



Waiting

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“I don’t even know why I’m going to this,” Jack said. He zipped his duffel bag closed, squeezing down a third pair of socks he knew he wasn’t going to need. Everything was packed.

“I don’t know why you’re going either,” Sue smirked at him. “I mean, you’ve told me, but I still don’t know why.”

He slung his duffel bag over his shoulder – then nearly tipped from the weight while stooping to tie his shoes. She giggled, just a little. He resented the giggle.

“I’ll see you in a few days,” he said. Hugged her and kissed her forehead. She smelled like apple shampoo and green tea skin cream and sweat from her morning bike ride. He released her and left out the front door.

“Bye,” he heard her say, once the door was almost closed. “Bye.”

At the airport he got his boarding pass at the counter and checked his duffel bag. He didn’t like letting go of his bag, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. The fat middle aged man behind the counter told Jack this, which Jack resented, but he didn’t like making trouble.

Jack was always early for flights. He knew he was always early for flights and so he tried his best to show up as far after the two hour recommended arrival time as he could stand, but he wasn’t very good at it. The most he’d ever made it was thirteen minutes less than the full two hours.

It meant that he always ended up sitting in the terminal, playing free trial games on his mobile phone (because he was too cheap to buy the full versions) and paging through some paperback he was too excited to read. His leg bounced up and down and his fingers drummed over and over on the wobbly armrests.

Jack didn’t really care for flying. It wasn’t that he was scared of it or anything – it was just exhausting: all those little waits. Wait to get to the airport, wait to check-in, wait to get through security, wait to board the plane, wait for the plane to take off, wait for the flight attendant to bring a beverage, wait for...etc. All those little waits were too short to get engaged in his paperback, but too long to just sit there trying to appear mildly bemused about the present state of his life and the universe. And everything.

He wasn’t mildly bemused about any of those things though, which made it even tougher. Mostly, it was what he was doing and where he was going that Jack wasn’t looking forward to. Well, no, it’s just that – it was complicated.

Jack was on his way to the wedding of his first girlfriend. Well, first ex-girlfriend, really. Of course, she was his first girlfriend before she was his first ex-girlfr-ah, hell, it didn't matter. He was nervous.

He'd met Cindy his freshman year of high school and they'd dated until late his senior year, finally breaking up when he announced that his intentions to go to college in Chicago. His plans conflicted with Cindy's desire to stay in the small town of Greenbell and, quote, "pop a few out," with or without his help.

Ten years before, Jack decided not to help and he'd never regretted his decision. He wanted out of the small farming town in a bad way and Cindy didn't want to leave. That was it, really. The crux, as they say.

And now Cindy was getting married and Jack didn't know why he was going to the wedding. He wasn't sure why she invited him, either.

It wasn't that he had any latent feelings for Cindy, no, no, nothing like that and please don't think it, thanks very much. He'd barely thought about Cindy for years. She just never even entered his mind, no more than he ever thought about ten years ago or high school.

Thoughts interrupted by his boarding call, Jack stood. He was grateful to be moving again, even if it was just for the few minutes of hallway down to the plane and to his seat. He winked at the old flight attendant who scanned his boarding pass. She sighed at him. No sense of humor, he guessed. Oh well. Jack didn't mind. He had enough for the both of them.

In his seat on the plane, Jack faced the same options as he'd had in the terminal: phone games, paperback, reminiscing. He made the same choice.

Why was he going to this damn thing since he didn't care about Cindy?

But he knew. Yes, yes. He knew. His leg bounced more. The old man in front of him turned back and snorted.

"Ya mind, buddy?"

"Sorry," Jack said. Yeah, he knew.

Gwendolyn Thompson: that was her name. Cute, brainy, blonde. She liked math and music, wanted to be a violin player. Jack thought about Gwen every day, and had for as long as he could remember. Of course, he could remember a time before he met her (he met her in second grade), but that didn't matter because he'd still loved her before he met her and so it didn't bother him that he hadn't *technically* known her yet. Let other people worry about the technicalities, anyway. Hang the technicalities.

Playing the violin. That was her dream. At least, that was her dream when Jack saw her last, which was at high school graduation ten years ago. But some internet stalking on social networking websites told him she'd made it. Playing the violin professionally in The Big Apple. Good for her.

When Jack thought about Gwen he felt like H. Humbert thinking about Lolita, "light of my life, fire of my loins," that sort of thing. He felt illicit. He felt like he shouldn't have been thinking about her. He felt...pretty damn ridiculous.

