

LITERARY NOVELLA: FIREWORKS FOR BASTILLE DAY BY KATE KIRSCH

Summary: Eleanor is attracted to Rhys, and attends his summer party to see where she stands with him. Her quasi-boyfriend Lionel also attends. Rhys seems charming and well-heeled, but Eleanor doesn't know the trouble he has had in the past.

As Eleanor arrived at Rhys' house for the party, a slight-figured, bleached-blond woman dressed in white linen was promenading down the brick walk with her herd of three Corgis.

"I'm looking for Rhys," Eleanor told her. The Corgis were panting.

"Aren't we all!" said the woman with a laugh. "Forgive me – I'm his mother. He invited you, did he?" She looked down at Eleanor's white espadrille sandals. Her eyes rose to Eleanor's lemon-lily sundress. Finally she beheld the arrangement of auburn curls swept up from Eleanor's neck and fastened with a gold filigree barrette. "Lovely," she said, almost in spite of herself.

Eleanor felt like she towered over the woman, and tried to shrink herself somehow. "Nice to meet you," Eleanor said, as the woman clucked the Corgis out to the street.

"Go through the garden gate. Have fun!" Rhys' mother threw a hand in Eleanor's direction to wave goodbye.

So that's Caroline, Eleanor thought, remembering her conversation with Rhys. She heard Amy Winehouse singing the blues somewhere in the house and a loud guffaw from some guy. Coming around the corner of the house, she saw sherbert-colored Japanese lanterns strung in a square shape around the back patio where a tall, balding, yet young man was grilling chicken quarters.

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“I hope you’re hungry,” he said, brushing barbecue sauce on the legs and thighs. “Grab a drink inside.” He introduced himself as Greg, Aline’s husband, as if Eleanor knew the family lineage already. She would have to be on the lookout for an “Aline.”

The kitchen was a crush of people she did not know. Rhys stood near the sink, shaking martinis. His smile broadened at the sight of her, and he shouted her name, like a pronouncement, and a beckoning. “My lord, you are just poured into that dress!” he said, when she came closer. Eleanor looked down at her dress to see what he saw, to no avail.

Rhys laughed. “Margarita or melon-tini?” he asked.

She chose the cantaloupe martini. “It’s my first,” she told him, but he was distracted, doing a slight cha-cha with the silver canister for some other girl who admired him from across the breakfast bar.

“It’s everyone’s first – they dared me to make it work. “ He had been laboring long and hard with a food-processor, blender and juicer, trying to strain the pulp. “Next up is honeydew melon. So stick around.”

Eleanor wanted to kiss him out of pure happiness to see him, but it wasn’t clear how demonstrative he wanted to be in front of his other guests. She considered it a date, although she had to share him with what seemed an awful lot of other women, all younger than her thirty-one years. She didn’t even know how old Rhys was – perhaps her own age or a little older.

On the counter was a light blue flyer with blood-red lettering in a French Script typeface. It read:

Bastille Day Celebration!

Le Quatorze Juillet

Free the writers! Steal the guns! Run naked through the streets!

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Feasting – Dancing – Fireworks

1220 Crossmark Way

8:00 p.m. until ?

So, Rhys had sent invitations. Eleanor had received a phone call from him, but not an invitation.

She followed the blues-y trail of music through the vacant dining room which housed a long mahogany table, gleaming under a crystal chandelier. It cast shards of glittering light in defiance that no one was dining under it. Eleanor followed the music through the hallway and found the front stairs, also well-lit with another chandelier over the handsome second-floor landing with a window seat that looked over the side entrance of the house. Down the hallway the music grew stronger as she neared a pair of double doors. Pushing them open, she found a well-lit den where a number of guests had gathered and were taking leave to sit, rather than to stand in the kitchen where the blender gnashed its blades without notice.

