

Life of the Party

Eric sat and idly stirred his oatmeal with a spoon as he read the newspaper. It was his second year on the indoor track team and he was still told he was overweight. "If you want to run the 3000," his coach said, "you should lose about another five pounds." He was starving but he felt the weight coming off and he felt lighter than ever on his feet. His parents and even a few friends told him that he looked unusually tired and gaunt, but he wanted to beat Dumont, so he thought of revenge as he ate his carefully portioned 600-calorie meal. He was reading about a problem with the introduction of the Euro to Denmark.

"Did they settle everything!" his father exclaimed as he entered the kitchen and grabbed his coffee on his way out the door to work. It was an old and oft-trodden joke and greeting between Eric and his father. Eric smiled forcibly. "Do you have a meet this week?"

"No, we're hosting a tri-meet next Monday though." "Oh, right. I'll try to make that. I might be out of town though. I don't know." "Alright." "Alright, see ya," the father said as he grabbed his coat and walked out the door to the garage.

"Everyone, hand your homework into the front of the class," the teacher said from behind her desk. Eric was busy searching through his bookbag. Pens and markers and pencils were crammed into the bottom of the bag, the front pocket bulged with the shape of a new digital camera that he planned on bringing to practice, and there were several textbooks, folders, pamphlets, and other assorted literature in no intelligible pattern throughout the bag. He looked through his folder labeled "Western Civ" and could not find his work. Eric looked up and the girl in front of him was trying to collect his paper. "I don't have it," he said and the girl turned around to hand her paper up the row of students.

He kept looking through his bag throughout class. The teacher

looked at him as he held his English textbook open by the cover and fanned the pages open, hoping that the homework had somehow landed within. He smiled up at her as he continued searching. He tried to work more furtively to avoid unneeded attention. "Alright, so for the rest of class we are going to go over your rough draft for the paper that's due two weeks from now. Each student will get five minutes with me, so Marshall, come on up."

Eric continued to look through his bag. He opened every textbook, went through it, and set it aside. He went through his folders and set those on top of the pile of textbooks on his desk. He felt a tap on his arm as he continued searching. It was the girl in front of him. "It's your turn." He looked up to see his teacher looking back at him.

He got up, careful not to topple his pile of books from his desk, and walked sideways up the narrow aisle to the teacher. "So, your paper was good. There were some grammatical issues in the first paragraph that I'd like to go over."

"Well, first, I'd like to say that I'm sorry that I didn't turn in my homework today. I was looking through my bookbag and I must have left it at home."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you know the policy. Any late work is an automatic 'F'. I'm sorry, I am, really, you just need to be more conscientious about these things."

"Look, I mean, you gave us twenty minutes at the end of class to begin it yesterday and I finished it in, like, the first ten. It's not very hard. Could you give me another copy of the homework? I could fill it in by the end of class or even after class before next period. It would take only ten minutes."

"I'm sorry, but you know the rules. I can't make exceptions. They don't tolerate this kind of stuff in college. This is an AP class, so

it's college rules."

"Look, it's sitting on my bed right now. You know I know this stuff. I've been getting good grades and everything. I just...it seems excessive, I'm sure it's on my bed right now." The teacher was slowly shaking her head as he continued. "You know, it's just I have so many things in my bag, I have track after school, I barely have time, you know, I'm just busy. I misplaced it, that's all."

"Well if you can't handle the workload, maybe you shouldn't be in track. School needs to come before athletics."

"Look, alright, whatever," he mumbled as he reached to look at his highlighted paper.

"What did you say?" "Nothing, do you want to just go over my paper?" "Look, you're a good student. And I like you. But this whole act," she said as she gestured towards him "isn't going to get you anywhere." Eric vaguely felt the glare of the teacher as he looked away. He noticed that he was gaining the attention of his classmates.

