loving families in a quiet Belgian town where people knew one another, where neighbours exchanged greetings across garden fences, and where the sound of children playing often filled the streets long before the sun disappeared behind the rooftops.

It was the kind of place where childhood seemed to move at a gentler pace. The houses stood close enough for neighbours to notice when someone was unwell, when a family was celebrating a birthday, or when a child had been absent from school for several days. Parents trusted one another, children moved freely between familiar homes, and friendships sometimes extended naturally from one generation to the next.

Ethan and Lucien had grown up in this atmosphere of familiarity and trust. Yet, although they lived in the same town and attended the same school, their friendship had not begun at birth. It had started several years earlier, at a local fair, during a bright afternoon when neither boy could have imagined how profoundly the encounter would shape the rest of his life.

They had been about ten years old.

Ethan was a lively, observant boy with a thoughtful expression that often concealed a mischievous sense of humour. He had a way of asking questions that adults sometimes found surprising. He wanted to understand how things worked, why people behaved as they did, and what might exist beyond the boundaries of the familiar world.

He could be quiet when he was concentrating, but when he felt comfortable, his laughter came easily. He possessed a generous nature and an instinctive concern for people he loved, although, like most boys his age, he was still learning how to express his feelings.

Lucien, on the other hand, was more openly expressive. He could turn an ordinary incident into an entertaining story, imitate a teacher's mannerisms without being cruel, and make Ethan laugh even when his friend had decided that nothing in the world was particularly amusing.

He was curious, loyal, and occasionally stubborn. When he believed something was unfair, he found it difficult to remain silent. He was also the kind of friend who remembered small details: a promise made in passing, a favourite snack, a difficult examination, or a problem that someone had mentioned weeks earlier.

Their differences did not separate them. They completed one another.

Where Ethan sometimes hesitated, Lucien encouraged him. Where Lucien became impatient, Ethan helped him think things through. Each possessed qualities that the other admired, and neither felt the need to pretend to be someone different in order to earn the other's affection.

At first, they were simply two boys who enjoyed each other's company.

Neither understood that they were beginning to build something that would eventually become one of the defining relationships of their lives.

2. The Day Their Friendship Began

The annual fair had brought unusual excitement to the town. Stalls lined the streets, children moved between games and attractions, and the smell of freshly prepared food drifted through the cool afternoon air.

Parents watched their children carefully while trying to enjoy the occasion themselves. Groups of teenagers gathered near the rides, and younger children ran excitedly from one attraction to another, their pockets filled with coins they hoped to spend wisely.

Ethan had come with his parents, Daniel and Claire Moreau.

Daniel was a reserved but dependable man who believed that a child needed both affection and discipline. He was not particularly talkative, but when he spoke, his words carried weight. Claire, by contrast, possessed a naturally warm disposition. She had the rare ability to make people feel welcome without making them feel examined, and her home was often filled with the sound of visitors who came for a short conversation and remained for hours.

Lucien had arrived with his parents, Marc and Isabelle Laurent.

Marc was sociable and good-humoured, a man who enjoyed conversation and rarely missed an opportunity to make a neighbour laugh. Isabelle was attentive and practical, with a gentle firmness that ensured her household remained orderly despite her husband's easygoing nature.

The two families did not yet know one another well. They had exchanged greetings on a few occasions, but their lives had followed separate paths until that afternoon.

Ethan was standing near a small game stall, examining a collection of prizes displayed behind a counter, when he noticed another boy arguing—not angrily, but with great determination—that he had been cheated out of a turn.

The boy was Lucien.

"You said I could have another go," Lucien insisted, looking at the stall attendant.

"I said you could try again if you won the previous round," the man replied.

"But I did win!"

"You knocked the target over after the bell."

"That was because the bell rang while the ball was still moving!"

The attendant shook his head, trying unsuccessfully to conceal a smile.

Ethan watched the exchange for several seconds before stepping closer.

"I think he has a point," he said.

Lucien turned towards him.

"You saw what happened?"

"Not all of it."

"Then how can you say I have a point?"

