

## *Blind*

The first morning I was blind, I called in sick. My boss's secretary took the message.

The second morning I was blind, she said, *Yeah, something's going around the office.*

The third morning I was blind, she asked if I could check my email from home. I said I'd see if I could later on. Then I coughed a few times and hung up.

I stayed in bed a lot those first few days. What with all the bumping into and stepping on things, it just felt safer – plus I ran out of Band-Aids pretty quickly. I watched movies and news programs on TV – well, listened to them anyway. I'd flip the pages of a magazine to keep my hands busy. I thought about working on the blanket I'd been knitting for my niece, but then I thought better of it.

After a week of being blind, I figured it wasn't a cold. Or a headache. Or something a new pair of glasses could fix. I stopped calling into the office. I felt bad – the election was coming up – but then how bad could I feel, really? After another week, my boss called me. He was worried-slash-angry. I said something about being sick, and he said something about respect and rights and disabilities and world order. Then he said something about mailing me some forms to have my doctor fill out. Maybe he did. I haven't seen them.

At some point I switched to soaps and talk shows. They were easier to follow and easier to imagine. Every woman on a soap looks like she just stepped out of a beauty parlor, and people on talk shows tend to be fat and poorly groomed. I'd half-listen. I'd brush my hair. Braid it, unbraided it. I painted my nails once. I used to paint my nails most Sunday mornings, but it felt odd not knowing what the color was now, so I took it off before it had time to dry.

I drank sodas and orange juice and ate cheese and sandwich meat. Things in boxes and bags, things that didn't require a stove or an oven. Cereal. It was fine. It was like being a man. Canned soup. Microwave dinners. I ate things I don't remember buying. Could've been years old. Frozen meats I couldn't identify. It's a very economical way to clean out the kitchen. You can't suffer over whether or not something looks good or passed the expiration date. If it's there and smells okay, then you can put ketchup on it and eat it. When I ran out of ketchup, I used some other thing. It wasn't barbecue sauce. I'm not sure what it was.

When the kitchen was pretty much empty, except for oregano and cooking spray, I called information and got the number for the pizza-and-sub place around the corner. That was a nice change. I paid in cash for as long as I could, just handed the delivery boy most of the bills from my wallet and took back the change.

*(Um, this is four dollars.*

*Oh, I thought I gave you a ten. I must be blind. Here.*

*Um, this is another one.*

*Whoops. Silly me.)*

When I ran out of cash, which didn't take long, I handed the boy a credit card. He said you usually have to give the number over the phone, but he'd write it down this once. I said, *Thanks, things have been a little crazy lately*, and he said, *Yeah, I know how it is*.

I figure it's either a brain tumor, a stroke, or some horrible disorder. I don't really need to know which. Whatever the case, it's kind of a shame I quit smoking those last three times, because I'll probably die before lung cancer would've gotten me. Then again, maybe it's just as well that I don't smoke now. I still don't remember where the matches are, and besides, it's not a good idea for blind people to play with fire.

I struggled to remember where a lot of things were in those early weeks. Like the end tables, the electrical outlets, the path to the front door. Paper towels, sugar, tampons, the cord for the electric razor. Tampons. I washed my sheets twice in a row just in case. I think I used bleach.

After a month or so – it's hard to keep track – I was out of food and cash. I'd raided my change drawer, pulled out all the quarters and dimes. I had no idea where my checkbook was. So finally, I ordered something from the pizza-and-sub place like usual, but when the boy arrived, I told him it was no big deal, but I'd give him twenty dollars or my laptop or a hand job if he'd help me memorize my credit card number. He said that was cool. He had to be back at work soon, so he'd just take the twenty-dollar tip.

He was pretty easygoing. We spent about ten minutes on it, and I gave him the tip plus a few magazines, *Newsweeks* or something, I'm not sure. He'd commented on them – they were on the coffee table, apparently – and what was I going to do with them? Before he left, I explained to him the whole blind thing. He said, yeah, he had his suspicions.

