

The Best Friend

by James Como (July 2015)

Rain was falling hard and it was the tail end of rush hour, so when Eli snagged a cab on eighty-sixth and Lexington he knew he had been lucky. Well, maybe not lucky.

“Hey you prick! That was my taxi!” The pudgy young woman had the door in her hand when Eli splashed a puddle and slid into the back seat. As he jerked the door closed he saw that her face looked swollen, with a flattened nose and squinty eyes. She banged on the glass with the handle of her umbrella. He was happy with himself. He was ugly too, but not that ugly.

He was on his way to Grand Central Terminal and could have taken the subway, but he had a residual fear of them. Much had frightened him as a child but nothing more than subways. Nothing had ever happened to him there, but the *sub* part, and the closeness, and the people he called *denizens* all added up to danger. Added up in his head, he knew. But since that was where he mostly lived, that was all the math that mattered.

He was meeting his old friend Jack at the Oyster Bar. They had met in sixth grade. Eli had arrived mid-year and had made a big impression: swarthy, kinky hair, eyes peering from beneath his brow, dressed in a motor cycle jacket that he would not take off: all zippers and buckles and clips. Everybody wondered just how tough he was, even Big Leon, the toughest kid in sixth grade. Eli would be one of only two friends at Jack’s small wedding.

By now it had been a while since they had seen each other: different cities, much travel, life. Jack had always seemed interested in what Eli was up to because, Eli knew, he was Jack’s most intelligent friend. Intelligence had been their first bond. So later, when Eli tried to push apricot pits as a cure for cancer, Jack said he had heard that it might work. And when Eli called the Israeli Prime Minister to suggest a peace plan, Jack was amazed.

The rain had gotten worse; the noise on the cab was upsetting. Eli never understood people who romanticized rain. There was nothing, nothing, good about it. He even hated drizzle. Rain made him alter his habits, and that was bad by definition. Now he realized that traffic was snarled beyond all reckoning. He’d have to sit there wasting time, stewing in day-old unventilated dankness, and bored. But he could think, which he was good at, so he thought more about Jack.

He had forgotten what Jack knew. He knew that Eli was a CPA, but had Eli told Jack that he had gotten his MBA? That he was a certified massage therapist? That he had gotten a second

Master's degree in library science? Or that he had become a limo driver? All this, he knew, would amaze Jack, who must be bored and boring. Wife, two children, a PhD. in rhetoric (what the hell did that mean? Who did that?), assistant professor of English literature, a devotion to some obscure English writer that no one heard of any more. (G.K. Chesterton? The really fat guy.) Well, he would fill Jack in. Jack would be impressed. All quick. Then one more stop, back to JFK, and home. Really, he had called Jack only to catch up, to be friendly instead of rude.

In ten minutes the car had moved four blocks. At this rate it would take a hundred minutes to get to Forty-Second Street. He looked out the window but couldn't see through the glass. He opened his coat. He thought to go through some papers that he carried in his omnipresent briefcase, bulging with old essays and pamphlets about the Peruvian fishing industry.

He began to feel too warm, really, so he cracked open the window. That helped with the temperature, but it also reminded Eli that he was – and he may as well admit it – that he was trapped. He dug deeper into the case but it didn't help. The memory of one time when he was trapped as a kid jumped into his head.

Jack had picked him for his punch ball team when nobody else would, then he suggested to Eli that he come around the block to hang out. But some kids on the block didn't want the "jewboy" to mix, so they began to push Eli around. Eli was too scared to defend himself, so there he was against the wall in the alley when Jack stepped in. He walked up to Maxie – everybody knew his parents had been Nazi bastards during the War – and, nose to nose, told him to shut the fuck up. Of course Maxie said, "make me." And that's when Jack clocked him with a right hook to the chin. He was down, and out, for a few seconds. When he got up he apologized to Eli. Jack and Eli never mentioned the incident.

Maybe Eli would remind Jack. Or of the time, much later, when Eli's mother called Jack to ask if he knew anything about how Eli was doing. Now in grad school, her son wouldn't get out of bed, and poor Mrs. Ganz had no idea why. In fact, she had no idea what her son was studying or if he were doing well. It seems Eli kept all his work in the briefcase, locked. It must have weighed fifty pounds. So Jack went over, got Eli out of bed, picked out his clothes, walked him through some want ads, and took him into Manhattan to make some rounds. Eli found a job; Mrs. Ganz thanked Jack.