"Because you look like someone who is very determined to be right."

For a moment, Lucien stared at him. Then he burst out laughing.

"And you look like someone who enjoys getting involved in things that have nothing to do with him."

"Only when they are interesting."

"Then you must be very bored most of the time."

"Not anymore."

That answer made Lucien laugh even harder.

The attendant, perhaps relieved that the dispute had turned into entertainment, allowed Lucien another attempt. This time, he won a small wooden whistle, which he immediately held up in triumph.

"There!" he announced. "Justice has been served."

Ethan shook his head.

"You sound like a judge."

"And you sound like a lawyer who has lost his case."

They laughed together as though they had known one another for years.

For the remainder of the afternoon, they wandered between the stalls, shared something to eat, and discovered that they attended the same school. They were not in the same class, but they recognised one another from the corridors and the playground.

By the time their parents called them to leave, the boys had already exchanged names and made arrangements to see one another at school.

Neither considered the encounter extraordinary.

It was simply a pleasant afternoon, the sort of afternoon that children forget about as they grow older.

But some of life's most consequential beginnings arrive without ceremony.

There was no music to announce the birth of their friendship, no extraordinary promise, and no reason to suspect that this ordinary meeting would become the starting point of a story marked by such profound sorrow.

There was only a boy named Ethan, another named Lucien, and the unexpected ease with which they had begun to understand one another.

3. A Friendship That Grew with Them

In the days that followed, Ethan began looking for Lucien whenever he arrived at school.

At first, their encounters were brief. They greeted each other in the corridor, exchanged a few words during breaks, and sometimes walked part of the way home together.

Then the brief encounters became longer.

They began waiting for each other after lessons, sharing their lunch when one of them had forgotten something, and comparing their experiences with teachers whose expectations seemed impossible to satisfy.

Although they were in different classes, they found that they had plenty to discuss.

Ethan sometimes told Lucien about a difficult mathematics exercise that had taken him an entire evening to understand. Lucien would respond with a dramatic account of how his own teacher had insisted that every pupil explain an answer at the blackboard.

"And what did you do?" Ethan would ask.

"I explained it."

"Correctly?"

"That is an entirely different question."

Ethan would laugh, and Lucien would pretend to be offended.

They learned one another's habits with the ease of children who spent more and more time together. Ethan knew when Lucien was pretending to be confident because he was worried about something. Lucien could tell when Ethan was troubled even when his friend insisted that everything was fine.

They also learned how to disagree.

Sometimes they argued about football, school assignments, or which of them had been responsible for a particular mistake. Their disagreements could become surprisingly intense, especially when neither wished to admit that the other might be right.

But their quarrels rarely lasted.

One would eventually approach the other, sometimes with an apology and sometimes with a ridiculous joke designed to make forgiveness easier.

Neither wanted to remain angry for long.

Their friendship became a familiar part of their school lives. Teachers began to notice how frequently the boys sought one another out, and some smiled at their devotion while others reminded them that friendship did not excuse talking during lessons.

"Those two," one teacher remarked on an afternoon when Lucien had waited outside Ethan's classroom for nearly ten minutes, "would probably find a way to communicate even if we placed them at opposite ends of the country."

The other pupils laughed.

Ethan and Lucien exchanged glances.

They knew the teacher was exaggerating, of course.

At ten years old, neither had any idea what it would mean to be separated by a distance they could not cross.

For the moment, they had only to walk through a school gate or along a familiar street to find each other again.

Their world remained reassuringly small.

And in that world, friendship was as natural as breathing.

4. The Old Mango Tree

It was Lucien who first showed Ethan the old mango tree.

The tree stood a short distance from the paths they usually took home, in a quiet place where the noise of the town seemed to fade. It had been there for years, long before either boy was born. Its thick trunk bore the marks of time, and its broad branches spread outward in irregular shapes, offering a generous patch of shade.

It was not a perfect tree.

Some of its branches were crooked, its bark was rough, and parts of its trunk had become uneven with age. Yet there was something dignified about it, something that made the boys feel as though they had discovered a place that belonged to another world.

