

## Echoes of Our Promise

Willow pried her eyes from the random video playing on her phone. 4 AM already? Rubbing squinted eyes, she turned her phone off and let her phone drop on her bed by her head. Turning on her side, she sighed out into the silence of her dark room. For some reason, she had a heavy feeling in her chest. Deciding it was just her lack of a sleep schedule getting to her, she sighed once more, burying her face deeper into her pillow before drifting off.

“...Willow, get up, please,” her mother’s voice drifted into her mind, pulling her out of her sleep. Peeking one eye slightly open, she groaned and turned away from her mother’s figure standing in her bedroom doorway. Her mother continued, “Come on, it’s Mardi Gras today. You should go out—have some fun today! I even bought us a king cake last night. So get up, already.”

Groaning, Willow turned once more, with both eyes giving her mother a groggy glare. “Fine, give me a minute,” she mustered out in a heavy voice. Once her mother left, she reached behind her and pulled her phone to her face again. At the top of the screen, it read 8:36 AM. Great, 4 hours and 36 minutes of restless sleep was exactly what she needed before Mardi Gras Day. Another holiday she had to spend without Reyna. *Oh God, that’s why I felt so weird last night*, she realized. *Why do the holidays get so hard without her?* Not bothering to answer her own inner dialogue, she huffed and headed straight to the bathroom, wincing at the initial coldness of the tiles beneath her feet.

After letting the warm water of the shower wake her up a bit more, Willow quickly dried off and dressed herself in her usual attire: a fitted black shirt, black jeans, her beat up converse, and any assortment of accessories she could find around her messy room. One ring she could always find, though, remained on her middle finger; a gift from Reyna before she... Willow

shook off the thought and finished getting ready by brushing her teeth, washing her face and applying her usual makeup—black liner, lashes, and enough concealer to cover her occasional blemishes—before heading to the kitchen.

“You look like you’re headed to a funeral, you sure you want to wear that on Mardi Gras?” her mother half-jokingly laughed out, turning back to the pancakes she was making. The sweet smell of the sugary pancakes helped Willow to ignore her mother’s jest. Sitting in her usual seat at the small table in their kitchen, she crossed her arms over her stomach in an attempt to silence its hungry growls.

As her mother finished the first batch and began placing two pancakes on the plate before Willow, the words left Willow’s mouth before she fully processed the thought, “I think I might go to Canal Street— or something... this year.” Her mother looked at her, trying to contain her small bolt of surprise at her daughter’s announcement. The last time she went out for Mardi Gras day was with Reyna, those few years ago. It felt so much longer though.

Quick to hide her shock, her mother replied, “Okay! Sounds good to me, just be home before midnight, love. And text me every now and then to let me know where you are, alright?” Willow nodded her response, eyes focused intently on her pancakes, racking her brain as to what made her say that so suddenly. “I think you’ll have a lot of fun,” her mother added more gently.

Willow let out a quick “Mhm,” before scarfing down one pancake, and finishing off most of the second one rather quickly. The last thing she needed was her mother bringing up Reyna. Anything but that would be great, especially this early in the morning. She stood up from the table, brought her dishes to the sink, and retreated back to her room to grab her bag and phone. Upon entering her room, she huffed out a sigh of relief from having avoided talking about...

Her eyes locked with Reyna's—well the picture of Reyna on her dresser. It was a picture of the both of them, only in middle school at that time. God, they were losers back then. The thought made her laugh; it was something that Reyna would've said if she were in the room. *Yeah, I mean total losers. Look at my braces! Looks like a cage in my damn mouth,* Reyna's voice said in the back of Willow's head. "Yeah... total losers," Willow agreed with a pang of sadness in her voice. She looked away from the picture and quickly grabbed her phone and her small backpack. She checked her complexion in the mirror next to her closet. She looked quite different from her middle school days. Her once pitch black hair fell in now-blonde and brown coils around her face, complimenting her light brown skin and dark eyes much better, in her opinion, at least. Reyna would look much cooler if she were around, she was willing to bet. That's just who she is— was.

Willow quickly stalked out of her room, shouting a quick, "I'm going, love you!" to her mother before rushing out the front door and into her car. Starting it up and turning on her usual favorite choice of music—R&B from the 80's and 90's—she back out her driveway and started heading to the closest mall in New Orleans. Thankfully, the drive was only fifteen minutes from her home. Or at least, it should have been under normal traffic circumstances. She forgot how busy the streets could get during Mardi Gras season. Tourists and regular citizens of New Orleans flooded the streets with parade-fever traffic. Since it was still earlier on in the day, the soon to be parade-routes were still open for drivers. Nonetheless, it took a generous 35 minutes to finally reach the mall. All the while, her music blasted in her car, keeping Willow distracted enough to not be too annoyed by the traffic.