"Are you listening to me right now?" He looked over. "Oh yeah, fine, yeah, sure." "You are being incredibly rude right now. For your own good, you need to drop this act. Right now." He felt his pulse quicken. It seemed she wanted a fight. He slouched and felt the way his shirt bunched up as he casually slung his arm over the back of the chair. He felt the class become quiet. He hoped they noticed his bicep.

"Well, I just don't get why I should get an 'F' on a worksheet you know I did. If you give me another right now I can finish it in five minutes. It was really easy."

"Alright, we'll do it your way." She opened her top drawer and pulled out a pad of ten and a half by five triplicate sheets.

"A demerit? Are you kidding? For what?" he asked sitting up in his

chair.

"For talking back, for being rude, for disturbing the class, you name it. You're acting like an idiot right now."

Eric began to rub the frustration out of his eyes. "Well, I'm the only one saying anything about these rules. So I guess that makes me King Idiot, at least."

"Okay, alright." She handed the demerit to him. "Go to Ms. Faven's office, give this to her, and I'm sure she'll want to talk with you."

Eric took his demerit, grabbed his bookbag and jacket from his seat, and headed out of the class. "Idiot, right," he mumbled as he walked out.

"King Idiot," he mumbled under his breath as he walked down the hall while he looked at the floor. He continued the chant – "King Idiot, King Idiot" – and let the rhythm connect with his stride. Right foot, "King," left foot, "Idiot". He felt the joy of the mantra so he increased his volume. "King Idiot. King Idiot." It felt good. He felt the lightness in his feet. "King Idiot. Hey! King Idiot. Hey!" He started jumping. Right foot, "King," left foot, "Idiot," jump onto the right foot, "Hey!" He started to let the joy of the moment creep into his torso and arms. He increased his volume as his dance increased in complexity. Soon he found himself dancing – not knowing if it was out of joy or anger or both. His steps would become variously staccato or smooth. He felt connected to something ancient as he lifted his knees higher and higher while the tempo of his stride began to increasingly match that of the booming drum in his chest. So with a smile on his face, he clicked his heels as he turned into the principal's office.

He sat on the bench in the principal's office and waited for Ms. Faven to come back from some errand. The bell rang to signal the changing class period and shortly thereafter the door opened. He

stood up to greet Ms. Faven and was surprised to find his Western Civilization teacher.

"I brought the demerit, it's not like I wasn't going to come here," he said. "Yeah, well you didn't bring this one," she said as she held up another. "What is that?" "What is this? Really? You don't think I heard you yelling 'King Idiot' to the entire school. You were singing it at the top of your lungs!" "Yeah, well I mean, I wasn't thinking about —" "Right, you weren't thinking." Ms. Faven entered as his teacher was speaking.

"Ms. Faven, I've got a student for you. Here's one demerit, which he earned after I gave him the demerit he is currently holding," she said as she handed Ms. Faven the second demerit.

"The two demerit combo, I know that one," Ms. Faven smiled as she received the demerit. "Alright, come on in," she said as she motioned to her office. It was there that he was informed that this was his third demerit of the semester and that he would have In-School Suspension. Including the two demerits, he was given another form in triplicate to bring home stating the cause of the suspension and asking for parental acknowledgement.

As he left practice later that day he felt the cold on his wet head while he breathed in the sharp air. Every day during the winter sport he considered how it was a mistake not to fully dry his head when he got out of the shower after practice. As he sat in his car he felt the thick wad of demerits and the suspension notice folded in his back pocket. It seemed that he couldn't stop making mistakes — as if he was pushing a weight up a hill and he could never reach the pinnacle, the point where he could look around and calmly assess. He suddenly began feeling the faint tug of the new and foreign thought that perhaps it wasn't for lack of strength that he couldn't get the weight to the top, but rather some peculiar and magical property of the weight itself that prevented him from reaching the top. He sneezed and started the car and felt the usual

hiccup as the car jumped from park to reverse.

He resolved to get his punishment out of the way quickly, so he entered the door and said "Mom, I need to talk to you."

