

## **Louder Back Then - Akshara, Year 5, NSW**

She used to push me into bushes.

Not hard enough to hurt me, just enough for me to trip and yell her name loud enough to scare birds out of trees.

And then she'd laugh. Always louder than me. Always louder than anyone.

I remember one time after school, we were walking past the grocery store when she jumped up and threw the "No Littering" sign for no reason.

"Oops, I littered," she said, holding her hands up like she was being arrested.

"No, you're just weird," I said.

"You love it," she said.

"Do not."

"Do too."

I pushed her that time. Right into the bushes. She came out with leaves in her hair and slapped my back like I'd scored a goal.

That was her.

Always moving. Always laughing. Always doing things like skipping over cracks in the sidewalk like a little kid, even though we were in middle school and people stared.

She never cared.

One time she got a piece of paper stuck in her locker and tried to blow it out with her mouth like it was some kind of magic spell. I was standing there like, "Just use your hand?" and she said, "Where's the fun in that?"

She hit me in the arm constantly. Not hard. Not mean. Just little taps. Like punctuation when she talked.

"You hear what happened in science?"

"Bet I can beat you to the crosswalk."

"You smell like gym class."

I started tapping her back. We didn't talk about it. It just became part of walking home. We'd throw our backpacks at each other like swords. Sometimes one of us would miss and the other would fall into someone's trash can. I can't count how many sticks we crushed under our feet. Or how many times we walked into poles because we were too busy fake-fighting.

It was stupid.

But, it was perfect.

Sometimes she'd surprise me with little things, like the day she gave me a half-eaten candy bar from her busy lunchbox.

"You need energy," she said like she was some kind of teacher.

Or the time she showed up at my house with a crooked paper crown she made from art paper.

"You are now the king of the sidewalk," she declared.

I wore it for five minutes before it fell apart.

She never cared if things weren't perfect.

She was always moving forward, even when I really wanted to stop.

Now the sidewalks are quiet.

No footsteps matching mine. No sudden shoves into bushes. No stupid backpack wars. Just quiet.

She's been gone for two months and twenty-five days.

That still doesn't feel like a real sentence to write. I've written it down a billion times, hoping one time it'll actually feel fake. It never does.

Some people leave slowly. Not her. She left like a light being turned off. One second there. The next... not.

It was just an ordinary Tuesday.

We didn't even argue that day. I think we just talked about cereal. She said Cinnamon Toast Crunch was the best and I said it was soggy garbage. She rolled her eyes and said, "You have no taste. You should be arrested."

Then she said, “Later, loser,” and turned down her street.

I realised what happened the next morning. Everyone was whispering before class. I heard her name. I heard “accident.” I heard “ambulance.”

She didn’t make it.

That’s what they said.

That’s what everyone said.

Like it was a thing people just say.

She didn’t make it.

I can’t say how it feels to know she’s not coming back.

The first week after it happened, I sat on the little bench by the bike rack, staring at the place where she used to stand.

I thought if I just stared just long enough, she’d come back.

She wouldn’t.

The hallways seem too long now, like the walls got farther apart, like there’s more space where she used to be.

At lunch, I don’t search for her anymore.

Sometimes, when the bell rings, I can hear her voice shouting at me from the end of the old playground. But there’s absolutely nothing. Just my imagination.

Just silence.

I remember that one time she dared me to jump off the tall playground slide. I was so nervous, but she went first, laughing the whole way down. She always did stupid things for me.

“Now it’s your turn!” she said, with a big smile on her face.

I jumped.

It felt like flying.

Then she smiled and said, "See? Not so bad."

I was proud of us.

When I walk past the empty playground, I can always see the slide and wonder if she is still up there, waiting for me to jump off with her.

I wish she was.

I keep her candy in my backpack. It's broken and stuck to the side, but I don't throw it in the bin.

Sometimes I take it out and put it up to my nose. It still smells like raspberries.

I don't eat it.

They say time heals everything.

I don't think they know what they're talking about.

Time doesn't heal anyone at all. Not for me, at least.

Time just makes you want things that you can't possess.

Sometimes, at night, I dream of her.

Her blonde hair is flying in draughts.

We're standing on the slide.

She's still laughing.

I'm still trying to catch her.

And then I wake up in bed.

I miss her.

I miss her loud laugh.

I miss her annoying taps.

I miss her.

And in just a few seconds, she was gone.

And all I have left are the quiet moments.