“I’ll Come Running” / 1499 words (excluding footnote)

I’ll Come Running

“Travis.”

“I’m here, Dad.” I move closer to my father’s bedside. Dad’s weak voice is hard to hear through the steady chorus of beeping hospital monitors.

“Someday-” Dad swallows and tries again. “Someday that boy is coming back. I know it.”

That boy. My younger brother, Evan, who left the house four years ago with the money Dad had saved up for his college. The one who we haven’t heard from since. The one whom my father is convinced will come back.

“When he comes back-”

“Dad, just relax. Lay back down.”

“When he comes back, I won’t be there to wait for him.”

“Dad-” I try to deny it, but we both know my father doesn’t have more than a few minutes to live.

“Every day for four years I’ve sat on the porch waiting. I said, *when he comes home I will jump up and run to him*. I’ll come running, no matter how far.”

“I know.”

“But I can’t now.” He grasps my hand. “Travis, promise me-”

“Dad-”

“Promise me that you’ll come running. Promise that you’ll bring him back.”

I bite my lip. I don’t know if I can promise that. Not after everything Evan did.

One of the monitors raises its plaintive voice above the murmurs of the others in a steady whine. As if on cue, several nurses push their way into the room and order me out. I try to resist the gloved hands that are pulling me out, away from my dying father, but the tide of green latex succeeds in sweeping me away to the waiting room. For once in my life, there’s nothing I can do.

Twenty-four years, I think to myself in the waiting room. Twenty-four years of straight A’s, varsity, and finally legal college; twenty-four years of doing everything right and caring for my father; and all he can think of is Evan. Every day for four years he’s believed that someday, Evan will come back. *I’ll come running…* yeah, right.

The funeral is over in a blur of friends and casserole. When everyone leaves, I collapse onto the couch in exhaustion. Across the room is the chair where Dad always sat. It looks empty without him.

The doorbell rings, a melancholy hollow chime. More casseroles.

I pull open the door, expecting middle aged ladies in flowery dresses bearing lasagna and sympathy. Instead, there’s a homeless kid in a camo jacket, huddled in the alcove by the door to escape the afternoon drizzle. He looks up, and I freeze.

“Evan?” I choke.

“Travis? Where’s Dad? I need to talk to him-” Evan shoves his way past me into the house.

“Hey, you can’t-”

“Dad?” Evan calls. I frown at the tracks of mud left by his worn sneakers.

“Dad’s not here,” I say, coming in behind Evan. Evan stares at Dad’s empty chair.

“Where is he?”

I look down. “Gone.”

Evan searches the house desperately. “Gone? Gone where? I need to talk to him. I need to tell him that-”

“Evan, he’s not here,” I say, surprised at how angry it sounds. “He died a week ago, and you didn’t even come to the funeral.”

Evan stares at me, shocked. “Dad-?”

Evan wilts into a chair. He looks sick: bony and yellow. “I didn’t know,” he whispers. “How-? How can he be gone?”

A bolt of white heat flashes through my mind. “I’ll tell you how. He spent four years, Evan, in his wheelchair on that porch, waiting for you. Waiting for the son who stole from him and ran away. He believed that someday you’d come back and now it’s too late.”

Evan rocks back and forth on the couch. “I’m sorry. That’s what I wanted to tell him. I wanted to say sorry for everything. I don’t know what to do… Just tell me what to do…”

I feel my teeth grinding together. “You can leave. It’s what you’ve always done. You leave and put everything on my shoulders.” As soon as the words are out, they leave the deep, dark pit where they’ve been hiding empty. Everything feels dark and empty. Especially the house, when Evan runs out the door into the pouring rain.

The house passes by in a tear-blurred kaleidoscope as I race down the stairs toward the garage. It was Dad’s favorite place.

The garage smells like gasoline and sawdust. Parked in the middle is a red farm truck. It was Dad’s car, the first car that I wrecked. I was terrified of what might happen now that I had let my dad down. Sure, Evan did it all the time, but I was supposed to be different, the mature and responsible one.

When I drove back to the house, Dad came running out of the garage to meet me. I handed him the keys, and he hugged me. “I wrecked the truck,” I said.

“I know.”

“You aren’t mad?”

“I am mad. I’m also so glad that you’re okay. Because you’re my son, I care more about you than the truck. And trust me, nothing you could do could make you any less of my son.”

*Nothing you could do…*

I have to find Evan. I can’t love him the way Dad did, but I have to try. It’s what Dad would want.

The rain comes fast and hard as I pull the farm truck onto the road. I drive with my head twisted painfully to the right, looking out the window for Evan. In the distance, near Farmer Mallory’s field, a solitary figure is stumbling through the rain, too big to be a cow and too small to be Farmer Mallory. I pull the truck to a sudden stop on the roadside and tumble out into the driving rain.

“Evan!” The thunder and wind steal most of my voice, but Evan hears me anyway. He starts running away. I look down at my black dress shoes in regret, then plunge into the squelching mud, racing after Evan.

*Someday, that boy is coming home. And when he does, I will jump up and run to him.*

*Do you hear me? I’ll come running. Doesn’t matter how far.*

Dad should be the one running, not me. My lungs burn, my eyes sting from the rain. The dress shirt and pants are painfully tight, the shoes pinch. I keep running, catching up to Evan.

Finally, Evan’s jacket is within reach. I lean forward to grab his hood and my shoe catches on a rock. The ground flips up and crushes my face in the mud. I lie there for a minute, knees and palms stinging, glasses cracked and pushed against my nose, wet mud oozing past my mouth. I expect to hear Evan’s smug retreating footsteps.

Instead, I feel a hand grip my arm and pull me out of the mud. Evan’s bony arm is deceptively strong.

“Travis? What are you doing?”

“Coming running,” I mumble through a swelling lip. Evan stares at me. With his hands on his hips, I can see the resemblance to Dad. “Evan, I didn’t mean what I said. I don’t want you to run away again. Even if we don’t get along, you’re all I have left now that Dad’s gone. I- I couldn’t do anything about losing Dad, and I’m not going to lose you too.”

Evan looks at the ground. When he looks up, he says, “Your nose is bleeding.”

I wipe it away quickly with the back of my hand. The bright scarlet of the blood against my skin is startling. Evan shivers and draws back when he sees it. I wonder how much he’s seen since he went to the city.

“Travis?” he says. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I made you carry everything on your own. I know how that feels now- to be alone. Everything still feels fragile-” he breaks off as if afraid his own voice might cause a collapse.

“I know,” I say. And I do. “Let’s go home.”

“Home,” Evan repeats, as if waking up from a dream.

We walk back to the truck together. I head for the driver’s seat, but Evan stops me and makes me hold the bridge of my nose to stop the bleeding. “I’ll drive,” he says.

I climb in the passenger’s side and huddle by the heater as the rain pours down outside. Evan is a good driver. I’d forgotten.

I take a look around the cab, at the homeless kid and the muddy funeral-goer, both of them dripping rain on the floor of an old red farm truck, both of them sons of the same man. I wonder what Dad would say if he were here. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a piece of paper lying on the dashboard. It’s an old, tattered bookmark. On the front is quoted,

*“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*

On the back, in my father’s handwriting, is the word *someday*.

*1. “For this son of mine…” quote taken from Luke 15:24*