Word Count: 3,300

BLIND STICKS

I remember that first moment, exiting the train, when I saw a bushy-haired man who I assumed was blind for he tapped, tapped, tapped with his stick at the bottom stair. But was he? His eyes didn't stay fixed, lazy and barren as one long blind, nor did they zip about like fruit flies, hopeful and wanting as one just realizing he is going blind. He tucked the handle of his stick into his left armpit while the rest of him slouched, the fingers of his free hand rubbing the bridge between his eyes. The stick was upright and solid, the bottom tipped by a white eye-like rubber ball. No, I thought, you carry a blind stick, but you are not blind. You tap-tap around for special treatment, taking the lazy way through a world that parts before you. While considering confrontation, he tap-tapped his way onto the train. But over the next couple weeks, I saw many similar specimens.

At first it was easy to imagine these imposters were just pretending to be blind, or quietly mocking the blind, or else some combination of such motivations, say, a pretty dental hygienist bothered by only a slight defect of sight who also happened to find the blind a little funny and

not immune to some ridicule. Those like her, with mixed emotions, carried their blind sticks without conviction and their tapping was barely convincing. But soon I noticed other, more responsible tappers—those who, having neither warning signs of ocular degeneration, nor the desire to ridicule, nevertheless diligently underwent precautionary measures for blindness they resigned themselves to eventually acquiring. They were often older, a crease forming between their cheeks and chins, and mostly male, architects and engineers and administrators. Their walking was confident, taps insistent and searching, and their eyes usually closed.

As months passed and both the omnipresence of tap-tapping and the frequency of collisions on the train platform grew, others began tapping about with blind sticks too. I remember one lady waiting on the platform with co-workers. She looked like a fox with a long nose, angled eyes, a slight smirk and a brown fur wrapped around her thin neck. When a blind-mocker tap-tapped by, sliding across the tiled floor on the heels of a truly blind man identifiable by his honest, clean and sparse tapping, I blurted out what so many of us must have been thinking, “Look at all these assholes tap-tapping around.” I regretted it at once. I figured an argument would ensue, probably a fight. But instead the foxlike lady shrugged her shoulders and turned back to her group, each of whom had a blind stick of their own. Then the group dispersed, spreading out in all directions with eyes closed, tap-tapping in a very generic sort of way, except, I noticed, with a more vigorous habit. When a number of them paused to dictate observations into identical handheld tape recorders, I realized this was no leisure tapping. They were blind stick testers. There was a haughtiness about them; an air of righteousness on their dour faces, straining as they approached the staircase, or else, as with the foxlike lady, the escalator. Should any blind person go sauntering across the tile with full confidence in their implements only to

tumble down the steps on account of some tester's negligence, you could tell each and every one of them would burst into tears.

And what child, seeing the tap-tapping of all these adults, would not want to try it too? Children practice; that's what they do; practice for when grown enough to have their own opinions on the humor of the blind, the mockery of the blind, the safety of the blind, or, god-forbid, the afflictions of the blind. And there are plenty of occasions for children to find themselves blessed with an adult-sized blind stick of their own. Some of them—those with more practiced imaginations—must imagine they are blind and tap-tap their oversized blind sticks with one eye half-open, the eyelid closed just enough so the veil of eyelashes provides a filtered view of the world, all the easier for them to believe they are different people and that their tap-tapping is just part of the larger chorus of the everyday. Others, lacking in imagination (usually the poor offspring of blind-mockers) simply mimic their distracted parents' actions, or attempt to. Their tap-tapping is the worst of all in its over-exaggeration—tapping up the walls, tapping on sleeping dogs, occasionally tapping an innocent bystander on the knee. Their parents provide no discipline. And just imagine how frustrating this all was for the children of the blind themselves. But who could tell? Those sad children were extremely hard to distinguish from the rest of the common, idiot children for neither had yet developed the nuances to distinguish their tap-tapping in any way, mocking or real.

