

Chocolate Milk Day

by Deuce Black

Many people may judge him for this, and in fact many did, but Eugene didn't care. His favorite restaurant of all time was Texas Roadhouse, and no one was going to change that fact. *The food isn't that good, they would say. It's way too expensive for what you get.* "Oh well," Eugene would say to them. "I guess you just don't see its charm like I do." He didn't so much care for the baked potatoes, or the ribs, or even the flagship sirloin steak. He mostly just went there for casual peoplewatching, and there were certainly some interesting subjects. The contrasting pairs were always his favorites. Once, there had been an enormously tall woman who had to angle her neck so as not to hit the ceiling with the crown of her head. Eating across from her was another woman whose feet could not reach even halfway from the seat to the floor. Eugene liked to think about these occasions, as the sheer display of extremes could make him chuckle at times.

He liked to come in shortly before closing time and shortly after a nap. In truth, he was obligated on most days. Sure, late night dinnergoers tended to be some of the most unique characters, and that was always fun for him, but really he came so late and gorged himself on white rolls and Coca Cola in anticipation of his roommate getting off from her shift there. They shared a car, and Eugene always started class partway through her shift. To solve the issue, he dropped Miranda off at work when she was finished with her classes every day, a bit after noon, then took the car back to campus for his own classes and picked her up when she got off at the end of the night. He never knew how she got up so early for classes. He dreaded even having any as early as eleven, let alone half past seven as she did. He shuddered at the thought, even knowing that she got far better sleep than he did on most nights.

His waiter that evening had been new. He wore a name tag that read 'Romano' and he didn't know about Eugene's habit of coming in near closing time. There was obvious confusion on his face when he received the order of "Just some rolls and a Coke, please," especially it being so late for a glass of caffeine-ridden bubbly delight. After Eugene's first refill of the complimentary rolls and second refill of Coke, he saw Romano talking to the restaurant manager. He did not want to stare directly, so instead he studied their faces in the reflection of the window and imagined what they would be saying, about how "This guy hasn't ordered anything more than a drink, should I ask him to leave?" Then the manager would respond with something like, "Ah, he's a regular, just here to pick up the dishwasher after her shift, leave him be," and Romano would try to rebut as the manager walked away, to no avail.

Another fifteen minutes or so passed, along with a third Coke refill that he'd barely touched, before Eugene finally began to hear someone whistling *Closing Time*. It was then that he called Romano over and asked for the check. He paid his due of two dollars and seventy-four cents in exact change, and left a two dollar tip for Romano's patience as he rose to meet Miranda at the kitchen door. The door swung open quickly as he reached out to grab it, and he had to jump back so as not to get hit. Through the door, he could smell the usual steak and potatoes, but also a much sweeter, much closer aroma of lilies, peaches, and bliss – *Fleur Nouveau*, as she called it. He loved that smell, as it signified the end of his day of working and studying and the beginning of an evening of something closer to relaxing.

"Oh! Hey Gene!" Miranda exclaimed, smirking.

"Please don't," he replied.

"Don't what?"

“Don’t sing the –”

Miranda interrupted him with a loud and proud “Closing Time” chorus, informing the entire restaurant who her ride home was, as if she had a choice. She continued singing as they walked out the front door, and all the way across the parking lot to their car. Eugene didn’t actually mind, he just found it funny when she thought she was jokingly annoying him. As he unlocked the used Elantra from across the lane of parking spots, Miranda finished the chorus. “*You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay* – ah! That reminds me. I’m driving tonight.”

He tossed her the keys. “What for? We always go to the same place, might as well keep up the monotonous robot routine, right?”

“You don’t even know what you’re in for, do you? Do you know what today is?”

Eugene thought for a moment as they opened their respective doors and got into the car. “I didn’t miss International Talk like a Pirate day, did I?” She shook her head with a chuckle as she started the car. “Hmm... It can’t be your birthday, that’s tomorrow,” he said, earning another giggle and knowing full well that her birthday wasn’t for another four months and twelve days. “Ah, shit, is it my birthday?”

