

# The Fifth Time She Said It

*by R J Tomlin*

I'll never forget the first time she said it; lying there on an old blanket, my back and hips feeling like bruised fruit, the sleeping bag shared between us, and my feet poking out from underneath so it's pulled up enough to cover her ears. The festival sounds boom around us; music, voices, clinking bottles and muddy footsteps.

But inside the nylon of our tent none of it exists. We lie there for hours, talking through our tiredness, sharing stories of old friends despite our youth. And when the weight of our eyelids becomes too heavy to carry, she plants a kiss on my cheek and buries her head in my chest and says "I could stay here with you forever." And I say "Why don't you?"

I'll always remember the second time she said it; we're in a dark room, a chink of pale light shines through the gap in the curtains, planting a stripe on the wall. The bed sheets hang over us as she lies against my chest, my body sandwiched between fabric and flesh. I run a hand through her hair, feel her soft breath against my skin. Nothing else outside this room exists. Seven billion beings and this one matters more than all the others put together. I love her so much it scares me. She places a hand against my face and says "I could stay here with you forever." And I say "Why don't you?"

I couldn't forget the third time she said it; we face each other from both sides of the aisle, a sea of eyes stare at us, waves of tearful smiles. My suit is too loose, the cuff reaching past my wrist, and my shirt too short, barely long enough to tuck into my belt. I would've taken notice if I wasn't staring at her. A face I've seen a thousand times yet each time somehow more beautiful than the last. A long, white dress runs down her body, and a veil hangs over her eyes. She looks up at me, a face so perfect an angel would stare in envy. A room full of hundreds but only us two exist. The organ plays its final chords, and just as it stops she whispers "I could stay here with you forever." And I say "Why don't you?"

Nine months later was the fourth time she said it; we drive back from the hospital, the distant city lights twinkling like stars against a skyline black as ink. I leave the window open and the chilly air seeps in. I'm freezing but I like it, it reminds that I'm not dreaming, that I'm really here. Cold on the surface but warm inside. I haven't slept all night but I'm more awake than I ever have been. We pull up to the house and the car rolls to a stop. I help her out the back and we limp towards the front door, across a drive that seems to last for miles. We don't have the energy for the stairs and head straight for the living room. As we slump on the sofa she rests against me, our new-born baby cradled in her arms. We stare at the life we've made, the only thing on this planet I would genuinely die for. Seven billion people on this planet and I'd trade all of them to keep these two. For a moment it's like we aren't separate people, like we're different parts of the same being. She closes her eyes and whispers to me "I could stay here with you forever." And I say "Why don't you?"

It was years later, the fifth time she said it; I look down at her on the bed, a sleeping face so peaceful it could be chiselled out of stone. I clasp her gentle hand in mine and watch her chest rising with each breath. I haven't slept in days and I've given up trying. Sunlight creeps over the horizon, an orange blaze burns through the window and streaks across her. But now I see a face I hardly recognise. Cheeks so hollow they hold shadows, skin so tight it's like fabric wrapped around bone. Tubes run up her nose and the ugly hospital gown hangs loosely off her fragile body. Her beautiful long hair is gone, replaced with skin so bare it's as if she never had any. Despite it all, she's still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I hear voices in the corridor, the heart rate monitor beeping steadily. Her eyelids flutter and she turns to me and says "I could stay here with you forever." And I say "Why don't you?"