

Sex with a Blind Man

By

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Six-fourteen on a sleeting Manhattan Saturday morning and Jude's phone rings. His oldest friend calling from Connecticut. Beside him, Alma-Almost-His-Boss snores through her tangled hair, so he keeps his voice low—only one thing could have compelled Elizabeth to call him at this hour—her beloved younger sister's leukemia has worsened. Jude swings his legs over the side of his bed and keeps his back toward Alma.

“Can you pick up Peter?” Elizabeth asks.

“Things that bad with your sister?”

“Unbeknownst to me apparently she and Peter have made some sort of pact about that stupid sex-with-a-blind-guy thing. And now she's asking for him. He told her he'd take the subway to Grand Central and a train to Greenwich. But with this fuckin' weather, what if he slips? Can you get him?”

Since the day he was nine and she towed her little sister through the hedge separating their properties, Elizabeth has been the soul of capability. Her artful “unbeknownst” now sounds like a spectral word from her former self bubbling up through an oily tide of exhaustion. Tiredness so fierce she's forced to grab onto “fuckin'”, a Dollar-Tree free modifier she once would never have let enter her brilliant mind, let alone breach her lips. Elizabeth, his rock-solid Elizabeth, is washing away.

“Jude, you still there?”

“Yeah . . . still here.” Alma-Almost-His-Boss has turned over and is slow-walking her fingers up his spine.

“I have to go, Jude. Whatever you decide about Peter, can let me know one way or another? I want to tell Allison.”

“Sure. Sure . . .bye.” Jude senses Alma’s eyes boring curiosity holes into his back. He turns to her. “Look, I’m sorry. I”

She’s propped up on an elbow, and for an older woman, looks surprisingly dewy. “Whatever that was about, it doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s just that I have a friend . . . we actually grew up together, and now her younger sister is sick, very sick . . . leukemia.”

Alma-Almost-His Boss sits up. “Jesus! How old is she?”

“I don’t know . . . twenty-eight, maybe? Twenty-nine?”

“Jesus!” She whips out of bed and starts snatching up her clothes. “Well, you gotta do whatever you gotta do, Jude. Just give me a minute.” She hustles toward his bathroom. “And don’t worry about the bamboo sock account.”

But Jude *is* worried about the bamboo sock account. The sock account is why he slept with Alma in the first place. His job at Aperture Inc. is his third in five years and things aren’t going well. His fucking Alma-Almost-His-Boss was part of his strategy to avert being let go again. To make him feel indispensable to her. And now he wonders if she knew all along that was his plan. He throws on some clothes, rinses his head under his kitchen tap, and makes some coffee. It’s six forty-two. He calls Peter in Brooklyn. “Hey, so, you’re going to Connecticut?” “Allison called about an hour ago . . . she can barely talk, Jude. For Christ’s sake, I have to get there. I can always try Uber, but in this weather”

“Listen, I’m coming, just hang tight, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And call Elizabeth to let her know.”

Jude fills his “I Climbed Mount Yale” mug, and a silver one for Alma. She comes out of his bathroom fully dressed, ready for work—they were going to finish the bamboos sock account together today.

He holds out the silver mug to her. “I didn’t know how you take it.”

“Black, but don’t bother. Look, I’ll be fine. Just let me call Uber.”

“No . . . no . . . trust me, in this weather the only Uber drivers are serial killers and that camel trader from Turkistan.”

She smiles. “Lyft, then.”

“Lyft, on the other hand, they’re great so long as you don’t mind someone emptying his colostomy bag every other storm drain.”

She takes the silver mug, and he drives her to Aperture. “So how old is your friend? The one whose sister is dying,” she asks.

“My age . . . thirty-two.”

“So where are the parents?”

“Their dad’s in Davos. He goes to that forum almost every year. And their mom’s in Washington, prepping some cabinet secretary so he can go to Davos, too. As long as I’ve known them, Allison has been more or less Elizabeth’s responsibility. It’s complicated. We’ve got another friend. He lives in Brooklyn and Allison wants to see him. Like I said, it’s complicated.” “We’ve still got three blocks.” Alma sips from her silver mug.

So he tells her how he met Peter in a film class. “We were walking across a quad in New Haven. I was a junior. I think he was a sophomore. I’d known him for a year, and one day and he just blurted out that he had retinitis pigmentosa. I hadn’t had a clue, but when I think back about it, I wonder if that wasn’t why he was such a film nut. I mean I was interested in film, but Peter was a fanatic. I wonder if he didn’t want to soak up every image his eyes could hold, so he could store them away.”

