

Five Minutes in Purgatory

By Abigail Miles

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Student writing that is better than the crowd it runs with. The voice is foxy, funny, ironic and cool, the narrative is smartly paced and the prose sorta Erma Bombeck while thankfully (and we mean this) avoiding the trap of ‘girl talk’ (like, you know, um I mean, so yeah...)—something you usually don’t find at this level. There are the little bumps and grinds here and there that are a part of the emerging writer’s locus but the big picture works and it works well. The ending bites hard because the final couple of sentences really rock. And that, people of the Universe, is all we give a crap about.*

Quote: The most important was the way his eyeliner-covered eyes crinkled in concern when they, too, probably thought that I was about to drop dead right there in the line for coffee and biscuits. Also the way his shirt sleeves were rolled up enough to see something that looked like it might have been the astrological symbol for Sagittarius inked into the oh-so-tanned skin of his bicep. Also those biceps, in general. Man. I would marry those biceps all by themselves.

(Font size is author’s own.)

Five Minutes in Purgatory

They said it couldn’t be done, but that’s because they have an imagination the size of a pecan and no comprehension of the meaning of optimism. They said I couldn’t make a boy fall in love with me through sheer force of will, and I told them to sit back on their discounted maroon couch from HomeGoods and watch me.

They, of course, were my parents, who had courted for seven years back in the era where courting was the trend and not an outdated practice associated with taking a stroll through a nice

Victorian park with a parasol on your shoulder and a gloved hand on your beloved's arm. My mother and father had also been set up by their own parents at a young age, and I grew up my whole life being told that if I hadn't secured a man by the time I turned twenty five that I would wind up being chucked into an arranged marriage with their friend Marge's anemic son Luther who smelled perpetually of cornflakes and had the lifelong ambition of holding the world's largest collection of quarters. I think they meant it part in jest, but at least a smidgeon of their intention must have been sincere, and that threat hung like a looming noose around my neck for the first twenty five years of my life.

Flash forward to year twenty four, when the pressure was really and truly on for the first time. Actually, scratch that. The pressure was on in high school when peers were buying promise rings for each other, and then junior year of college when everyone was getting engaged to their college sweethearts, and then a year after graduation when I attended seventeen different weddings within six months.

The conversation happened at Christmas that year, where my parents put on their concerned faces and stared me down like the dynamic duo they were and asked me when I was going to start getting serious about my life. As if having a job and a 401k and dental insurance wasn't enough to consider myself serious about life. No, because apparently being serious meant having a boyfriend-- or, better yet, a husband. And as of yet the only "boyfriend" I had ever had was Leroy Thompson in the second grade when he held my hand during recess for a week, before dumping me for Veronica Marie, who was the envy of every other eight year old on the playground because she could dance a proper hand-jive if you started playing anything at all from *Grease*.

So anyway, my parents asked me the question, and they asked why I didn't try to put myself out there more, and then I looked back at both of them with their smug little wedding rings wrapped around their mocking fourth fingers, and I smirked and said in a voice that was a hundred times more confident than it had any right to be that I could make a boy fall in love with me in five minutes if I tried, there just hadn't been anyone yet worth trying for. Then they had laughed, in that pseudo polite way where you can tell they are not-so-secretly judging you behind their strained smiles, and they had told me that if that were true then I would have secured a man years ago.

Well. I mean, fair enough, but also, I couldn't let that stand. And I really couldn't let my mom continue on with the train of thought she began barraging down right after when she brought up Marge's son Luther and his quarters again immediately after I had made my grand declaration, as if I really never would be able to find anyone, and Luther would forever and always be the best I could do. The most secure option. And that just could not stand.

Attempt #1: Barista Boy with the dreadlocks and eyebrow piercing that made me want to get a needle shoved through my own forehead to match:

Basically, the hottest guy I've ever seen asked me what kind of coffee I wanted, and I blacked out so hard that the person behind me in line thought I was about to faint and asked if I needed a cup of water. I decided Barista Boy was a good enough place to start in my pursuit of relational happiness.

If we are being completely honest here, I know he was definitely wearing a name tag, and I definitely made a point to read it, but then the whole black out thing happened, and now for the life of me I cannot remember what that name tag read. Not that it matters anyway-- his name was

the least important part about him. The most important was the way his eyeliner-covered eyes crinkled in concern when they, too, probably thought that I was about to drop dead right there in the line for coffee and biscuits. Also the way his shirt sleeves were rolled up enough to see something that looked like it might have been the astrological symbol for Sagittarius inked into the oh-so-tanned skin of his bicep. Also those biceps, in general. Man. I would marry those biceps all by themselves.