The power was the first to go off. (*Really, you sent a bill? I'm sitting at my desk, and I don't see it anywhere.*) The mortgage people were next. (*I've been sick, shut in. Can you take a credit card over the phone?*) You never want to become blind without a credit card. I made up a little song in my head to be sure I wouldn't forget the number.

I tried to learn the order of people in my cell phone directory, too. I called my way down the list. I'd see who answered, then hang up or say hello. But I didn't make it past *N*, because it gets tiresome listening to people complain. My cousin was having marriage trouble again. My old college roommate was worried about the president. My mother fussed about her

allergies and her asthma, and my ex-husband was stressing about his coffee shop franchise in Houston. When people asked, I'd say things with me were fine. I'd say, *Can't complain* in that little singsongy way. People like it when you say, *Can't complain*.

*Oh, well, that's goooooood*, they always say. Every time.

The pizza-and-sub's boy sold my car. He helped clear a better path for me through the living room. He had furry cheeks. And earrings in his left ear and left nostril. And an eagle tattooed on his forearm, or so he said. He got big tips every time. He said he was glad to help. He said it was a bum rap. He said my roots were showing big-time, and did I know how retarded I looked wearing plaid with stripes?

Shopping is tricky when you're blind. There's some guesswork involved, some awkwardness. Ordering a dozen solid blue shirts is not as simple as you'd think it should be. (*Actually, I don't have the catalog in front of me. No, Internet's down. So it was dark blue. Okay cobalt, sure. V-neck, okay, sounds right. And then there was, um, another blue shirt – Yes, one more, still blue....*) Thankfully, I remembered the name of a woman I used to work with who once asked me to accept Jesus as my personal savior, then tried to get me to sign up for a multilevel marketing program. She said she was glad to hear from me. They missed me at the office. I asked her to ship me toiletries and tampons and nonperishable foods – she only sells one brand of everything, which makes shopping easier. She asked me if I wanted to go with her to church one day soon. I said I'd think about it, and she said she'd pray for me to feel better, and then I told her someone was at the door and I had to go.

Every time the pizza-and-sub's delivery boy came over, he'd take something. Another magazine. The alarm clock. A vase – his sister's birthday was coming up. We'd have sex sometimes. He'd skim through my mail, take the trash out to the curb. I think he was a virgin.

When you turn blind, at some point, your mother's bound to find out.

*(Why didn't you tell me?*

*It didn't come up. How's Tiger?)*

She was annoyed, I know. She felt left out. There were a lot of questions. (*You couldn't water the plants? Look at this – the ficus is unsalvageable.*) There was a lot of sympathy. She tweezed my eyebrows. She dyed my hair back to brown. She said I needed to start shaving my legs. She gave me some money. The six doctors she called had six different explanations and wanted to do six different tests. I stopped paying attention after she told me about the first two.

Fruit baskets came. And came. And came. And baskets of cheeses. I'd ask the pizza-and-sub's delivery boy to read me the names. They all tasted strong and white and bitter. People sent over dinners and yarn and scented candles. Scented candles aren't relaxing when you're blind.

Money started coming in, too. My mother filled out some papers. I guess she deposited the checks; it all seemed to work out. I started shaving with

the electric razor. I got my mom to cut my hair so it would be easier to deal with. And I asked the boy to move in with me.

It made sense. He saved money on rent. And there was space. One weekend, we went through everything, all of my clothes, furniture, closets. Just cleaned things out. Everything glass – the dishes, the coffee table – gone. Everything inessential – knickknacks, books, pictures he didn't like. And he was nice to have around. (*Watch that corner. You missed a button. Here, touch this.*)

Life became so easy after that. We'd listen to music together, or he'd watch one of his movies. At night, he'd play video games, and I'd nod off to the sound of electronic car chases or gunfire or a digital girl shouting *Help me, Help me* on the television set. Sometimes we played two-player. I'd shoot randomly or push buttons when he told me to. He'd carry the game. Sometimes I called him sergeant. He called me Blue 'cause of my clothes.

*Don't you wanna go out some time*, he asked, and my mother asked, too. But by then I had a good path through my house, and as long as everyone kept it clear, I was fine. What was I going to do, go out and see the world? Besides, I'm allergic to dogs. (*They make seeing-eye ponies, too. Supposed to live longer.*) I was fine at home, I said. It was easier.

