

Different When

by suzvoy

The call comes in the middle of a pitch.

He's holding up a board, pointing to a picture of a half-naked guy and telling Rebecca Thompson why the image is going to sell a shitload of her skincare product, when Cynthia bursts into the room. High heels resound heavily on the floor as she rushes in and for the first time in Brian's entire professional life with her, she looks...*undone*.

"Excuse me," she says, for the sake of the small group of people at the table, and advances towards him.

Brian wants to ask what the fuck's going on but he knows, he *knows*, he just don't know *who* yet.

Until she's standing next to him, and begins speaking quietly. "Jennifer just called from the hospital. There was an accident...Justin...she doesn't know how bad."

Fuck fuck fuck.

The board must be slippery because suddenly Brian can't hold onto it and, clearing his throat, places it on the desk. "I'm sorry," he tells the assembled group, "family emergency. I have to go. My colleagues will take over."

"Of course, Brian. I hope everything's okay," Thompson says, and if he were the type he'd thank God she's not the type to insist he be the one to finish.

Leaving the room quickly, Brian tells Cynthia that she and Ted are taking over, and that he'll be out for the rest of the day. And then... "Allegheny?"

She nods.

Brian hates that fucking hospital.

Driving there is a new experience in torture. Every asshole on the road seems determined to cut him off or slow him down, but he focuses on the actions, move your hand, change the clutch, indicate, and by the time he arrives he hasn't thought about Justin being dead much at all.

Leaving the car somewhere he can't quite remember, Brian reaches the front desk and doesn't even have to ask for Justin before Jennifer's flying towards him.

"Brian!"

They hug quickly before he pulls back, needing to ask the question he really doesn't want to fucking ask.

"Do we know how he is?"

"No," she complains, voice thick with tears as she pulls back. "Haven't heard a single thing."

"What happened?"

Taking a moment to close her eyes and compose herself, she speaks. "Justin borrowed my car. He and Ben both wanted to check out that new health food place on the other side of town. It would have been a long journey on a bike, and Justin doesn't have his own now anyway..." Fuck, and Justin could only have been going there for him. Since the cancer he kept making a big deal about the importance of a healthy diet (so much so that he was starting to bug the shit out of Brian). "There was a drunk driver..."

Fuck. Jesus Fuck.

And that's when Brian sees Mikey further down the corridor, anxiously pacing back and forth.

Justin and Ben.

Brian's moving towards him before he's aware of it, and then Mikey sees him and they're holding onto each other.

"They're gonna be fine," Brian tells him, staring over his shoulder at Hunter, looking lost in a depressing-looking chair. "They're both gonna be fine."

There's waiting then, because that's what you fucking **do** at hospitals, and he can't fight off the memories of endless, silent nights standing in the corridor, watching Justin. He doesn't want to fight them off, because it's better than thinking of anything that's happening right now.

Finally, a doctor pushes through the double doors and studies everyone. "Ben Bruckner and Justin Taylor?"

"Yes," Mikey answers, surging to his feet, "I'm Ben's partner." And Brian decides that if the guy gives Mikey any fucking trouble he'll punch his fucking lights out.

"Justin's my son," Jennifer says just as quickly and Brian's standing next to her as she grabs his hand and squeezes tightly.

Brian finds himself talking. "Whatever it is, just tell all of us."

The doctor waits for nods of consent from Jennifer and Mikey before speaking. "They're both going to be okay."

There's more talk, then, of Ben having a concussion and a broken leg, of deep lacerations and blood loss but how he's expected to make a full recovery, but Brian's hugging Jennifer again and he's not sure who initiated it.

"As for Justin," the doctor says, and they pull away from each other, "he was quite lucky. He has some bad contusions and a few cuts, but that's about it. However..." He pauses and Brian knows, he just fucking knows a shitstorm is about to land. "...it's my understanding that Mr Bruckner is HIV positive."

"That's right," Mikey sniffs, rubbing his right eye with the back of his hand, "I told them that as soon as I got here."

"Mr Bruckner told the paramedics at the scene," the doctor nods, before sliding his gaze towards Brian and Jennifer. "Justin's face was sprayed with what we believe to be Mr Bruckner's blood. Now while the risk of transmission is extremely low and we don't believe any of the blood got into Justin's mouth or eyes, as a precaution he'll have to be tested for HIV. We also strongly recommend putting him on a cocktail of drugs for four weeks as a preventative measure."

He was right. Shitstorm it is.

Jennifer goes in to see Justin first, which is just as well because all Brian can think is three fucking months. Three fucking months.

He'd known, but the doctor had explained anyway about the three month waiting period between the risk of infection point and getting a reliable result.

Jennifer hadn't been very fucking happy about that, either.

Mikey hasn't been allowed to see Ben yet and he sits next to Brian, rubbing his shoulder.

"He'll be fine, Brian."

Of course Justin'll be fine. He just has to wait three fucking months to find that out.

Jennifer returns looking a little brighter, and then he's standing up and walking into Justin's room.

Justin looks...okay. He's not even lying down; instead sitting on the edge of the bed, kicking his legs back and forth.

"You know," Brian begins, and Justin's eyes snap towards him, "if you wanted to get some attention, all you had to do was suck my cock. This drama queen stuff is boring as shit," he says, his actions belying his words as he moves towards Justin.

