

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Philip Holland
Not a Party To

BE SERIOUS, HE THOUGHT. The group he had been conversing with was now across the room, having resumed talking upon leaving him. What had he said to make them leave? Only what he had been determined to say, what he understood to be the problem when not said.

Too secretive, is what he understood. "You never express what really matters to you," Stephanie had put it. And before her, Amanda. It was distressing how they could fall in love with you thinking one thing and leave you thinking another – his fault, he knew: their errors in judging him had been of his own making.

So tonight, in a moment in which a group of four seemed to want it, he shared something of himself. The cheerful mood and the dim but festive lighting had animated most of the party – in gatherings of three and four – enough to carry their raised voices, their voiced selves, above the recorded jazz. The rustic room was a renovated barn, its cathedral ceiling like the empty hull of a great inverted ship; the immense floor was an archipelago of rugs over a dark and flattened sea. A lone swallow had gotten in and swooped among the rafters. Warren stood on his own small plush square, thick under his feet. Alone, he was glad to be holding a drink; it accompanied him. To avoid ending up like this was why he resisted revealing himself.

What had he said, when eyes turned to him? That people could change. The opposite of what they had been saying. Saying it, he had conjured his father, who had pushed him in his youthful studies, who had fumed at grades that Warren saw as beneath himself too, grades justifying an anger that Warren didn't feel. But pushed, he had learned – had learned to learn, even – then applied those lessons in college, studying biology; in graduate school, studying business; at work, designing medical devices. He became skilled at golf, could read German, had gotten fit. Were anyone interested, he could go on about how he did it, how others did too. But he had accepted that you share your loves in peril, are better off not being serious. Certainly not at a party. He had said what he believed, for right or wrong – and the group had grown quiet, guarded, and gradually wandered off.

A young caterer in an apron arrived with a raised platter, and Warren was happy for the momentary company. He wanted to be as others implored. So try again. Be serious, he thought – reviving the same injunction from before his last encounter.

Not far away a woman stood, bent in examining something low on the wall next to a table and lamp. Then she straightened and turned to look up into the rafters. Her hair touched her shoulders, her skirt was long, and her face appeared both kind and solemn. He felt for a moment (a sense, an impulse), as if she might be one with whom he could be serious. Yet still some nagging feeling told him, Beware. Remember the four, and the four before that. Don't be a party to it. Accept instead the year you might get

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before the leaving. It's better than standing alone, drink in hand, at party after party. Could he tell her? Could he tell anyone?

Be serious, he thought.