

Release: Part 2

Written by Smoke Signals

Friday, 31 December 2010 19:13 - Last Updated Tuesday, 01 March 2011 04:17

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By Freida Theant

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"The nametag on your jumper," she replied, paused while she livened her Pall Mall with a short tug and opened her mouth packed with the downy cloud. And then instantly, with her gulp of air, it vanished within, revealing her delectable mouth. For a space of three heartbeats, there was stillness, broken by the muted rush of her opaque breath. "You must have forgotten you're wearing that."

"You're right; I always forget. But you don't have any nametag."

"Right O. My name is Allison Lessing," and she parked her cigarette in the transparent tray to extend her right hand in a formal acknowledgement. "Glad to know you Allen Dane. So what are you? What I mean is, are you in the U.S. Navy?"

"Coast Guard. This is our summer cruise." He asked, "Did you see it? The three masted bark? Docked in Hamilton?"

"From a distance, but I would dearly love to see it up close. Can you arrange that?" The perfectly formed ash on her cigarette retained the defined shape of the unlit tip but was now too long. Her slender fingers, so pale, and tipped with fingernails painted the color of venous blood pushed the glass bottom of the tray with the edge of the ash, angled the cigarette up and rotated several turns, sloughing off the waste. "I should be ever so grateful," she pleaded.

"Sure. I'd be glad to show you the old banana," he laughed. "But, it took me a while to get over here to St George. I kinda wanted to get to see the old fort and stuff before I leave. I like seein' the things from the pirate days. Could you wait until I've seen some of the sights?"

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"Oh, of course! I wouldn't dream of keeping you from your tour."

"So, how did you want to arrange this? Wanna meet me in Hamilton? Maybe sometime this afternoon?" he suggested.

"Well, if I understood you rightly, you had plans to tour the historical sites, Right?"

"Yeah."

"So how would it be if I joined you and we made a touring party of it?" she made sure he had time to consider his response by taking another pull from her diminishing "fag" and holding the lungful longer than usual. To extend the lull, she slipped the thinnest of exhalations out from her pursed lips in a leisurely jet that barely missed his face and scudded past his ear. "After all, I came here on holiday, and I shouldn't like to be accused of hedonism; missing the cultural spots just to play and engage in scandalous living. That simply wouldn't do!"

Allen's response was cautious, as he thought to himself, 'a woman of such ... well, breeding, lovely and confident shouldn't be so forward, should she? What about that famous English Reserve? But then, Gold Is Where You Find It; so Carpe Diem.'

"A touring party, then? Sure, why not?" Responding before he had time to consider any further objections. "I had my eye on the ruins of the Unfinished Church, and Fort St Catherine. Whadda ya think? That sound good?"

"Quite," and with the same resolve, jammed the remainder of the butt hard onto ashtray like the judge hammers his gavel after the ruling. "Shall we?" she invited him, rising from the table, gathering her purse and leaving the tip. "Let me get the bill for this one," she remarked as they neared the cashier's counter, "sort of a prepayment for the cigarettes I'm going to cadge off of you."

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Allen grinned. "Sounds like a good deal. I guess you like'em?"

Settling the bill she answered, "They're a little milder than mine. That's what I like. Of course, that means I might smoke more of them. Beware!" she warned him sweetly.

Talking and walking, they shared tidbits of their lives to better acquaint each other with their own personas while traveling the quaint streets with names such as Duke of York and Duke of Kent. Heading toward the Fort St Catherine and the Unfinished Church and guided by the tourist signs; she walking closer to his side than was usual for casual acquaintances he found her warmth and her charm intoxicated him. But he struggled to behave naturally while suppressing his giddiness, interrupted by bouts of suspicion. 'There has to be a reason she's so ... interested in me. But what could it be?'

"Church's Folly Lane," she called out the name on the approaching street sign. "This simply has to be it!"

Climbing the grassy incline they approached the ruins. Mostly cut stone, the first story of the modest cathedral was largely constructed with a tower at the rear that extended into a second floor, flanked by buttresses and extended walls, but there was no roof at any level. Passing through the high- arched main entry, they saw walls resting on the same grass foundation as the front lawn, supporting nothing but the air above. Going inside, they passed great blocks of stones at the main portal that were scattered as though ready for tomorrow's construction, but were in fact abandoned a hundred years earlier. Heroic brick arches formed naves in roofless overhead arcs, as the walls reached up into the blue, and just stopped. A row of pedestals ran the full length front to back, waiting a century for the support columns to be laid atop.

"Looks like those ancient abbeys back home," she broke the quiet, pensively. "Only this one was never finished before it fell to ruin. And it's nowhere near as old!"

"It's an illusion," Allen summarized. "At eye level you feel like you're touring an eighteenth century church, but the grass and missing roof says different. Like being indoors and outdoors all at once."

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"It's intimidating, she affirmed, "and a bit mysterious."

They traced the perimeter of the walls, scrutinizing and absorbing the details of the aging stone until Alison rested on the pedestal nearest the altar.

