

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

By

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INT. DINER - MORNING

A HANDFUL OF PATRONS are scattered around on the booths and stools. BARB, 40s, the bored-looking waitress, dries coffee mugs behind the counter. The place is quiet, dozy.

The entrance bell jingles as MEGAN, 18, attractive and friendly, steps in off the street, the door swinging shut behind her.

She scans the place, clearly looking for something.

Barb looks up from her mug.

BARB  
Can I help you, hon?

Megan continues to scan.

MEGAN  
No thanks, I'm...

She spots what she's looking for - the top of a BLACK BERET at the far booth, facing away from her.

She narrows her eyes.

MEGAN (CONTD.)  
...fine.

She advances down the diner. Barb goes back to her drying.

INT. DINER - REAR - CONTINUOUS

Megan reaches the booth. She stops, leans round to look the beret-wearer in the face.

MEGAN  
(gently)  
Eric?

ERIC, 18, cute but not remarkable, slowly raises his head to look at her. He's dressed as a stereotypical Bohemian - silk scarf, white shirt and waistcoat, and of course the beret.

ERIC  
Ah, Megan. You came. That's great.  
That's so great. Please, sit.

His voice has a dreamy, drawling quality. It's nauseating.

He gestures to the seat opposite him. Tentatively, Megan slides into it.

ERIC (CONTD.)

So how are you? Are you good?

MEGAN

Yeah, I'm fine...what's going on Eric? We haven't spoken in like, a week. Where have you been? And why are you wearing that dumb hat?

ERIC

It's called a beret, Megan. A soft round cap made of felt, usually associated with France, and the trademark of hipsters, intellectuals, Bohemians and Beatniks of any nationality.

MEGAN

You sound like you're quoting Wikipedia.

His mouth twitches. Busted.

ERIC

Err...

MEGAN

And your hat looks stupid.

ERIC

It does not!

The aloof-y dreaminess slips for a moment. Megan holds her hands up.

MEGAN

Okay, touchy about the hat. But seriously, where have you been? We're supposed to be a couple, you can't just inexplicably drop off the radar.

ERIC

I understand that, Megan, and I apologize. But I've spent the past week doing something...incredible. Something wonderful. Something life-changing.

MEGAN

And that is...?

ERIC  
(with pride)  
Finding myself.

Megan groans, rolls her eyes.

MEGAN  
Oh God, not this again...

ERIC  
I found myself, Megan. I looked,  
and I found myself. It was like,  
"There you are!"

Eric points at himself with his left hand.

ERIC (CONTD.)  
"Yes! Here I am!"

Eric waves to his left hand with his right. Megan stares at him, completely bemused.

ERIC (CONTD.)  
It was such an amazing moment, a  
moment of complete realization. I  
finally know what I was born to be.  
Isn't that great?

MEGAN  
Yeah, terrific.

A moment of silence.

Eric just smiles at Megan, blissfully happy.

BARB (O.S.)  
So what'll it be?

Megan turns her head. Barb stands next to the table,  
notebook in hand, pen poised.

MEGAN  
Uh, I'm okay thanks.

BARB  
Gotta buy something, hon. It's the  
rules.

MEGAN  
Fine...I'll have a lemonade.

BARB  
(writing it down)  
Coming right up.

Barb turns and goes.

Megan looks back at Eric, who is still just smiling at her.  
She raises an eyebrow.

MEGAN  
So...what were you born to be?

Eric's smile widens.

ERIC  
A writer.

Megan blinks.

MEGAN  
A writer?

ERIC  
Yes.

His happiness and satisfaction are truly disturbing.

Megan speaks gingerly, as if reasoning with a insane person.

MEGAN  
Eric, you're really, really bad at  
writing. You can't even spell.

ERIC  
So? They have spell-checkers now.  
That's the beauty of modern  
technology - you don't have to be  
good at something to be successful  
at it. Look at Kesha.

MEGAN  
Okay, point taken, but I mean you  
have no talent. None whatsoever.  
You never have - I sat next to you  
in English, remember, and you can't  
even write a decent book report.  
You don't get syntax, tone,  
grammar, register...look at this  
note you sent me.

She puts her handbag on the table, reaches in and pulls out  
a folded piece of paper, opens it up.

