

Smoke and Diamonds, Diamonds and Smoke

By Katelyn Dix

The dress was dark red satin and fell to her ankles, though the material was gathered along the right side, so that her right calve was exposed almost to the knee. The bust was low and padded and pushed her breasts up and together. They shook like jelly when she made quick movements. But right now she was standing almost totally still in the full-length mirror, absent-mindedly twisting one strand of hair around her middle finger.

She'd bought it after having lunch with Bethany that afternoon at the cafe in Kenmore Square where they ate together every Saturday. She had prodded her salad with her fork and listened to Bethany explain her problems with their mother the same way she did every time they went out together. At first Maggie listened carefully and done her best to consider everything her sister said, but it was always so hard to stay focused, and she ended up fidgeting, glancing around the room and playing with her food, trying to find something else to give her attention to. Lately she was finding it impossible to keep her mind fixed on anything.

It always made her feel tense to listen to Bethany's problems, anyway. They were the same every time they spoke, and Maggie had run out of things to say about them. There wasn't any more advice to give, no more suggestions or observations to make, and she got more and more nervous as Bethany spoke, worried about what she was going to say to prove that she'd been listening, that she cared. What was worse, she wasn't even certain that she had been listening, or that she did care.

When Bethany finally did stop speaking, all Maggie could think of was to look up at her and nod. Bethany nodded back, looking satisfied, and they sat in silence over their almost-empty plates.

Then Maggie blurted out: "We're going to a Christmas party tonight. Louis has a friend who lives in the South End. He's having a party. Louis is taking me." She wasn't exactly sure why she said it. She hadn't even been sure she wanted to go to the party. All afternoon she'd been thinking of excuses she could make to Louis so that'd he'd go without her.

"Oh, I'm so jealous!" Bethany clasped her hands together and grinned, "I'll bet it's going to be amazing, in one of those big old houses and everything, with champagne and fancy clothes... what are you wearing?"

And so, when Maggie confessed that she was planning on wearing the same blue dress she'd worn to their brother's wedding last spring, Bethany had insisted they go shopping for a new one ("something more festive!"), and Maggie had ended up buying the red satin gown with the tight fit in the hips and the low-cut bust.

It really had looked wonderful in the dressing room. The idea of wearing something so sexy, so beautiful, had been exciting then. She had conjured up a picture of herself as soon as she put it on: elegant and smoldering with a glass of champagne and a cigarette, legs crossed while she sat on a velvet sofa in a fire-lit room. But now it just seemed foolish. The florescent lights of the bathroom vanity made her make-up seem caked and sloppy, and her hair looked limp and dry.

But that wasn't the real problem, she thought, staring at the full-length image of herself on the back of the door. It was her face—the expression on it: she couldn't make her expression match the dress she was wearing. She looked bored, cynical, flat. When she tried to make her face look glamorous and seductive, it came out looking mocking and sarcastic instead. It looked ridiculous to her, the dryness of her expression on top of that dress. Even her hair and make-up, her shoes, the silver necklace with a tear-drop pendant that rested just above the place where her breasts curved out and separated—it all fit together so perfectly. But it was all secondary to the incongruent expression on her face that destroyed the whole thing.

She knew Louis wouldn't notice the absurdity of it. When he came to pick her up he'd be stunned, floored. He'd take one look at her and gape, come to her and start kissing her all over her neck and shoulders, tell her she looked so sexy and amazing. Somehow knowing that only made it worse. Eventually he'd notice that something was troubling her, and he'd push her to tell him what it was. She wouldn't be able to explain it, of course. He wouldn't understand, and she wasn't even sure if she'd be able to find the words to explain it even if there was a chance he would. She didn't want to be admired and seduced. It would feel like a joke, a game, like she was just pretending to fit into something that her face made it clear she wasn't made for.

