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Finalist

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### Let Me Go

The message was clear.

I noted the set of your shoulders, the resolve in your eyes, the defiance lining your stance. In your left hand, you gripped a small picnic basket topped with a bright green bow. With your right, you steadied your bike, the painted purple frame glinting in the setting sun.

I turned away, straining to block the image from my mind. It was too soon... I wasn't ready. Ignoring the tremors in my hands, I swung open the front door and leaned against the solid wood. When I looked back at you over my shoulder, you hadn't moved from where you stood on the sidewalk. Your voice pressed down on my chest as you called to me again.

Over the years this argument had repeated itself, widening the rift between us with each fresh occurrence. Once a child myself, I knew that we would experience some difficulties as you grew up. Nevertheless, I couldn't just let you go off on your own... you weren't ready. Though you had grown increasingly persistent with this matter, you had always listened to me in the end.

"Come inside," I asked, beckoning you towards me. In the past, it would only take a few seconds before you would let the bike fall and reluctantly follow me into the house. As I studied you this time, however, I knew instinctively that something was amiss. To my surprise, you took a step back.

"Let me go," you repeated, the words clear and unfaltering. Your little fists tightened on your basket and bike, clutching both decisively.

Rubbing my jaw, I crossed the doorstep and dropped my bag beside the remnants of our potted plant. I took a deep breath, leaned over to pull off my shoes, then placed the dusty sneakers alongside your new, red slippers. You had never worn them; there they sat, shining and untouched.

At the rapping of footsteps on pavement, I whipped around to see you running down the street before mounting your bike, your basket dangling from the handlebar. Where you had so recently stood, a strip of green lay on the sidewalk, faded, frayed, and forsaken.

Scrambling off my knees, I hurled myself out the door and after the bike that just rounded the corner. As I hurried to catch up, shards of gravel dug into the cotton of my socks, ripping at the thin material. My soles screamed with each step, but I pushed the pain aside. When I leapt onto the main street, the blare of a horn dimly registered as a truck narrowly swerved around me.

Although my breaths ran ragged and my legs buckled in misery, I continued to sprint after you. Regardless of my efforts, you continuously pulled further and further away. Frenzied, I tried to call your name, but my cry splintered in my throat. I coughed up blood, then wiped it off my cheek with the back of my hand.

“Just let me go!” you shouted from up ahead.

I couldn't.

Thus, together we rushed past fields dotted with chartreuse, lemon, and periwinkle. As the familiar summer fragrances wafted towards me, a memory began to materialize: you and I, weaving between sunflowers as we searched for the perfect bouquet. I remember admiring the sun as it began to dip beneath the horizon, painting the skies with a rosy glow and illuminating the surrounding filigrees with golden light. I picked you up and twirled you around, a wreath of Queen Anne's Lace adorning your neck.

When the asphalt beneath my feet gave way to soft, damp earth, I stopped running. Keeling over, I opened my eyes to dusk and struggled to regain my breath. I had followed you to a small clearing—one of our favourite spots.

There, crouched against a small rock, you pulled your knees to your body and shook your head. The picnic basket lay beside you, worn and tattered. Gingerly, I bent down and sorted through its contents: an emerald ribbon, a red slipper, a dried floret of Queen Anne's Lace.

A sob clawed its way up from my chest, emptying my lungs.

“Dad,” you whispered earnestly, “let me go.”

Your voice was barely audible over the susurrations of the wind and the stillness of the forest.

Slowly, I reached towards you, placing my hand on the smooth, cool stone. As I traced your name with my fingertips, I held onto you one last time.

Then, I let you go.