

:: Dana's Weekly Insight :: 04.27.09 – The More Things Change



We had really been looking forward to the birthday celebration of our good friend. To mark the occasion of this particular birthday, he and his partner decided to host a black tie affair complete with big band, Australian pop star, mystery entertainer at 10 o'clock and carriage rides through Central Park at midnight.

I decided to wear the black, sleeveless *Dolce and Gabbana* with the black *Christian Louboutin* pumps rather than the short sleeved *Marc Jacobs* dress and the gold reptilian boots. Better to play it safe and err on the side of elegance. Auguste opted for a *Ralph Lauren* Tuxedo.

"Dad, you've got cat hair all over the back of your jacket," Gussie scolded Auguste, while zealously overseeing our preparation.

"Now stay away from Claude," she continued, punctuating every word with each swipe of her lint brush. Then, having successfully convinced me to lose the false eyelashes in favor of a few extra coats of mascara, she conducted her final inspection before giving us a thumbs up and sending us on our way.

The black town car was waiting for us when we stepped outside.

"63rd and Park Avenue," Auguste reiterated to the driver.

We settled into the back seat and I opened the window. The warm air brushed across my face and I allowed myself to finally exhale.

"I wonder who the entertainment is," I asked in anticipation of what I was sure would be a fun evening.

"Liza Minnelli," Auguste guessed, without giving it much thought.

"Too cliché," I decided, factoring in, however, that he does have this uncanny ability to figure these things out.

About fifteen minutes later as we began our approach, I made a quick call to Gussie to remind her that dinner was in the oven and to tell her that I'd check in with her later on.

"Just pull up here to the right," Auguste directed.

The driver stopped right in front of the stairs leading up to the front door, where men dressed up in kilts were standing at attention and holding bagpipes. The valet opened the car door.

Auguste grabbed my hand to help me out of the car. I waited while he put his jacket on again and then, together, we headed toward the door.

"You need to use the side door around the corner," the doorman insisted authoritatively as he pointed us in one direction while looking in another. Had I missed the part where Auguste says to the guy "We're here for the Reynolds party?" And maybe he had simply forgotten, because he was so busy, to say, "Good evening. Welcome. Have a nice time."

His curt instruction didn't make a lot of sense to us but I was navigating a pair of four inch high heels, Auguste was adjusting his black tie, the bagpipes were signaling our arrival-there was so much to pay attention to that we unconsciously obeyed his command.

Walking quickly because we were running a little late, we both slowed down to a halt after we turned the corner because men in white uniforms and little white caps were huddled in groups to catch a quick smoke. Truckers with dollies were wheeling boxes of food up dirty wooden ramps that led to the side door. Garbage lined the wall along the side of the building.

The men in the white uniforms and caps looked up at us and stopped talking as if to acknowledge that we were somehow misplaced; that we were, in fact, intruding. That is when it became crystal clear to me exactly where we were and exactly why, and I was momentarily transported back to that Sunday morning...

A friend had invited me to attend a brunch at Sotheby's for the unveiling of a collection and one of the staff assistants, who was also a host, turned to me over the poached eggs and caviar and asked,

"So, how long have you worked for Mrs. Eastwood...?"

And now here I was again-- in my black, sleeveless Dolce and Gabbanna dress, standing with Auguste wearing a Ralph Lauren tux at the back door--having been mistaken for "the help".

"You have got to be kidding me...," I inadvertently blurted out.

"Can I help you folks?"

The man walking toward us looked like someone who might be in charge.

"Uh, yeah. You can," I snapped, eager for the opportunity to unleash my righteous indignation.

"Apparently there's been some kind of mistake," I made sure to turn up my nose at the cigarette butts and the limp lettuce leaves that were surrounding my high heels. "Or is this the entrance that you're asking all of the guests to use tonight," I added without any interest in or consideration for diplomacy.

"I beg your pardon?" He seemed very concerned.

"We were told by, I presume one of your doormen, that we were to use the side entrance; you know, 'the back door'."

"Who? Who did that," he demanded.

"I'll tell you what," Auguste said, stepping in and leaning gently toward him, still adjusting his tie. "I'll point him out to you and then I'll let you take it from there".

"Folks, I'm really sorry. We've got a gospel choir performing at the party tonight and I'm sure he just thought that you were..."

"With the band?" I quipped. "Right, right. Because that's what we do. You know, when we get dressed up. We entertain."

Auguste just kept biting his lower lip.

I wasn't angry really. I was irritated at the reality check that never fails to suggest that I don't get to enjoy the luxury of being able to assume, that when people look at me they actually get who I am. I was resentful of the reminder that "we" don't benefit from certain automatic presumptions of honesty, competence, legitimacy and belonging that White people do. I was confronted by the fact that, I'm Black, and even I don't want to live next to, sit next to, be next to "the Black person" before they've proven to me that they're "okay".

I was regretful that we had unfortunately let our guard down.

We turned the corner heading back toward the front entrance and Auguste gestured toward the perpetrator as promised to the man in charge, and went inside. I lingered just long enough to watch him being pulled aside and then I hurried to catch up with Auguste recognizing, once again, that there is not a *Dolce and Gabbana* sleek enough or a *Ralph Lauren* Tuxedo slick enough to erase in an evening what history has so deeply ingrained.

Dana