MEGAN

(reading)

"Megan, my darling. Meet me at Lou's Cafe at ten o'clock, tomorrow. It is of the utmost importance" - it's a 'c' in 'importance', by the way - "that I see you forthwithly. Yours, Eric."

ERIC

Your point being?

MEGAN

Well, for a start, there's no such word as 'forthwithly'. It's 'forthwith'. But besides that...who do you think you are, Heathcliff?

Eric thinks for a moment.

ERIC

Is that the guy who plays Harry Potter?

Megan slaps a hand against her forehead.

MEGAN

That's Radcliffe, moron. Daniel Radcliffe. Heathcliff? Emily Bronte? 'Wuthering Heights'?

Eric looks at her blankly. Megan sighs.

MEGAN (CONTD.)

Okay, for a wannabe genius-writer, you're seriously under-read. But setting your ignorance aside for a moment - you write like you're in a gothic romance. Only, you do it badly. You sound pretenious, self-important, and stupid. In short, even this note sucks.

Eric waves a hand dismissively.

ERIC

None of that matters, Megan. None of it. I have things to say to the world, things they need to hear. There are messages of love and beauty in everything I write, and those messages aren't affected by...by misplaced commas or incorrectly-used apostrophes!

MEGAN

Do you even know what an apostrophe is?

ERIC

(ignoring her)

I'm going to change the world! I'm going to change the world with my art. I'm gonna wipe out poverty, disease, suffering...I'm going to lead humanity out of the Dark Ages and into a better time of truth, honesty, and...betterness. In the future, when people talk about the beginning of the twenty-first century, they'll remember my name. I'll live on in my masterpieces, and a thousand years from now, kids will be writing book reports about me. It's my destiny, the thing I was born for. And now I know that. Isn't it just the most fantastic thing you ever heard?

He looks at her intently, beaming.

MEGAN

So is that it?

ERIC

Huh?

MEGAN

You dragged me all the way down here just so you could tell me you're going to be the literary version of Bono?

ERIC

Oh no, not just for that. I asked you to come so I could tell you, face to face, that I'm breaking up with you.

She didn't see THAT coming.

MEGAN

Ex-cuse me?

ERIC

I'm breaking up with you. I need some tragedy, you see.

MEGAN

Tragedy.

ERIC

Yes, some tragedy.

MEGAN

You need some tragedy.

ERIC

Or else I'll never be a great writer.

MEGAN

(voice rising)

Eric, what the HELL --

BARB (O.S.)

Here's your lemonade.

Megan looks up. Barb stands with a glass of lemonade on a tray. Megan takes a deep breath, smiles at her.

MEGAN

Thanks.

Barb sets it down on the table.

BARB

No problem. You just yell if you want anything else.

She leaves again.

Megan turns back to Eric.

MEGAN

Eric, what the hell are you talking about?

He takes her hand, holds it. Megan is too stunned to object.

ERIC

Megan, Megan, Megan. Every writer needs tragedy. Otherwise, what are they supposed to write about? Now, we've been together what, a year? And it's been fun. But being a writer is my calling, and after thinking it through, I've decided I'm willing to sacrifice our relationship for that. I really hope you understand.

Megan looks down at her hand in his.

Slowly, she withdraws it. She looks back up at him.

MEGAN  
(quietly)  
You know what I think, Eric?

ERIC  
What?

MEGAN  
I think you need to grow up.

His aloof-y dreaminess flickers once more.

ERIC  
Excuse me?

MEGAN  
You heard me. Grow up. Jeez, I can't believe this! I honestly cannot believe you're doing this to me again. And I can't believe I haven't learned my lesson yet. Every few months you drag me down here to tell me all about your latest epiphany and why it means we can't be together, and every time I sit here and listen to it!

ERIC  
I think you're exaggerating just a teensy little bit...

MEGAN  
No! That's the worst part - I'm really not! Let's cast our minds back, shall we? Last year there was the whole 'soldier' thing...

INT. DINER - FLASHBACK

Megan and Eric sit in exactly the same places, except this time Eric wears full ARMY COMBAT UNIFORM. He looks across at her with a serious expression.

