

Back to the Truth

By Siddhi Garg

2nd Place in the 12-17 Age Category

There is a small pebble wedged down the middle of my right trainer. I can hear the click of my footsteps, but I don't bother taking it out. It is the only sound on the loop today.

Every breath feels like I am chugging ice-cold water and the frosty air creeps along my spine. The trees throw long shadows on the path, trapping the whole circuit in a dim haze, for in Hillsborough Fort I am truly alone.

It wasn't always this way.

We were ten and Callum moved like a stray dog — wild, sudden and untamed. His raw, purple cheeks split by a playful grin, his voice bouncing off the stone walls. He dragged me along, roaring with laughter as we skidded across the black ice. I thought he was fearless. He was indestructible— unfazed by the darkness seeping into every winter evening. He had no rules, no curfew, no mother calling out from the porch. I remember my fingers throbbing from that icy chill, begging him to head home. He just started giggling again. He refused to stop. He swore it wasn't cold, insisting we play one more game — just five more minutes — anything to delay the walk back to his front door.

The far curve of the loop opens up. Walking slower now, the silence gives those old details room to breathe. You carry a story for years thinking it is about a reckless friend who loved the dark until context begins to fill in the blanks. You don't see it all when you're ten.

The way Callum's hands shook when he pulled up the zipper on his jacket. The way he used to stare at the digestives my mum packed — like he had to prove he was allowed to have them before wolfing them down. The way he stayed out every night till his teeth were chattering so hard he couldn't speak. He did it because there was no one waiting at home, this was the only place where there was no yelling. And the bruises. The bruises he blamed on the tree roots were too livid, too neat and far too old to be an accident.

My chest is heaving, my shoulders shuddering. How could I have got it so wrong? Yet you can't fix a childhood that's already over. You can't reach through years of fog to hand him a plate of food. You can't turn back time and stand between an innocent child and his daunting front door now.

There's no undoing it.

That is the worst part. My eyes prick and tears bleed out. It's too late now. Twelve years too late. The path keeps going on in an endless circle, bringing me back to the start but abandoning my dearest friend in the dark.