

Every Journey Ends with a Smile

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Losing someone isn't easy. I feel like everyone should know that by now, whether they've actually lost someone or not. But sometimes—no one seems to understand.

I lost my best friend, Willow, three weeks ago. I didn't expect her to leave this world so soon. We're only twelve. But soon I'll be thirteen. High school will come quicker than my initial thought. Before I know it, I'll be an adult. Then I might start a career and thrive in life.

But Willow will forever be twelve.

I'll experience so many new things that she won't be able to. It's unfair.

For example, I'm going on a cruise this summer. It's my first one. It would've been my friend's first, too. Our families were planning to go together...until three weeks ago.

Now it's just my parents and I who will be traveling. I'm not looking forward to it as much.

I was frowning when I packed my bags.

My smile was upside down when we were on the plane.

My eyes looked lifeless when we reached the dock.

I felt *guilty* when we settled into our room on the boat.

Why do *I* get to enjoy things while Willow watches from the clouds? I don't wanna make her jealous, I don't wanna make her sad...

I lay on my bed, letting the mattress engulf me. I watched the sea from the window. The waves seemed rough, yet so pretty. The water wasn't a clear blue, but I was still mesmerized by the way it glimmered in the sun.

Suddenly, I frowned. It was like admiration of anything meant letting Willow down.

"Come, dear. Let's explore the ship," my mother said.

I shrugged, reluctantly getting out of bed.

We walked down the hallways, taking in the beauty of the ship. I couldn't help myself, and I let my jaw drop at some of the sights around me. Music filled the air, people were laughing while eating some good food, and the place just felt so lively.

"There's a fun children's program on the ship," my mom said. "It's a place where kids can just hang out and have fun. Maybe you'll meet new people."

The only person I wanted to meet was Willow. I just wanted to see her again. Still, I said yes to my mom, knowing that she was trying her best to cheer me up.

The area which was made for kids to meet up was okay. It was clean, had some activities, and some kids were there. However, almost everyone in the room was either a toddler or a teenager. I didn't see anyone who was my age. I took this as an opportunity.

"There's no one that I can hang out with," I told my mom. "So we might as well leave."

I turned around on my heel, about to leave, when my mom pulled me back. "I'm sure there are other 12 year olds around here. Keep looking." She sounded tired, but she still put on a smile for my sake.

I sighed heavily and ventured through the place, looking for someone who I could talk to.

In the corner of my eye, I saw a girl with long, brown hair. She had pretty blue eyes, and her red shirt made them pop. I wasn't sure if she was exactly my age, but I sat across from her anyway, grabbing a paper to draw on. She was reading, seeming to be about halfway through the book.

"*Percy Jackson*," I acknowledged, nodding. "It's a good series."

She looked up and smiled.

My heart dropped. She had the same exact smile as my old friend.

"It is," she replied. "I'm only on the first one, but it's really good!" She glanced at my paper before making eye contact with me again. "Who are you drawing?"

I looked down. I hadn't even realized I was drawing Willow. "No one," I responded.

"Well, it looks great."

I forced a grin. "Thanks."

She put her book down. "I'm Winona."

My heart sank again. A name starting with W.

"Uh—I'm Tara," I answered, voice faltering.

"You like music?" Winona asked. I nod. "Yeah."

"What's your favorite song?"

"Um..." I paused. Willow and I both really love the same artists. "Little League."

"No way! You like Conan Gray too? My favorite song is Lonely Dancers," Winona exclaimed, laughing contagiously.

That was Willow's favorite.

This time, I didn't feel any weight on my shoulders when Willow came to mind. I figured that maybe she should be a memory that makes me smile. If I think of her, I should grin while remembering everything we did together.

So I did.

I smiled. A real one.