She was getting flushed, her breath tight and heavy. She looked down at her feet and tried to breathe slowly and deeply. It didn't work. She was starting to get the lump in the back of her throat that meant she'd soon be crying. But she couldn't cry, she didn't want to, so she tapped her foot hard and fast on the bathroom floor, as if to shake it out through the bottom instead. She raised her eyes and stared into the brightness of the overhead light until the urge to cry had passed. It was an old trick she'd learned as a child—if she stared for long enough at something so bright it almost hurt, it seemed to burn the thoughts out of her head. If she did it just right, it could dull the voices inside of her to a static murmur, something unintelligible that didn't matter, if only for a moment. She looked in the mirror again. There wasn't much of a choice. She ran her hands over the silk of the dress and reached for the doorknob.

Louis was in a great mood, high on the excitement of Saturday night with a beautiful woman on his arm. He spent most of the ride to the South End making small talk with the cab driver, a large man with a bald spot and a thick Maine-country accent. Maggie smiled, laughed when they laughed, and played with the clasp on her purse while she gazed out the window at the soft lights coming from inside the brownstones. It was just under a week until Christmas and a powdery snow was falling. She started to feel a little warm and glad. Watching the snow was always a comfort to her—it made her feel almost numb, which was relaxing, a relief.

The cab let them off outside of a beautiful brownstone facing a small park surrounding a fountain. Louis led Maggie in through the front door. Someone was playing the piano inside. The host of the party greeted them as they walked in. He took their coats and complemented Louis on Maggie, giving her a full-toothed smile and telling her she looked “ravishing in that beautiful dress.” She felt herself flush and murmured a thank you, turning away from him and trying to find the source of the music she’d heard on the way in.

The piano was in the back of the room, next to an archway covered by a dark green and purple tapestry. The woman seated at the piano had thick blond hair tied up on the top of her head, loose strands falling at the back of her neck and around her ears. She sat very straight in a silky black dress, and her brow was furrowed as she moved her fingers over the keys. The music was gentle and wintery; it sent tingling chills up Maggie’s spine.

The host noticed Maggie staring. “That’s my sister, at the piano,” he told her. “She’s living with me right now” he hesitated “she’s had some rough times recently. Her name’s Hannah. She plays well, doesn’t she?”

Maggie nodded. “She’s beautiful,” she said. “She looks like a ballerina.” It was true. Hannah was long and slender in a way that was almost hard, sinewy.

“She used to be a dancer. She danced with a ballet company in high school. She was very good. In college she started a modern dance group. She wrote, too, choreography. She can’t do it anymore—she broke an ankle, it didn’t heal right. It’s a shame. She was brilliant.”

Louis came over with glasses of wine for himself and Maggie, and began to talk with the host. Maggie didn’t listen. After a moment she started to make her way to the piano. Hannah was playing Chopin, a dark, dramatic piece that Maggie recognized from somewhere she couldn’t recall. Maggie found a barstool in the corner and moved it between the bookcase and the piano. She sipped her glass of wine and watched Hannah’s hands. They were exquisite—white and delicate, her fingers long and graceful. She wore one ring on her right hand, a thin silver band with a small amethyst in the center. Maggie’s eyes traveled over the silk of Hannah’s dress to her neck. She was wearing no other jewelry, but she had a black satin ribbon at her throat. It was tied in a bow at the back of her neck, and the strings hung down to the middle of her bare back. The shadows from the fire and the candles on top of the piano danced across her skin, which was pale and unfreckled, so smooth it seemed almost translucent. She had a gorgeous profile, a nose slightly upturned and dark blue eyes. Her lips were slightly parted and her eyes cast downward in concentration.

When she finished playing, Hannah turned towards Maggie and smiled. Maggie felt ashamed; she hadn’t realized that Hannah could see her watching. She wasn’t sure she had a right to stare at someone so beautiful.

“You play beautifully,” she said, blushing. “I wish I could play like that.”

“I don’t really. It’s just practice. How long have you played?” Hannah’s voice was low and honey-sweet.

“Me? Oh, well not long...I mean, I just started taking lessons again a few years ago. I forgot most of what I learned when I was a kid. I mean, I stopped playing when I was fourteen. I just started again.” Maggie felt foolish, but something about the way Hannah smiled at her made her feel that it didn’t really matter.

“I’m sure you’re wonderful. Why don’t you play something? Here,” Hannah moved over to make room for Maggie on the bench.