The tree stood apart from the busiest streets. People passed nearby occasionally, but few had any reason to stop. From a certain angle, its branches partly concealed the space beneath it, creating a natural shelter where the boys could sit without being disturbed.

Lucien had discovered it while exploring the area with a cousin. He had returned several times before deciding that Ethan needed to see it.

"Come on," he said one afternoon, taking his friend's arm.

"Where are we going?"

"You will see."

"That usually means trouble."

"Only for people who ask too many questions."

They followed a narrow path until the old tree appeared before them.

Ethan stopped.

For a moment, he said nothing.

The afternoon light filtered through the branches, creating shifting patterns on the ground. The air was still, and the place possessed a quietness that felt entirely different from the noise of the schoolyard.

"You found this place?" Ethan asked.

"Of course."

"By yourself?"

"Yes."

Ethan looked around.

"And you did not think to tell me about it before?"

Lucien folded his arms.

"I was waiting for the right person."

"That sounds very important."

"It is."

Ethan studied him for a moment, then smiled.

"Well, I hope you realise how lucky you are to have found me."

Lucien pushed his shoulder lightly.

"Do not ruin the moment."

They settled beneath the tree and began talking.

At first, their conversation concerned ordinary things. They discussed school, their classmates, the games they played, and the small disappointments that seemed enormous at their age.

But something about the place encouraged them to speak more freely.

Without the interruptions of the playground or the expectations of adults, they could take their time. They could tell a story from beginning to end, admit that something had frightened them, or confess to a mistake without worrying that other children might turn it into a joke.

The old mango tree became their private refuge.

They began returning to it regularly.

Some afternoons, they arrived full of excitement, eager to tell each other everything that had happened during the school day. On other occasions, one of them would sit quietly while the other tried to discover what was wrong.

They spoke about their teachers, their families, their ambitions, and their fears. They invented stories about the adults in their town, debated what they would do when they grew older, and made plans that changed almost every week.

Sometimes, they did very little at all.

They simply sat beside one another, watching the light move across the ground as the afternoon slowly faded.

Neither boy felt obliged to fill every silence.

They had discovered something rare in childhood: the comfort of being understood without having to explain everything.

One day, Lucien brought two small notebooks.

"What are those for?" Ethan asked.

"Our plans."

"What plans?"

"The important ones."

Ethan opened one of the notebooks. On the first page, Lucien had written several ideas in large, uneven letters. They included places they wanted to visit, things they wanted to learn, and promises they intended to keep.

Ethan laughed when he reached the final line.

Never abandon your best friend.

"You wrote that yourself?" he asked.

"Obviously."

"Why would you need to write it down?"

"So you cannot claim you forgot."

Ethan's expression softened.

"I would never forget you, Lucien."

Lucien looked away, embarrassed by the sudden seriousness of the conversation.

"Good," he replied. "Because I would come looking for you."

Neither boy understood how deeply those words would one day wound the person who remembered them.

For now, they were merely children beneath an old tree, making promises with innocent confidence.

The mango tree kept their secret.

It did not know what the future held.

5. The Stories They Brought Home

As the boys grew older, their meetings beneath the tree became a part of their daily routine.

By the time they were eleven, their friendship had acquired its own rhythm.

They attended their separate classes, completed their assignments, endured examinations, and dealt with the ordinary dramas of school life. Then, whenever circumstances allowed, they made their way to their favourite meeting place.

Their conversations grew more elaborate as their understanding of the world expanded.

At ten, they had mostly discussed games, amusing incidents, and minor grievances. At eleven, they began asking questions about fairness, courage, family expectations, and the kind of people they hoped to become.

At twelve, they sometimes spoke as though adulthood were just around the corner.

"Do you think we will still be friends when we are grown-ups?" Ethan asked one afternoon.

Lucien turned towards him with an expression of disbelief.

"What kind of question is that?"

"A normal one."

"No, it is not. Why would we stop being friends?"

"People change."