Justin's smiling, a little, as Brian's arms go around him and pull him into a kiss. Brian uses tongue deliberately because he has to show Justin he's not scared, that he's not scared of *him*, when nothing in his life has ever terrified Brian the way Justin does.

"How you feeling?" he asks eventually, still holding onto each other. "Fucked any hot nurses yet?"

Justin laughs against his neck. "I'm fine, Brian. I can even go home today, once I get something to wear."

Murmuring that he'll take care of it, Brian perches himself on the edge of the bed and keeps holding on, telling himself it's for Justin's benefit.

In bed that night, Brian catalogues Justin's scrapes and bruises with his mouth but doesn't try to fuck him - he tenses up anytime Brian gets near his cock or his ass. Justin mumbles an apology but Brian tells him to shut up and just enjoys kissing him.

"I'm probably being stupid," Justin whispers later, his back pressed against Brian's chest. "But...shit, this must be how Ben feels every time he fucks Michael. How do you cope with that? Worrying every time that if something goes wrong, you could infect..." His voice catches.

"It's Mikey's decision to be with him," Brian says, and finds himself pausing, biting his lip. Then says it. "And it's my decision to be with you."

Justin's crying openly now. "Shit, fuck. What if I have it, Brian? What the fuck am I gonna do?"

Brian's been waiting for this and holds him tighter, kissing his shoulder. "You'll be fine." It's all he can say. "You'll be fine."

Brian becomes paranoid about every sneeze, cough or headache that Justin produces. He stocks the fridge with orange juice and fresh vegetables, and prints off recommended recipes (he passes them on to Justin, of course, because it's not as if *Brian's* about to start cooking).

Justin starts letting Brian jerk him off and even starts sucking Brian's cock again, but that's as far as it goes. He tells Brian quite forthrightly - one evening as he's stirring something in a pan - that he's not going to be ready for actual sex anytime soon, and if Brian wants to fuck he'll have to go to the back room at Babylon.

Brian tells him to fuck off, slams out of the loft, gets drunk at Woody's and doesn't fuck anyone.

Justin takes his meds every day like the good boy he never was, and fatigue settles in. Brian knows it's a side-effect, as is the rash that flares up from time to time, but he can only feel thankful that - so far - Justin's been spared the indignity of vomiting every five minutes.

That's something he knows a little too well himself.

He starts hating Ben in interesting and creative new ways. It's not rational at all and even though he knows that, it doesn't stop him from wanting to kick Ben's crutches out from under him every time he sees him.

Ben notices, of course, and after a failed attempt at reconciliation avoids Brian at all costs.

Ben isn't the only one to notice.

"It's not like it's his fault," Justin argues one evening, because not fatigue, HIV or even full-blown AIDS is ever going to stop Justin from being *Justin*, "he didn't do it on purpose. Jesus, Brian. You're treating him like *he's* the virus, and you fucking know better than that. All the times you've stood up for him and Michael, saying that it was their decision, and now you're-

"I know what I said," Brian interrupts. "I know what I fucking said, okay? It's just fucking *different* when he might have infected *you*. Is that what you want to hear? Brian Kinney's fucking losing it because his *boyfriend* might have HIV."

Not wanting to hear anything else Justin has to say right then, Brian grabs his jacket and his car keys and leaves the loft. There's only one person he can think of who knows how he feels, and eight minutes later he's knocking on her door.

"Come in, kiddo," Deb says, and immediately starts plying him with pasta and wine, like she's been waiting for this to happen all along.

Maybe she has.

He doesn't talk much, just lets her talk at him - which is pretty much par for the course. She rambles on about the diner and it's oddly soothing until she starts talking about Ben.

"I didn't like him for a long time," she tells him, which is hardly a surprise. "He wasn't Ben. He was the guy who had that disease that could kill my son. But...hard as it is to think of sometimes, my Michael's a grown man. Who makes his own decisions."

"Justin didn't make any decisions," Brian argues quietly, "he didn't get to make any choice at all."

"Neither did Ben," she leans in, resting a hand on his forearm and meeting his gaze. "Neither one of them had any choice. It's no one's fault, other than that drunk asshole. And he got his when he didn't survive."

Hours later Brian stumbles into the loft, closing the door behind him and stripping off his clothes on the way to the bedroom. The orange light above the bed is on, and Justin's lying on his front with his face turned towards Brian, wide awake. He should be sleeping.

Brian thumps down next to him and stares up at the ceiling.

"Where'd you go?" Justin asks quietly.

"Deb's."

It's so quiet Brian can hear Justin swallowing before he speaks again.

"I need you to stop freaking out," Justin says firmly. "And I need you to at least try to not hate Ben. I get why you do, it's just...it's hard enough waiting as it is, Brian. I don't need things any more difficult than they already are."

Turning onto his side, Brian reaches out with his right hand and rubs it over Justin's hair, letting it move down over his neck and across his back, memorising the feel. "I know."

Moving, Justin shifts over and Brian tries not to notice the circles under his eyes or the weight he's lost already as Justin presses against him and lifts his mouth to Brian's ear. "I love you."

Holding him tighter, Brian closes his eyes and knows that, lesbianic though it may be, he'll never forget exactly what this moment feels like.

It's different because it's Justin.

~FINIS