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Journalism

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### **It Doesn't Count If It's A Girl**

Greg and Donnie are sitting across from me at the elongated wooden table with the chipping gray paint, which often doubles as a bar for big events. I had stopped by to help clean up as nobody was in any shape to clean up by the end of last night. By this point we had finished cleaning and were now conversing over Greg's "homemade" iced tea.

"I feel like I should apologize for my embarrassing performance last night. God, I was such a mess."

"Oh, don't apologize!" Greg insists as he swats my apology away. "We love when people find love at The Bureau!"

With a look of mischief in his eyes, Donnie dives right in.

"So, how's Catie?"

Then sensing my obvious hesitation, "If you'd rather not tell us, you don't have to! I mean we'd love to hear! But, no pressure!"

"I didn't go home with her. Nothing happened. We didn't even kiss."

Donnie glares at me in disbelief. "What? But, I walked in on you two remember?"

I think back to last night. I'm wearing Catie's chic, black beret when Donnie turns the corner and finds us. I almost have her pinned against the bookshelf amidst a sea of red balloons. He lets out an audible cackle and then promptly turns around.

"We weren't making out."

“It sure looked like you were making out.”

“Well, we weren’t.”

Greg and Donnie exchange puzzled glances and I begin to pack my things.

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*Wait...am I early? Seriously? I should have stopped to eat. Fuck. Well, I’m already halfway up the stairs, so I can’t turn around ‘cause by now they know I’m here. God, when did I last eat? I guess I had that sesame pancake sandwich for lunch. But, that was like, 10 hours ago, right? What have I had since then...I guess just coffee? Yep. I’ve had a sandwich and about six cups of coffee today. Wow...just a stellar job at pseudo-adulthood, Kat. Okay, you’re almost at the top; time to put on your sharing face. Geez, what is my problem? I mean... I adore these people and I’ve been looking forward to this. I’m just exhausted. I just wish I had better time management skills. I just wish I had enough sense to eat before I showed up to work.*

“Hey, Donnie!”

“Oh! Hey, Kat!” With a sly but well-meaning smile, my boss saunters over towards me, once again rocking the leather jacket from his high school days. “You’re early. *That’s* new!”

“Yeah. Well, it was accidental responsibility. I thought the festivities started at 7:30.”

“Nope. Tom isn’t scheduled to show up until 8:00. Which probably means we won’t see him until 9:00, at the earliest. But, his publicist is here. He’s been here about 40 minutes now...”

Donnie directs my attention to a 20-something in a pale blue turtleneck, so concentrated on crafting his book display he didn’t seem to notice we were silently judging him.

“You know,” he says, tuning his attention back to me, “you didn’t have to tell me you got the times confused; you could have let me think you were early because you were just *so* excited for our birthday.”

“I know. I tend to overshare, and it’s only gotten worse since I got to New York. But, I *am* excited... Where’s Greg?”

“He’s picking up Thai food from across the street. We haven’t eaten all day and Greg is on his third Tsingtao.”

“So...I’ll start setting up the bar, then?”

*I can’t believe they’ll be eating right in front of me. Plus, the aroma of Thai food carries; the whole goddamn loft will smell like lemongrass and green curry. I suppose I could fantasize about eating; maybe I’ll hallucinate, start imaging people as walking bowls of pad Thai or something colorful like that. How cool would it be if Vanessa’s delivered? Ugh. I’m an idiot.*

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Vanessa’s Dumpling House, home to the aforementioned sesame pancake sandwich, is a Chinese restaurant about the size of a modest foyer on the Lower East Side. I would routinely pick up lunch for my boss, Greg Newton, and myself from Vanessa’s every Friday during my Fall 2013 semester with the New York Arts Program. Greg and his partner, Donnie Jochum, own The Bureau of General Services, Queer Division, the only LGBT\*Q centered bookstore in New York City. (Shocking, isn’t it?) I did have two other really great internships - one as an editorial intern for Out Magazine, the other with Morea Steinhauer, a photojournalist who was in the process of launching a personal branding business - but I might have enjoyed The Bureau most. I worked on Fridays, as well as one or two nights a week bartending for events. (Because they never actually obtained a liquor license, we didn’t sell alcohol. Instead, I served beer and wine while strongly encouraging \$5.00 donations.) In Cage, the name of the artist collective space Greg and Donnie rent out month to month, The Bureau hosts all sorts of events: book signings, poetry nights, amateur photography exhibits, etc. Though, it might be pertinent to note that they

did not start out at Cage; rather, they spent their first nine months at Strange Loop Gallery just a couple of blocks down. In fact, I got there right in the heat of their transition.

