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Maxine

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Maxine

Author Bio

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Maxine

NOELLE G. MUNI

Maxine picked nervously at her nail beds as she approached the Spicella Spanish Kitchen. Looking down at them, she thought she should've painted them, or at least not bitten them all off. Too late now though.

She pulled back the heavy door and walked in, the familiar smell of fresh tortillas and peppers overwhelming the room. It was her favorite restaurant, the kind of place where the meal takes ages to make but you know it'll be damn good. It would be, at least, if you were able to eat in peace and not on a shitty blind date you didn't want to go on with *Matt*, whoever that is. Maxine looked down at her wrist-watch. 7:02. He was supposed to be here at seven, but there was no sign of him. Maxine honestly hoped he wouldn't show up. Harper was the one who set the whole thing up, anyway. She panned the room, maybe he was here already and had chosen to wait inside. A few of the tables were occupied by families, one with a couple chowing down on a plate of empanadas, but none of them occupied by a lone man. She approached the young waitress who stood staring down at the screen on the host stand.

"Hey, I—"

"One moment please." The waitress, who upon closer inspection was visibly frustrated, furiously tapped the screen, "this stupid thing isn't working again. Give me a second." She grumbled and disappeared into the kitchen. Maxine, quite honestly, wasn't sure what to do. Was she supposed to stand right there or was that too intimidating? She didn't think it was, but she was kind of tall. She took a step back and pulled out her phone, opening her text chat with Harper. She typed out a message, her thumb hovering over the send button.

When're you going out tonight?

She waited for a moment, and finally pressed down. No little text bubbles appeared, she tucked her phone back into her bag. She could see a small fridge behind the stand. It was lined with an assortment of glass bottled "Jarritos" that shimmered as the light shone through them, casting an array of colored waves of light. Maxine gazed at the purple light for a moment, watching it ripple against

the tiles as the ambient music of the restaurant became muffled by her thoughts. It reminded her of the glow of the huge purple sign that shone against the brick walls of the Electric. She could still see Harper dancing beneath that sign.

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“We’re not even inside yet, you can hardly hear the music.” Maxine tried not to smile as Harper flailed around in a strange series of movements she insisted was dancing but appeared to Maxine to be more of a universal sign for distress.

“Max, the music is inside me! I am one...” she paused dramatically, looking around before lowering her voice to say, “with the song.” She giggled and resumed her dance, the sparkled pattern of her dress glistening in the purple neon cast onto the sidewalk from above. Maxine would have found this unbearably annoying from anyone else, but Harper just had this something about her. Maybe it had to do with the purple lighting, or that the muffled song playing inside the bar was actually pretty good, who really knows? All she knew was that instead of being an asshole, she just smiled and shook her head.

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Harper was probably out for the night by now. Maxine checked her watch. 7:05. If he was going to be a no-show, this whole thing would be extra pathetic. She thought about having to sit there for the rest of the night, either alone or with her date who apparently had no propensity for punctuality, and made up her mind. “Whatever. I’m getting out of here.”

Maxine pushed open the heavy doors and stepped out onto the sidewalk, her boots clicking on the pavement. She adjusted the grocery bag she held on her shoulder; she’d started using it in place of a purse for convenience sake. It wasn’t one of those shitty plastic bags, it was a themed reusable one, the kind they make you pay a little extra for so you could believe you’re saving the planet. She wasn’t really sure when she got it; things like that just sort of appear eventually.

The sun just dipped down over the horizon, shining a warm light over the street. A few blocks from the Spicella Spanish Kitchen the sidewalk curved around a large, grassy hill. It led up to a good spot where you could look out over the whole city and see everything. As her skirt brushed against the hill’s collection of wildflowers she could imagine the last time she’d visited.

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Harper’s golden hair was practically glowing. Maxine embarrassingly couldn’t help but think that she looked like an angel. Harper was

fiddling with a small bundle of various wildflowers she had collected throughout the walk: blue ones, purple ones, yellow ones of course. She took hold of Maxine's hand and gently placed the delicate flowers in it. She smiled up at her, "Hand picked just for you."

Maxine could feel the warmth spreading across her face. She fingered through them, selecting a small pink blossom from the bunch. She carefully tucked it behind Harper's ear.

"Am I beautiful now?" Harper asked, batting her eyelashes playfully.

