

Back on the Horse

Ethan Marley

“What’s it been? Six months?” John jabbed his fork full of spiraled spaghetti at Eric.

“Seven.” Eric took a sip of coffee and breathed a heavy sigh while he looked down at his lap. “It’s been seven months.”

John slurped the noodles off his fork and laughed. “Single for seven months. We gotta get you back up on that horse,” John said, taking a gulp of ice water to chase down his large bite of pasta.

Eric shook his head, both at the idea of dating again and at John’s decision to order spaghetti at eight o’clock in the morning. “Why?”

“Listen, the longer you’re alone, the more that stench of loneliness starts to follow you. It’s like unwashed clothes, or morning breath, and if you wait until it festers enough, everyone smells it on you and then it’s too late.”

“No, I mean why are you eating spaghe- you think I smell like morning breath?”

“You don’t smell like morning breath, but we need to get you with a girl. It’s been too long, and its starting to reflect poorly on me.”

“You’re not dating anyone right now either, John. How is this a poor reflection on you? According to what you’re saying, we’re equally smelly.”

“Don’t be hung up on the smell thing. I am just trying to tell you that it’s time for you to leave single life and find the girl of your dreams. Or, you know, someone that seems nice.”

Eric stared into his cup, watching the last sip of almond-colored Folgers sway from side to side as he rolled the cup in his hand, thinking about his “single life” that he had built for himself, that John was trying so desperately to get him away from. Eric didn’t like the idea of having to give that up quite yet. After downing the last of his weak coffee, Eric placed his cup down on the table with a furrowed brow and finally spoke up. “I like being single though.”

John stopped his hand in midair as he was about to shovel another bite of spaghetti into his mouth and dragged his gaze toward Eric.

“I mean, what’s so bad about it? I get free time, I have extra money, I get to do what I want pretty much all the time-.”

“You work all the time. You fill your free time with more work, and what you want to do all the time is work. You need to get outside of that bus, Eric; it’s corrupting your mind.”

“Any more coffee?” their waitress said. Her name was Tess, and she saw these two come in every morning at the same time, to sit in the same sticky, torn, red booth that they always did, right under the dimmest fluorescent bulb in the diner.

Eric smiled. “Yeah, thank you.” She poured him another cup and glided away like an ice skater in early winter.

Tess didn’t mind her job, but she did feel like she worked too much.

“I shouldn’t even know his name, let alone be able to call exactly when Eric is going to wipe his mouth with his crumpled napkin,” she said to the other waitress as she came behind the counter to return the pot of coffee to the warmer. Without turning to look at Eric, she said, “I bet he is right...now.” She looked at the other waitress for confirmation.

“I think you are here too much,” she said.

Eric finished wiping coffee from the corner of his mouth and chin with his balled-up napkin.

“You’ve been in a slump, and you’ve been working to distract yourself from it,” John said. “You know it’s true. No happy person with prospects offers to work weekends and holidays driving a bus around Coralville, Iowa.”

“I have plenty of prospects.”

“Besides driving your bus, name one.”

“Recently I’ve been considering getting a rabbit.”

“That’s a non-committal pet. Huge red flag. You don’t have to care for a rabbit, you monitor it, like a warden. If you can’t get a dog, don’t get anything. Plus, a dog would help you in your situation.”

Eric was skeptical about getting a rabbit, but was especially reserved about the idea of getting a dog. Whether women would like it or not, that sounded like a lot of work. And, being out of the house all day driving his route, he didn’t want to hire someone to take care of it.

“Eric, are you thinking about work?” John asked.

“N... Yeah.”

“You don’t even have work today, and you’re spending your day off thinking about driving a bus.”

The driver’s union of Coralville had contacted Eric and told him that he had to take the day off because he was about to work his third fifty-hour week in a row, and apparently that was bringing into question their stance on “labor rights.” While Eric thought it to be a bit much, he knew that it was time for him to take a breather. He didn’t know what else to do, so he came to the diner he did every morning before starting his route (which was located directly next to the bus depot), and planned to stay for as long as John would keep ordering food.

While the diner was usually free of customers at that early hour of the morning, John and Eric turned their heads when they felt the icy February air hit them. The front door of the restaurant had opened, and in the doorway stood a heavily wrapped figure, scarf wrapped around their face, a hat almost pulled over their eyes, and a coat so puffy it could have popped.

The person began to unravel themselves from their winter armor, first unspooling the tight scarf from around their face, then pulling the hat from their head. Under the layers was a woman, with long dark hair and a bright red, cold face. She was more beautiful than any woman Eric or John had seen in Iowa.

“Girl of your dreams,” John said under his breath.

The woman shuffled to a booth across the small diner from the two, and Tess followed her to ask what she would be having. They heard a

voice smooth as silk say, "Coffee, please."

"Sounds like you already have a lot in common," John said.

Eric hadn't heard anything since the woman walked in. He sat, frozen as the power lines, and stared in wonderment. She looked so different from the women he saw every day on his route, there was something so fresh and new about her, and he started to think that his work might not be so important (at least for today).

"John," Eric said, "I think you might be right about dating."

"Say no more."

John shot up from the booth and traipsed toward the mystery woman's booth.

"No, no..." Eric tried to pull him back, but John blew by him with a flip of his arm to shake Eric off.

John pulled his wallet, a battered, folded piece of brown faux-leather from his pocket, and turned to wink at Eric.

on the Horse No matter how hard Eric shook his head to call off the operation, John continued forward and as he passed by the woman's booth, he threw the wallet toward her feet.