"I could really use one of your fags," she said. "This building really does affect one, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, struggling to retrieve the pack from the tight folds of his uniform pocket. Tipping the case upside down and tapping out the looser Pall Malls through the rectangular tear, he offered her the pick of the irregularly raised posts.

She, then he, plucked their choices, and he flicked his Zippo to life with his right hand, while cupping his left around her cigarette. As before, she took his lighter hand in hers and lovingly brushed the tip with the yellow triangle until it transferred its orange-gold color to the brown tobacco. Releasing his hand gently, she formed a "V" with the fore and index fingers, and slid it upwards, capturing her cigarette at the base, and anchoring it so as to draw in the discard puff. As Allen brought the wind-flickering flame to his Pall Mall, her hand overlaid his cupping hand, giving him double the windbreak. He felt the electric flow of her touch and the surge of excitement within. His lips sucked flame hard into his cigarette, jetted out the waste drag, and then chanced to raise his eyes. They went directly into hers, brown and green flecked; that penetrated him to his very depths. He felt his soul burning in harmony with the brilliance of her coal as she kissed her cigarette in a lengthy and leisurely pull.

He tore his eyes free and upon her left hand he spotted a thin gold band with a diamond set on top. He felt a chill seize his chest. "Allison, you're not married, are you?"

With barely concealed pain she blasted her last drag forcefully, creating a nimbus cloud large enough to hide her face when replied, "No, but I am engaged."

"Umm Huhmm," was all he could manage in reply, with his voice trailing off on the last syllable. The quiet resumed as Allen's mouth sucked hard on his Pall Mall, his fingers squeezing the paper skin so hard it crinkled and the glowing coal actually crackled as it ate its way toward the

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other end. He ejected the remains of his lungful violently as he rose from the stone seat.

"You know, Allison" he said, trying to restore normalcy to this devastating moment, "the tower behind the altar ..."

"Wait, Allen," she interrupted. "Would you do something for me? Could you not call me Allison? I only use that in formal situations. My chums call me Nimbsy. I should like it very much if you would too."

"Okay, Nimbsy. Nimbsy? Why do they call you that?" Allen asked.

With no further comment, she looked straight at him, took an exaggerated pull on her cigarette, and blew a billowing cloud for his benefit. "Nimbus cloud," she answered, jabbing her cigarette at the puffy form for emphasis, "hence, Nimbsy. Quite simple really."

He laughed in spite of the anguish, or perhaps because of it. "That's funny."

And in relief, she too laughed, albeit nervously until she remembered, "you were saying something when I interrupted you. What was it you were trying to tell me?"

"Just that the tower over by the altar has an opening and I can see some stairs. Think you'd wanna go up and look out over this from the pulpit overhead?"

She stood up in reply, "Yes, I should like that. Might be exciting." She planted her half-finished cigarette in her mouth and squinted slightly as the curls of smoke irritated her eyes, but she focused on her left hand, twisting the engagement ring until she freed it from her ring finger. "Forgot I had this on," she commented darkly as she shoved the jewelry within the recesses of her handbag. To his surprise he noted her look of thorough disgust.

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"Something wrong?" he asked as they passed into the darkness of the tower.

As she lifted her foot onto the first step of a curling spiral of stones, she said tersely, "I'm here on holiday precisely to forget about that!"

Surveying the structure, they realized that the foot traffic over the intervening century had worn the centers down into rounded craters, leaving the joints worn and open to light. It hardly inspired confidence to be climbing a spiral staircase so obviously in bad repair, but she continued leading the way.

"I don't understand," Allen climbing right behind her. "Don't you like your fiancée?"

She trod the steps cautiously, "He's a rotter. A beast of a ... I can't even call him a man."

"I don't get it," he said, pausing on a broad step to look out the small opening just above her head. "Why the hell would you be engaged to someone you can't stand?"

Illuminated only by narrow window above they were in the deepest shadows.

"Because, it's all been arranged. I've no say in this matter," she replied her voice rising, as she stopped and turned back to him. "My grandfather made that perfectly clear. It's a matter of what's best."

"They can't make you marry someone you can't stand," he protested. "Who is he, anyway?"

"He's Hanley Fitzroy. Earl of Westumbria."

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"An Earl? What's wrong with that?"

"Well, for starters, he's nearly twenty years older than I" her tone implied that this was the least of the objections.

"I thought that was common in Europe. Husbands being much older?" he said. "I've heard it makes for a more stable marriage."

"For another, he's not right."

"Whaddy mean, 'not right?'"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," she apologized, consoling herself with a badly needed hit from her diminishing Pall Mall. In the reduced illumination of the tower, the glow from her wand's stoked coal highlighted the curve of her aquiline nose and patrician cheekbones. Whooshing out her pent up smoke and anger, she reconsidered her response, "Let's just say that he is a man of peculiar habits, all of which are more than a little dotty. He's a bad sort, but he puts on a good show. We shan't speak of it further, if you don't mind."

Allen was taken aback, "No, not if you don't want to."

"And besides, he can't stand for a woman smoke," she finished the litany. "Imagine me, Nimbsy, for heaven's sake, prohibited from smoking in my own place?"

To be continued...