"You were beautiful without it," Maxine grew red hearing her own words. She could not believe she said that.

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As she walked closer and closer to the apartment, her heart was nearly beating out of her chest. *What if Harper's there in the apartment sitting on the couch and when I walk in we make eye contact and she sees the time and knows I didn't meet him and looks at me disgusted and thinks I'm a horrible, horrible person and never wants to see me again.* She mulled over the thought for a while, picking at her lip nervously. Before she could make a break for it, her boots brought her to the door of the apartment building.

The lobby was freezing, as usual. There was no reason for the air conditioning to be on, it wasn't even hot outside. Warm, sure, but hot? Not at all. She grumbled to herself and shivered slightly as she waited for the elevator. *Ding.* "Thank god," she sighed with relief when the shaft was empty. She pressed the grimy little button labeled "3" and waited for the doors to close, shredding her lip all the while. The apartment door was right across from the elevator. There was no time for mental preparation. If Harper were inside sitting on the couch—which was, admittedly, extremely unlikely—Maxine would simply have to combust on the spot to avoid the inevitable conversation. It was the only reasonable option. Fortunately, though, the apartment was empty, all of its lights dark.

"Harper?" she called out to the dark room. No answer. She wasn't sure whether she was relieved or disappointed.

She threw open the door to her room, flopping down onto her still unmade bed careful to leave her feet dangling off the edge as she pushed her shoes off by the heels. She checked her phone again. Still no message from Harper. For the next hour or so she mindlessly scrolled, thirty second clips cutting through the brief silence between swipes. Eventually, though, something drew her eye to the floor. It was her best dress, green with a tie in the middle and a wide neckline that gently draped tulip sleeves over the shoulders. Harper had wanted her to wear it tonight.

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“Oh Max!” she had cried out pulling it from the closet, “You have to wear this! Matt is going to absolutely die when he sees you in it.”

Maxine was spread out lazily on the bed in a ratty, oversized Vampire Weekend t-shirt, shoveling popcorn in her mouth, her hair thrown up in a mess of tight, dark curls. With her mouth still full she slightly lifted her head, “who even is this Matt guy?”

“He’s a good guy, he’s in my philosophy class and he always makes these witty comments. I feel like you two could bounce off of each other, get a good rapport going. Granted, he’s not as much of an ass as you are.” Harper’s smug little smirk seeped into her words.

“I pride myself on believing nobody is.”

“Yeah, yeah. Max, we have lived together for over a year and I have never once heard you speak one word about a guy. You need to get some! Live a little! I know if I waited for you to put yourself out there I would die before it happened so be grateful I did the legwork for you. Now get excited cause you’re going to have a great time in *this dress*,” She laid the dress on the bed, satisfied with her choice, “I want to see the final product before I leave! You’ll thank me!” With that she left the room, closing the door gently behind her.

Maxine was wholly unimpressed with this “Matt” who she still didn’t know anything about aside from the fact that he was (1) a man and (2) witty in philosophy class. Neither sounded interesting. She sat up and took the dress up into her hands. The thought of putting on her best clothes to impress some guy made her lips curl in disgust. Maxine rolled her eyes and yelled out after her. “I’ll go out, but I’m not wearing this!”

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She grabbed the dress and rushed into the bathroom. With a couple products and a near breakdown she managed to tame her hair, tidy the uneven wings of her eyeliner, and slide into the dress, carefully ensuring that both sides of the bow were exactly right. She adjusted the front pieces of her hair, “A little to the left, no that’s too far. More to the right. Ah, whatever.”

It had been over an hour. Still no text from Harper. She grabbed her keys from the kitchen counter and headed out. Now, to the Electric. Harper loved that place and it was a Friday night. If Maxine was going to find her anywhere, it would be on that dance floor. She contemplated waiting for a cab. No, there was no time. She began walking, practically running, toward downtown. Maybe the guy who sold her that grocery bag had it right, she really was saving the planet, one unused cab at a time. The walk wasn’t as

bad as she remembered, and before long she could see the giant purple sign.

“She’s gotta be here,” she muttered to herself, sliding into the doorway. The floor was vibrating, dim lighting broken up by flashes of neon. Maxine agonized for a moment before heading deeper inside. She made her way to the bar, elbowing her way past some assholes taking up all the stools. She propped herself up on the counter to better survey the crowd. She poured over every face in the room at least a hundred times, and each time none of them were hers.