Considering the work I did, aside from my extensive research on potential grants for The Bureau, which relies heavily on community donations, I felt more like a glorified volunteer than an intern. But that didn't bother me, partly because I was still receiving school credit, but mostly because Greg, Donnie, and the entire Bureau crowd were invigorating and encouraging. Sure, occasionally I encountered some assholes. One, in particular, wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, overused the word "poignant," and liked leaving in the middle of performances to pop into nearby dive bars. I had one guy look me up and down and ask at what kegger he could find the rest of my sorority sisters. But all in all, The Bureau was an uplifting experience; and, despite the hunger that was eating me alive, I was especially looking forward to tonight. It was the one-year celebration of The Bureau's inauguration in November of 2012

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"Kat! You're here!" I take a pause from stocking the cooler, spin around, and see Greg in a pink pinstriped shirt, sleeves rolled up and unbuttoned at the top just enough to display a tuft of red chest hair, holding a small takeout bag in one hand and a bottle of Prosecco in the other.

"Yeah! Are you surprised?"

Greg hands the bag over to Donnie and Donnie greedily begins rifling through it. I hated him in that moment

"I just didn't expect to see you this early. But, I hardly have much room to talk. I didn't learn timeliness until after dropping out of grad school."

"I didn't know you dropped out of grad school."

"Oh, yeah." Donnie chimes in. "But he wrote a chapter of his dissertation first."

“Well, I decided the world could get along without “The History of the Emergence of Monochrome Paintings in 1950s New York.””

I glance over at the balding man in the taupe jumpsuit with the flower in his pocket standing next to Greg, hinting at an introduction.

“Oh! This is DJ Dandelion.”

“Nice to meet you!” But before I could extend my hand, he throws a quick wave and quietly shuffles over to the sound booth. I don’t think I’d ever met such a mousy DJ before. Then again, I don’t think I’d ever met a DJ before...

“So, Stephen is supposed to be here soon,” Greg explains to the room as he helps Donnie sort through containers of chili soy sauce, “and Catie said she was going to stop by early because she’s not sure how long she can stay.”

“Oh! Catie’s coming?”

*Shit. I don’t think I pulled off nonchalance very well. Jesus, Kat, could you act like you care even a little less?*

“That’s what she said...” Greg replies in a sing songy voice.

“Why?” Donnie asks. “Do you have a crush?”

Greg and Donnie had picked up on my feelings about Catie fairly early on. I had met her a couple of months back while working my first Bureau event, Lambda’s 2013 Emerging Voices Poetry Night. I had no idea I would be playing the role of “bartender;” but in retrospect, I’m relieved it was sprung on me. Because, I don’t know if it was getting the corkscrew stuck in the unopened bottle of Cabernet or spilling an eleven-dollar beer all over one volunteer’s trousers, but I have a feeling, had they asked me to audition for the part in advance, I would not have gotten a callback.

I believe it was right after recovering from the beer incident that I saw Catie. She had short, dark, voluminous hair and was sporting a pair of clear, thick-framed glasses and a white hairband with red polka dots. I still can't pinpoint precisely why, but I was instantly drawn to her; though, I do remember thinking, as I watched her work her way through a rather intimidating throng of up and coming poets and their supporters, she seemed friendly. While I have somewhat of an aversion to small talk, I suspected our chats about wine and weather would not only be pleasant, but entertaining - a scene plucked right out of Gilmore Girls. You know...if Gilmore Girls was a show about a bi-curious college student trying to make it in the big city? The point is we would be witty and heartwarming.

The most confusing part of the whole situation, however, was that this was the first time I had ever felt these things for a woman. I felt myself wishing Catie would come over and ask me to pour her a glass of wine, hopefully from a bottle I had already opened so I wouldn't run the risk of embarrassing myself, yet again; and, about ten minutes later, she did just that. I can't recall all the details of our conversation, but I remember her smile, and the way her nose crinkled when she laughed; her laugh was light, but infectious.

Considering her reaction to me telling her I was interning for Greg and Donnie ("You're their new intern?! That's so neat! They're so great, aren't they?") I gathered she had a close enough relationship with The Bureau that running into her again was highly likely; and, I was fond of the prospect. I suppose I tried bringing her up to Greg a few too many times and they eventually got wise to my game; hence, their playful, older brother style of taunting.

"Maybe. Probably. But, I'm not going to do anything about it."

And I wasn't. It was just an innocent crush. Anyway, I had a boyfriend.

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*When did Catie get so close to me and just how the fuck did I get so drunk?*

It's probably past 11:00 by now. The signing with Tom Bianchi for the release of his photography book *Fire Island Pine* – a collection of personal Polaroids – was winding down and the dance party, courtesy of a much drunker, much more hyped DJ Dandelion was beginning. Catie joined me behind the makeshift bar about ten minutes ago. I didn't think much of it until, after bonding over our weakness for red wine, she challenged me to match her, drink for drink.

“Are my lips purple?”

Giggling, Catie replies, “Maybe a little...”

“Damn. I recently vowed to give up drinking red wine in public because it always turns my lips a very distinct ‘I've been drinking’ shade of purple.”

“Well, its dark. Nobody can tell except for me, and I don't mind.”