Eric saw the woman look down, stirring in her seat and shifting to pick up whatever this man had "dropped." He saw John waving his arms in an exaggerated apology and taking his wallet back from the woman. To his dismay, he watched as John leaned over her table and put on his most persuasive face. He talked to her for about ten seconds and a smile stretched across his face. Eric thought this might've been a good sign until John's smile fell off his face and was replaced with a defeated frown. He moped back to their booth and plopped down.

"What was that?"

"Fate. It's not meant to be, man. I'm sorry."

"What do you mean? What did she say?"

"She wasn't receptive."

"To what?"

"Well I pulled the ol' wallet move, you know, as you do, throw the wallet on the ground, they pick it up, you go from there."

"I've never heard of the wallet move."

"Regardless, she told me she wasn't interested."

"In who?"

"Me."

"Were we not talking about getting me a girl? I thought that's what you told me?"

"You're one hundred percent right, sorry, I bailed on that plan in the moment. Your turn, though."

"What does that mean?" Eric asked as Tess came over to their booth again.

"Did you want anything to eat, Eric?" she asked, and he looked down, embarrassed that she might've heard their conversation. Eric and John had been coming every morning for six months, since Eric had gotten his job driving the Coralville city bus (John tagged along with him every day, due to his lack of employment/ambition). Tess and he had gotten to

know each other, as well as two people can through cups of coffee and the occasional plate toast, but even still, he didn't want to look desperate.

"No, thank you, though," he said, his face red.

"All right, John? Anything for you?"

"It's been a rough day, Tess. I'm gonna need a few pieces of that apple cobbler. And Eric'll have the bill. What?" John said after Eric glared at him. "We talked about you loosening up."

After Tess scribbled his order onto her pad and whisked herself away, John leaned in and said, "Eric, this is your chance. Forget your fifty-hour weeks and not having any furniture in your apartment. It's time to grow up, so go over there and ask that woman on a date right now."

There was a long pause, and Eric found himself unconsciously clenching his fists. His palms were sweating, and the butterflies in his stomach had turned to angry birds of prey, but he summoned the courage to slide to the edge of the booth. John pumped his fist and slapped Eric hard on the shoulder as he stood up, straightening his shaky knees, and took his first step toward the woman of his dreams.

Every inch of the thirty-foot walk was a laborious step through a pool of molasses, and Eric felt time creep to a halt. The back of the woman's head scared him more than asking her out. He finally reached the table, and so did Tess, who came over to give her a small mug and pour her a cup of watery coffee. Eric stood to the side as Tess gave the woman her coffee, trying to stay out of sight until the moment was right. He heard the same silky voice before asking, "Where's the cream and sugar?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. I'll have that right out to you," Tess said.

A woman who knows what she wants, Eric thought. I like that.

Tess stepped away and rushed behind the counter, and Eric took over her position by the booth of the woman. He finally stepped around the booth and saw the top of the woman's head, her face buried in her phone. "Hi."

"Thanks," the woman said without breaking eye contact with her phone and reached out for the cream and sugar that she thought he had delivered.

When her delicate hand only grabbed the air, she looked up from her phone, first at the table, and then up at Eric.

"How are you?" he asked with a smile.

"I'm not buying anything," she said, returning her intense eyes to her smartphone.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm not actually selling anything, I was wondering--"

"Listen, your friend already tried, and he told me that you were really nice and that you're 'too precious to deny,' but I'm passing through and I don't need this right now. My aunt just died, and unfortunately she picked this place to die in."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Eric didn't know what to do. He looked back at John, in a panic, and held two thumbs way up and smiled. Eric shook his head, and John lifted his thumbs higher, as if his hand gesture was going to improve the situation by being higher in the air. It struck Eric that John had lied to him about trying to ask this woman out and that he

had really gone over to try to set him up for victory.

“Okay,” she responded, looking at him with annoyance.

“Uh, what,” Eric cleared his throat. “What’s your name?”

“Can you do me a favor?” the woman asked.

“Anything,” Eric said, immediately regretting such a personal answer to someone who clearly wanted to remain strangers. She noticed it too, and paused, holding eye contact with him and not knowing if he was all there.

“Can you, please, can you just, for me, walk away. Can you do that? Can you go away?” She made a pushing motion with her hands, as if to shoo him. “Go away. Walk away from me, please.”

Her condescending tone compounded the embarrassment of Tess having walked up at that moment to deliver the woman’s cream and sugar.

“Can I get you anything else?” Tess asked, her gaze cautiously shifting between the annoyed woman and Eric.

“The check.”

Tess walked away without saying anything, and Eric followed suit, managing to eke out a meager, “Bye,” before lifting his feet, which had become flesh cinder blocks attached to his ankles, and walked back to John’s booth.

He stared at the floor, even after sitting back in the booth with John. “So, when’s your date?”

“I’m not ready for a girlfriend,” Eric said.

“She play hard to get? Easy, what you do is you get your wallet out, and you...”

“John. Just stop.”

They sat in silence; John forked at his apple pie, but never took a bite, and Eric relived the worst moment of his romantic life in technicolor, over and over.

“Want some more coffee before you go?” Tess’s tone was different than it was before, more comforting and solemn than upbeat. Eric shook his head, and smiled for the first time all day when Tess said, “Saw your strikeout over there.”

“Sorry you had to see that,” Eric said. “Hopefully it won’t take too much counseling to make you forget.”

Tess laughed. “Well, if you want to talk about it, I get off around three today.”

Eric dropped his smile and stared at her. “Really?”

She laughed again and said, “Yeah.”

After dropping the check off, Tess walked away beaming, and Eric still stared at her. John slapped him hard on the shoulder.

“See,” John whispered. “I told you.”

Eric shook his head with a smile and saw that the bill was just over ten dollars. He left a twenty on the table, and John followed him out of their booth and into the bright sun.