Miranda let out a roaring laugh as she pulled the car out of the parking lot and onto Dorset street, in the opposite direction of the university campus. She held up an opaque plastic grocery bag with condensation on the outside and two vaguely brown cylinders on the inside. “I’ve had these in the break room fridge since this morning. Don’t tell me you forgot!” He had. It was Chocolate Milk Day, and he felt foolish for not remembering. In his defense, though, his days tended to blur together without much of a seam. On occasion, he would get halfway to the university on a Saturday before realizing he had two days before his next class.

Without ever turning off of Dorset, they pulled into the parking lot of their old middle school as Miranda let out a yawn, clearly extending her conscious hours for this express purpose. They got out of the car and walked toward the picnic tables outside the school's cafeteria. Eugene took out his phone and turned its flashlight on, and began searching the ground near the building. To his surprise, he found nothing. "Hey, they finally filled it in!" he called.

"No way," Miranda responded in tired disbelief, following his voice to check the validity of his claim. Near the cafeteria's exit, there was a rough ellipse of concrete that was a slightly different shade from the rest, covered on its edges by a thin layer of tar. Where once a small crater had been, just large enough for a young Eugene to fit his foot in and trip, there now was just a vague, blurry shape embedded in the ground. Eugene stood up and took a few steps back, letting the scene replay in his mind.

It was exactly nine years prior. It was a Wednesday, since he remembered having pizza on his lunch tray, right next to his open bottle of chocolate milk. He had just left an English class and gotten his mind off of prepositions, readying himself for the just-mediocre square pizza and a little bit of time to relax. He had been on his way out to a table where his friends usually sat on nice early-autumn days such as that one, when his foot sank into that exact pothole, sending his face straight into the pavement and his lunch tray off at a skew. His chocolate milk had splashed all over the back of a girl at one of the outdoor picnic tables. As he stood up in pain, his hands, knees, and face bloodied, he had expected the girl to be yelling at him about how he'd ruined her favorite shirt or something, but instead she offered a hand. "Nice one!" she had said, sarcastic even back then. "Your face looks like it slid across a cheese grater! Wanna go to the nurse?"

Miranda thrust a bottle of chocolate milk into his hands and sat at one of the picnic tables, snapping him back to reality. He sat down next to her, twisted it open and took a sip, but quickly

decided he would save it for later after having already had two glasses of soda that night, and closed the bottle back up. A blunt jab struck Eugene's side as he sat his bottle down on the table, for which Miranda quickly apologized. "Oh, sorry! I can't seem to get this stupid cap off."

Eugene rolled his eyes. "Do I have to do everything for you?" he joked, taking her bottle and effortlessly opening it. She thanked him and took it back, downing half of it without taking a breath. He looked up at the night sky through the dead branches of the tree above them, and noticed the surprisingly biting chill for how early in the season it was. Absentmindedly, he took another sip of his chocolate milk.

"Do you remember," Miranda started, cut off by a yawn, "when we left the nurse's office on the first Chocolate Milk Day? When I asked you where you were going, and you just said, 'Oh, it's ok, it's definitely not where you're going'?"

"Ah. Little did I know, right?" he responded.

She nodded. "Mhm. That stupid math class was so much more fun once I knew you were there." Then, she took a deep breath with a long exhale, stretched her arms out upward, and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I still can't believe you finally caved and let me call you Gene. And it only took about a year. Does it still make you feel like an old man?"

Eugene smiled and gave her a quick, one-armed hug. "Not so much, since now I practically am one."

"As if."

"Aren't we all at least ten percent old man, on the inside?" They both chuckled softly.

Miranda sighed, and looked up at him. "Thanks for existing, Gene."