“Oh god, I couldn’t. I really couldn’t. I’m terrible. All these people...” Maggie looked around at the crowd by the fireplace and at the window. “There must be fifty people in this room alone.”

Hannah laughed. “You’re just shy. They’re sloshed, most of them. Do you really think they’ll even notice? Most of them are just trying to find someone to take home tonight, anyway. They’ll tell you you’re brilliant even if you’re miserable--” she looked Maggie over and raised an eyebrow-- “especially in that dress.”

Maggie’s hands instinctively flew to her bodice. She moved her hands over the material as if to smooth out wrinkles or brush away crumbs. She looked around again, then hopped off the barstool and moved to the piano bench, surprising herself with the quickness of the move.

“I hate this dress,” she said forcefully to Hannah, leaning towards her. “It looks ridiculous. I’m not fit to wear something like this. Look at me. It’s obscene.”

Hannah just grinned at her, then started laughing. Maggie started laughing, too. It seemed so trivial, all of a sudden, the way she’d made such a fuss over how she looked. She glanced at the keyboard. It didn’t seem quite so intimidating, up close.

“Alright,” she said, looking back at Hannah. “I’ll play something. You have to promise not to laugh. It’s the only thing I know by heart.”

She took a deep breath and held her hands above the keys for a moment, then closed her eyes and started playing. It was Beethoven, a sonata, the first piece she’d learned to play the whole way through as a child. Her fingers still knew where every note was, although she stumbled a few times with her timing. Her head felt empty while she played, light and quiet. When she finished she looked up at Hannah and giggled. Hannah was smiling. Maggie’s eyes darted once around the room to make sure no one had been watching. Then she looked back at Hannah and shrugged.

“See?” she said, “I’m not very good.”

“You play wonderfully, darling,” Hannah said gravely. Then she smiled again and said “come on. Let’s go get drinks.”

Maggie followed her through the covered archway into the kitchen. The lights had been dimmed, and bottles and glasses were strewn everywhere. Hannah uncorked a bottle of wine, took a long sip straight from the bottle, then handed it to Maggie, who poured some into her glass, then handed it back. Hannah took another swig and chuckled.

“These parties,” she announced, “are totally nuts.”

“What do you mean?” Maggie asked. “It’s beautiful. It’s a lovely party.”

“Oh, come on. You know just what I mean. I can see it. I could see it as soon as I looked at you,” she leaned towards Maggie confidentially, “I have an eye for people.”

Maggie giggled. “I’m not sure what you mean, though. I’m really not.”

“Sure you do. Everybody gets all dressed up, comes to this party in some swanky part of town, looking their best only to get drunk and talk to people they don’t know about things they don’t care about. If they’re lucky they get a date or a phone number—well, I guess if they’re really lucky they get laid—but it never works out because it’s always going to be founded on something fake. Don’t you think it’s just profane?”

Maggie wasn’t sure what to say. Hannah had got her started again, feeling the way she had earlier. “I was so nervous...” she murmured into her glass.

“You were what?” Hannah asked, picking at the label on the bottle in her hand.

“No... I don’t know. Nothing.”

“No, what? You were nervous?”

“About coming here. I spent an hour in the bathroom, just staring at myself. Do you ever feel...like you just don’t match up? With all the ideas in your head, like you just don’t fit into them?” she paused and giggled nervously. She didn’t know if she was making any sense. She took down the rest of her glass in one gulp, then reached for the bottle and poured another. Her head felt fuzzy. Random thoughts kept circling around each other.

“Keep going.”

“Well, I don’t know...I’ve been so scared lately...I walk into a room and I can barely keep track of myself, I’m looking at everyone and I’m terrified because of what I know they’re thinking about me,” she was talking faster than she could think. She wanted to get it all out fast, because she knew once she’d said it she’d feel ashamed of having told it all to a stranger. “Every time I go out, do anything, I feel like I’m just pretending. Like it’s all a game I’m playing, and everyone else is too. No one ever acts like themselves. I could spend a whole day talking to a roomful of people and what would we actually know about each other? Nothing really. And I don’t know why, but it just terrifies me. I don’t know. Am I making sense?”