I have never been any of the above faux-blind-types. My blind stick was purely ornamental at first, allowing me to move about unnoticed. I took it up just before meeting my wife, back when I still snuck peeks at the changing town and fumbled with my food. Drinks were easy, as were hamburgers and sandwiches. Soup was the hardest. Chopsticks, though it doesn't

stand to reason, became my implement of choice. I gave up on knives completely, and with them said goodbye to steak and pork chops. My life was otherwise routine, minding my own business, commuting to and from the train station, though my job as a ticket vendor did acquire some unusual aspects. First, it became difficult to understand my customers beneath the volume of all the audible instructions that had been added to supplement the visual signs, describing everything, commanding us what to do. *Cross now. Press the top button to go down. Stand back while the train doors are opening. Enter the train.* I was also tasked with regularly requesting janitorial to double its shifts in deference to the prevalence of dirty, yellowed toilets, and animal excrement tracked everywhere (cat shit smells the worst; their digestion has worsened with their owner's eating habits). The janitorial department's response was always delayed, and in the meantime, layers of dust collected on everyone's fingertips while riding the escalator, now officially recognized as the most challenging aspect of the platform. While the stairs offer continual struggle from top to bottom, the *click, click, click* of the escalator's entrance tempts would-be passengers with a free ride so long as that same tap-tapping passenger heeds the voice whispering "Exit" without injury as those teeth chew and swallow stair after stair. Always that hum fills the ambience behind the tapping, behind the shifting of the trains, behind the relentless instructions.

One evening, feeling sorry for the blind and having had enough of all the tap-tapping on the platform, I sought refuge at my favorite club halfway between the station and my home. It was a dance club, and though I didn't dance, I liked the cocktails and half the fun was watching others. The blind have rhythm; the frauds do not. But when I arrived, the door burst open, the broom-like lining of horse-hair on its bottom edge sweeping debris away and clearing a path for

the tapping of a veritable parade of women pouring from inside, followed by their men. The place was empty now. Not even a bartender. The owner, frowning, told me that someone had said the cocktails were shit nowadays, which prompted an argument, and then someone broke one of the mirrors. The owner tried to settle everyone down but they all left in a hurry and headed for the beer hall a few blocks over where the heavy rock music and mosh pit would allow them all to flail and fumble about without embarrassment.

With no one to serve me a drink, I returned to the street. I'd tap-tapped for only a block toward home when I heard a kind of tap-tapping I'd only imagined. It was punctuated, nervous, yet also soft and docile and highly regular. Obviously counterfeit.

"Whom do you mock?" I asked.

"The ones mocking," was the answer, a female's voice with a lilt of sarcasm.

I hated her at first, for her inversion, and for her presumption that I was just a blind mocker too, but as so many love stories go, it took only an evening of tap-tapping together for that agitation to soften and harden again as love. I have spoken of the blind, the mockers of the blind, the self-righteous helpers of the blind, and even the parents and children of both the blind and blind-inspired, but it was now up to me to exemplify their lovers. For while it is assured that with all this tap-tapping sometimes one tap-taps to places unwelcome, it is also true that one might sometimes tap-tap their way to a lonely brunette desiring nothing more than another to tap-tap alongside for a while. And so we walked—the battered, one-eyed, chipped-beaked pigeons scattering before us, no longer waiting for our swinging sticks to close in—and we talked. We argued over where to find a decent cocktail. We argued over how many classifications of tappers had proliferated, which we hated most, and whether a tapper's

motivation influenced their choice of eating utensil—chopstick, spoon, fork, or fingers. Gaining each other's trust, we played two truths and one lie. I told her that the day I first showed up to work with my own blind stick I split my head open on a railroad tie, and even as gullible as she is, she guessed it was the lie.

