

BEST MAN

At first, the flight status says only: DELAYED. When the new arrival time posts, it's fifteen minutes late, and Jake thinks, okay. But the arrival keeps getting bumped later and later, five or ten minutes every time the board updates. Now, the flight is almost forty-five minutes late. Jake, always 15 minutes early for everything, has waited for over an hour. And isn't it just like Kevin O'Connor to make him hurry up and stand here with his thumb up his ass.

Waitin' on you, Connie. Waitin' on you.

It's an Army thought, a CO thought. They've been thinning out, those catchphrases, in the year since he got out. He wouldn't say something like that out loud anymore, just like he's mostly lost the impulse to sir his boss. But the lexicon still comes back, in the company of other soldiers or in moments of head-banging frustration. The Army has more words for fucked up than the Eskimos have for snow.

Lafayette, he thinks, and shoves the thought away.

He should have refused this rendezvous. He could have claimed work. He could have claimed anything. Connie's call last night caught him off guard.

He has nothing to say to Connie. Nothing about their glory days at West Point. Nothing about his aborted Army career. And not one fucking thing about Jamie or the ugly rumors around

his death. Jake has pins in his spine, courtesy of his own tour in New Iraq. Some days, he can hardly stand up straight. But if Connie plans to interrogate him about his brother, Jake knows he still has it in him to kick his ass.

Fucker, he thinks.

Jamie isn't here to defend the bastard, to spin it around, to turn it funny.

Jamie isn't here.

Suddenly, the anger's gone, and he's eyeing the rows of empty terminal seats, sick and limp-dick tired. He wants to sit, but his back can't take it. He had to stop three times on the two hour drive here. He considers lying down on the floor.

The arrival time for Connie's flight is 15 minutes later. Beneath it on the status board, there's a new flight, also delayed, coming in from Lafayette.

Lafayette. And that is weird. Weird enough to make the hair on his arms stand to. He took that flight himself, fifteen years ago, after Connie and Gwen's wedding. Lafayette to Denver. *Lafayette to Montgomery, by way of Denver*. (He can just hear Jamie say it.) *Ain't that just the Army way?*

Lafayette. All through his sleepless night, his workday, his long, rain slick drive through the mountains, his thoughts have been blinking back there. To that last summer night. Before New Iraq and the crap on the Moon. When he and Connie were new minted 2nd lieutenants. Friends, more or less. And Jamie... his kid brother Jamie was nothing but a hotshot firstie, his great fuck-up of a life yet to come.

Jake shuts his eyes and he's there again, fifteen years lifting off him like a curse.

Kevin & Gwen O'Connor - Happily Ever After. Jake read the banner over the bandstand for what might have been the thousandth time and struggled not to roll his eyes. He shifted his numb ass on the satin-wrapped folding chair; swatted a mosquito on his neck. His sharp new Class A uniform had long since wilted in the humidity. It clung to every part of him, damp and itchy. Miserable as he was, waiting, he had to admit it was a pretty evening. Strands of white lights adorned the estate hedges and the tree limbs overhead. The warm evening breeze swam with the scent of fresh mown grass and sweet magnolia blossoms. The last guests standing bumped and sweated their way around the dance floor. Jake swirled the punch in his cup and dreamed of the cool, fresh queen-sized bed waiting for him back at the hotel.

His brother emerged from the darkness behind him and flopped in the nearest chair at the table.

“How’s the view?” Jamie asked, looking from the dance floor back to Jake.

Jake glanced meaningfully at his watch.

“Come party with us,” Jamie said, his grin a lighting flash under sky blue eyes.

Jake snorted. “I’m good.”

“You haven’t had enough to drink,” Jamie said. He dumped one of the glowing neon drinks he had been carrying into Jake’s plastic cup. “Here.”

“I’m driving.” Jake held up the rental car keys as evidence, and Jamie snatched them out of his hand.

“I’ll drive. Drink.”

Jake frowned at his brother, not sure whether Jamie was already too drunk to drive.

“Drink, boy, it’s good for you,” Jamie barked and Jake struggled to hold on to his frown. Jamie leaned toward him and pointed to the crowd on the dance floor. “That girl over there, the brunette in the blue dress...”

