

Novel Writing: Jean Kyoung Frazier Week

Day 1 – 11/05

After who-knows-how-long dancing together, I place both hands on Bonnie's shoulders to shift her attention from the music to me, and I mouth the word "Break?" I don't bother trying to yell it; the room is too loud around us, and I know my voice would be drowned out. Bonnie hesitates for a moment, just to make me feel lame for needing a moment to rest, then nods and leads the way back to our singular chair. Before I even get the chance to sit down and verify that our bags haven't been stolen, Bonnie is getting the bartender's attention and asking for two shots of tequila.

"Woah, woah, don't rope me into that," I say, not because I don't think I can handle a tequila shot but because I'm not sure Bonnie can at this point. She's had two more amaretto sours than I have, and she's never been a heavy drinker, so it shows. Dani once joked that Bonnie could get a buzz from a sip of a White Claw, and though she meant it as an exaggeration, it doesn't seem too inaccurate.

"Pleaseeeee," Bonnie whines, peering down at me with puppy dog eyes from where she's standing, leaning on the bar.

"You sound like Dani," I laugh.

Bonnie considers this for a moment, then nods, giving me a regular Bonnie answer: "Sorry. Please? It's my birthday."

As she asks, the bartender places two shot glasses in front of us. Tequila is definitely not my first choice for a shot, but I don't bother telling Bonnie that. What's the harm? "Fine. But only because I'm worried you'd have both of these if I didn't take mine."

"That's where you're right," she says. She picks up her shot, holding it as if she's going to make a toast, but then she doesn't say anything more. I grab mine, we clink ours together, clink them on the bar, and finally take the shot.

I cough once it's down. The bartender happens to be hovering by us when I start, and he pours me a glass of water. I basically chug the whole thing in one gulp, giving him a nod of thanks, then place the glass down on the bar. "God, that's terrible."

"Not a tequila fan?" Bonnie laughs.

"Didn't know you were."

Bonnie shrugs. Her eyes are glassy, and I wonder if she'll remember all of this tomorrow morning. I wonder if I acted like this the night that I came out to her.

"Thank you for coming here with me," she says, resting her head on her hand with her elbow on the bar.

I laugh. "Of course. Let's slow down the drinking a bit, okay? How are you feeling?"

She rolls her eyes. "I'm good. Never been better."

"Alright, whatever you say." I call the bartender over and ask for another glass of water, then slide it toward Bonnie. "Drink."

As Bonnie reluctantly takes the first sip of the iced water I ordered for her, a group of three guys that have been sitting at the bar since we got here get up to leave. It seems a bit early to be leaving, but then again I don't really know what time it is, and I don't bother checking. Bonnie and I both notice them leaving at the same time, and speed walk over to their seats.

"Finally. My feet were killing me," Bonnie says.

"You could've told me to switch!"

She waves me away with her hand. A pop song I remember Dani, Bonnie, and I dancing to freshman year is playing over the speakers, and Bonnie and I hum along to it, no doubt thinking of the same memory.

"Ask me a question." She shifts in her seat so her legs are facing me.

"What?"

"Ask a better question than that, jeez."

"What kind of question?"

"Fuck Marry Kill: Abi, Bridget, Wren."

"Ha! Um...Marry Wren, Fuck Bridget, Kill Abi?"

"Wowwww. That was a fast decision."

"I feel like thinking for an extended period of time makes it weirder."

"I guess so. You'd kill Abi?"

"Yeah, I can't kill the other two."

"Why not?"

"I know Wren too well. And then between Bridget and Abi, I feel like I understand Bridget a little more. We're similar people."

"So you're saving Bridget because you're a narcissist."

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Bonnie laughs. “Your turn. Question.”

I consider giving her a Fuck-Marry-Kill to answer, but that feels weird considering her relationship status. I go with what I assume will be a soft-ball: “What was your first impression of me?”

“Asking a question about *you*? The narcissism continues,” she says. But then, she wraps her legs under her so she’s sitting criss-crossed on the chair, and she seems to be considering her answer.

Day 2 – 11/06

“I thought you were quiet.”

“That’s it?”

“Which is ironic, because now you never shut up.”

I nudge her shoulder again and she holds onto the base of her chair to keep herself from swaying.