Hannah cocked her head and looked at Maggie for a minute. Maggie turned away and fidgeted uncomfortably with the stacks of cocktail napkins on the counter.

“See?” Hannah finally said, “I could tell just by looking at you that you’d know what I mean.”

Maggie smiled. Suddenly she realized she hadn’t even told Hannah her name. She held out her hand, “I’m Maggie.”

Hannah started laughing. Maggie stood awkwardly with her hand outstretched for a moment, then started laughing with her. A dark-haired man with glasses and a red tie came into the kitchen to make himself a drink and eyed them uncomfortably. Maggie started laughing harder. After he left, she noticed that Hannah had stopped laughing.

“Is something the matter?”

“That guy, he’s just a prick, that’s all.”

“Do you know him?”

Hannah shook her head. “I just didn’t like the way he looked at us. He looked like a fucking prick.”

It surprised Maggie. Hannah didn’t look worked up, but there was a violent force in her voice that was alarming.

Then she started laughing again. “I’m sorry,” she said, “Never mind. Hey, come on upstairs with me. I’ll show you my paintings. Do you paint?” She got up and motioned towards the archway that lead into the hall. Maggie followed.

“God, no, I’m not...I’m not very artistic. I guess you are, I mean, obviously... with the piano, and the dancing, and now the painting. Do you do everything?”

Hannah stopped in the middle of the hallway. “I don’t dance,” she said, without turning around.

Something in her voice made Maggie feel it was best not to press the subject, so she followed her in silence to the third floor, where they stopped at a door at the end of the hall. Hannah turned around, and there was no trace on her face of what Maggie had detected in her voice. She smiled.

“This is my room,” she said, “I mean, this is where I’m staying right now. It was a guest room, but he’s got plenty of extra rooms, so we made this one into mine.” She opened the door. It was a large room, with a thick rug, a bed, and a small sofa. The walls had been covered in photographs, posters, postcards, and also scraps of paper, ticket stubs, bottle caps. There were a

number of paint tubes piled on the floor, as well as a palette and a few empty canvases. Maggie walked to the sofa and sat down.

Hannah reached for a package of cigarettes on the bed and handed one to Maggie. She lit both their cigarettes with a match and handed the bottle of wine to Maggie. Maggie poured the last of it into her glass and set it on the floor. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the dresser and smiled.

“This is closer to how I pictured myself,” she said.

Hannah looked up from rummaging through one of the dresser drawers. “You look stunning, my dear,” she said.

“When I tried this dress on it made me feel like I would be like a movie star tonight. You know, hair falling down the shoulders, a glass of wine, sitting and looking sultry and smoldering and glamorous, all smoke and diamonds. Like Ava Gardner or Ingrid Bergman.”

“Smoke and diamonds, diamonds and smoke,” said Hannah, emerging from the drawer with a half-empty bottle of whiskey. “I like that.”

She took a drink from the bottle and dragged a portfolio case from under the bed. The paintings were beautiful. Maggie’s favorite was the smallest painting, of a forest that seemed to go on forever. The trees were uniform, tall and straight, leading off the canvas into the sky. Their shadows were long and black on the yellow ground, and the sky itself was a dark red with an orange ball of sun hanging beyond the trees. Maggie stared at it for a long time. It touched her, though she wasn’t sure why, the way the image was so still and so violent at once.

“These are beautiful,” she said, “they’re really amazing. You’re very talented. Where did you learn to do this?”

Hannah shrugged, “it’s just something to do, you know.” She ran her hands over the bedspread and stared out the window while Maggie finished her wine. Then suddenly she looked up at her with a grin.

“Hey, come on, I want to show you something.” She leapt up and took Maggie’s hand, leading her out the bedroom door.

“Where are we going?”

“Come on. You’ll like it.”

She took her to another door at the other end of the hallway, which opened onto another set of stairs. She led Maggie up the stairs, and then opened the door at the top onto the roof.

The snow was still falling, and the rooftop was covered now with about an inch of wet powder. Maggie shivered and laughed. The air was cold but she liked it, it felt clean on her skin.

“Look,” said Hannah.