Singing along to the lyrics flooding her car, a flash of Reyna holding a comb in her hand to her mouth as though it were a microphone came into her mind. *Do you ever dream of, candy-*

*coated raindrops!* Reyna yelled more than sang the lyrics. *Willow, take it away!* She would yell before shoving the comb by Willow's mouth, to which she would reluctantly but happily sing out the lyrics that followed. Their combined giggles echoed out in Willow's mind before she pressed down on the gas once the red light switched to green. Pulling into the parking lot of the mall, she hummed the same lyrics she used to practically scream under her breath. She parked close by the entrance of the mall.

She turned her car off and glanced once at the passenger seat before leaving to head inside. The familiar sounds, sights, and smells of the mall always helped her ignore the problems of life: The buzz of idle chatter between people that sometimes picked up in loud laughs or passing by conversations that her ears picked up; groups of people flowing in and out of stores, in a chaotic but somehow orderly fashion; the sweet aroma of cinnamon pretzels and varying flavors of frozen yogurt that filled the air of the food court. The mall was always her favorite distraction from everything.

Wanting to continue the oasis of escape, Willow perused her favorite stores. Looking through the shiny earrings, necklaces, and chokers of one store, onto the soft sweaters, ripped jeans, and cute pleated skirts of another, finally onto the plushies and various anime merchandise of another, she filled a few hours of her time feeling somewhat less alone amongst the crowd of random people. She decided to rest herself at a bench just outside the food court, sitting and enjoying the pretzel bites she bought. The sweet taste of the cinnamon dust covering the pretzel bites brought her mind back to Reyna.

*These things are like so addicting, I swear! We buy them every time we come here, it's like a ritual,* Reyna voiced from the back of her brain. Willow simply nodded to herself, still chewing on the sweet cinnamon taste. *They're so good when they're like fresh out the oven, too.*

*Oh! We have to get some beignets after this. I haven't had any in so long!* Willow looked up at the Café Du Monde sitting near the pretzel spot in the food court. She popped the last pretzel bite into her mouth and headed over, thankful that the line was somehow not reaching the edges of infinity for once.

*The line isn't crazy long for once, thank God!* Willow sighed, not offering up a response, although she did agree internally. After buying two beignets, she headed out of the mall and back into her car. She sat behind the wheel for a few minutes, just staring out into nothing. *You know, I don't know if it's the pretzels and the beignets fighting each other in there, but my stomach is not feeling too hot,* Reyna admitted with a weak laugh and a huff. A few seconds after, she made an odd noise and quickly opened the passenger door, ducking her head out to vomit onto the parking lot. Willow looked over, a look of dread and slight horror as she locked eyes onto the empty passenger seat and locked door. Her mouth reflexively fixed itself into a tight line as she held back a few tears.

“Reyna...” she whispered, pausing a moment before placing the beignets on the passenger seat turning forward to start up her car. Loud R&B blasted from her stereo as she pulled out the parking lot and headed towards Canal Street. Once again, the traffic made it a much longer drive. After an hour, she made it about halfway to her destination, stuck behind lines of cars. Looking out onto the sidewalk, she could see tourists pointing from their phones to various stores lining the streets. They walked past people seated on the cracked concrete, some playing beats on random objects, others belting out old jazz pieces. A few people stayed to listen before dropping money into their upturned hats and continuing on their walks. Almost everyone was adorned with various beads around their necks. The streets and sidewalks were littered with them, as well as plastic tokens and random objects thrown and forgotten from previous parades

and performances. Had she rolled her windows down, she knew the smell of plastic beads, gumbo and red beans with rice would cloud her nose. But, the cars suddenly began moving before she considered the thought much more.

It was already dark by the time Willow reached an area where she could park not too far from her destined parade route. Grabbing her bag from her side and the beignets off the passenger seat, she left her car, making sure to lock it. She almost instantly regretted not buying a sweater from the mall, as there was a faint breeze that she knew would soon turn bothersome as the night grew colder. It was no help that there was already a slight mist of rain coming down. No matter, she began her walk to the parade route, arms folded around her torso to keep warm. After a bit of walking through a stream of people, she sent her mom a quick text letting her know she was on Canal Street. She continued on, trying her best to not let her growing goosebumps bother her.

