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Dilettante

Shane Carley
Gettysburg College

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Dilettante

Author Bio

Shane Carley is from Trumbull, Connecticut and attends Gettysburg College where he majors in Political Science and minors in Writing and Cinema and Media Studies.

Dilettante

SHANE CARLEY

From across the living room, she stood next to the ornately decorated Christmas tree with a peppermint cranberry mimosa in her hand. She was alone among the bustling crowd. Everyone was intoxicated by the alcohol, the excitement of the holiday, or the news that brought them all there that night. I wondered who she was or which one of them she knew. Leaning against the wall, I stared at my drink, hoping to find the answers through the lens of inebriation.

Almost all the guests looked the same. Each man wore a red or green sweater, and their date wore one of the complementing color. One or two had varied the monotony of appearances by having a snowman or reindeer stitched to the front. George told me the party would be more formal. Not everybody understood what that meant. I wore my dark wool suit and the tie that Elise had given me for Christmas two years ago, the navy blue one with the yellow ducks on it. I hadn't seen my brother or Elise since I had arrived.

They tell me that it's time to get back out there. What do they know? George met Elise in elementary school, and they've been together ever since. I drove them to their prom and everything in between. They will never know how it feels for the love of their life to walk out on them, waking up the next morning to find the apartment they shared half empty without so much as a note explaining why it was over. Nothing except the engagement ring they had hidden in their sock drawer somehow finding itself on their coffee table.

Get back out there. As if it was that easy.

And yet, that woman by the tree had caught my eye. Smaller, slightly younger than George. Dirty blonde hair and brown eyes. Gentle eyes. The dark blue dress she wore made her stand out amid the sea of red and green. She sipped her drink with an expression of laxness painted on her face, as if the party was being held for her personal amusement. I rubbed my forehead to relieve the tightness etched into my skull. She really was beautiful.

Thinking about her made me sore.

But I thought anyway.

"Hello," I'd say. "Friend of the bride or groom-to-be?"

"Neither, I saw the lights outside and took it as an open invita-

tion.” We’d laugh and she might say, “Elise and I were roommates in college. I’ve known her and George forever.”

“You’re telling me. I drove them to their first date.”

“Overbearing older brother?”

“That’s right. I’m Newland.”

“Iris,” she might say. Those gentle eyes.

We could spend the rest of the evening together, chatting, getting to know one another. Maybe we would take a walk in the park as the snow begins to fall and she would admit that she had hoped I would talk to her. She might tell me that her previous relationship ended recently, too. How afraid she’s been. How happy we could make each other. How we wouldn’t have to worry about the other leaving in the middle of the night. How the answer might be “yes” instead of fleeing before the question is even asked.

George and Elise entered the room and brought me back into reality. Elise’s left hand sparkled with her engagement ring. The crowd flocked to them and left the room almost barren, except for me and her. On opposite sides of the living room, we stood our ground.

She caught my gaze.

The space between the woman and I seemed to grow. I dropped my eyes away from hers. I couldn’t make that distance.

I finished my drink, congratulated the happy couple, and made my way to the door.

As I put on my coat, I caught one more glimpse of the woman.

Could we have what George and Elise have?

The idea satisfied me enough, and I went out into the night.

I thought it would be snowing.