So yeah, make him fall in love with me, I thought to myself. Five minutes. Which is great in theory and all, except if I had actually spent five minutes at that counter ordering-slash-seducing, I think the people behind me in line would have gone into full on riot mode, pitchforks and all, because let's face it. Five minutes in life is barely enough time to blink, but in the line for coffee? You could grow up, get married, have four kids, retire, live for ten years in Honolulu, and then die a peaceful death at the age of eighty nine in those five minutes. So I had to be strategic. Use all of my seconds to their highest advantage.

"Uhhh," is the brilliant opening I opted for, which was then followed by ten full seconds of complete silence, after which I pointed randomly at a pastry in the display case and mumbled something about how gluten will be the death of all of us. Mercifully, I don't think Barista Boy caught that last bit. He handed me my croissant and asked for two bucks, gave me my receipt, and then looked expectantly behind me for the next customer. Except-- and here's the kicker-- I did not move. I stood there, like a loon, staring at him and waiting for him to realize that I was the girl of his dreams, just as I had already decided he was the boy of mine. Well, here's the city for you, because then the man behind me-- the same one who had offered me a cup of water two minutes before, I might add-- shoved me to the side like a pestering fly that was in his way, and proceeded to order a large double espresso with a splash of almond milk and a shot of

peppermint syrup, three pumps of caramel and a dash of artificial sweetener. Hold the whipped cream. Well, maybe not all of it.

I left that coffee shop with one stale croissant, no coffee, and no love of my life. But hey, at least I got the croissant, I thought as I bit into it and nearly chipped a tooth.

Attempt #2: My Dentist, who is easily at least ten years older than me, but has the most beautiful smile you could imagine, and is an excellent conversationalist:

I didn't actually chip a tooth on the stale croissant from Barista Boy, but I did have an aching pain in my mouth that wouldn't go away, so I decided to pay my dentist a visit. For the first time since college. Don't worry about it.

I promise you, I did not realize that he was married. They have to take their rings off to put on those stretchy gloves that smell like baby power, and he just seemed so *young, so free*, and so I (incorrectly) assumed that he was. Pro tip kids: never assume. You know what it makes out of you (u) and me?

But also, he was *so* friendly. From the moment I walked in until I walked out, I genuinely don't think he stopped smiling. It was almost unnerving, but also way too attractive for my own good. I swooned, right there in the dentist lobby, when he came out to bring me back. He laid me back into a turquoise plastic-covered chair and gazed into my eyes and asked me about my life, which no one had done in far too long. And so I opened up to him, and I told him about my overbearing parents and my mind numbing job and my lack of friends, and he *understood*. It was a beautiful time.

Except that then he turned to look at the screen that had the x-rays of my mouth displayed, and his smile flickered for the first and only time that I was in that office, and he

turned back to me and informed me in a bright and chipper voice that I had five cavities that needed immediate filling.

Well, at least I have insurance.

I don't remember much else after that. There was a lot of anesthesia and mouth numbing and pointy needles that I'd rather not recall, if I'm being honest. I left the office some hours later with a face that felt like melted concrete and a brain that was having difficulty remembering which door was the exit. But My Dentist walked me out, and it felt nice, to be cared for like that, until it all came crashing down like Jenga blocks when his receptionist called out and said that his wife had dropped off his lunch.

Attempt #3: Guy Next To Me On the Bus who offered me his seat and smelled like something woody and wore flannel that would make Davy Crocket jealous:

After I left the dentist office with a sore mouth and decimated pride, I decided I probably wasn't in quite the right mindset to drive home, and so I chose the bus instead.

I hate the bus. It's always so full of too many people heading from who-knows-where going to who-cares-where, and they always have grocery bags full of weird things like water bottles covered in moss or sheets with mysterious stains on them, and everyone on the bus always glares suspiciously at all the other bus-riders, as though trying to determine which one is the best suspect for an open murder case.

When I got on my bus, it was already nearly full to the brim, and of course there weren't any seats left, so I reached up and grabbed one of the bars that hung down from the ceiling, even though it was clear I was at least five inches too short to effectively do so. The first jolt of the bus beginning to surge forward sent me sprawled out on the decrepit floor of the bus, clinging to

my aching jaw after the impact made my teeth clang together. I opted to stay seated on the floor until the bus stopped again, figuring it was probably the safer option over attempting to regain balance on my feet while the bus driver wove us between traffic and around turns that I don't remember ever being so sharp in the past.

Once we stopped, and I struggled back up to a standing position, I saw a man in the seat next to where I stood getting up to his feet, and he gestured down to the space he had just vacated. "You can sit here," he said to me, and if my eyes didn't immediately morph into hearts in that instant then I must not know anything about love, because that was hands down the most romantic gesture that has ever been directed toward me.