"That doesn't sound good."

"Well, it's kind of a long story, but I got a demerit today so I have to go to In-School Suspension next Wednesday. I need you to sign this form," he said as he held up the wad of papers out of his back pocket. She took the forms out of his hand and read them over. An uneasy calm passed over her face.

"You waltz in and you hand me a wrinkled pack of demerits and a suspension slip to sign," she said as she looked over the papers at her son. "Tom, come in here and see what your son did!" His father came from the kitchen and looked over the scene of the two standing in the foyer – she holding the forms and he looking back at the father. He took his glasses from his breast pocket as he walked over and grabbed the papers.

As he looked over the report, his face slowly started to smooth out and sag. "King Idiot? King Idiot? Are you kidding me right now? We need to talk," he said as he grabbed Eric by the arm and walked him to the front porch. The father closed the door as the mother looked on from the entryway. He led Eric to the front step and sat down himself. "What the hell is this? What were you thinking?"

"Well, I got the first demerit because I turned my homework in late and —" "It says you got it for talking back and being disruptive." "Well, yeah, I mean--"

"And the second demerit for yelling 'King Idiot' in the hallway? I mean, Jesus Christ..."

"I thought it was funny, I thought —"

"Do you know how irritating and disruptive that is? The whole school hearing someone yell," he paused as he attempted to force the offending phrase through his lips, "King Idiot through the halls?" He let the statement sink in. "This is crazy. You know what? You're not going to senior week."

"No, no, no," he pleaded, "everyone is going to senior week."

"I can't trust you to go to school and act right, do you really think I'm going to let you go to senior week and fill your body with booze around a bunch of other idiots at the beach?"

"Yeah, but dad, it was all a misunderstanding."

"Alright, listen to me now if you've never listened to me before. It's always a misunderstanding. Life is a misunderstanding. I mean, you have to think about your reputation." The father looked at Eric as the kid looked down at the stoop.

"I don't give a damn about my reputation," Eric half-sang under his breath.

"Goddammit you're an asshole," the father responded. "Do you know how much I care about you? Do you know how much I worry?" The father took out a pen and signed the form and handed it back as he got up from the step.

Eric went and got his homework from his room and put it on the kitchen counter.

He ate dinner, did his homework and went to bed.

After waking up the next day, Eric walked into the kitchen to make breakfast. He sat down to his oatmeal and looked through the paper. He realized that the homework was not sitting on the counter anymore as his dad walked in. "Did they settle everything!" his dad asked and firmly patted Eric on the back as he picked up his coffee.

"Have you seen my homework? I had it sitting out."

"Oh, it was just sitting out. I thought it was trash."

"No, it was the homework that I got the demerit about. I left it out here so I wouldn't forget it on my way to school."

"Why didn't you just put it in your book bag?"

"I don't know. I just put it out here."

"Well sorry. I didn't know," his dad said as he walked out. Eric got up and picked the homework packet out of the trash. There were coffee grounds on the edges that he had to brush off and what looked like a bit of yogurt at the bottom that he carefully wiped off with a napkin so as not to smudge it further.

Eric quietly approached his Western Civilization teacher before class began.

"Hey, listen, I'm sorry for what happened yesterday. I thought about it and I was being a jerk. So, I'm sorry."

"It's ok, just try to watch it. Do you have the homework?"

"Yeah, here it is," Eric handed the teacher the packet.

"What is this? It's covered in coffee and garbage. I mean, first it's late, and now it's covered in filth. I'm going to have to mark this down."

"You're going to mark it down from the 'F' that it already is? It's just an accident, my dad threw it away on accident," he said as he found himself smiling.

"Well you need to take more responsibility over your things. I mean, this is just like yesterday."

"Yeah, no, I get that."

"Do you think this is funny?"

"No, no, I'm sorry, it's fine. Again, I'm sorry about yesterday," Eric said as he tried to suppress a smile as he walked away.