He mowed the lawn. He bought groceries. He turned nineteen inside me. I'd listen to the sounds he and his friends made. Sometimes they left on a movie or a game, and the TV would play the same minute-long soundtrack over and over. After it stopped being annoying, it became relaxing.

It's easier to relax when you're blind. To sit still. I could spend an entire afternoon lying on the sofa half-listening to music. Or sitting in the bathtub, warming up the water and adding multilevel-marketing-brand bath foam. One day he came home with furry handcuffs and hooked me to the headboard while he went out to deliver subs. I didn't mean to, but I fell asleep before he came home for dinner.

The pizza-and-subs delivery boy was a good cook. I could lose whole hours thinking about what he might be buying at the grocery store. Or what sounds he might bring home. The zap-ping of a BB gun shooting cans outside? The growl of car races? Digital explosions that sometimes sound real? And would he touch me during or before or after? I could lose whole hours thinking about that.

He joined the army at some point. I'm not sure when. We'd joked about it, but I guess somewhere along the way he decided to do it, 'cause eventually he had to go away. I was sad, but he promised to have his friends check up on me – the one with the ponytail and the one with the deep voice. They came most afternoons, and sometimes in the evenings, too. I think it was afternoons and evenings; they blend together. The one with the ponytail would take care of the lawn, and the one with the deep voice would keep my path clear and make sure I had groceries. The one with the ponytail had a long scar running down the side of his leg. Sometimes I'd have sex with both of them at the same time.

I missed a lot of phone calls. Most calls. I wouldn't notice them, or the guys would tell me my cell phone was blinking and I'd forget to check. I'd just lose track – couldn't very well leave myself a note on the refrigerator. One day, my mother stopped in. She was angry and said the kitchen was a mess and that there were team posters and beer signs hanging all over the living room. I didn't know, *but I don't mind*, I said. She said I should get a job and wasn't I worried and what was I doing with my life. She said she was sick and getting old and that if I'd paid any attention I'd have noticed. *Blind*, I had to remind her. *In my head, you look fine – and you finally got your ears pierced after all these years*. She laughed at the time, but still she died a little while later. I didn't see it coming. The guys said I was better off skipping the funeral. Not a good time to go out, they said.

The one with the deep voice wanted to join the army, and the one with the ponytail said he was in already, but I wasn't sure 'cause of the ponytail. They had a lot of friends with short haircuts though. They'd come over and eat pizza and call me Blue. They felt bad for me 'cause of my mother and plus the whole blind thing. They took care of the cooking and talked about the war and gave me beer and played video games and shot BB guns out back all night long. Nights I was alone, I couldn't sleep without leaving some noise on in the background. The one who cried sometimes helped me find the right button on the game machine.

They always left the path clear, the guys. That was a house rule they all maintained. Even after I lost track of them – the one with the dimple and the really tall one and the one who used to have a ponytail and the ones who walked around with no shirts on. The pizza-and-sub delivery boy came back for a visit once, but I lost track of him, too. His stomach was harder, his earrings were gone, and he said *Yeah, boy* a lot. When I followed the path to the bedroom and crawled into bed, I never knew who'd be there. Sleeping. Or resting or flipping through a magazine. It was like being at a slumber party or having a lot of really big cats. Except sometimes, I'd hide under the bed and wait for one of the ones with no shirt on to find me and tickle me and take me from behind.

Most of the guys left at the same time. They said they'd be back soon. (*Before you know it, Blue.*) The one who cried sometimes and one I didn't know much were the last to go, and I haven't seen them in a few weeks. They left my path clear, though, and gave me all sorts of creative foods: dehydrated something and protein-rich something else. And they'll be back soon. At night – at least I think it's night – I'll sit in my bubble bath and listen for them (zap-ping, *Yeah, boy*) outside my window. And when I'm falling asleep, I'll play the digital explosions from the game box, and I'll imagine that I'm the girl in the video game waiting to be rescued.