

To Third Technique

I tell stories to get close to people. That's my first technique. Most nights, I truthfully hit two out of three. The second is finding things in common; for example, 'Oh, we both have two little brothers!' or 'Ohmygod, I love Grey's Anatomy', although many people fake this technique in order to get to the third technique: sex. I'll be the first to admit I'm one of the culprits; I've never even seen or read *Fight Club*, but it's my favorite movie *and* book (the first rule of *Fight Club* is "don't talk about *Fight Club*" and that's all I need to know to appear to be a die-hard fan).

The serendipitous moment happens when you check off your first technique and it leads to the second; once you check that off truthfully, the third technique is fireworks; it's ten jägerbombs without the heart attack or liver poisoning; it's flying above the world and seeing each city and each countryside from a bird's eye view. I spend many nights at Mama's Bar searching for the bird's view, unsuccessfully most of the time. Keira the bartender expects me every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday at the dingy Alphabet City joint that smells like joints, sweat, and PBRs. On Wednesdays, we talk about my job as a preschool teacher, her job as a bartender, our writing "on the side" (which we consider the job we actually want to do), men, cities in Europe older than any city in the US. On Fridays, she's prepared with the shot of jäger and can of Red Bull for me after my week of changing diapers, playing duck duck goose, and wiping mucus off mouths and noses of Long Island suburban four-year-olds. It's my liquid luck for getting close to men, and Keira watches each Friday as the luck plays its tricks and does its job when Nameless Man and I leave Mama's Bar at one o'clock a.m.

I wouldn't really consider Keira a friend; we're not close enough - I guess we're missing the third technique. But she's a woman, and I like men. I believe Keira's straight too... although I wouldn't be surprised if she's made out with other girls or even licked a

nipple or two. Still, there's an intimacy that's absent between us; I don't have many female friends because of this. Not many male friends either - I third techniqued them all.

Keira watches each Friday as I pick my man, usually the tall, lanky type with wide-rimmed glasses and a plaid button-down shirt. I hold my eyes onto him with a gaze stuck on like a spider to its web so I don't lose him; when he looks in my direction, I quickly flip my head so he sees my messy bun with chocolate hairs dripping down my neck that takes me seven and a half minutes to perfect in its just-right careless design. 3... 2... 1... I turn back and let the straw of my whiskey and coke find its place between my red-painted lips. My eyes drift up and meet Nameless Alphabet City Man's and I let the straw fall from my mouth to inspire a closed-mouth smirk-smile. I turn to chat with Keira, unsure if I was actually sexy, or if I was more like one of those awkward fail gifs that ends up on a Tumblr blog or BuzzFeed list. But something works in my mating technique; the man moves next to me and grabs Keira's attention.

"One PBR please," he politely wants.

"Make that two," I wink at Keira. I'm feeling bold, my Friday night liquid luck kicking in. He looks at me.

"You a beer lady?"

"I prefer Top Shock but I can't deny my inner Bushwick." He raises his eyebrows, opens his scruff-rimmed mouth with a smirk, and nods, impressed.

"Alright alright alright," he mimicks Matthew McConaughey.

"Okay, Matthew, is PBR really your beer of choice?" I've played this game too many Friday nights before. Keira keeps an eye on the conversation, observing that it barely changes each time.

"I'm a Becks man. And it's C," I don't remember his name ever after the first conversation. I just pick the avenue I bet he lives on to define him.

"A pleasure. So what do you do C?"

“I’m a writer/I play in a band/I’m a photographer,” he says something along the lines of one of those Bushwick-I-actually-support-myself-as-a-waiter jobs.

“Solid.” I turn back to Keira.

“What do you do?” he asks the classic attempt to re-grab my attention and effectively pass my test on if he’s actually interested.

“I teach preschool.”

And then he proceeds to say something along the lines of ‘I went to preschool’ which I just want to respond to with ‘duh’, but I nod and say something like, ‘Oh did you like your teacher?’ and he says ‘I think so’ because apparently nobody remembers their preschool teachers, and as a preschool teacher that’s a sad fact to ingest. And then I say, ‘Well, do you want to hear a crazy story about a student I had a few years ago? I wonder if he remembers me,’ and the Nameless Man says, ‘Of course,’ but he actually just wants to sleep with me. I tell it to him anyway.

“I had this student named Stjepan.”

“Stjepan?”

“Yeah. S-T-J-E-P-A-N.”

The man puts his hand on my knee. I take a sip of PBR.

“And Stjepan didn’t talk to any of the other students. During free time, he would play with blocks alone and talk to them in a language I could have sworn was from Mars. So I called his parents in for a meeting. His dad came in. Big guy, maybe six foot five. Not gonna lie, I was a little scared.” This always makes the man feel an urge to protect me - a trick of the story.