"People change their clothes. They change their minds. They change their favourite football teams. That does not mean they have to abandon their friends."

Ethan smiled.

"You make it sound very simple."

"Perhaps it is."

"And what if one of us moves away?"

Lucien considered the question more carefully.

"Then we will write to each other."

"What if we are too busy?"

"Then we will make time."

"What if—"

"Ethan!"

Lucien threw his hands into the air.

"If you intend to invent every possible disaster, we will need a whole afternoon just to finish this conversation."

Ethan laughed.

"All right. I will stop."

"Good."

A moment passed.

"Do you think we will still meet here?" Ethan asked.

Lucien looked up at the branches.

"Here?"

"Under the tree."

Lucien considered the question as though it required serious deliberation.

"Yes. Even when we are old."

"How old?"

"Very old."

"That is not an answer."

"Old enough to complain about our backs and tell our children to stop making noise."

Ethan burst out laughing.

"And what if the tree is no longer here?"

Lucien looked at the trunk, then back at his friend.

"Then we will remember where it stood."

For a while, neither spoke.

They could not have known that the future would eventually demand far more of their friendship than they were capable of imagining.

They only knew that the old tree had become a place where the world made sense, where they could speak without fear of being misunderstood, and where the ordinary details of their lives acquired a special importance simply because they were sharing them.

There were afternoons when Ethan arrived carrying a disappointment he could not explain at home. Perhaps he had received a poor mark, quarrelled with a classmate, or disappointed his father by failing to complete something he had promised to do.

Lucien would listen.

There were other afternoons when Lucien arrived angry with himself, frustrated by a mistake or embarrassed by something that had happened in class.

Ethan would listen in return.

Neither possessed the wisdom of an adult. They could not always offer useful advice, and sometimes their attempts to solve one another's problems only made them laugh.

But they were present.

And at that age, being present was often enough.

6. Two Families, One Growing Friendship

Their friendship did not remain confined to the schoolyard and the old mango tree.

As the boys spent more time together, their parents gradually became acquainted. What began with brief greetings developed into conversations, invitations, shared meals, and eventually a genuine friendship between the two households.

Claire Moreau was the first to notice how often Ethan spoke about Lucien.

At dinner, he would recount something his friend had said, describe an incident from Lucien's classroom, or ask whether he could invite him over during the weekend.

Sometimes Claire would smile before answering.

"You have mentioned Lucien three times since you sat down."

Ethan looked up from his plate.

"Have I?"

"Yes."

"Well, he did something funny today."

"Apparently, he does something funny every day."

"He is a very funny person."

Daniel, who had been listening quietly, lowered his glass.

"And does this very funny person ever do his homework?"

Ethan grinned.

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"Most of the time."

Daniel raised an eyebrow.

"That is a reassuring improvement."

Claire laughed, and Ethan returned to his meal, already preparing another story.

At the Laurent household, Lucien was no different.

Isabelle often heard about Ethan before she had even asked how his day had gone.

"Mother, do you think Ethan could come over on Saturday?"

"Perhaps. Have you finished your assignments?"

"I will finish them tomorrow."

"You said that yesterday."

"Yesterday was different."

"How?"

Lucien paused.

"I cannot remember."

Isabelle shook her head, smiling despite herself.

"You are fortunate that I find your friend as pleasant as you do."

Lucien immediately brightened.

"Does that mean he can come ?"

"It means I will speak to his mother."

For Lucien, that was practically a promise.

The parents gradually discovered that they shared more than a concern for their children. Daniel and Marc enjoyed discussing their work, the changes taking place in their town, and the practical problems of family life. Claire and Isabelle found pleasure in exchanging recipes, talking about their households, and occasionally laughing over the particular challenges of raising boys who seemed to possess an inexhaustible supply of questions.

The two families began visiting one another regularly.

Sometimes they met for lunch on Sundays. On other occasions, one household invited the other for an evening meal that stretched long into the night because nobody seemed eager to leave.

The boys were delighted.