*Okay, calm down, Kat. Okay? So, maybe she's flirting with you. Maybe you're flirting back. Maybe it's just the wine talking. But, that's it. There's no harm in flirting, right? I flirt with that one Starbucks barista back in Katy sometimes. It means nothing. People do it all the time. Well, except for Austin. He doesn't even flirt with me, really. I mean...at least not intentionally. But, it's fine. I'm fine. It's just harmless fun.*

I find myself reaching for my gold pen necklace, twirling it, biting it, obviously trying to draw attention to my mouth, unsure of what exactly I'm trying to achieve.

“I really like your necklace.”

“Really? Thanks! It was a gift from my godmother. She gave it to me, like, the day before I left Katy for New York. It reminds me of the one Joan wears on Mad Men.”

“Oh, yeah! Do you like that show?”

“I’ve actually only watched the first season. But, so far, yeah! I like wearing it to work because it makes me feel empowered.”

She gently takes my necklace from my hands and starts playing with it herself. She seems almost fixated on the purple jewels.

“You know, it’s my birthday in like, an hour.”

*Shit, really?*

“Shit, really?”

“Yep.” Then, she smiled the cutest fucking smile.

“I’ll be 26.”

Side by side, we settle back against the wall. Suddenly, my entire body feels heavy. She tries to hold my hand and I do nothing to stop her. I wonder how much longer I can keep my balance.

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She’s standing behind me, in the glow of a soft, white light emanating from the window, arms around my waist, as I turn my head slightly to the right and cautiously raise my hand, the one holding the cigarette, to her mouth, offering her a drag. She delicately wraps her lips around the Marlboro Red, and as she inhales, we lock eyes for a moment, but I quickly turn my head back around. I cannot kiss her.

I hear two sets of feet trotting down the Bureau stairs. My instincts tell me to move out from under Catie’s arms, but I don’t, and soon, two partygoers are standing opposite us, hands deep in their pockets trying to keep warm.

“Hey, I don’t mean to be a dick, but could I bum one?”



Blue, a friendly giant of a man in a mesh muscle tee and vibrant lipstick, flashes his Crest Whitestrip commercial worthy smile in our direction.

“Sure! I’m trying to quit, anyway. I’m finishing this pack tonight, then I’m done.”

I can assure you I did not follow through on that.

I extend the pack to Blue, then to his smaller, mohawked friend, decked out in leather and chains, whose name escapes me, but he shakes his head.

“Wow,” Blue comments. “Cowboy Killers.”

“Hah. Yeah, I’ve heard so many people in New York call them that. I’ve never tried anything else, so I didn’t know they were that intense. I think I picked them up because they’re what my uncle always smokes. It’s comforting, somehow.”

I feel Catie’s breath tickle the tip of my ear; then, it’s her lips.

“I’m only kissing your ear. It’s not cheating if it’s just your ear, right?”

Blue and friend exchange an expression of mutual discomfort.

*I don’t know. I mean I have a friend who would drunkenly make out with girls all the time. She said her boyfriend, David, didn’t mind because it obviously didn’t mean anything. But, I don’t think I agree with that logic. I don’t know. What do you think, Blue? Does this scene say “infidelity” to you? Okay. No. This is not cool, Kat.*

“I’m going to put out this cigarette.”

It’s absurd that New York’s streets are so littered with cigarette butts when most people usually don’t have to walk more than a block before reaching a trashcan. So, I scurry down to the end of Orchard Street, make sure my cigarette is extinguished completely, and toss it into the trashcan on the corner. Then, I turn around and amble on back to the group, eyes fixed on Catie in her chic, black beret.

*What the hell do I think I'm doing?*

“Hey. Don't you think The Bureau should serve food during their events? Like, at least cheese and crackers to balance out all the alcohol?”

*Oh, Blue. You have no idea.*

#### **Author's Afterword**

I did not want this to be a coming out story, a coming of age story, or a story about my sexuality, which is why I tried to avoid using labels to describe both Catie, and myself, though she did tell me she identified as a lesbian. I don't know if I'm bisexual. I might be, but I am weary of identifying as such, partly because I've never actually been with a woman before, and partly because I do not feel I struggle with the same sorts of issues that out bisexuals do. I have a boyfriend, Austin, the same boyfriend I talk about in this article; so, as far as anyone else is concerned, I'm straight. I wanted this to be a story about Catie and the lasting effect she had on me, about a night that made for some unresolved issues. Although it hasn't even been a year since that night, it took place during a time in my life when I felt very out of control. I barely had a clue of what I wanted, or needed, and I was desperate, which is why I included the inner monologue-styled rants. In a sense, I did feel unhinged. Lastly, I wanted this to be a story about a time I was a very shitty girlfriend. I ended up telling Austin about the whole ordeal and he ended up laughing about how worked up I was. But, I still feel guilty and at times, I found this difficult to write. I told him everything, but I still feel like he doesn't know the whole story.