“Get out of the way! I’m tryna get a drink!” Maxine shot a glare in the direction of the complaint, but hesitantly obliged and swatted her way out of the crowd. It didn’t make any sense; it’d been months since Harper hadn’t spent a weekend either at home or here. Maxine thought about going home and waiting for Harper there, but she knew that she would lose her nerve. She thought about trying the surrounding storefronts. It was a long shot, sure, but she was running out of options. There were restaurants, a psychic, shops. On the far corner was the Quick Fare.

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She remembered the night a couple months ago. It was the early hours of the morning, neon and moonlight illuminating the street. Harper had been dancing all night and ditched her shoes a couple hours earlier. Maxine, who spent most of the evening idling on the far wall, was enlisted to guard the heels with her life. Luckily, there were no attempted thefts so she was able to avoid lethal combat. Harper came scurrying out the exit and ran up to Maxine.

“If I may,” Maxine knelt, holding one of the heels up.

“It would be your pleasure,” she laughed as Maxine slipped the shoe onto her foot and offered her the second. “Did you have a good night, Max?”

“Yeah, I think so.” She stood up, dusting off her knees and adjusting her dress. “Going out like this isn’t really my thing.”

“Let’s try your thing.”

Maxine questioned her sincerity, but her genuine excitement was reassuring. “Well...” she paused. “Okay.”

Harper wrapped her hands around Maxine’s arm laughing. “The night is young!”

Maxine’s smile made her cheeks sore as they walked arm in arm to the Quick Fare.

“Your *thing* is going to the grocery store?” She teased.

“It’s part of the process.”

They roamed the aisles, selecting whatever their hearts desired. A couple bags of chips, some cookies, the like. They checked out, the over-worked cashier offering them a reusable grocery bag for a small fee. The woman behind them in line complimented the way their dresses looked together on the way out. Maxine couldn't help but agree.

They found themselves up on the hill over the city sitting on the scratchy blanket Maxine usually brought with her. It was small, so they laid close together, looking up into the sky. "I usually just come out here and think for a while." She paused. "I don't know if that's stupid."

"Stupid?! It's incredible! I can't believe you've never brought me here before. Look at all this!" Harper reached up toward the sky, pointing out patterns and twinkling lights Maxine had never seen before. She looked over at Harper, seeing all the little freckles dotting her cheeks that she had never noticed.

"Me neither."

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Maxine headed straight for the hill. The moonlight was enough to see by, her boots retracing her well trodden path until she reached the top. There she saw a scratchy blanket stretched out over the grass and a swath of blonde curls spread across it. She must've heard Maxine coming, since she propped herself up on her arm and faced her. Harper scooted over, making space on the blanket. Maxine blushed, totally speechless. "Come sit, Max. It's beautiful out."

Maxine obliged, taking the seat carved for her on the corner of the blanket. "Why're you up here?"

"I ran into Matt and he asked me where you were, and I figured you really only run off to one place. Plus, like I said, it's a really nice night."

"I'm sorry—"

"No, no, don't apologize. I should've known you wouldn't like being set up like that, I guess I just thought you could use some help putting yourself out there, you know? You're a gem, Max. Anyone would be lucky to get to know you as well as I do. I hate to see you alone."

Maxine thought her heart was going to beat out of her chest. "Alright, I just need to tell you this straight out, and I know that it could ruin everything, or maybe it won't, but I just have to say it."

Drawing her eyebrows together, worry spread across Harper's face as she sat up. She took Maxine's hand up into her own. "What's going on?"

Maxine clasped her hand around Harper's and closed her eyes. After a deep breath, she responded shakily, "I—" she physically pushed the words from her mouth, "I love you."

Harper sighed with relief. “Why would that ruin things? We’re best friends, of course I love you.”

“Right,” Maxine pulled her hand away, worried it was too clammy as her heart pounded in her throat. “I guess I was just overthinking it.”

“Don’t worry too much, Max.” Harper offered a reassuring smile. “Let’s just lay here for a while.” They both laid back on the blanket, shoulders gently pressed against each other. Her pulse beat against her skin, and she felt her ribs threaten to close in. *Of course*, Maxine chuckled softly, *of course I love you*.