They no longer had to treat every meeting as a carefully negotiated arrangement. Their parents trusted one another, and the children were welcomed into each other's homes with

a warmth that made the distinction between guest and family seem increasingly unimportant.

Ethan began spending weekends at the Laurent house.

Lucien stayed overnight at the Moreaus'.

They learned each other's household routines, favourite meals, and small domestic peculiarities. Ethan discovered that Lucien's father liked to tell the same stories repeatedly, often improving them with every retelling. Lucien learned that Daniel Moreau was not as stern as he first appeared and could be surprisingly funny when he felt relaxed.

Claire made room for Lucien at her table without hesitation.

Isabelle did the same for Ethan.

There were occasions when one boy arrived looking troubled, and the other family instinctively gave him space. The adults understood that friendship sometimes required a child to speak privately with someone his own age, and they respected the quiet confidence that had grown between the two boys.

Their friendship was becoming part of the family life around them.

No one had any reason to imagine that this ordinary happiness could ever be taken away so suddenly.

7. Weekends That Felt Like Home

The boys particularly loved the weekends they spent together.

At the Moreau house, Ethan's bedroom was usually tidier than Lucien expected. His books were arranged on a shelf, his schoolbag rested near the desk, and a few personal belongings occupied the corners of the room.

Lucien, however, had little interest in admiring the arrangement.

He would enter, look around, and immediately ask where Ethan kept the things he was not supposed to touch.

"Do not start," Ethan would warn him.

"I have not done anything."

"You have that look."

"What look?"

"The look you get before you do something foolish."

Lucien would smile innocently.

"I am offended that you think so poorly of me."

"You are offended because I know you too well."

Their laughter would travel down the corridor, sometimes prompting Claire to call from the kitchen and remind them that other people lived in the house.

At the Laurent home, the atmosphere was equally welcoming.

Marc enjoyed teasing the boys during meals, asking questions that he knew would provoke elaborate answers.

"So," he would say, resting his elbows on the table, "which one of you is going to become famous first?"

"Me," Lucien would answer without hesitation.

Ethan would look at him.

"For what?"

"For being the most intelligent person in the town."

Marc would burst out laughing.

"An ambitious career."

"I have high expectations."

"And you, Ethan?" Isabelle would ask. "What would you like to become?"

Ethan would think for a moment.

"I am not sure yet."

Marc would nod thoughtfully.

"That is a perfectly acceptable answer. You have time to discover what matters to you."

Lucien would immediately intervene.

"He wants to become a scientist."

"I do not know that yet."

"An explorer, then."

"That is not the same thing."

"Someone who discovers things."

Ethan would laugh.

"Perhaps."

Those conversations mattered more than the boys realised. They were growing up in households where they could ask questions, admit uncertainty, and imagine futures that had not yet taken shape.

They were surrounded by adults who cared about them and by a friendship that made the years of childhood feel secure.

When the boys stayed overnight, they often continued talking long after their parents believed they had gone to sleep.

They discussed school, their classmates, the things they found embarrassing, and the people they admired. Sometimes they imagined what life would be like at fifteen, sixteen, or eighteen.

At those ages, adulthood seemed distant enough to be exciting and close enough to make their plans feel important.

"Imagine us when we are eighteen," Lucien whispered one night while they lay in the dark.

Ethan turned towards him.

"What about it?"

"We will be practically adults."

"Practically?"

"Well, not completely. But old enough to make our own decisions."

"That sounds dangerous."

"Only if you make bad decisions."

"Which you do regularly."

Lucien threw a pillow at him.

Ethan laughed so loudly that they heard footsteps approaching the bedroom door.

"Are you two still awake?" Isabelle called.

"No!" Lucien answered.

There was a pause.

"Lucien."

"Yes, Mother?"

"That was the least convincing answer you have ever given me."

Ethan buried his face in the pillow to suppress his laughter.

A moment later, the footsteps receded.

The boys waited several seconds before resuming their conversation in whispers.

They were still children, protected by the familiar rhythms of their families and the assumption that tomorrow would arrive much like today.

Neither knew how precious those ordinary nights would become.

