I Will Wait

“I will wait for you.”

*\_\_\_\_\_*

*“… Now I'll be bold*

*As well as strong*

*And use my head alongside my heart”*

*\_\_\_\_\_*

Connor’s eyes were shining with excitement. He stood by me on the playground, rocking back and forth with the natural adrenaline all ten year old boys seem to have. He was almost entirely covered in mud.

“Just… a… minute…” I finished tying the shoelaces on my pink Sketchers. My pudgy little fingers weren’t the most useful for knot tying; they slid as I fiddled with its strings.

“I’m coming!” I sprang off the ground and burst towards the Moon Slide. Barely turning around, I yelled behind me, “Last one there is a rotten egg!”

Connor chased me, our excited giggles carrying through the air. I tripped my way through the mulch and almost fell face-first twice.

It was a cold fall this year. Chilly wind bit at my ears and auburn leaves crunched under my feet. Pretty soon, our days of outdoor frolicking would transfer to indoor recess. Although the warmth of our classroom was great, I was going to miss the feel of tree bark and chalk on concrete.

After what seemed like an eternity, we were there: the Moon Slide. The single greatest piece of playground equipment in all of history. It was vibrant red and blue, twisting around itself like spiral macaroni. Not only was it almost a million feet high–the height of the moon–it was so big, so tall, and so scary, only the sixth graders had ever gone down it before. That was until today.

I gulped.

Connor yelled to a group of kids across the playground: “GUYS! WE’RE GOING DOWN THE MOON SLIDE!”

Whispers rose from the four-foot crowd. A kickball rolled down the pavement as my classmates ran towards us. Their small voices sounded loud in the silent air.

*“Is he really gonna do it?”*

*“There’s no way…”*

*“He’s only in the fifth grade…”*

I looked up at Connor and pulled on the hem of his Spider-Man sweatshirt. “Are you sure about this?” I looked up, and the ginormous shadow of the Moon Slide glared down on me. “Connor…”

“Trust me, Belle. We’ve got this. We just gotta be brave. Like… umm… Superman!” He said it in a deep voice, and I laughed.

Together we climbed up to the top of the slide. Each step was scarier than the last, and my heart started racing. At this point, the kids were chanting.

“CONNOR!”

“BELLE!”

“CONNOR!”

“BELLE!”

Once we reached the tippity top, he looked over at me. “Are you ready?”

I cleared my throat with a sudden rush of bravery. “I’m ready.”

He grabbed my hand. “1…2…3…!”

And with a kick of our feet, we were off.

\_\_

“I will wait for you.”

*\_\_\_\_\_*

*“… But I'll kneel down*

*Wait for now*

*And I'll kneel down*

*Know my ground”*

*\_\_\_\_\_*

Connor met my gaze, his eyes wide with emotion.

He was still bent down on one knee, a burgundy velveteen case perched in his hands. The sun sparkled off the ring, making its silver shimmer just as brightly as the sparkling diamond. I’m pretty sure he was shaking.

I could feel myself choking up. “I am so sorry. It isn’t you, I promise, it’s just the timing, and I’m not sure I’m ready–”

“Shh,” he gave me a warm yet hesitant smile. “No apologies. We’re still in our twenties, and the amount of pressure you’re under with the business and your college schedule… I should have waited.” I started to interject, but Connor stopped me. “I’m not going anywhere, Belle. I’ll be here when you're ready. I promise.”

I nodded and bit my lip. I opened my mouth to speak, but couldn’t find the right words. I opened up my arms to him.

He grabbed me and pulled me close, squeezing me tight and holding me against his chest. The smell of hair gel proved he spent a lot of time preparing for this.

“How about a little walk?”

“Mhm,” I nodded.

We set off silently down the trail, careful not to squish any of the flowers blooming in pavement cracks. I was acutely aware of a black-capped chickadee chirping in the tree beside us.

Eventually, he reached into his pocket and dug out a pair of earbuds. He popped one into his ear and pressed the other to my palm, gesturing for me to put it in. As soon as I did, the music started.

*“Well I came home…”*

\_\_

“I will wait for you.”

*\_\_\_\_\_*

*“Like a stone*

*And I fell heavy into your arms*

*These days of dust*

*Which we've known*

*Will blow away with this new sun”*

*\_\_\_\_\_*

Connor looked at me, tears glistening in his eyes. His voice cracked with each word. I placed my hand against his burning forehead, wrinkles creased into his ninety year old skin. The fever was getting worse, just as they said it would.

I studied his face; the graying hair and comforting eyes and warming smile. I couldn't process any of it. I wouldn’t. To me, he was still the muddy little boy on the playground.

“Wait for me? What do you mean?”

“Heaven, Belle.” He coughed. “With the pearly white clouds, and the fresh green meadows, and the dandelions, roses, and buttercups. I’ll be waiting for you there.” A salty drop dripped down his cheekbone, sliding over his chin. “Come here.”

I leaned in close, my face hovering inches above his. He reached up a shaking hand, brought me towards him, and pressed a soft kiss against the top of my head. His lips were ice cold.

“I love you.”

I collapsed on top of him. “I love you too.”

We stayed like that for a while. He traced the silver band on my finger, and my dry skin, and the veins that criss-crossed along my wrist. Way too soon, the motion stopped. The rising and falling of his chest began to dissipate.

“Belle?” He said, his voice just a whisper now.

“I will wait for you.”

He squeezed my hand one more time, and then went to the place where the waiting began. The place seemed so close around the corner, yet so far away, and so unreachable.

I let out a sob and kissed him. His words hung in the air.

“I will wait for you.”

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