

*Sick Girl Goes on a Date, Alyson Lee*

For my first date as a sick girl, I wore a black shirt with ruffles that exposed my midriff and a pair of expensive jeans borrowed from my sister-in-law. I felt pretty. I practiced giggling in the mirror because I was afraid I had forgotten how to smile.

They say you shouldn't talk about anything traumatic on a first date but we had not even finished our appetizer before I told him that at age 20 I had a stroke, I lost function of my fingers and legs, I had a worm in my eye and got de-wormed like a horse, and I am slowly losing vision in my right eye.

I had meant to tell him the cute version, that I had had a stroke and it was "crazy." But he never interrupted and looked at me without pity so I kept telling him more. I said, "once a month I get lasers burned in my retina to kill cells that are trying to attack me." I said, "at one point they thought I had cancer, but no one had the heart to tell me." I said, "they never figured out why this happened." And I laughed the whole way through, with a few well-timed self-deprecating jokes, watching him carefully to see if he laughed too.

I said, "well yep. That's my shit," and looked at his eyes, the hands in his lap to see if he was anxiously picking at them. But he looked me in the eye, without a note of irony, and said "I guess what I can say is, you're incredible."

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I can say then that other things happened on this first sick-girl date. He told me he read Pilgrim's Progress three times cover to cover and I laughed and said, "that's hot." He asked me what my favorite basic science class was and I said, "Cell Biology." The C-train was late so we took the 1 and he told me when he was little, he played Schubert at a recital and an old, dying lady in the crowd was so moved she bought him a baby grand and paid for his piano lessons until she died. And I laughed and shamed him for not playing piano now when this lady had died thinking she had found the next Mozart.

And because he dropped me off at my apartment and said, "When can I see you again?" the first sick-girl date became a symbol, a memory to signify the moment when I realized that I had told him everything and he didn't run away, that you could tell someone you have broken blood vessels but they still desperately want to know why you think N-linked glycosylation is so elegant.

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The next day he sent me a picture of his finger, freshly cut from a kitchen knife, wrapped in a band-aid with a smiley face he drew on with a pen. He called his bandaged, smiling finger Rex for "Right Index" and sent photos of Rex accomplishing various tasks throughout his day.

I told him that I named the hypothetical parasite in my optic nerve, Edworm, and said "we are basically the same."

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I guess you could say I was ecstatic but I could not help but be worried. Because I had found the first boy to say, “I’m thinking about you” after my body had fallen apart and I did not trust myself to know whether he really liked me or just liked taking care of me, whether I could call this love when it was really sympathy.

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One time, my dad stood up when Dr. J suggested a new medication after the first one failed. My dad said, *we won’t do that*, and pulled me from the room.

Later, when I asked why, he said the drug causes infertility and miscarriage. I thought about all the pills I had swallowed and whether I had unknowingly killed my first born child.

And that meant I had to ask myself questions about babies before I had even had sex. Questions like, what would that mean to me? If I could not have children of my own, would I feel incomplete? If I had a baby with my partner’s DNA but not my own, would I feel jealous? If I could not have children of my own, would he leave me? If I could not have children of my own, could I say I am really a woman? Or must I say I am always a girl?

After I missed my period for 6 months, my OBGYN said it doesn’t look like I’m ovulating right now. I did not want to ask her whether that meant I was not able to have a baby because I did not want to think about these questions.

I wonder if by the time I am brave enough to ask, it will be too late.

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In my darkest of thoughts, I can say I am glad. Because I wonder whether this illness I have is heritable and if I would just be giving birth to a broken baby. I can say I am relieved because I do not want my baby to resent me.

Sometimes, though, I picture myself in mismatched pajamas, a t-shirt from college and gingham thermal pants, and my head is in my hands and my hands are in my hair, pulling, and my hands are on my belly and they are pressing down on my belly button trying to feel whatever it is that is empty and cold.

I pre-mourn the disappointment. Because it will be another way my body has failed me. Except in this case, it would fail a lot more people than just me. Because in my picture, I am always alone and I know it is because we had tried but it was too much for him to bear, because he had not pictured his life to turn out this way, and even though this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and he told me I am more than my birthing body, he leaves me for a woman with wider hips and greater follicle-stimulating hormones.

Sometimes, though, I picture the moment after the doctor tells me bad news, when she tells me the days I have left. I picture what it would be like to sit my children down and tell them, *mom’s*

*not doing so well anymore.* And I mourn the wails I will not hear and the words of comfort I will not get to say.

I do not even know if this is something I have to mourn. But I am too scared to find out. So I just mourn what I do not know, waiting for the day I do.