

The Stand-Off

by Freida Theant

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Diane looked forward all week to this girls-night-out, specifically the 'casino' that would assemble after the party swelled and got noisy. She had already made her fashionable entrance to the party, which was rocking, but expecting the players to gather and make up the 'casino' at any moment, she fled outside to wait in a patio lawn chair. She drew thoughtfully, maybe desperately on her Eve 120 and in the twilight of this summer's star-flecked evening, her soothing cigarette glared out for as many seconds as her lips coaxed inward the stream of smoky flavor.

Turning her sun-kissed brunette head toward the hostess' one-and-a-half story ranch, she pursed her harp-shaped scarlet lips to slide the flowery filter out, leaving the merest tendrils of white streamers to seep from the stained fibers of the filter. Glancing at the sliding glass door of the bright living room, she saw the time had arrived, which brought her to her feet immediately.

Her delicate fingers tipped in American Beauty Red polish, matched to the same shade of lip gloss shot the floral cigarette to the paving stone; the butt exploded angry sparks all around until she crushed them with a twist of her shiny black Vuitton flat. The energized woman fairly trotted to the beckoning door-wall, exhaling the last drag violently, which left a chalky bluish-smoke trailing behind her in a rotating funnel-shaped cloud.

Diane in her petite black dress seized a nearby folding chair and elbowed her way between the other raucous guests to position herself in the dining room at the newly placed card table. Seven other competitors did the same; dragging over seats and scattering cards, cash, ashtrays, drinks and lighters on the octagonal, green-felt surface. This dense crowd-within-a-crowd was firing up the opening round of amateur poker here within Sharon's monthly girls-night-out.

She dropped her clutch purse, pack of Eve light 120's and Yves St Laurent lighter before her, and captured a glass ashtray. She appeared to ignore the announcement that, "this would be five card stud, nothing wild" from the middle aged Italian-looking brunette shuffling the deck, and teased another of her Eves slowly from its feminized pack. She inserted her cigarette between her Rose-glossed lips hesitating; suggesting she hadn't decided whether or not to smoke or just gossip on. The unlit Eve bobbed up and down in sync with her consonants while she gathered up the just-dealt five card hand. Holding her cards with her left hand, she neared her lighter to

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the tobacco with the other, but it passed through the flame in staccato arcs. Finally Diane steadied the cigarette, burned in the ignition and pulled on the Eve, hands-free, with her mouth collapsed into creases from the force of her draw. Fluffy plumes of smoke jetted outward, thrust from her nostrils over her hand. She pulled a second toke while still exhaling; her personal space was shrouding in varying densities of grey-blue haze dominating her corner of the action.

She was marking her territory with her exhales. The ditzy, cigarette-chaining, slightly sloshed party-girl was working her show.

All this to hide the fact that card gambling promised more than just the allure of monetary gain for Diane; winning the game was her all-consuming rush. During some tourneys even the value of the prize money lost its importance. Within that first hour of play this woman studied the other player's game strategies and habits, which made her a calculating and usually unbeatable opponent.

But she took pains to keep that hidden. Her performance would have impressed Meryl Streep, convincing players that she brought only a novice's understanding to the field. For as long as she projected that innocent "Oh My Gawsh, isn't this exciting?" personality, she could scrutinize her opponents' gestures undetected while her neighbors revealed more than their "poker-face" personas hid. That strategy and counting cards got her insights into which cards they used to base their bets, calls and bluffs. Hefty chunks of the pot mounded around her as the night played out, but after that initial hour, her winnings gave her away and less-dedicated players folded, moving off to the bar to dampen the sting of their losses. Those die-hards who stayed finally took her seriously, but it was a little late for them to bring their 'A' game. On a bad night, she might be the next to last to leave the game, broke and furious for failing to take the honors of triumph.

Smoking featured in her strategy of deceptions and reading tell-tale signs. Mostly she acted a routine that did not vary from hand-to-hand, making no distinction between the good and the bad. But she used her flashy Eves 120 to attract attention and command the table's visual field at certain critical points. Her cigarette light-up routine signaled that here was a slightly tipsy player ripe for the plucking and her Eves helped during bluffs when she needed to hide a bad hand. When she realized she had a loser, she stubbed out her current cigarette excitedly after reviewing her cards, squint her eyes and flame up a new Eve joyfully, with one of those extended light-ups where she held the flame long enough to light three cigarettes. Her resulting mouth-exhale was noisy and she plumed the smoke like a spray painter: players assumed she'd just gotten a good hand.

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She also understood what competitors were telling her with their individual gestures and smoking style; things they never thought to include in their 'poker-face' routine.

The 40's something red head across from her tended to abandon her cigarette to the ashtray and burn untended while she manipulated the cards with both her hands, examining the new hand. If the time exceeded a minute, Diane sensed her cards were disappointing; shuffling them around to see if they looked better in a different order. On the other hand, when her hand showed promise, she gripped her Winston firmly in her apricot tinted mouth, and tugged serious drafts out of it, pumping the plumes away in tumbling roils. She was easy to read.