“So Stjepan’s dad comes and enters my office. I have no clue what ethnicity he is, what language he speaks, so I ask. ‘Uh, Mr. Penavić, what language do you speak at home with your son?’ And he answers, ‘Croatian.’ So I’m just like, oh, they just have to speak more English with him, he’s totally normal! So I tell the big guy, ‘You should practice

English with him at home,' which I guess set something off in the guy. He looked down at me from like a foot above, glaring, like his eyes could be red, and he just says in a thick accent I barely understand, 'Now you listen me. I speak my son Croatian, you teach my son English. You understand?' So I nod. 'Yes, uh, thanks very much, I will, sir, Mr. Penavić, yes, sorry about that, so sorry.' And he just nods back to me and leaves!"

"Woah."

"Yeah. Preschool teachers deal with some crazy shit, man." He laughs, I swipe my hair to the side, and turn away for a moment so he sees my neck. I look back. We talk about movies or books, about how *Fight Club* is the best movie but we can't talk about it, about the fact that basketball is hard to watch on television, but we're not really into sports anyway so it's okay, about the weather. He pays Keira for the drinks, closes his tab, and says in his cliché predictable way, "Wanna get out of here?" and off I go with him. I tip Keira, and as I leave, I realize I'd rather chat at Mama's Bar with Keira than go to a foreign apartment with a foreign man - a room that might be covered in used condoms or worse, in "used" tissues, or maybe just in bread crumbs and coffee cups, but it's not a place I want to be. I go anyway. I'll be back at Mama's tomorrow.

Saturday rolls around, and after waking up in a twin bed somewhere by Avenue C next to a man whose name I forget, I throw on my clothes from last night. Underwear, check. Bra, check. Skirt, check. Shirt, yes. He rolls over and squints in the sunlight shining through the window. "Where are you going?" I kiss his cheek and exit without looking back. I walk to the sound of the story that gets me into bed. I'm a preschool teacher, a preschool teacher! And that's the story I tell to get me into bed. He wants to protect me, he wants to save me, but I take care of little kids, I protect them. I don't need that. Why do I tell that story?

I enter Mama's, much earlier than usual. Usually I go back to Long Island first, change my clothes, brush my teeth, make myself smell like a human instead of a sock. But it's noon and I walk into the bar ready for another PBR. Keira pours two shots of whiskey

instead and hands me one. “Rough night?” “I don’t know.” We clink our shots, I pound mine on the counter in my shot ritual, and we down the whiskey. It’s smooth. Really smooth. “I could do another,” I look Keira straight in her eyes - her blue eyes, speckled with spots of green. “Oh yeah?” She smiles back, and pours two more. We go shot for shot until we’ve each hit five. It’s not even 1 p.m. I start really examining Keira, the way she moves behind the bar, the way her long arm reaches for the bottle of Jameson and her breasts fall away from her body, just a little bit. She pours the whiskey into the glasses with a graceful flick of the wrist, puts the bottle back, and flips her red-dyed hair into place. I feel her gaze on me, and finally meet her in the eyes again. The dark bar spins around a bit, but her eyes are very still. She speaks first, deliberately, so I know she’s coherent even though the whiskey’s hit her.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you something.”

“Yeah?” What could she possibly say that she hasn’t said already?

“That story you tell, the story to all those alphabet city men, I have a nephew named Stjepan.”

Oh, that’s it. “No way!” I respond, seemingly excited, but I don’t feel excited. I feel like something died, although I don’t know what. It’s just as bad as me saying *Fight Club* is also my favorite movie.

“Yeah. He went to preschool back in Long Island. And his dad tells that story every motherfucking Christmas.”

“Wait, do you speak Croatian?”

“No, dumbass, he speaks perfect English! Although I do speak a little. His wife is my older sister.”

“No way!” This time I mean it. So Keira is Stjepan’s aunt... no fucking way.

“So you’re like, his aunt? You’re an aunt?”

“Yeah, I’m Cool Aunt Keira!” She smiles and I realize we now have two out of three. Stories, check. Sharing, check. I still feel an emptiness and I wonder...

“Keira, how do you get close to people?”

“I, um, I guess I sleep with them. ‘Make love’ if you will.” She mocks the term.

“Girls ever?” I look at her mouth with my eyes glazed over from the alcohol as she speaks the words, “Not yet.” I break the gaze and grab my things, not bothering to pay because I know she won’t let me. I start walking out the door of the empty bar, and I turn back.

“I’m coming back tonight. I’m staying past closing time.”

“I know,” she flips her red hair to her left, and I see her neck. My eyes follow her neck down to her clavicle bone down to her breasts and back up to her red-painted lips.

“I want to get close to you.” I turn away, and walk out the bar, knowing Keira is watching my skirt graze my thighs as I leave, knowing that Stjepan’s story is finally the serendipity I always hoped it could be.