Almost solemn, Alma sets her mug in the holder. Her fingers are long and lovely. “For me, it would have been just the opposite. I couldn’t bear to remember what I’d lost. I’d be like poor Dylan Thomas drinking himself to death at the White Horse Tavern . . . raging at the dying of the light.”

“I’ve never seen you rage.”

“That’s only because you don’t know me very well, Jude. I’m thirty-seven, and here I am spending my Saturday tweaking the asinine videos of some influencer half my age so she can sell bamboo socks. Yeah, I rage.”

He pulls up to Aperture Ink and goes through the motions of offering to walk her inside, but she waves him off. They trade good-bye smiles.

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On the Brooklyn Bridge, an horrific accident has gnarled traffic, and Jude has to edge around it inches from the railing. The sleet hides the frigid water below, but he senses it. Suddenly the actuality of his hands on the wheel, the wipers on his windshield, the mangled car

are obscured by an overpowering dread of smashing through the guardrail. His mind splits in two: one senses himself tumbling toward the icy river; the other remains on the bridge and watches the horror of his ending life. He's almost past the wreck before he notices a cop, beckoning and nodding—*You can do this . . . move forward, move forward.* Jude summons the will to press the gas and drive on. Once over the river, he stops and calls Peter. “Should be there in ten.”

“I’ll be outside.”

“What? No! It’s miserable out.”

“I’ll be fine. Besides I’ve got Marilyn with me.”

“Who?”

“Marilyn . . . wait ’til you meet her.”

“Peter, I really don’t think this is the sort of situation you should bring someone new. . . .”

“Relax, it’ll be okay. Marilyn will be fine . . . trust me.”

When Jude turns onto his street, Peter is standing at the curb and holding a white stick. When Jude gets out, he taps it on the sidewalk. “I don’t really need this yet; I just want to practice.” But Jude notices he handles it as if it were his natural appendage. They get inside and Jude makes a U-turn. “Where’s your friend Marilyn?”

Peter thumps the stick on the floorboard. “Jude, meet Marilyn. Marilyn meet Jude.”

“Good to meet you, Marilyn.”

“She used to have this unbelievable figure, Jude, but then she went all keto on me . . . lost all her curves. Still has a great personality, though, but kinda quiet.”

“Why didn’t you wait inside?”

“I’m trying to cultivate my senses. It’s high tide. I was wondering if I could smell salt.”

“Could you?”

“Maybe . . . I’m not sure. Could just be the power of suggestion. Or I smelled the cold and mistook it for salt.”

Jude remembered when Peter first had mentioned cultivating his senses. In their heady New York twenties the four of them had formed a loose quartet trading sardonic tales of Whacka-Mole romances and career-thwarting bosses; by their thirties, Peter’s retinitis pigmentosa had worsened, and Allison contracted leukemia, and they coalesced into a four-square tribe holding up the weight of the world.

Jude drives past the café where they had spent an early May Saturday. All the other outdoor tables had been full of Gen Zs flashing exaggerated smiles, but the mood at theirs had been somber—Peter just had come back from seeing another eye expert, this one at Johns Hopkins.

“They all claim to have the newest, the best, but basically they’re just throwing shit experiments at walls, hoping something sticks,” he’d told them. “I don’t know what to do . . . keep chasing one experiment after another. Or resign myself . . . concentrate on adjusting, cultivating my other senses.”

Suddenly, like a piece of speckled grace, a sparrow touched down in a planter of pink geraniums. The four of them fell quiet and watched it scratch and peck among the flowers, intent on some unfathomable purpose, just as it apparently was insensible to them. And then, answering some imperceptible summons, it lifted its wings and flew away on the thin, spring air, leaving the four of them silent and oddly bereft. The pink geraniums no compensation for the vacant space created by a common bird.

Jude watched Allison’s eyes lock onto Elizabeth’s. “Remember Mrs. Muldoon, junior English?”

“Right . . . Mrs. Muldoon and her Emily Dickinson.”

Jude had had Mrs. Muldoon, too. But he kept quiet. The voltage of the sister-bond arcing across the table was high and exclusionary.

“Yeah, Emily and her definition of hope . . . ‘the thing with feathers’ . . . I never got it,” Allison said. But now I think maybe nutty Emily was onto something. Hope, you’ve got it one minute, the next it flies away . . . motherfucker.” Allison whipped off her wig, walked around the table, and took Peter’s hand. “If you have to choose between those experiments and your own senses, go with your senses.”

“You think?”

“Yeah . . . especially touch.”

“Why touch?”

She turned his palm upwards and ran her thumb over his fingertips. “You idiot . . . don’t you know touch is like all your other senses. You can develop it to an exquisite degree. Any asshole can go all humpity hump over the sight of rosy nipples or a sweetly freckled ass. But a man who sees through his fingers, well, there are millions of women who may be fat or scarred or whatever, but who still have passion waiting for that special touch.”