On the far window seat were congregated a group of five women, two or whom had pulled up chairs to talk to the three on the window seat cushion. They were somber, almost grim, or perhaps smug, thought Eleanor. Or perhaps they were mindful of the reason for the party and were donning an aloof ennui, suitable only for the most sophisticated French celebration. Eleanor wanted to avoid them, but the central girl on the cushion lifted her hand to her, as if Eleanor were a *maitra'de*.

“Did Greg invite you?” the young woman asked, with the beginning of a scowl around her lips. She had the same slightness as Rhys’ mother, although her peaches-and-cream skin was smoother, and her hair was the genuine champagne blonde.

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“No – Rhys did,” Eleanor said, wishing there was a guest list to keep everyone straight, and that a butler had approved her at the door. “You must be Aline.”

“Why, how canny of you!” Aline said, reassembling her mouth into a bud of a smile.

Eleanor introduced herself, taking Aline’s delicate hand in her own. One of the girls drew up another chair from the huge desk nearby.

“We’re so bored,” confessed Aline. “Tell us something interesting, and save us.” She sipped her margarita.

“Rhys’ melon-tini is great,” Eleanor offered.

“It’s ridiculous,” said Aline. Her friends twittered in agreement around her. Eleanor saw that they all had salt-rimmed margarita glasses filled to various levels. Just then, Rhys came through the door with a tray of margaritas.

“I see you’ve met Eleanor,” he said, handing the drinks to each woman, and collecting the empties. “She’s an artist. I have some of her work, and I believe, someday, it will be a collector’s item.”

“Well, you didn’t say you were an artiste,” said Aline, as Rhys whisked out of the room.

“Rhys is too kind,” Eleanor said, feeling herself reddening, a personal hazard of hers.

“So it’s a professional relationship you have with him,” Aline decided aloud. “Right, because you’re not his type.” She sipped her margarita, almost unaware of what she had said.

“What does Rhys like?” asked one of her friends.

“Legs,” said Aline.

Eleanor rose from her chair. “I need another,” she said holding up her empty glass. “They’re so good.”

“Do come back...we’re so bored, you know.”

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Eleanor flashed a smile and made a bee-line for the double-doors, deciding not to come back to the little hornet's nest of idle women, even if one of them was Rhys' sister.

Out in the hallway, she saw Lionel. "You don't want to go in there," she warned him.

"You don't want to go out there," he said, gesturing to the kitchen.

"Why are you here?" she asked him.

"He put up flyers...on telephone poles!"

"I thought he sent them as invitations."

"Maybe it started out that way...I dunno – you wanna get outta here?"

"Probably," she said. "I'll just say goodbye to Rhys."

"I'll wait outside," he said.

When Rhys saw her come into the kitchen, he quickly took off the flouncy peach apron he had been wearing and tossed it on the counter. "Oh, Eleanor, I have been ignoring you." Then he turned to a burly man beside him and said, "Would you spell me for a minute, Jerry?" and took both Eleanor's hands. "Come out here with me," he said and led her through the crowd that packed the kitchen now, and out to the patio where couples danced to an accordion player's quaint tunes.

The patio was as stocked with folks as was the kitchen. The crowd was spilling out into the garden and through the garden gate onto the driveway. Old men and young men sat at card tables playing chess; Eleanor recognized them from the bakery in the Square. Jerry came out with a tray and served plastic martini cups of pink drinks and plastic goblets of green ones.

"Go ahead!" Rhys yelled to guests on the driveway. "Open the garage door!" "They'll know what to do," he said to her as they half-waltzed around the patio.

"What?" she asked.

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“Get the lawn chairs...heck, they can even sit in my Dad’s old Caddy, if they want.”

Rhys laughed. “Do you like the party?” he asked.

Eleanor was quick to say yes.

“How do you like my sister?”

“She’s nice.”

“She’s a pill, but you’re too polite to say so,” he corrected her. “Her husband is also a pill, but he’s a good grill-man, so I tolerate them both to be here.”