8. Growing Up Beneath the Same Sky

Time moved forward, as it always does, without asking whether anyone is ready for the changes it brings.

The boys passed from childhood into early adolescence. Their voices began to change, their interests broadened, and the concerns they brought to the old mango tree became more complicated.

At thirteen, they were no longer content to discuss only school assignments and amusing incidents.

They spoke about identity, ambition, relationships, and the uncertain future waiting beyond the familiar streets of their town.

They also began to understand that growing up meant encountering difficulties they could not always solve together.

Sometimes Ethan became unusually quiet. He worried about meeting his father's expectations and about choosing a future that would make his family proud. He wanted to do well, but he was not always certain what success should look like.

Lucien listened without pretending to possess answers.

"You do not have to decide your whole life today," he told Ethan one afternoon.

"I know."

"Then why do you look as though someone has asked you to explain the meaning of the universe?"

Ethan smiled faintly.

"Because everyone keeps asking what I want to do."

"And what do you tell them?"

"That I do not know yet."

"That is an answer."

"It does not seem to satisfy anyone."

Lucien picked up a small twig and turned it between his fingers.

"Perhaps they are asking because they want you to have a good future. That does not mean they know what your future should be."

Ethan studied his friend.

"Since when have you become so wise?"

"Since this morning."

"That explains everything."

They laughed, but Ethan's expression gradually became more serious.

"I sometimes think that when we are older, everything will change."

"Everything changes," Lucien replied. "But that does not mean we lose everything."

"What if we do?"

Lucien looked at him directly.

"Then we will find a way to keep what matters."

Ethan said nothing for a while.

He wanted to believe that his friend's confidence could protect them from whatever waited ahead.

Perhaps Lucien wanted to believe it just as much.

Their friendship had become so deeply woven into their lives that imagining a future without it seemed almost impossible. They had grown accustomed to sharing their experiences, their questions, and their private thoughts. When one encountered something important, the first instinct was to tell the other.

They did not yet understand that love and friendship could remain powerful without being able to control the events that threatened them.

For now, they continued meeting beneath the tree.

They were growing older, but the old mango tree remained their familiar point of return.

9. The Winter of Their Fifteenth Year

By the time Ethan and Lucien reached fifteen, their friendship had survived the ordinary tests of growing up.

They had argued and reconciled, made promises and revised their plans, laughed over foolish mistakes, and supported one another through disappointments that had once seemed impossible to endure.

They were still attending the same school, although they remained in different classes. Their academic responsibilities had increased, and their teachers expected greater maturity from them.

The boys had also begun to understand that their families could not arrange every detail of their lives. They were given more independence, provided they behaved responsibly and kept their parents informed about where they intended to go.

The old mango tree remained central to their routine.

They still met there whenever their schedules permitted, sometimes immediately after school and sometimes later in the afternoon.

Their conversations had changed, but their affection had not.

Ethan occasionally teased Lucien about his confidence with girls. Lucien responded by reminding Ethan that he was not exactly an expert in matters of romance either.

They discussed their examinations, their ambitions, and the possibility of travelling beyond their town one day.

They were at an age when the world seemed to be opening before them, full of opportunities they had not yet explored.

Neither could imagine that one of them would soon disappear from the other's life.

The winter in which everything changed arrived quietly.

The mornings became colder. The trees along the streets lost much of their colour, and the sky frequently remained grey for hours. A thin dampness settled over the town, leaving the pavements dark and the air sharp against exposed skin.

The old mango tree stood beneath the pale winter light, its familiar branches extending above the place where the boys had spent so many afternoons.

The season made their meetings shorter on some days, but it did not prevent them from coming.

They had always found reasons to sit together, even when the weather was unpleasant.

Sometimes they brought warm drinks from home. On other afternoons, they simply tucked their hands into their pockets and complained about the cold.

Lucien was usually the first to make a joke.

"If this continues, I shall have to ask the tree to provide us with heating."

Ethan would glance upwards.

"I do not think it has that kind of money."

"Then we shall have to negotiate."