Jude remembers how Peter actually had put aside his worry and smiled. “You’re nuts, know that, Allison?”

“Can’t help it . . . chemo brain. But let me tell you something else.”

“What?”

“This girl knows she wants the memory of a loving touch to be the last thing her mind holds.”

“You got it.”

Now that afternoon seems like an ancient time ago. Somewhere in Queens, Jude stops for gas. Overhead, silver planes from LaGuardia conceal their contrails in the icy sky, while from a small screen in his pump, a former child star he once had a crush on urges him to buy air freshener. The chattering actress, the dingy pumps, the roaring planes, he feels engulfed by discord. Back on the highway, he rides a black Suburban’s slipstream toward the green lawns of Greenwich and the rabbit hole of his past.

“Hey, wanna play?” One summer morning, a big girl about his age with shaggy bangs and her little sister came through the hedge. Her family had just moved into the house next to his, and her directness astonished him—in his own family, after his father left and the yelling stopped, the silence screamed, making his mother’s fingers shake as she reached for another cigarette, another glass. But Elizabeth was boisterous, fearless, and up for just about anything. At the beach, she didn’t hesitate to grab primordial horseshoe crabs by their tails and flip them over. “Let’s see if this sucker’s male or female.” She became his lifeline. But he knew he always came second to Allison.

Like a camper coaxing a flame from tinder, Peter had been twirling Marilyn in his palms. But, as they neared Greenwich, he set her aside and pressed his hands to the heater.

“You cold?” Jude asked

“I can’t touch her with icy hands, Jude. What kind of fuckin’ memory would that be?”

“This sex-with-a-blind guy-thing, you think she’s well enough for that?”

“How should I know? She’s so brave, she scares the shit out of me. She used to call me and we’d talk, sometimes for hours..” “I didn’t realize you two were so close.”

“Then you don’t know jack.”

“That’s the second time this morning someone’s told me something like that.”

“Then I’d say you’ve got a problem.”

“This sex-with-a-blind-guy thing . . . ”

“Yeah?”

“Is that how it works? For you, I mean. Are your other senses getting more responsive to aspects of women other than their looks?”

“You mean like Al Pacino in ‘The Scent of a Woman’?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I wouldn’t know. Marilyn can get jealous. Besides, you’d be surprised at how many women aren’t into a manage a trois with a stick. It’s more like as my vision fades, I see things more clearly.”

“You mean with your inner eye?”

“I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

“So what does your inner eye see?”

“Wonder. Actually, my inner eye sees wonder. Think about it, Jude. They create life! LIFE! We dudes may plant the seed, but women, they’re the ones who make it grow. I mean if you touch their bodies, you’re literally touching a life source. Every one of them, no matter what her looks are, is a life source. So how can you not see that as wonder?”

“I wish you hadn’t said that.”

“Why?”

“Well, how am I supposed to have sex now, with your frickin’ ‘wonder’ bouncing around in my head?”

At the Greenwich exit, Jude turns off the thruway.

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In the breakfast nook overlooking her family’s back lawn that stretches to the Long Island Sound he sits across from Elizabeth. Her broad shoulders are stooped and her hair is a mangle of split ends. She’s telling him that someone at Davos has lent her father a plane—he’ll be home by three and her mother’s already on the Acela from Washington. Jude offers to pick them up, but she says no. Everything has been arranged. Peter has been with Allison for more than an hour, but neither of them says anything about that.

“I’m so scared, Jude.”

“Oh, Elizabeth.”

“From the time she was born I hid behind her.”

“What? No! You always were the”

“The ‘strong one,’ right? That’s what everyone always thought.” She leans back in the nook and gives him the full view of her blotched complexion, her lumpy body, her run-away eyebrows. “Let me tell you, it’s easy to play the strong one, especially if you’re bookish. You can bury yourself in chemistry or French, and peep out from time to time to watch your little sister taking her lumps, having her heart broken. Then all you have to do is pat her hand and say ‘There, there . . . he was an asshole.’ If you’re the strong one, you let someone else take all the risks.”

“No, Elizabeth, you dated . . . you had boyfriends.”

“Not really. Yeah, there were guys, but whenever I’d feel things getting serious, I’d think up some excuse . . . a new job, a new boss . . . anything. And then Allison got leukemia . . .” Suddenly her broad shoulders are wracked with sobs.

Jude watches, paralyzed. Then something propels him to get up, cross to her side of the nook, and press her head to him. “Elizabeth. Oh, Elizabeth.”

She sobs into him, then wipes her nose on her sleeve, and looks up. “It gets worse, Jude.”

