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The Ride Home

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The Ride Home

Author Bio

Liz is a senior English major with a Writing Concentration. She is from Clinton, New York and is especially fond of bagels, jazz music, and the Boston Red Sox. On campus, she plays the flute, writes articles for the college website, and does community service with Alpha Phi Omega.

The Ride Home

Liz Williams

Julie took the window seat, picking up the skirt of her chiffon dress as she sat, and turned a cold shoulder to her husband. They looked out of place on the train, Archer dressed in a black suit and tie and Julie in an evening gown, but neither one had wanted to try driving through downtown Boston on a Saturday night. It was raining outside and Julie had held her handbag over her head as they made their way from the restaurant to the train station, ignoring Archer's offer of their umbrella. She could see in the window reflection that the ends of her hair had started to curl in the moisture. Even though they were seated next to one another, Julie had no intention of speaking to her husband. She glared out her window, squinting into the darkness that lay just beyond the reflections of the passengers in the train.

"Hey," said Archer, nudging her with his knee. "Can we talk about this?"

Julie's legs pulled away at his touch, and she shifted more pointedly into the corner, refusing to face him. He had ruined the evening. The dinner had been wonderful at first—all of Archer's company was in attendance and a tuxedoed waitstaff set before them shrimp cocktails, watercress salads, and filet mignon. At their table sat Jim and Don and their wives, who were fond of gossiping and shopping and sported diamonds that dangled from their necks and ears. Julie had little in common with them, but she enjoyed their company all the same. They were always placed at the same table and Julie got a kick out of their meaningless chatter about the latest shoe fashions and which restaurants could offer the best glass of wine.

She looked forward to the annual company dinner and selected her outfit weeks in advance. It was often the only chance she had all year to dress up for a formal event. A four-course dinner would be followed by speeches from the company executives and then a few hours of dancing at the end. The dancing was her favorite part of the evening and she could not wait to show off her beautiful new gown to the other wives in attendance. Archer would hold her close and the look in his eyes would remind her how proud he was to be her husband. But she didn't get the chance to twirl and float across the dance floor this year. No, Archer had ruined it all.

The train pulled out of the station and the lights on buildings outside began to trickle by. Julie had insisted to Archer that they cut out early, skipping the dancing altogether, and she showered her apologies on those

at their table as they left the glittering hall. She had no desire to dance. It was just past ten o'clock; her kids would be sound asleep in bed when they got home and she would have to make up an excuse to give the babysitter as to why they were home early. She would talk to Archer then, in the privacy of their bedroom where no one would be around to witness her tears and anger.

"Surprise!" he had whispered, leaning over to her ear as the room erupted in applause around them. The CEO had just announced Archer had been promoted to Head of Finance and would be relocating to the company's headquarters in Washington, D.C.

"You must be so excited!" the faces beaming around her exclaimed. Jim and Don smiled at her knowingly and their wives babbled on and on about the shopping district in Georgetown.

"Oh, it's glorious!" said Jim's wife, reaching over her husband to touch Julie's arm. Her thick eyelashes, laden with mascara, bounced up and down in front of Julie, with a fleck of glitter stuck to one of the lids. Julie could not have cared less about shopping. Her cheeks soon ached from forced smiles and giddy profusions of "thank you" to her husband's co-workers. She waited patiently for the first opportunity to leave the hall.

"Jules, I thought you'd be happy!" said Archer, a little too loudly. His voice cut through the quiet hum of the train. Julie checked the reflection in her window to see if any of the passengers had taken note of his words. Across the aisle from them, a boy who looked to be in his twenties with dark spiky hair and wearing a lime green t-shirt, rocked along to music coming from oversized headphones. In front of him she could make out the profiles of two middle-aged women looking at some sort of electronic device in one of their hands—a phone or an iPad, perhaps. Everyone else in view was either resting their eyes or sleeping.

She could see a slice of Archer's face, soft and pleading, with his dark brown eyes trained on the back of her head. He looked pathetic, a big, sad man trying to reconcile with his offended wife—such a contrast from the man who addressed his company from a podium two hours before with an aura of confidence and charisma she usually found so attractive.

"You should have asked me," she said, without turning to face him.

"I wanted to surprise you. You always talked about moving somewhere warmer."

She watched his expression in the reflection. It was true, she had mentioned wanting to move further south. She had grown up in southern Pennsylvania and had never really gotten used to the cold of the northeast. In all fairness, she would have loved to move to Washington, D.C. She could have used a change of scenery and would be sure to find work there.

But he hadn't asked her.