By now the cab was in the fifties. The rain had not lightened up but the traffic had, a little. Eli had been impatient to arrive; now he was morose. He had become angry at Jack. "Who the hell did he think he was, stepping in like that? I'll catch him up, all right. I'll catch

him up." Now Eli's intention was to straighten Jack out.

He had spoken out loud, so the driver said, "excuse me, sir?" An Indian. Eli didn't answer. Instead he began to hatch a plan. He would remind Jack that Jack's own father had befriended Eli. When Eli was at his worst, he would call Old Jack, no matter day or night, and the old man would talk with him for hours, would listen, would give advice and encouragement. Eli hadn't mentioned that friendship to Jack and he knew Old Jack never would. That's how he was. The old man was a *mensch*, not like his own pathetic father. "There was a friend, Jack. Your old man." That's what he would say to Jack.

Jack knew Eli was on the spectrum, without knowing what that meant, back in the seventh grade, when Eli showed up with his head covered in Vaseline, "to fight dandruff," he had said. That's when Eli had his first talk with Jack's father.

After Jack was married, Eli visited and stayed three nights instead of the two. He really resented what happened after. He had taken a couple of baths, and Jack just had to comment on the mess he left. Then, to top it off, he called Eli to mention the bread and butter note to his wife that he had not written. Jack tried to make it sound like a suggestion, but it wasn't. It was an instruction. So there's a history of this condescending, intrusive crap.

Eli decided right then that he'd have to tell Jack that, no, he was not and had never been his best friend. He began to play out the scenario. Hair a bit thin, trunk running thick, of course chatting with the bartender, who was chuckling at something.

"John junior."

"The one and only. How are you Eli? You took your time."

"Rain, traffic. You're lucky I made it at all."

Jack smiled. "Oh, I know, Eli. You're busy. You're looking, I don't know . . . rested."

"I'm disabled in New York State, Jack. I can't work."

"You can't? You don't look disabled, my friend."

"Mentally disabled, Jack. I guess I hadn't mentioned that. I'm medicated."

"Ah. Right. The spectrum, yes?"

"Yes. The spectrum."

That would be a good start. That would do it. With traffic running now he was in the Forties. He would be at the Oyster Bar in a few minutes, so Eli didn't have time for more imagining. All he had to do, really, was to remember the one bullet point. You never were my best friend.

That's how far it had gone when Jack said, "The spectrum, Eli? Is that why you missed my father's wake?"

Eli was stunned.

"You knew he died. You didn't bother to show up. But do you know who did, Eli?"

"Listen, Jack. You're lucky I'm not here with a bomb strapped to my chest. The anger that I feel . . . "

"Shut the fuck up, Eli. There's the spectrum. Then there's character. I asked if you know who showed up at my father's wake."

"Yeah, everybody I suppose. He was a popular guy."

"Almost, Eli. Everybody plus one. Your father showed up, shmuck. He took me aside. He told me how grateful he was to my father for having helped you. That you wouldn't let him in, but that he prayed to God in thanks to my father for stepping in. He wanted me to know that. That's character. That's a *mensch*."

"My father – "

"Say one bad fucking word about your father, you sorry bastard, and I'll dislocate your jaw."

"Who do you think you are, Jack? Mr. Big Man. Stepping in for me, now stepping on me? I don't have this coming. I don't. I came here in good faith – "

"You've never done anything in good faith, you self-absorbed prick. That's the only way you're *not* un-fucking-believable. Enough to finally make you uninteresting."

"That's the Asperger! You should know that. If you were a real friend you would." Eli had decided not to mention the schizophrenia, the real reason he was medicated. "But now *here's* the truth. You were *never* my best friend, Jack. You thought you were, you think you are, but it's never been true."

"Not your best friend, Eli? For twelve years I was your only friend, and I thought I knew what

an albatross was. But it was my old man who really knew, who carried the weight, because he was the best friend you ever had.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry for what?”

“I was talking to your father, Jack.”

“Really? That’s good, Eli. Now, how about you leave him alone. And me.”

In the cab on the way back to his room – he’d be leaving early the next morning for Denver: he was also mentally disabled in Colorado, an interesting story, he thought – in the cab on the way back he thought that things had gone as well as could be expected. Poor Jack was understandably distraught, what with having lost his father as well as his best friend. Now, stop off at Levin’s. Pick up the few hundred Levin had promised him, as a loan. A good friend, Levin. The best.

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