

3rd Place - Poppy N

Weeping Willow

Bathed in pale morning light, Willow stood in the kitchen, the room mirroring her family's fractured façade. She glanced at the torn picture of the three of them, suffocated under her dad's cold leather briefcase. Dozens of forms and business cards veiled the fridge with bleak and bitter words, Willow's achievements abandoned on the dusty counter. Suddenly, her parents' voices, sharp as glass, shattered the morning's fragile peace. Their daily arguments proved that responsibility eclipsed the warmth in their hearts, and their strictness cast a shadow over Willow's every action. Her dad hastily grabbed the car keys, departing without a glance in her direction. They didn't even say goodbye.

Willow slipped her school bag over her shoulders and shuffled out the door. She saw her classmates skipping along merrily with their parents, their laughter ringing like a mocking chorus. Overwhelmed, she turned down an unfamiliar path, footsteps growing quicker with her racing emotions, falling into a desperate beat. Running, Willow fled further, her tears blurring the forest into a kaleidoscope of silver and green. With a painful thud she slammed into the crumbling bark of a willow tree and collapsed to the ground, the world spinning into a pulsing darkness.

Plunging into a dreamscape, Willow found herself back in the white light of her home. A knock on the door and her friend's voice broke through the hazy dreamlike fog. "Do you wanna come play?" her friend asked, her eyes lively and inviting. Willow hesitated, sorrow coiling around her heart. "My parents won't allow it" she breathed. Her friend peered at her, confused, "what parents?"

Willow's eyes skimmed the hollow room. There were no family photos, no paperwork, no remains of her parents' presence...

She spent the day with her friends, bliss illuminating her face as she played in the sun, a bird finally free from its cage.

As twilight draped the world in shadows, Willow sauntered home, a drop of loneliness slowly seeping into her heart. She settled into bed, and a void, cold as December's breath, enveloped her.

A sudden snap of twigs and reality pierced through the illusion. Willow awoke amidst the dark greenery where she had fallen, submerged in the forest's eerie beauty. Realisation washed over her like a cool breeze, and she retraced her steps towards home under the sterling moon's gaze.

She reached the cobblestone path outside her house, a warm glow bleeding from the windows and onto the porch. Her dad's eyes were green pools of regret as he paced the room. And the silhouette of her mother cradled one of Willow's bears close to her heart, her mind flooded with sacred memories of her lost daughter.

Tears cascaded down Willow's cheeks, flushed with gratitude, as she followed the warm path to the front door.

When there's no one there to make you breakfast in the morning and wait for you after school, when you can go out and do whatever you like, what do you call it? Freedom or loneliness?