MEGAN (V.O., CONTD.)  
...you said you were going off to fight in Afghanistan, and you didn't want me to be 'another army-wife just waiting for the phone to ring'.

PRESENT DAY

MEGAN (CONTD.)

You'd completely suck at desert warfare, by the way - you're a total wimp, you hate sand, and you burn ridiculously easily.

Eric frowns. Megan plows on.

MEGAN (CONTD.)

And then that summer you saw the trailer for that new Johnny Depp film and suddenly you were going to be the next John Dillinger...

FLASHBACK

This time Eric wears the costume of a TYPICAL 1930s GANGSTER - trilby, dark pinstripe suit, dark overcoat.

A fat, unlit cigar sits between his lips.

MEGAN (V.O., CONTD.)

...you were gonna make your fortune robbing banks, but 'I shouldn't have to join you in living the dangerous life of a fugitive'.

PRESENT DAY

MEGAN (CONTD.)

How did the bank-robbing thing go, by the way? You a millionaire yet?

Eric doesn't have a reply.

MEGAN (CONTD.)

Oh yeah, and then there was your NASCAR phase.

FLASHBACK

Eric sits in FULL RACING DRIVER OVERALLS. A helmet sits on the table.

MEGAN (V.O., CONTD.)

You were gonna be the best in the world, despite the fact that you scream like a little girl every

(MORE)

MEGAN (V.O., CONTD.) (cont'd)  
time your mom goes over fifty, and  
you've never actually driven a car  
in your entire life.

The other side of the table, a differently-dressed Megan  
just stares at him.

PRESENT DAY

MEGAN (CONTD.)  
What I don't get is, how do you  
even find all those outfits?

ERIC  
I know the guy down at the fancy  
dress shop. He lets me borrow  
stuff...

MEGAN  
You know who you're like? You're  
like Mr. Toad out of 'Wind in the  
Willows'. You get hooked on  
something, totally obsess over it  
for a while, and then get bored and  
move on. I don't hear from you for  
like, a month, and then you just  
reappear and act like nothing  
happened. It's so stupid. At first  
I thought it was cute. Then I  
thought it was mildly irritating.  
Now it's just ridiculous.

She looks at him as if she's seeing him clearly for the  
first time.

MEGAN (CONTD.)  
I have no idea why I keep taking  
you back. And you know what? This  
time, I'm not gonna. Because maybe  
if I finally dump you, you'll  
finally realise that you're just  
Eric Williams, born and raised in  
Hackensack, New Jersey, just a  
regular high-school kid like the  
rest of us. And that's it. You're  
not a soldier, or a gangster, or a  
racing driver, and you're  
definitely not a writer. You're a  
nothing, "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere"  
- that's Fitzgerald, by the way, a  
proper writer. You're just a waste  
of time I could do without.

She stops, just glares at him. Eric smiles warmly, patient and understanding.

ERIC  
Are you done?

MEGAN  
Actually, no. One last thing. I think I have an idea for your first 'masterpiece'. Wanna hear it?

She picks up her glass and THROWS HER LEMONADE over Eric. He GASPS as the cold liquid soaks his face and clothes.

Megan slides out of the booth, stands up, grabs her bag.

MEGAN (CONTD.)  
A sad, pathetic loser gets dumped by his way too patient, could-do-better girlfriend. Yeah, that sounds good to me. You need tragedy, J.K. Rowling? Just go look in a mirror.

Eric just stares at her, incredulous.

A drop of lemonade falls from his nose. Megan shakes her head, turns to leave.

MEGAN (CONTD.)  
So long, Eric.

She walks away.

INT. DINER - FRONT - CONTINUOUS

Megan marches towards the door.

Barb smiles to herself as she passes, glancing up from her mug-drying.

With a jingle of the bell, Megan exits.

INT. DINER - REAR - CONTINUOUS

Eric remains motionless as the door swings shut.

Eventually he reaches up, removes the wet beret from his head. He looks down at his soaked shirt, pulls off his sodden scarf.

When he speaks, he's no longer mellow, dreamy and aloof.  
He's just pissed off.

ERIC

(calling out)

Can I get some napkins, please?

(beat)

Now?!

And on the image of him sitting there, dressed like a  
jackass, wet, humbled and alone, we...

FADE OUT