“I’m kidding. But, yeah, you seemed...sure of yourself. It was a little intimidating.”

“Sure of myself?” I definitely wouldn’t describe myself as that, except maybe on first dates with my Tinder men. I especially wouldn’t describe myself that way when I was in my first semester of college. I had no clue what I was doing.

“I just mean that, like, you were quiet, but you weren’t shy.”

I give her a look of confusion. “Okay...?”

“Do you get what I’m saying?”

“Yes, I think. That’s just a more complicated answer than I was expecting.”

“I thought you were pretty, too. I wondered if you were gay.”

Suddenly, everything but Bonnie’s face is blurring in and out of focus. It’s strange how this happens sometimes, where I’ll think I’m handling my alcohol fine until something shocking is said, and I question if I’m hallucinating all of it. She thought I was pretty? This is news to me. Dani and I met each other a few moments before we both met Bonnie. When she met us, we were standing next to each other. I said my name a second after Dani said hers. Did Bonnie think Dani was pretty? When did her pretty beat out mine?

“You did?”

Bonnie nods. She is sipping from the straw to her amaretto sour, and I study the outside of the glass, watching the level of the liquid quickly drop.

I don't think I should ask it, and part of me knows the answer already, so I'm not sure why I do. Once the thought forms, it's already slipped from my lips: "Did you think Dani was pretty?"

Bonnie laughs. "Of course."

"Okay, good." I laugh it off, as if I was just checking, steering the conversation toward her girlfriend as a joke, not out of genuine curiosity.

"What about me?"

I have a decision to make here, and it's one I wish I would be able to take more time with than I feel can. Bonnie is leaning forward, her head tilted to one side, eyebrows raised in anticipation of an answer. I could lie. I could say I thought that she seemed kind, or that I remembered her being awkward. Anything like that. But I don't say that. "I thought you were pretty, too."

Suddenly, Bonnie is kissing me. She must dive in for the kiss fast, because it seems to happen all within one blink, and even before I open my eyes, I feel her lips against mine. I've wanted this for so long – ever since we met, really –, but I can't wrap my head around the way that it's happening. Dani *asked* me to take Bonnie out. She's going to call at the end of the night to check on us and ask for funny bar stories. If we get coffee together again, which I'm sure she'll ask to, she's going to tell me she's grateful to have met me. That she's grateful I'm living with her and Bonnie. The little campus family.

One of Bonnie's hands is on my thigh, which is steadying her as she leans over her chair to reach mine. The kiss is sloppy. I'm not sure if this is due to the alcohol or if it's just how she kisses. I never thought I'd find that out. I kiss her back for a prolonged few seconds, feeling everything I've been waiting to feel for the past two years of my life, then placing a hand on her shoulder to gently nudge her away.

"Bonnie," I say.

"What?"

"We can't."

Bonnie laughs, sending anger through me. I shouldn't have to be the responsible one here. Bonnie is the one in the relationship. I shouldn't have to set all of these boundaries.

“What are you doing? You’re with Dani. I don’t want this. This can’t happen.” I am frantically looking around the bar as I speak, trying to figure out who may know Bonnie or Dani and witnessed the kiss.

“Nell, come on.”

“What?” The look she’s giving me is comical, cartoonish.

“You don’t want this?”

“Bonnie, you’re with Dani –”

“You haven’t necessarily tried to hide the fact that you’re into me, Nell. I mean, Jesus Christ, even Dani knew.” Bonnie is angry now, gesticulating with her hands aggressively and making a scene. She’s raised her voice, and it’s a side of her I’ve never seen before.

“What? I don’t –”

“Don’t lie. Come on. We both knew this would happen at some point.”

I’m stuttering, trying to get a word in but I can’t decide what word to start with: “I’m sorry if I –”

“All I’m saying is you’ve been pining over me for as long as we’ve known each other, so don’t act like I’m *fucking crazy* when I finally do what you’ve been begging me to.”

Day 3 – 11/07

“I think you’re being unfair –”

“Fuck you, Nell. You know I’m not. Don’t lie.” The words hang in the air after she says them, reverberating and pounding against my head. I want to tell her that I have no clue what she’s talking about, that I’ve never tried to sabotage her relationship, that I’ve never had feelings for her at all, but I know she’ll see through the lie. Bonnie knows me better than anyone else does. Or, at least, I thought she did.