From the rooftop they could see the streets, and the tall buildings in the distance, all covered with snow. The white lights strung through the trees were glowing below. It was quiet, the voices coming from downstairs only a hushed murmur. Maggie smiled and Hannah squeezed her hand. She shook two cigarettes out of the package in her other hand, lit them both and handed one to Maggie. They walked to the far edge of the roof and stood in silence. Maggie laughed in short bursts and glanced now and then at Hannah, who just stood and stared.

“I love the snow,” Maggie said after a while. “And Christmas. It makes me feel sort of sad, but I like that. When it’s snowing it feels like the whole world is just quieted down a little. I feel like I can breathe a little better. Like things in my head are sort of muffled.”

“You’re lucky,” Hannah said without looking at her, “but don’t always count on it. It can always get taken away.” Maggie turned to watch Hannah. She looked perfect in the snow, with her white-blond hair and her pale skin. Her eyes looked so dark and private. Standing with her in the snow, Maggie felt almost real.

And then, Maggie wasn’t sure why, but suddenly and without thinking, she stepped closer to Hannah, put her hand on her face, and kissed her, full on the mouth. The minute she did it, all the blood rose up into her face and the whole world came spinning back into her head. She felt dizzy and afraid. She shook the snow out of her hair and ran to the door, back inside and downstairs. Hannah didn’t follow.

Maggie found Louis in the small sitting room off the main living room, and he gave her a big smile and a kiss on the cheek. He was jolly and laughing, which Maggie guessed meant he’d been drinking pretty heavily, too. She was glad; if he was drunk, he wouldn’t be so observant or questioning.

“Do you mind if we go?” she said, “I’m getting a little tired of socializing.”

They said goodnight to the host, who kissed Maggie on both cheeks and wished them a merry Christmas. In the taxi, Louis stroked Maggie’s back and ran his fingers along her neck and through her hair. She put her hand on his knee and tried not to think, but she felt instead like her mind was tumbling over itself. She couldn’t keep track of herself.

In Louis’ apartment, Maggie unpinned her hair and tied it loosely at the back of her head instead. She stared at herself for a long time in the bathroom mirror, then went back out to Louis, who was leafing through a magazine on his coffee table.

“Hey,” he said to her, “That woman you were with all night—John’s sister... what’s her name?”

“Hannah?” Maggie asked, walking to the piano in the corner of the room and sitting down.

“Yeah, her. I was talking to John—you know, the reason she’s living with him, I guess, is because she went nuts. Totally nuts, I guess. She was in a hospital for six months. Now their parents don’t want her living on her own, so she’s there with him. Wild, huh? You wouldn’t know it looking at her. I guess she’s always been that way, though. Artistic temperament—isn’t that what they call it?”

“Yeah. Artistic temperament.” Maggie played a few notes on the piano in no order. Louis stood up and came over to her, rubbing her back and kissing her neck while she stared at the black and white keys.

“You look gorgeous” he said, “you look absolutely stunning tonight.”

She tried to respond, but she felt choked. She turned around and smiled. He kissed her, but she had to pull away. It was getting hard to breathe.

“Do you want a drink or something? Something warm?” She nodded. Louis smiled and kissed her forehead. “I’ll make some coffee. Or some tea. Which one?”

“Tea,” she managed to say, and Louis went into the kitchen, humming to himself.

She played a few more random notes, then sat up straight and positioned her hands above the keys. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe deeply, then opened them and looked down at her fingers. They looked very far away. She started to move them over the keys as she had at the party, but the sounds that came out of the piano were hollow and jumbled. She tried again, but she couldn’t get it right. Her throat felt small and tight. She was going to cry.

She took her coat off of the sofa and put it on. There was a pen on the coffee table—she used it to scribble a note to Louis, which she left on the piano bench. She opened and closed the front door as quietly as she could.

The snow was falling hard enough now that there was a clean sheet of white, free of footprints, on the sidewalk. Maggie walked two blocks wiping the stray tears off of her cheeks with cold hands, then stood on the corner under the streetlights. She stood staring into the bright bulb shining down onto the street, the bottom of her dress soaked with snow and her mind turning gently to static.