"With a tree?"

"It has been here longer than either of us. It must have accumulated some resources."

Ethan would laugh, and the conversation would move on.

Those ordinary exchanges were part of the comfort they found in one another. Even as adolescence brought new uncertainties, they retained the ability to turn a difficult day into something manageable through humour and companionship.

Yet the winter seemed to carry a stillness that neither could explain.

Perhaps it was simply the weather. Perhaps it was the way the bare branches moved against the fading light.

There was nothing extraordinary about that afternoon.

Nothing that should have warned them.

10. The Last Conversation

On the day Ethan disappeared, the sky was overcast.

The cold had settled in early, and a faint breeze moved through the streets. The clouds were heavy without being threatening, and the afternoon light had the muted appearance of a day that would end before anyone felt ready for evening.

School had been tiring.

Both boys had spent much of the day dealing with lessons and assignments. They had exchanged a few words during a break, but they had not had enough time to talk properly.

Their meeting beneath the old mango tree therefore felt particularly welcome.

Lucien arrived first.

He rubbed his hands together, stamped his feet against the cold, and looked down the path.

"Ethan!" he called when he finally saw his friend approaching. "I was beginning to think you had decided to become a responsible student."

Ethan shook his head.

"That would be a terrible misunderstanding."

"You are late."

"By five minutes."

"Five minutes is a long time when someone is freezing."

"You could have gone home."

"And miss the opportunity to complain about you? Never."

Ethan laughed as he joined him beneath the tree.

They settled into their usual place, where the trunk offered some protection from the breeze.

At first, they talked about school.

Lucien described an incident involving a classmate who had confidently given the wrong answer to a question and then attempted to convince the teacher that the question itself was badly formulated.

Ethan laughed.

"Did it work?"

"Of course not."

"Then why did he try?"

"Because he was desperate."

"And you?"

"I would never do such a thing."

Ethan looked at him.

"You did exactly that last month."

Lucien's expression changed.

"That is an unfortunate detail."

"It is a very important detail."

"Let us move on."

They continued talking, moving from school to their families and from their families to the plans they had made for the coming weeks.

Lucien told Ethan that his mother wanted the family to visit relatives soon. Ethan mentioned that Claire had been considering inviting the Laurents over for another Sunday meal.

"Your mother makes the best food," Lucien said.

"My mother would be pleased to hear that."

"She should hear it more often."

"I will tell her."

"Tell her that I am available for further appreciation whenever she needs it."

Ethan laughed.

"You are impossible."

"And yet you continue to meet me."

"Someone has to make sure you do not become unbearable."

Lucien shook his head with exaggerated disappointment.

For a while, they were simply two boys enjoying the familiar pleasure of one another's company.

Then Ethan glanced towards the sky.

"We should probably head home soon."

Lucien followed his gaze.

The light was fading, and the temperature seemed to be dropping.

"Yes. My mother will start wondering where I am."

"Mine too."

Neither wanted to leave immediately.

There was always something else to discuss, another story to tell, another question to ask. Their conversations rarely ended because they had exhausted every subject. They ended because the weather, their parents, or the demands of everyday life eventually required them to return home.

That afternoon was no different.

They stood, brushed the dust from their clothes, and gathered their belongings.

Lucien looked at Ethan.

"Same time tomorrow?"

Ethan nodded.

"Same time tomorrow."

"You had better not be late again."

"I will do my best."

"That is not a guarantee."

"It is the best you are going to get."

Lucien smiled.

"All right. Tomorrow, then."

Ethan extended his hand in a gesture they had invented years earlier, a small ritual that had become familiar through repetition.

Lucien clasped it.

For a brief moment, they stood facing one another beneath the branches of the old tree.

There was nothing dramatic about their farewell. No trembling voice, no sudden confession, no sense that they were standing at the edge of a moment that would divide their lives into before and after.

Ethan turned towards the path leading home.

Lucien went in the opposite direction.

They did not look back.

Neither imagined that this ordinary separation would become the last time they would see one another for twelve long years.

11. Two Different Roads