He looked strong, and outdoorsy, like maybe he enjoyed camping on the weekends, or maybe he had grown up in a cabin in the mountains. But not a nice cabin that tourists pay hundreds of dollars an hour to sleep in. One of those ramshackle cabins that have probably been there since the Civil War, that look like they could cave in at any second, but are all the more fun for the uncertainty.

I wanted to say something to him-- to thank him for giving me his chair, or ask him where he was from, or try to tell him that I thought he smelled spectacular-- but two issues arose, the first of which being that I realized I could not speak. My jaw was nearly swollen shut, and when I tried to open my mouth to mutter out something like appreciation for the seat, all that came out were a series of m's and n's that together probably sounded something like:

"Mnmnmnmnmn."

The second problem was that twenty seconds after he gave me his seat, the gorgeous, flannel-wearing man exited the bus without even a backwards glance at the damsel he had saved. Blech. Men.

After attempts at seducing men one through three all failed, I went home and slept for two days straight, which gave both my mouth and my pride some space and time to heal and recuperate. I was lying on the couch, watching reruns of some crime show that my dad was always going on about, and holding a frozen pack of brussels sprouts up to my chin, when I heard a knock on my door.

I was fully prepared for it to be my mom or my dad, or maybe the UPS man delivering some package I had forgotten I had ordered weeks before, or a neighbor coming to complain that my television was too loud, and could you turn it down a little please? I was in no way ready to open my door to the squinty-eyed face of one Luther-son-of-Marge.

He looked just about as awkward as I felt in that moment, and it was ten long foot-shuffling seconds before he held up a box that I hadn't realized was in his hands.

“Mother sent me over with soup. She said you might need it.”

I stared at the container of soup in his hands and then back up at his face, that still looked more than a little uncomfortable to be there in the hallway outside my apartment's door, and then I stepped back to let him in. He let out a huge breath and came inside looking marginally more content, like it was the notion that I may have banished him from my presence that had been the cause for all his concerns in life. He set the soup on the counter and then looked around my apartment as though it was a museum and he was a curator. I gestured for him to sit down on my worn, gray couch while I went to heat up my soup.

When the soup was good and warm and steaming I came over and sat down facing him, and we stared at each other across the six feet between us for a few silent, awkward minutes. Except, I realized after the fact, it wasn't actually as awkward as I would have expected it to be.

And soon enough Luther started talking while I ate, going on about how it hadn't rained this much since the flood of '02 and about how he heard that so-and-so was running for Congress this year and about how his dog, Petunia, had just given birth to a litter of puppies. I listened, and I realized that Luther was actually more interesting than I had ever given him credit for. And his face wasn't all that awful-- it was actually a little cute, in an I-could-almost-be-a-Picasso type of way. And his cornflakes scent was really more like frosted flakes. I liked frosted flakes.

So an hour after he arrived with my bowl of soup Luther left, and as I closed the door behind him I couldn't help the smile that tried to rise to my lips, before I remembered that my face was too swollen to actually smile. But it doesn't change the fact that I wanted to.

And the craziest part? I think that after he left he was probably smiling, too. So yeah, maybe it didn't take five minutes, and maybe he wasn't exactly the person I'd had in mind when I set out to make a boy fall in love with me, but turns out, Luther isn't that bad. Or at least, this is what my drugged-up brain told myself when I went to lie down in my bed half an hour later, and my dreams veered in the direction of me and Luther, ten years down the road, counting coins out with our four year old daughter who had his pasty complexion and my bad habit of making impulsive life decisions. But I was happy in the dream, at least. So I guess there's that.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *"Five Minutes in Purgatory" was contrived largely in response to my own tendency to see a random person on the street and envision an entire future with them. The idea for the story also came about as an assessment on the pure and simple fact that dating is hard. Or, to be more precise, people are hard, and as a result so are any and all interactions that occur between more than one of them. I wanted to write a story that encompassed how much we all long to be noticed, how much we wish we could be that brave person who can go up to another human being and engage in a meaningful conversation with them, when in reality (at least for me) that hardly ever winds up happening. I wrote this story to tell the truth of human awkwardness, and to expose the embarrassing moments that*

we all know we have all been through, but in a humor-infused manner that hopefully people would be able to relate to while also pointing a finger at their screen and laughing out loud. I also wrote this story because it was fun to do so, and I hope you had at least a little bit of fun reading it.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Abigail Miles is a creative writing student at Appalachian State University. She aspires to make the world a little more interesting and a little more bizarre through her stories, and to share with readers the dreams that both haunt and inspire her. She has been previously published in *Bending Genres Journal*, and has work forthcoming in *Cold Mountain Review* and *Atlantis Magazine*.