“Elizabeth, no. You did”

“Everything . . . right? I did every fuckin’ thing. You bet I did. Leukemia was the best excuse ever. Some guy’d ask me out, and I tell him I couldn’t . . . I had to take my sister for treatment.” She slaps her stomach. “Meanwhile I was packing on the pounds, telling myself it was stress, but the truth is I’m terrified. I need to hide behind something. I always have. And if it can’t be Allison, it will be fat.”

Jude kisses her crown of chaotic hair and looks out the window toward the beach. One night a month before he and Elizabeth were to graduate from high school, Allison asked to meet him there. She wouldn’t say why, so he grabbed a six pack and waited on a washed-up log. “Jude!” She came up behind him, in white jeans and dark t-shirt, the cute little sister. She sat down beside him and took a beer.

“You’ve got to promise me something, Jude.”

“What?”

“The prom?”

“What about it?”

“You have to dance with Elizabeth. And I mean more than once.”

Ever since he'd asked her two months earlier, he'd been wondering how he was going to untangle Heather Halsted from her gown and here was Allison asking him to dance with Elizabeth.

“She’s going with a bunch of girlfriends . . . everyone thinks she’s lesbo. . . but she isn’t. It’s just . . . well, she’s never really cared about how she looks. But I’ve been working on her. Her gown is . . . I can’t tell you, but trust me, she’s going to look killer. I’ve got a spa day reserved . . . the whole bit. And I’ve even got her practicing moves in her heels. You’ve got to promise me you’ll dance with her . . . then maybe other guys will.”

He'd never imagined such a thing was possible . . . that cute little Allison, would have the strength and devotion to coax her big sister into her own beauty. He never could have imagined such love outright.

When he looks down at the crown of Elizabeth’s head, he sees a few silver strands interwoven with the brown. The story of that night with Allison on the beach, he tucks away for now. It’s a bittersweet tale, and at the moment, there’s sorrow enough.

The sleet has stopped and over the sound, gulls are screaming. Suddenly Jude hates them, hates them for being alive and too dumb to know it.

Peter comes across the hall. Whatever transpired between him and Allison has staggered him. He taps Marilyn into the kitchen but can’t navigate around the marble island. Jude gets up, takes his arm, guides him to the breakfast nook.

His sightless eyes look up at Jude. “She wants to see you.”

“What?”

“She asked me to tell you . . . she wants to see you.”

Jude hadn’t prepared himself for this. He looks to Elizabeth for guidance, but she’s gazing out the window. He has no choice but to go across hallway and into the study where Allison’s bed has been set up. An attendant signals him to wait, so he steps back into the hallway stretching from the front door to the back where a flagstone terrace meets the smooth lawn. Feeble sunlight on the icy grass makes it look silver-plated.

The attendant comes out, and Jude goes in. Against white pillows, Allison appears luminous, as if the chemo has set her aglow with an inner light. As if departing photons were sparking off and away from her. She smiles. “Hey, Jude,” their old, tired joke still shared by their four-square tribe.

“Hey, Allison, how’s it going?” Stupid . . . stupid . . . how could he have said something so stupid? “Oh, Allison, I’m so sorry, so sorry.”

“Shut up, Jude. Sit down.” Her voice is a whisper.

He sits in the little chair beside her bed and hardly notices that taking her hand feels as natural as breathing. She has closed her eyes, so he sits and waits, knowing he will wait for however long she needs. For whatever she must do. For whenever that will be. Then he feels a squeeze. Her eyes are still closed, but she’s gathered the strength to say something. He leans in close.

“You’re good people, Jude.”

“So are you, Allison, . . . the best.”

Her eyes open— “The difference is that I know I am.” —and they close again.

She says nothing else, but he sits, holding her hand, looking out at the silver lawn, willing the lapping waves to stop. To just stop. Everything to just stop.

The attendant comes in, and he knows he must leave. He stands and kisses Allison’s forehead, letting his lips linger, willing them to imprint into their nerves the memory of her warm, dry skin. Then he leaves the study and stops in the hallway. Through the kitchen doorway he sees Peter and Elizabeth in the breakfast nook. Their arms stretched across the table, they’re holding each other’s hands. And with sudden clarity, he sees their future, years of shared morning coffees and glasses of sunset wine, decade after decade for the big-boned sister and the blind man. His friends bound by memory and sorrow.

And himself? What role would he play? The best man? The godfather showing up for birthdays and holidays? The third member in a remembrance trio?

That night, back in his apartment, under the scant light on his bedside table, he will run a finger around the faint imprint the absent woman Alma left on the pillow next to his. And notice that by his sink, the silver mug she drank from just that morning sits, chalice-like. Waiting for moonlight.