Bright neon lights from stores began to pierce her vision, along with the intruding noise of shouting people that grew louder as she neared the sidewalk she planned to watch the parade from. Although there were different people crowding it, it still felt the same as she sat down against the exterior of a small shop. Thankfully, the balcony of whatever apartment rested above the shop kept her protected from the drizzle of the rain. She placed her bag and the beignets onto her lap and rested her head against the bricks behind her.

*Why are you sitting down? The parade is gonna start soon! And we both swore we were gonna get matching stuffed animals this year! Plus, I'm the one who puked, so I should be tired!* Reyna whined, following it with a laugh when Willow shot her a glare. Willow complained about having walked for so long just to end up where they started looking for a good spot to watch the parade. *Yeah, well, if you don't scope your options then you're like asking for a bad*

*spot! You have to think about these things, you know,* Reyna laughed, following it with a small cough. She had been coughing so much lately. Reyna sat next to Willow, however, fitting her body right next to Willow's. Willow could feel the goosebumps lining up Reyna's arms. Hugging her knees to her chest, Reyna looked up into the lights of the buildings in the night sky. *You know... I'm glad we're watching a parade together. We live in New Orleans our whole lives and I feel like we barely do New Orleans-y things. We should do this every year, Willow. Hey, are you even listening to me?* Reyna turned her head to Willow. Willow turned to look at Reyna, but saw only the bricks and the concrete of the sidewalk.

Tears pricked at her eyes. That was the last parade they ever saw together. And it was so fun, but she never admitted that to her at the time. They caught a few beads and random objects from the parade float riders. Their throats were worn thin from yelling and laughing. They never did get those ridiculous stuffed animals Reyna wanted so badly. A small laugh erupted from Willow's throat. The crowd of people roaring with sudden cheers and clapping drowned out the sob that followed. Wiping the tears from her eyes, Willow quickly stood and grabbed her bags to move forward through the people. Before her were glorious floats, almost as beautiful as the ones she saw with Reyna. She could only stand and stare in awe at the large floats, filled with nobility-costumed riders and eye-catching props of various royal figures. Music blared through the street, mixing into a wild symphony with the parade-watchers. Eventually, Willow found herself joining in their orchestra, yelling and cheering for beads and other things to be thrown to her. Though, she was eventually silenced when she managed to catch something that felt unlike beads or plastic objects. Looking down into her hand, she saw a stuffed animal. The one that Reyna had wanted to catch. It was a simple teddy bear with soft brown fur and a small glittery mask of purple, yellow, and green over its button eyes. A small smile found its way to her face.

Likewise, tears found their way, too. Although, the oncoming drops of rain made it hard to tell if they were tears streaming down her face.

*Hey, stop crying, you'll make me feel even worse,* Reyna let out weakly, followed by a faint laugh. She looked so different in that hospital bed, but her smile was always the same. *Come on, when Mardi Gras comes up, we're gonna catch those teddy bears, so stop crying already Willow.* Willow grabbed her hand so tightly, she worried she would hurt Reyna then.

She grasped the teddy bear in her hands the same way. She backed away from the front of the crowd and sat back against her spot on the sidewalk. Letting the sounds of the parade fade away, she opened up her bag of beignets. She placed the teddy bear down onto her lap, and took a bite of a beignet. *We did it, Reyna. We got those ridiculous bears you wanted. You got it,* Willow said in the quiet of her mind. She sat and watched the floats move through for a while, catching glimpses of it through the people before her, enjoying the sugary pastry. Eventually, she checked her phone—it was 10:15 PM already. She got her things together to leave, holding the teddy bear to her chest tightly.

Just as she stood up, Reyna echoed into her mind, *Hey, let's do this again next year okay? And like, every year after this,* she suggested so earnestly with a laugh. Smiling her response, Willow looked down at the teddy bear before turning to walk back to her car.

“Well, I don't see why not,” she said to herself, to the chilled night air, to Reyna. Just as she did back then, when they were only 15 years old. Three years ago, she gave Reyna the same response. This time, though, it was a promise she meant to keep.

From then on, her promise stayed true. The teddy bear that soon rested next to the photo of Reyna and Willow from middle school was a symbol of it. For the first time in such a long

time, Mardi Gras had become Willow's favorite holiday. It was what made New Orleans her home. Her and Reyna's home.