“They’re *all* in blue,” Jake grumbled, even though he knew.

Jamie raised his eyebrows. *Please*. “She’s been checking you out all evening. I’m telling you, bro, easy as pie. Tell her you’re on your way to flight school next week and she’s all yours. Come on.” Jamie got up and offered him a hand.

Jake shook his head. He had been watching the girl in question all night, and he was sure she hadn’t shot one look in his direction. In fact, she had spent the whole evening, like all the single girls at their table, watching Jamie. Jake had been watching him, too, to tell the truth. He shone.

For the last few hours, Jake had sat back the way he always did, watching his little brother work the crowd, trying to figure out his trick. He studied the way Jamie’s mobile face could be goofy, delighted, serious, all in the space of a five-minute conversation. His best man’s toast had Gwen’s grandma weeping with laughter. No one could resist him. One minute, he was sipping whisky with Connie’s father and grandfather; the next he was soaked and dishing out retribution in a short-lived water fight with Gwen’s little cousins. He must have danced with a hundred girls. Skinny, fat, young, old, not a soul escaped him. He spent a couple songs twisting it up with a six-year-old flower girl, and Jake gave up. The boy was a mystery to him.

“There! See?” Jamie said, elbowing him, as the girl peeked at them and blushed. And she might, she just might have looked at him. “Come o-o-n, Jake.”

“Naw.” Jake said, his resolve beginning to slip. “She’s looking at you. You go.”

Gwen swept by, barefoot now, holding the hem of her slim white dress off the lawn. As much as Jake disliked her, he couldn’t deny she made a stunning bride. Her auburn hair floated loose about her face, falling in heavy curls over bare shoulders pale as magnolia petals. Jamie’s head snapped around, and Gwen glanced back at him as she passed.

“Gwen!” Jamie said, twirling the rental car keys around his finger. “Come over here.”

She slipped away with a sad little smile over her shoulder, exchanging a private look with Jamie that Jake didn’t like one bit.

Jake frowned. *That bitch.* Here she was, on her wedding day, eyeing her husband’s best friend. *Women,* he thought bitterly.

Jamie glanced at his brother’s scowl and shrugged. “Good looking bride,” he said, then distantly, “They’re already fighting.”

“There’s a fucking newsflash.”

“Yeah,” Jamie said, but he didn’t quite smile. “Kind of sad for her, though.”

“Even sadder for Connie.”

“Amen,” Jamie laughed. He looked at the sky, then grinned at his brother. “Bridesmaids, Jake. Bridesmaids.”

Jake sighed. He heaved himself upright. “One hour. And give me the keys. You’re drunk.”

Jamie pulled the key fob from his pocket, and bounced it thoughtfully in palm of his hand. His eyes flashed.

Jake leapt, but he was too late.

Jamie stepped back and pitched the keys onto the three-story gabled roof of the big white manor house. As they rattled into a rain gutter, Jake's vision of sleep in clean hotel sheets and air conditioning winked out like a lightning bug. He grabbed his head like he was trying to hold it on.

"Fuck! Jame! I'm flying out at 0700 tomorrow."

"I'll get you there, bro." Jamie said, shaking him by the shoulders. "Come on. Party with us. This is the last time we're all going to be together like this."

"Fuck," Jake groaned. He downed the drink in his hand. It tasted like rubbing alcohol mixed with half a pack of KoolAid. He coughed.

Jamie swatted him on the back. "That's more like it."

Jake scowled. He was going to wind up crashing on the floor. Again. He just knew it. "Why did I even bother getting us a hotel room?"

Jamie leaned back on his heels and laughed. "Man, I have *no* idea."

Jake smiled. He couldn't help it. "I'm going to need more than that if you expect me to dance."

Jamie pushed the other drink at him and dragged him out onto the dance floor.

Jake snapped awake in the no-man's-light of early dawn, unsure what had wakened him. He stretched his legs between cool cotton sheets, savoring the feel of the girl's bare body, hot against his. He slid his hand up the silkiness of her side and hugged her drowsily, pleased. He

wanted to stay there just one minute more, before he had to wake all the way up and face the full magnitude of his hangover. He started to drift off again, wondering how much time they had, and she shook him.