Jack hadn't seen Gwen in the ten years since high school and had barely said more than a single mouthful of words to her even when they were there. They barely knew each other. Well, no, that's not true – she barely knew him. He knew her. He felt it.

And he knew it was a little creepy, thinking about her all the time. Not serial killer creepy, or even uncle's hand a little too high up past his niece's knee creepy, but unrequited affection creepy. Still creepy because he was flying six-hundred miles back to his hometown to go to an ex-girlfriend's wedding just because he'd heard that Gwen might be there.

Plus, there was Sue back home. His longtime girlfriend and certified best friend (he'd made her a plaque – she'd chuckled and hung it in a closet) who knew he was going to an ex-girlfriend's wedding but didn't really know the real reason. She thought the whole thing was a little funny, but Jack was a funny guy and she knew that. She'd just laughed and told him she'd see him in a couple of days and to say hello to his mom for her. He said he would and left.

Finally, the plane began to taxi down the runway. So many little waits, all mixed up inside the big ones. Jack hated waiting.

Jack woke up just as the plane was landing. He checked the time on his cell phone. The wedding was in three hours. He had more than enough time to rent a car, drive the thirty or so miles out to Greenbell, check-in to the one hotel in town (he didn't want to stay at his mother's), change into his suit, and make it to the wedding.

Jack hated weddings almost as much as he hated flying, and for exactly the same reasons. He was always too early, always ending up fidgety with waiting, and never knew how to fill all the little waits. Wait to go inside, wait to be seated, wait for the ceremony to start, wait for the ushers to release the row, wait to greet the newly married couple outside, drive to reception, wait for it to start...etc. It was awful.

During the ceremony, Jack spent the whole time craning his neck, looking for Gwen in the audience. He didn't see her.

After the service was over, Jack got an awkward hug from Cindy in the entryway of the church. Her farmgirl hair, laced with small white flowers, was pulled back and piled in an awkward bale on top her head.

"Oooh, Jacky," she breathed into his neck as she pulled him close. "I'm sooo glad you could make it." He hated how she called him Jacky. It'd been more than ten years since they'd last seen each other, but for some reason she still took a line of familiarity Jack didn't think existed anymore. Or had ever existed, as far as he was concerned. And he was always concerned.

"This is my husband," she said, pulling back from the hug. "Teddy. His daughter was the flower girl. Wasn't she so cute? We wanted to make our son the ring bearer, but three is still a little too young for that, don't you think?" She smiled.

"Nice to meet you, Teddy," Jack said, extending his hand to Cindy's new husband.

"It's Ted," Teddy said.

"Ted, then. Nice to meet you."

"Jacky, will you be at the reception?" Cindy asked, widening her eyes to punctuate her syllables.

Jack told her he would. The people behind him were getting impatient, Jack could tell, so he got out of the way.

More waiting.

At the reception Jack drank cheap beer from the cash bar and chatted with acquaintances from high school. He kept his eyes on the door, hoping to catch a glimpse of Gwen when she entered. After an hour or two he'd drank too much, not eaten anything, and was feeling a more than a little buzzed.

"Anyone seen Gwen?" he asked the stragglers still at his table. Almost everyone was up dancing.

"Who?" asked a guy he didn't recognize. Jack wasn't sure if the guy had just changed so much from high school that he was just unrecognizable, or if he'd ever even known him at all.

"Gwendolyn Thompson. You know, from high school? I thought I heard she was going to be here."

"Oh, Gwen, sure, sure, what a piece she was," the guy chuckled. "No, I haven't seen her. Where did you hear she was going to be here?"

"I'm not sure," Jack said. "Maybe I was wrong."

After three more hours and double as many beers, Jack got up to say his congratulations to Cindy and leave. He found her sitting on the far edge of the dance floor, looking drunk and exhausted. She leaned back in her chair, face red, eyes glazed.

"I'm taking off, Cindy," he told her. "It was nice to see you."

"Oh, Jacky. Are you leaving so soon? It's barely getting started here."

"Yes. I'm sorry. It's just a little strange for me, considering, well, you know. Plus, I've had a little too much to drink. I better go sack out."

Cindy pulled down Jack's neck and pressed his face against her bare shoulder. The cheap lilac perfume she was wearing barely covered the acrid scent of her sweat. After what he felt was an acceptable length for a hug, Jack tried to pull away, but Cindy held him fast, pressing his face against her neck. He waited for her to let go.