He smiled. “Any time. You too.” They sat there for quite a while in silence, Miranda occasionally drinking from her bottle of chocolate milk and Eugene trying to refrain. Once she finished drinking, he knew what would come shortly after as her sleep schedule caught up to her, so he patted her shoulder and suggested they go home before she fell asleep. He walked her to the passenger’s seat of the car, got in the other side, and started on their way home back toward the university, quickly passing Texas Roadhouse once again. The drive home was pleasantly silent. Eugene smiled gently most of the way, even knowing he would have to half-carry her up multiple flights of stairs when they got back, and he did just that. He parked the car outside their building and opened the passenger door to wake her. He secured one of her arms around his shoulder, and shut the door with his leg. It took a good few minutes, but he managed to help her stumble tiredly up two flights of stairs. Once they were inside, he helped her take her jacket off so she wouldn’t end up sleeping on a zipper, and she half-consciously thanked him for his help as he laid her on her bed.

No light switches had been touched since they got home, and Eugene was going to leave it that way. He sat down on the couch in their apartment’s living room and sighed, exhausted but not sleepy, despite the hour. They had been at the school for far longer than he had anticipated. He twisted his head to the right, observing the cloudy night as the moon faded in and out of view. The old couch suffered a deformation to the shape of his legs, even after he stood up from his short-lived rest to place his milk bottle in the refrigerator. While staring into the cold brightness of the interior of his fridge, Eugene grabbed his remaining leftover spaghetti from two nights prior and decided to eat it cold, out on the balcony. It was unusually chilly for a September day in Vermont, and he was greeted with that chill as soon as he opened the sliding glass door.

The waxing gibbous shone down from directly above him, illuminating the tops of street lights that never got much attention. The first bite of cold marinara sent a chill down his spine. He decided it would be a bit before he took a second one and set it down on the ground as he sat back in the porch's hammock. The cicadas' chirping was quieter than it had been lately, and it settled at a volume just noticeable enough to be soothing. In that moment, Eugene thought he might actually get some sleep that night. He closed his eyes and wondered at the marvel of the cicada chirps, slowly drifting in and out of consciousness for a long while, before deciding his efforts were futile as usual and once again opening his eyes to take in the darkened scenery. His eastward gaze could no longer spot the moon, as during his tired trials it had drifted farther behind him.

For an amount of time unknown to him, Eugene stared out over his balcony's guardrail at nothing in particular, taking the occasional break for a bite of cold spaghetti, before a loud thump very close behind him made him nearly jump out of the hammock. He turned his head quickly to search for his assailant, but he only found the real reason he liked Texas Roadhouse so much: a still-sleeping, open-mouthed Miranda on the inside of the sliding glass door. "Jesus," he muttered. "You've gotta stop doing that." She fumbled with the handle, knocking her hand against the glass once more. Eugene let out a long exhale before standing up from the hammock to open the door for her.

A sliding hiss came from the edges of the door as it parted for the two of them, letting the sweet leftover scent of Fleur Nouveau flood onto the balcony. Miranda took a stumbled step toward him, nearly tripping on the door frame, but he steadied her gently so as not to wake her or let her fall. He guided her slowly around the hammock, moved his plate of unappetizing pasta out of her way, and put some light pressure on her shoulders to suggest she sit. She lowered

herself onto the ill-supported fabric of the hammock, Eugene's hand still on her back steadying her the whole way. Just as the tops of the street lights were shown off that night, so too was the glister in Miranda's raven black hair. Eugene sat down with her, still admiring the strong reflection of the ambient night lights off of the top of her head. He took off his jacket and lightly draped it around her shoulders, reaching across her back to hold it in place.

They sat there in the cool dark, Eugene's vision occasionally darkening as he slipped in and out of an uncontrolled, unrefreshing rest. He had decided not to leave or wake her for the night for fear of shocking her back to consciousness. Regardless, his sleep habits would not be altered. He would wait for the sunrise as he always did, taking small naps for less than half an hour at a time, and he would wake her when she would need to get ready for class. He wouldn't have to wait long; the horizon in front of him had already begun to exude a purple-pink glow. Sleeping Miranda's head drooped onto his shoulder as the world's source of life and warmth rose over the distant valley, slowly overriding the low glow of the stars that had brought the tops of the street lamps to life. Among clouds of deep lavender and a sky of honey, holding Miranda next to him and still catching whiffs of lilies, peaches, and bliss, Eugene was content, and a warm smile overtook his entire being.