“Hey!” she hissed, and her drawl was not the least bit sweet. “Wake up!”

He rolled onto his back.

“Wake up!” she said again, and pinched him, hard.

“I’m up,” he said, catching her wrist. “Stop. I’m up.”

“Someone’s on the roof.”

Plaster dust and grit fell in his eyes as the beams above groaned under footsteps.

An avalanche of matted leaves and twigs clattered on the third story balcony outside and one long, swim-trunk-clad leg eased over the eaves. *Jamie*.

The girl shrieked. The noise sent a lightning bolt of pain through the center of Jake’s head. He sat up and the room spun. *Jamie’s* leg disappeared and the girl screamed again.

“STOP that,” Jake growled. The girl narrowed her eyes at him, like she didn’t much care for his tone. “It’s my brother,” he muttered. He put his arm around her and they blinked at each other for a few seconds. He recognized her as the brunette, now liberated from her blue dress. *Winnie, Windi, Vici?* Jake couldn’t remember her name. His eyes went over her, taking in the perfection of her dainty shoulders, the little morsels of her breasts. She huffed and yanked the sheet up under her arms as if she hadn’t ridden him like a polo pony a few hours earlier. She ducked when he tried to kiss her, and his teeth connected with the top of her head.

Jake got up and yanked on his briefs. The used condom slumped sticky and dejected on the night stand. He knew he ought to be glad to see it, but somehow he wasn’t. He bundled the

mess and the wrapper in a tissue, and dumped it in a flower-painted wastebasket.

A key fob jangled on the leaf-strewn porch and Jamie swung his hips down. Beyond him, the thin light revealed the wide lawns and gardens of Gwen's family estate, swaddled in fog and surrounded by a vista of mossy treetops that might have gone on forever. Jake's watch read 0500. If they hurried, he might still make his flight.

The gutter creaked ominously as Jamie dropped onto the balcony in front of the open French doors, grinning like a madman. Jake knew he should be pissed at him; all he could do was shake his head. Jamie'd spent his final summer at West Point training with the Rangers. He was planning to go for Infantry, Rangers, then Delta, and he'd been pulling crazy stunts all weekend as if to prove he had the mettle. Even if Jake found some of Jamie's daredevil antics unnerving, he was pleased, at last, his brother was interested in something other than getting laid.

"Veronica," Jamie said, easy as if he had joined their conversation at a garden party instead of infiltrating their locked bedroom, commando-style.

"James," the girl said coyly, and Jake, with his back to her, rolled his eyes.

Jamie smirked and threw the rescued car keys at Jake, who caught them as he struggled into his pants. "Ready?"

"Knocking," Jake said. "A useful skill."

"Door was open."

Jake shut his eyes, speechless. When he opened them, Jamie was still there, barefoot and half-naked, apparently not the least bit hung over. He had a long scratch from his navel to his collarbone which Jake suspected came from sliding over the gutter.

"You need to knock that crazy shit off," Jake said, dragging on his t-shirt. "What the hell

happened to you last night anyway?” He’d lost track of his brother somewhere between the tequila shots and Connie’s pukefest in the koi pond. Jamie hadn’t been anywhere in sight when the party finally broke up well after 0200. “Well?”

Jamie’s eyes flickered from Jake to the girl in the bed and back again.

“Not too much,” Jamie said.

“Mm,” Jake replied, knowing this was a lie. He frowned at Jamie, but didn’t push. If Jamie didn’t want to say where he’d spent the night, then it was probably an unfit topic for the present company. “Alright, let’s go. You drive.” Jake threw the keys back at Jamie, who seemed more sober than he felt. He stared at his brother until Jamie took the hint.

“I’ll go grab my stuff. See you later, V.” Jamie winked at her and padded out the door.

Jake sat on the edge of the bed and slid his arm around the girl. “Sorry about that.” She let his hand rove over the soft skin of her belly and hip. When he moved to kiss her, she stopped him.

“Look,” she said. “Just... Just go.”

