

## James Elliot

James Elliot was entering his late thirties but was undoubtedly as in shape as a retired college wrestler who sits on his couch eating Cheetos all day, so it would make sense for him to stumble stepping on the bus. His girlfriend, around ten years younger, did not stumble and, in fact, had to catch James to keep him from trembling. Walking through the door, the air was a wall of humming stench. Specifically, the scent of sardines was a good way to describe the degree to which the bus was packed. His girlfriend loathed sardines. The pungent smell worked its way up her nostrils, burning the hairs as they flowed through, giving her a piercing headache that lingered like the taste they leave. James Elliot sat across from his girlfriend.

To her right was the woman with the pack of canned fish. She had to be at least forty-five, with wrinkles starting to crinkle around the long parts of her face. She had blackened bags hanging under her eyes, which she could hardly keep open. As she jammed her food into her chapped, worn lips, she held the hand of a toddler whose nose was filled with snot that dripped down his bright blue shirt. Next to the kid, there were two others: Another boy and a girl. The boy, around twelve, had a seahorse shirt with blond hair, not unlike Justin Bieber's. A girl, who was the twin of a seahorse girl, wore a beaten-down black jacket that zipped up close to her head, covering her entire neck, and had sleeves that were too long and flopped over her hands. The kids were whining and crying to their mom, who had one wired earbud in. She was attempting to tune them out. They screeched how long until they got off this ratchety bus, and, "Can we get McDonald's?"

To her left there was a man who was also older. This man had a belly that plopped over his belt. He had thinning hair, revealing his scarred scalp. He shouted to the children, "We have food at home!" like a lion eating its cub attempting to muffle its wail. The only food they could afford was hot pockets and the ingredients of a PB&J, anyway. James' girlfriend noticed a ring on the man's finger that fit so securely that it formed a canyon of flesh. She looked back to her right and saw the same ring on the woman's finger, too.

James Elliot, the man who decided to take her on this dreaded bus, was still sitting across from her. He had a button-up shirt that he's been wearing since community college. He was skinny despite his diet of only garbage, fast food, and soda. He went to the gym twice a year, claiming, "This time's the time that'll make me consistent." She's been on a couple of dates with him over the past couple of dozen weeks, but not nearly enough for her to determine that she loves him. But at least this guy is sometimes friendly and respectful to her parents and has cracked a joke or two. He sat there looking at her, like an insane person looking at his victim, plotting, twisting the ends of his fingers, and biting the inside of his mouth. He also noticed the ring on the couple's fingers.

Right next to him was a guy who had just finished a mile-long run. He was young and short. He had sweat stains on his bright orange shirt, emitting a burning smell of body odour that mixed with the looming fish smell, piss and other bodily fluids that could be spurting out of one of the many people who were occupying that bus. But James's eyes were stuck on the ring finger. He felt a pulse throughout his body, and in a moment, he reached his fidgety hands towards his pocket. He breathed in the romance and pollution in the air and grabbed the box that could change his life forever.

Until he was interrupted by the kids across from him screaming, "We want McDonald's!" The mom yelled and sighed back at the children, "We have food at home!" The father yelled across to James's girlfriend in response with "Why don't we just get the kids McDonald's?" "We don't have the money, Harold? You think about that? Or are you too busy to realize you need to get off your ass and get a job to have money?" The father paused before saying, "I just think we should stop by McDonald's, hun."

While they bickered back and forth, James' girlfriend looked back at James with a slight smirk, but ultimately darted down to the floor. Her headache was too much. With the screaming she's endured and the fumes radiating, nothing else is on her mind but the pressure pushing to the front of her skull. She felt a pit producing in her stomach; she couldn't think how this bus ride could be worse.

"Will you marry me, babe?" shot out of James' Elliot's mouth, like a bullet headed straight for his girlfriend's head. The fighting family stops, and the whole bus is shushed. There was a stillness, with no sound except for the bus rattling and the wheels turning. All eyes turned to her like kindergartners do with an unfamiliar child. She stared at him as he bowed his head with the minuscule box in his hands. Every ounce of her body wanted to scream. She could hear her voice rising from the bottom of her stomach to the top of her throat. Her eyes push out her head like a chicken attempting to lay an egg to bug. Her teeth ground into each other, breaking the surfaces, causing cracks throughout. You could see her veins popping and physically changing the shape of her face. But with a dose of self-control and respect for the people around her, Elizabeth condescended her response, despite her face being dismantled, to a simple "No."

The people on the bus, especially James, were dumbfounded; frozen in place until the moment was interrupted by James' mouth uttering the words, "But I love you." The silence was shattered by a choir of gasps.