Two and a half weeks later, we were married. Our first night together in her apartment, I heard a tap-tapping out the window of her third-story bedroom. It was rhythmic, solitary, slow, totally lacking in irony. I couldn't help but open my eyes and sneak a peek at the street below.

"His arm is in a sling. And he has a flashlight on his blind stick. But it's not on," I said, aghast. "Who would affix a flashlight to a blind stick?" He was obviously not blind.

"A flashlight?" asked my wife.

"A flashlight."

"But no beam?"

"Just the tap-tapping."

"Just the tap-tapping?" she repeated, equally aghast.

"What an asshole," I said, careful my words wouldn't drift out the window.

"You peeked," she said.

Flustered, I defended myself. Surely I wasn't the only one to peek. But she claimed to have never seen anyone peeking, and neither, I had to admit, had I. I believed she was innocent—no one would have tracked as much cat shit into their apartment otherwise. For weeks after I snuck peeks while at work, trying to catch someone else, but to no avail. And so I relented, for her, and stopped my peeking, reserving such discretions for moments when muscle memory fails and I forget the location of a key on my keyboard, or else proofing a rare typing

error.

But more importantly, our incredulity toward that flashlight-yielding tapper had, paradoxically, and without either of us saying so, inspired the question of children in both our minds. Perhaps we each considered that flashlight-bearer unaware of the established system, like a child, imprinting generalized behavior while losing the fundamental meanings, or else like a wayward teenager abandoning the purity of the blind stick in favor of some sort of next-generation experiment. Regardless, the question was under our breath now, but would remain unspoken for months.

In the meantime, we worked, we ventured to other dance clubs, and otherwise stayed at home. My wife runs a local nursery and likes to garden, but wouldn't tend to the pots at the edge of the roof anymore, so we got rid of them. And yet it was her idea to set up a hammock on the roof. We swayed on it often, though from it we watched no sunsets, stared at no moon. We always ate at the kitchen table to avoid messes in bed or on the couch. I practiced my cocktail-making hobby on her, but the cocktails were loosely measured and merged into one cocktail with slight variations of a two-count pour. We spent much of our time in bed (perfectly fine by me), talking with the television on, and we went to sleep without knowing what time it was. All the while we ignored the unspoken question.

Finally, the evening of the first Friday of summer, swinging on the hammock together while sipping wine that she insisted was a sauvignon blanc (but was obviously a pinot rosé), her suggestion surfaced.

"It's time to consider our next step."

Oh the comedy of metaphor!

"A child? Madness."

I presented a litany of compiled observations.

At best, the brightest and most productive children I've seen, hugging the banisters at the outer edges of the platform, have proven themselves ready with an instant reply whenever one of us would-be parents tap-tapped over to them to say, "Little boy, little girl, just what is it that you'd like to be when you grow up?" Instead of bluntly answering, "Why, I'd like to make blind sticks when I grow up," or "Everyone knows I'm going to be the world's most renowned blind stick tester when I grow up," these children just start walking across the tile, arm outstretched, not bothering with a trainer blind stick, oh no, leading themselves with a perfectly adult-sized blind stick though its end rises over their little heads. Their grip, two fingers and thumb, tenderly guides the stick from halfway up. It was a technique I knew not by sight, but by the clumsy yet plaintive way they tap-tapped in circles around the rest of us, uncaring of their parents' acknowledgement. These children had already flown the proverbial coop, and their parents must proudly laugh to each other in bed at night, blind sticks propped beside the nightstand, for their children's precociousness is comical if not a little bit sad too.

But these children were few and far between. Typical children, I insisted, would will simply imprint on their parents, ignorant of the specific meaning behind the pitch and rhythm of their parents' tapping, serving no purpose, while pleading for attention from parents too busy navigating their own blind sticks to notice their children figure-eighting about, swishing this way and that with their chaotic tap-tapping. Except of course for those rare and delightful moments when surprising one of their parents with the smack of a stick to the face. Lacking guidance, the children are left to derive some sort of learning from the rest of us zigzagging about the tile, and

if asked what type of non-blind blind stick holder they hoped to be, they just look dumbly back at you.