He went. He respected her honesty. He appreciated the exemption from the usual phone number farce. Still, it stung. Jamie was waiting for him in the hall, now wearing shiny black low quarters unlaced with his trunks, his uniform jacket and slacks draped over one arm.

They walked down the long hall of closed doors in silence.

“So, was she as good as she looked?” Jamie asked at the top of the stairs.

“Yeah,” Jake said. He didn’t remember much of the sex beyond the polo pony evolution. Good enough, he guessed. “Easy.” For some reason, the whole thing made him depressed.

“What’d I tell you?” Jamie laughed. “Did you get her number?”

“No.”

“Aw, Jake... She’s going to law school at FSU with Gwen. She’ll be right down the road from you at Rucker.”

“I’m not going to have time for that crap.”

Jamie was quiet, then, “Maybe you ought to... you know... get a girlfriend.”

“What, like you?” Jake snorted.

Jamie shrugged.

“That’s the last thing I’m gonna need at flight school, Jame.”

After a careful pause, Jamie said, “You seem down lately, that’s all.”

“I’m not down!” Jake took a breath then let it out, too tired to argue. “I’m hung over. Do you have any more of those pills?”

Jamie produced a small bottle of D-TOX from a pocket, and Jake shook out two of the small blue pills, chewed them and swallowed. The bitterness made him shiver.

“Ugh. Thanks.”

Jamie chuckled in his good-natured, easy way.

“Te-kill-ya.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it was the beer.”

“Beer and tequila?”

“Beer and so-co.”

“Oh, man. Yuck.” Jamie laughed. “No wonder Connie was puking.”

Usually, when Jamie laughed, he looked about fifteen years old, but not this time. Not anymore. His kid brother was a man now, and so was he. Today they would start their own,

separate lives. Jake shoved him affectionately.

“I’m gonna miss my flight.”

Without another word, they slipped past the quiet kitchen and crept through the great room, stepping over sleeping forms huddled under blankets on the floor. When Jamie opened the tall door into the marble entryway, Jake dropped his shoes in a startled clatter.

Gwen O’Connor stood in a green silk robe, staring out the wide windows flanking the front door, her small feet bare on the white stone. Even half a mess, she was beautiful. She glanced at them, and her eyes stopped on Jamie before she turned back to the window, her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

Jamie cleared his throat.

“Connie’s in the bathroom by the stairs on the first floor if you’re looking for him,” Jake said, meaning to be funny. Gwen fixed him with a look so full of cold hate that he grabbed his shoes and fumbled to unlock the front door.

“Gwen...” Jamie said softly.

She reached out to snap the lock open, and Jake saw her pretty green eyes lined with smudged make-up and pink sleeplessness. Before he could help himself, he felt sorry for her, and ashamed for getting Connie puking drunk on his wedding night. Then Jamie nudged him onto the porch and shut him out, closing the heavy door between them.

“Hey. Hey now,” he heard him say as the latch clicked home.

Jake crossed the wide veranda to sit by himself on the cold stone steps. Unseeing, he watched the pale morning fog curl through the trees along the drive. She still had it in her power to reduce him to a fumbling idiot, even after all this time. He groaned and squeezed his aching

head.

Keeping movement to a minimum, he put on his socks and shoes; checked his watch. They would be cutting it close with the flight. Jake looked back over his shoulder at the front of the house. Through the window, he saw Gwen crying, her face buried against Jamie's neck, her hands balled at the base of her throat. Jamie was talking to her, his mouth moving above her ear as he rubbed her back. Jamie looked up and met his eyes.

Jake turned around and squinted at the dust between his feet in confused worry, the image of the two of them still in his mind. The way they were standing, something about the way Jamie had his other arm wrapped around her, low, across the small of her back, seemed too familiar. When he tried to evaluate what this meant, he found he wasn't sure what he had seen. He wanted to turn around and look again and he didn't. He stared at his own hands. His eyes hurt when he moved his head. He was still drunk. He laced his fingers together and rested his chin, then his upper lip against them. Under the ghost of the girl, he could smell alcohol fuming off his skin. He didn't know what he'd seen. Jamie wouldn't do anything against Connie. He knew this. Jamie and Gwen were friends. That was all.