"I'm happy here," she said, turning to meet his eyes for the first time since dinner. "I have a great job, my friends are all here, the kids are in a good school. What makes you think I'd want to just pick up and leave everything? Did you even stop to think how I would feel about this?"

One of the middle-aged women cast a casual glance toward them. Julie turned back to the window. The conversation would have to wait.

"I'm sorry," said Archer. "I should have asked you."

She crossed her arms over her chest and watched the lights go by outside. Soon the train slowed as it approached the next station. Julie could see the platform teeming with men and women in red and white jerseys, some with faces painted, others sporting green or navy blue baseball caps. The doors opened and a mass of people crowded the train, chanting "Pa-pi! Pa-pi!" Julie craned her neck above the seats to watch them shuffle down the aisle with arms raised and faces jovial.

"Those damned Yankees better be on a bus home right now, crying to their mommas," one yelled to his friend. "Big Papi showed 'em where it's at. Hit that baby outta the park!"

She looked to Archer to gauge his reaction. He moved his knees just slightly toward her to avoid the throng of people passing by.

"You catch the game?" a man said, leaning down to push his face into Archer's. Julie recoiled from the smell of cheap beer and cigarettes on his breath.

"No," said Archer, not looking up.

"We POUNDED them!" He shot up at the word "pounded" and beat a fist into his hand to demonstrate. "12-3!" he called over his shoulder, continuing down the aisle.

Archer turned to Julie and rolled his eyes. She did not react. The rowdy group filled the aisle with their chants and shouting. Julie ran a hand through her damp hair and turned back to the window. She was in no mood to deal with inebriated baseball fans. In the window reflection, she watched as one of the men leaned backwards and belted into the aisle, "Suh-weeeet Caroline!" to which those around him chimed in, "Bah bah bah!" with fists raised to the air. Their voices carried through the once-quiet train as they shouted along to the words of the song. Julie barely resisted the urge to whip around and yell at them to shut up. She had been through enough for one night, and could not take much more. Toward the front of the car, groggy faces turned around to view the source of the noise.

A man in a Youkilis jersey came down the aisle chanting, "Let's go Red Sox! Yankees suu-uuck!" with hands swaying above him as he walked. Just as he was about to pass Archer and Julie, the man stopped and cast a nasty glare at Julie, who had turned away from the window to frown at him as he passed. "What are you all dressed up for, pretty? Coming from some

swanky party? Yeah? Think you're better than the rest of us?"

"I'm not the one drunk on a train," she retorted, and the sharp words surprised even her. Archer, caught off guard by her reaction, turned, and she knew he was silently pleading with her not to say anything more. But the damage had been done and the man's cheeks colored with rage.

"OHHHH!" he bellowed, tossing back his head and exposing just a sliver of his thick beer belly. "Got ourselves a smartie here! Bet you can't wait to get rid of this one, huh?" He stuck his face in Archer's and jutted his chin out toward Julie. Her pulse quickened as his thick-bearded face hovered in front of Archer and she realized the situation could get ugly fast if they were not careful. Just as she was about to apologize and try to smooth things over, Archer cut in.

"Actually it's just the opposite," he said, facing the man for the first time. His voice was calm and steady. "She's one in a million."

Something in the evenness of his tone told her he was serious, and she wanted to believe that he was.

"Screw that," said the man with a snort, and he continued down the aisle, cursing as he went. Julie relaxed. One in a million. The sporadic shouting behind them continued and one of the middle-aged women turned around to glare at the noisy men. Her face twisted into a frown that clashed with her wool pink sweater and she let out a violent "Shhhh!"

"Oh, shut up, y'old lady!" one of the men responded.

A collective gasp came from the front of the train as horrified passengers turned to see who had shouted the insult at the poor woman. Julie looked at Archer and barely suppressed a laugh. It was not so much the exchange that she found funny, but the situation as a whole. She never could have guessed the evening would end up the way it did. While Jim and Don and all the other coworkers and their wives danced the night away, she and Archer were stuck on a train surrounded by a horde of drunk baseball fans. And maybe that was exactly what they needed—a complete change of plans, something unexpected and uncomfortable to get them to think about their life together in a different light. Archer squeezed Julie's hand and she pressed her hand into his.

"I don't have to take it," he said. "I can call my boss up tomorrow and tell him it's all off. I don't want to do this if you're not happy."

Archer started to apologize again, but his words were muffled by another round of shouting from behind. Julie laced her fingers through Archer's and studied his full brown eyes.

"Let's go to Washington," she said.