The hammock squeaked as my wife leaned forward. Either to humor or mock me, she suggested that some of those very same children might even become highly reputed inventors of new forms of blind sticks or blind stick tapping, having never had any formal training of their own. Then she leaned back, proud of herself, and slowed the hammock with her feet while fumbling around with her fingers to stroke my hair.

"Children wizen up," she insisted. "They all do. They'll choose a path to study, a parent to emulate. And besides, there are also plenty of children capable of imagining outside their parent's exposure. Our child wouldn't have to tap like you tap."

"Or you."

"Or me."

"Even worse," I said. And then there were the orphans. Just consider how many must be out there now. So easily lost.

"We'll protect him," she insisted, exhausted by my cataloguing.

"Or her," I said.

"She doesn't even need to tap at all."

"Sure," I said, and pictured that rare child who had remained isolated, had never seen a blind stick or even a blind person before; a child that never imagined being blind or mocking the blind or assisting the blind, and was not a child of the blind, the blind mockers, the blind worriers, or even the blind stick testers. Hers was simply the young and pliable and independent mind of a child, and one day she'd no doubt discover an abandoned blind stick at the bottom of

an escalator, or stuck in the railing at the bottom of a set of apartment stairs, its broken owner long since carried away. Is the child just not going to pick it up? Nonsense. She'll note the white ball on the end, and against the ascending face of the bottom stair she will make his first tap. It is fate.

Am I the first parent to have worried of these complexities? My wife seems to think so. She laughs and mimics my cataloguing, and when I protest she calls me cute, but secretly she is bothered. Back in bed, I was enjoying the curve of her belly and bosom with the side of my face, until she pushed me away, giggling from the tickle of my stubble.

In the end, she won, of course, and to the sound of the television sitcoms, our limbs smoothly navigating the tangle of sheets, we began the glorious effort of child-making, and maybe, just maybe, each of us might have peeked at each other one more time.

How did we get here, I wonder, all of us with our blind sticks? Who knows how long it's been since I noticed that first bushy-haired man parading his blind stick brazenly up the stairs of the platform. It was a Tuesday, sure, but how many Tuesdays ago? I have not seen a calendar in ages, but our anniversary must be approaching since the bump on my wife's belly is just starting to form. Sometimes we sit quietly in bed, listening for a distant tap-tapping outside. We ask each other how old our child will be before we give him his own blind stick, how long will it take before the complaint slowly resolves: "Aren't I entitled to a blind stick too?," or if he'll find one on his own before we are prepared for that conversation. But other times we stay silent, and I wonder instead what type of tapper he will be, how competent, how true, and as I playfully, gently and a little nervously tap my stick on my wife's taut belly, I wonder if either of us has any real control of when that will happen, and if every moment, every thought and every word

spoken is somehow affecting that outcome.

My wife, noticing my mood, tells me not to worry about the future of our offspring, and then laughs as I exhale a deep sigh and admit that she is right. But that calm only lasts until morning, when I'm back at work, thinking of the blind.

They are still here, among us, around the cool corners of stairways where the platform tile ends. I cannot feel sorry for them anymore. They are the only ones without blind sticks. Who knows how long ago they stopped needing them, how long ago we made the platform and the city around it comprehensible again? Like bats, they've learned to navigate the echo chamber we've created with our constant tapping on the floors and the walls. No one speaks of them. When it rains we hear them pant and moan with confusion, but otherwise they are silent, never speaking. They slip between us, around us. I know they're still here, considering how to use their new power, what to do with this army of naïve servants and tending like invisible midwives to those of us giving birth to the next generation. Sometimes, in my ticket booth, in the lull between recorded announcements, I can hear their laughter. If I dared open my eyes I'd see them shake their heads in appreciative pity.

THE END