If they didn't leave in the next five minutes, he could forget his flight. He really wasn't looking forward to camping at the airport all day, nursing a hangover. He hazarded another look at the front windows. Gwen was wiping her eyes on her sleeve. Jamie had his back to him, apparently talking to her, not touching. Jake turned to the driveway and closed his eyes. It was clear what was happening here: he'd made a mess of things and Jamie was picking up the pieces. The shots hadn't been his idea, but he had known how they would end. Deep down, he suspected he had fucked up Gwen and Connie's wedding night on purpose. He flicked a stray pebble off

the steps. He never should have let Jamie talk him into staying. He should have called himself a cab.

The great door clicked behind him. Jake saw the scuffed toes of his brother's black dress shoes, and looked up.

"Is she alright?" Jake asked him.

"Yeah," Jamie said and cleared his throat, "yeah, she's fine." He stood with his arms folded, staring down the misty driveway. "Jake..."

"I know. I know. I swear it was Connie's idea."

Jamie looked down at him, clearly puzzled. "What?"

"The tequila..."

"Oh. Yeah. I figured." Jamie said, and smiled at him absently, as if Connie's tequila debacle was the farthest thing from his mind.

Fifteen years later, Jake is once again waiting on a flight. This time he's not going anywhere. He stands with his hands at his back, waiting, just the same. The flight is over ninety minutes late.

He can't see much out the window in front of him, the terminal is too bright and the night too dark. Instead, he watches his own face reflected in the glass – his brother's face, one shade darker. This is more or less how Jamie would have looked, had he lived. Jake's imagination isn't up to the task of conjuring him. He can't see Jamie with those deep set lines in his forehead. He

can't see him with brown eyes instead of blue.

But he remembers his brother, even four years gone.

Connie's flight status is flashing again. DELAYED, DELAYED, DELAYED. The flight from Lafayette has arrived.

Lafayette, he thinks, and rubs the ghost of stubble along his jaw. *Lafayette*. That night, fifteen years ago, wasn't the last time he saw his brother alive. It wasn't even the last time he saw Jamie happy, but something about it has always bothered him. The memory of Gwen, barefoot on the cold stone floor, nags him like one of those stupid number puzzles he's never had any patience for. He can't solve it, plus it's pointless, but he can't put it down, either.

So, maybe Jamie *had* fucked his best friend's wife on her wedding night. Maybe he *had* kept at it all those years Connie spent posted to the Moon. Maybe he *had* been running drugs all through his last deployment in New Iraq. And maybe he *had* crashed that chopper on purpose, killing himself and taking his copilot with him. Jake doesn't want to believe it. He's always denied it. And now, four years later, he has to admit he only knows one thing for certain. He will never know the truth about his brother. And maybe that's why the probability of Jamie screwing Connie's wife bugs him so much. It's not the fucking around. It's the not knowing. He thought he knew his brother, better than anyone in the world. And maybe that's the lie.

Jake drops his head back against the sharp corner of the window frame, then does it again, just to feel the sting. He misses Jamie, whatever the truth. He wishes Connie's plane would hurry the fuck up and get here. He wishes it would get diverted or turned back or maybe even crash, so he can go home. If he was any less a soldier, he would have cut and run by now.

Even though he's no longer a drinking man, Jake suddenly wants a drink. He's

contemplating the sports bar across the terminal, when travelers start filing down the stairs from security. He scans them out of habit, his face half turned away. His eye catches on a tall, willowy figure in a smart green dress and heels. He doesn't even have to see her face to know it's Gwen. She's older now, still good-looking, her hair short and sleek along her jaw. Now Jake's really wishing he had that drink. He wasn't expecting her. Connie hadn't mentioned her. Last he heard, they were separated.

Just when Jake is calculating his odds for a stealthy retreat, Gwen makes him. She looks him right in the eye and Jake feels a stab of true fear. Then, she smiles. She raises her hand in tentative greeting. It looks like a little white flag.

Connie is two paces behind her, and the principal thing Jake can see of him is the scalp showing through his grizzled crew cut. He's got his arm around a boy, about 10 years old, near as Jake can tell, a boy with golden hair and blue eyes, and a smile Jake recognizes, a smile that shines like a light in the dark.