The mid-twenties, salon-tanned blond in the lavender blouse and lavender nails actually paused the game when a round of betting came to her, by withholding her bet several nerve-wracking moments while she shook a Marlboro Lite 100 from its box, grandly slid it between her lilac-hued lips and lifted a Bic to burn it into action before responding. Diane correctly read that to mean that this woman had almost no card sense, and that her hand was too confusing. "She'll be easy to knock off," Diane reasoned. "She'll be broke before the hour is up; she doesn't know how to play her cards". Lavender blond widened her mouth and let a dazzling white smoke balloon project for a millisecond before she snapped it back within, all of which preceded her announcement, which was merely to call. Diane figured she'd take the pot on this round.

The Italian looking woman who dealt the opening hand always flash-flamed her Marlboro reds when her hand was even remotely attractive. While she pulled on the filter, the cigarette inclined upward during the drag, and slowly descended as she gulped in some air to mix with the draft of smoke. If the hand was bad enough to fold, she actually picked up her Marlboro, up ended it and stared at the smoldering cherry before inserting the filter between her thin lips, like she needed to examine it before taking the hit. When her newly dealt hand puzzled her, she set her elbow on the felt surface and kept the Marlboro pinched between her first two fingers until she had decided her strategy. Then she flicked the ash off into the tray and tore a brief but powerful pull out of the cigarette, popped a quick snap exhale followed by twin cones racing away from her nostrils.

Diane's instincts were accurate, and she took that pot, for the reasons she predicted and several others over the next hour. Before 11 that night the lavender-shirted blond folded and seven rounds later, the 40's something redhead drifted off like smoke in the wind. The remaining players wanted to get up, stretch their legs, and relieve themselves, so Diane left the

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table and waited her turn outside the bathroom door. While she stood in line she recognized the Italian-looking brunette next to her. She radiated self-assurance, even if her garments were more 'soccer-mom'.

"You've been doing good at the table," she said to Diane, quick-brushing her dark hair with her silver-frosted nails.

Diane answered 'in-character', "Oh, I'm just lucky tonight. You're doin' good, too....you're still in the game!"

"Yeah! Luck has a bad habit of running out," she replied crisply, "but real talent keeps a winning streak going on and on. I wonder which applies to you." The bathroom door opened to discharge its latest visitor, and this woman ducked in parting with, "I guess we'll just find out."

When the four players reseated, Diane's stack of winnings looked small, but the value wasn't. A freckled redhead with good card sense dealt the next hand, and when Diane fanned her cards, she peered above to realize the brunette from the bathroom was marking her every move. Their eyes met, and something in that penetrating gaze gave Diane the chill a sparrow chick feels when the snake transfixes it with its beady glare.

However, she kept focused on the brunette, and casually brought her half-finished Eve back up to her parted lips without blinking. Clear-eyed, Diane drew purposefully for four seconds, letting the shimmering glower of the superheated coal fling a wordless challenge to her antagonist while she glared down the barrel of her cigarette. The brunette returned the gesture, never blinking nor straying, even when a stray smoke streamer slipped up her cheek and stung her eye. Instead she ripped an extended burn glaring out of her Marlboro like a visual war-cry responding to Diane's defiance. The duel lasted only a few seconds, followed by rolling billows of smoke from each, rolling toward each other and colliding like two storm fronts in the middle of the no-man's-land of the gaming surface.

That silent body language set off alarms in Diane's subconscious, and once she realized the significance of the stand-off duel that just happened, she took remedial action. Onlookers and players noticed nothing unusual.

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Though Diane had some powerful cards, she merely folded her hand. On the next deal, she overplayed some pathetic cards and lost that round and the respect of the players. For three or four more rounds, Diane continued to push losing hands, and folded the ones most likely to dominate. Her mound of winnings diminished over the next forty minutes until she had about the same amount of cash as she did when she started out. Players and spectators were relieved when she called it a night at the table; no one enjoyed watching a player's luck 'crash and burn'.

She would seek out Sharon just before departing, to thank her for the night, but first she slipped outside to the patio and get some fresh, cool air and enjoy the starry heavens with another Eve. The Italian-looking soccer-mom followed her out, and to her surprise, offered Diane a light.

"Boy, your luck kinda ran out back there, didn't it?" the brunette said, now lighting up her own Marlboro. Only the background sounds of the party were heard as Diane didn't respond. "Well that just proves you aren't one of those hustlers that hit these little suburban house parties," soccer-mom concluded.

Diane finally dropped her performance role, "You're in law enforcement....vice squad?"

The brunette didn't answer, but flashed the barest of smiles, "So, maybe you figured out what was happening? I hope so...and I'm glad for you....you seem like a nice lady. Enjoy your evening." With that she turned back toward the party's blaring bustle and disappeared into the throng.