"I miss you Jacky," she said. "Ted is wonderful, but—" She loosened her grip enough to be able to look at his face. "This could have been our wedding, Jacky. It should have been." Her eyes looked wet.

"Cindy, I really have to go," Jack said.

Despite what he told Cindy, Jack wasn't eager to get back to his hotel and go to sleep just yet. Instead, he left his car at the reception hall and walked half a block down to the town's small watering hole. Garish country music poured out of the joint, but Jack was already thirsty for another beer.

Inside, he ordered a pitcher from the bartender and set up in a corner by himself. Aside from his lonely corner table and the bartender, there were only three other patrons in the bar, a trio of old men on perched on barstools. Two were quietly conversing while the other played a video poker machine and swore with every hand.

Halfway through the pitcher, she just walked in. Gwen. There she was, standing in the entryway, blonde hair and all. Jack was wobbly drunk, but he was sure it was her. He watched as she crossed the floor from the entry to the bar, her summer dress swaying around her legs like a cloudy dream. Jack squinted at her through the dim light.

She set down a large straw purse on the bar with a huff. "This town!" she exclaimed to the bartender. "How exhausting! Dirty Gin Martini, please. Extra olives. As dry as you can make it."

The bartender nodded and set about making the drink. From the dust on the bottle of vermouth, Jack could tell not many people ordered anything but the cheap beer on tap.

"What are you in town for?" the bartender asked her.

She blew a stray strand of hair out of her face with a sigh. "I was supposed to be here for a wedding. Cindy and Teddy Sauer?"

"Sure, I know them. They come in here quite a bit. Good customers."

"Yes, well, my first flight was cancelled. I had to take the next one, so I just got here. And I finally get into town and find out I missed the whole thing. The reception's already over. Can you believe that? I'm ready for that drink."

She slipped the bartender a five and took a tentative sip. "Ah, delicious, thank you. Not very busy in here tonight, is it?" Gwen looked around the bar.

Jack waved to her when her eyes passed over him. She walked over, carrying her drink in one hand and her purse in the other. Jack drank in her details faster than he'd drunk the last of the beer in his glass, which was pretty fast. She quenched better than anything he'd drunk that night.

She looked even more beautiful than he remembered. Same blonde hair, trim figure, those same twelve freckles he remembered like baked cinnamon, scattered across her nose.

Jack opened his mouth, hoping to say something witty.

"Gwen Thompson. I waited for you at the wedding, but you weren't there," was all that came out. What an ass thing to say. He wanted to kick himself but was too busy shoving his foot in his mouth to use it for kicking.

"Jack...Hutton? Houghton was it? How are you doing?" She took another sip of her martini, but made no move to sit down with him.

"Jack Hoates," he mumbled. "I'm good. How're you?" Jack wasn't happy about the slurring coming out of his mouth instead of the suave speech he wanted to give her. He'd always loved her and it was time for her to know it. He'd heard about her violin playing and thought it was sexy as hell. He was ready to sweep her off her feet and marry her on the spot.

Actually, he kind of wanted to throw up, just a little.

"Well, Jack, I'm just great. It's a little strange to be back in this town, though. I haven't been here since high school. How are things here? Have they changed all that much?"

"I don't...I don't know, Gwen. I don't think so. Maybe some," Jack said. God, was this broken slurring really all he could muster?

She opened her mouth to answer, but the cell phone in her purse suddenly rang. "Excuse me, Jack," she purred. "Just a minute, please, I have to take this."

She turned her back to him and spoke into her phone in hushed tones. Her voice rose a few times, but Jack couldn't catch any words. After a short conversation, she quickly hung up.

"I'm sorry, Jack, I have to go." She downed the rest of her drink in one smooth swallow and set the glass on his table.

"No, stay," he said, reaching out to grab her hand.

But she was already gone.

Jack paid his tab and stumbled back to his car. He knew he shouldn't have done it after how much he'd drank, but he drove anyway: the short distance back to the hotel to sleep it off.

Waiting in his bed, waiting till morning.

"Sue, I'm home," Jack yelled as soon as he was inside the door. He set down his bag inside the door and went into the living room. Sue was on the couch, watching television. He bent down and gave her a long kiss.

She mumbled through his lips, "How was your trip?"

He pulled back, just a little.

"Fine," he said. "I did a lot of waiting."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," he grinned. "I couldn't wait to get home."

She gave him a funny look, but he just smiled at her and went to retrieve his bag to unpack.

He was sick of waiting.

There just wasn't anything to show for it.

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