We stare at each other, arms on the bar, both holding onto our empty glasses. There’s nothing I can say. Bonnie waits, pushing me to say anything at all, and when it’s clear I’m not going to, she hops off of her chair and starts wrapping her jacket around her arms.

“Wait, Bonnie –”

“I’m going home.”

“I’ll walk you.”

“Don’t.” She grabs her bag off of the chair, turns away, then turns back to me. “I get that you need to stay at mine tonight, so don’t, like, sleep on the street. But please leave me alone.”

All I can do is stare back at her, at her silhouette slowly retreating. I mumble an “I’m sorry” when I’m finally sure that she’s really leaving, that she won’t turn around again to say something more, but I’m far too quiet for her to hear. She leaves the bar.

I see Gary’s green Volkswagen bug slowly drive up in front of the bar thirty minutes later. The moments after Bonnie stormed out passed in a bit of a blur – I went to the bathroom, threw up, sat on the dirty floor wrapped up like a roly poly, and texted the one person I thought would be up at this time of night. The only person who would care.

“Are you awake?”

“Yes. Everything okay?”

“Can you pick me up?” I sent my location.

“Be there as soon as I can.”

I put my phone away and cried some more, crying for Bonnie and my friendship, which will never be the same, for Dani and my friendship, which I feel I’ve betrayed, and for the life I’ve been living the past few months. I know it won’t go back to normal. This is too big of a change for everything to just patch itself up.

I thought about what Bonnie said, that even Dani could tell I was in love with Bonnie. I wondered when that was, hoping it was a long time ago, that this semester she hasn’t still been worrying about it. I thought about texting her but decided against it, figuring I’ll let her have her peaceful spring break vacation.

Head in my hands, my phone started vibrating, and I left the bathroom stall to go meet him outside. On my way out, I stopped to fix – or, more accurately, almost wiped off entirely – my smudged and running makeup with a wet paper towel.

“Thanks for coming,” I say. Gary’s face is filled with concern. He’s wearing a T-shirt and flannel sweatpants. I glance at my phone to check the time – 1:54 – and realize he must have been about to go to sleep when I called. “I know it’s late.”

“Of course.”

I get in the passenger seat and he starts to drive, though I’m not sure where he’s heading.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t think I can.” My voice is shaking, and I’m worried the moment I breach the topic, I’ll burst into sobs again. Plus, I’m not sure what I’d even say. Everything happened so fast, and I haven’t processed it all yet.

“Okay. Are you safe?”

Day 4 – 11/08

“Yes.” He continues to drive. “I’m drunk,” I add a moment later.

“I figured.”

“Sorry.”

He laughs. “How did you get into a bar?”

“Fake ID.”

“I see. You know, you could get arrested for having one of those.”

“I couldn’t get *arrested*.” I snap at him, even though I’m not entirely positive he’s wrong.

“People get kicked out of school for stuff like that.”

“I’m not *in* school.”

“Okay, sweetheart, you just rest your head against the window and take a nap.” He’s mocking me, driving at his reliably slow pace and not looking at me as he speaks. It’s like it always is with us.

“Thank you for picking me up.”

“You already said that.”

I fall asleep to the light pattering of rain on the passenger seat window, the whine of Gary’s windshield wipers like a metronome that wipes me out for an unknown period of time.

When I wake up, the car is no longer moving. We’re parked, the only car in a far-too-large McDonald’s parking lot, and the scent of grease and fried food surrounds me. My stomach grumbles, remembering that it hasn’t eaten anything for hours.

Gary is sitting in the driver’s seat, his car light on, reading a history book about World War II. Classic.

“You know,” I say, and he sets his book down, realizing for the first time that I’ve woken up, “You’re killing your car battery with that on.” I point to the light.

He shrugs. “How are you feeling?”

“Hungry.”

“Ah.” He grabs a brown paper bag coated in grease and hands it to me. He’s folded it over to try and lock the heat in for me, but I must have been asleep for a while, because the food inside is already a bit stale. He bought me a 10-piece chicken nugget meal, fries on the side.

“No drink?” I ask.

He hands me a bottle of water. “I figured you don’t need anything but water right now.”

I take the water bottle and gulp down a large swallow. When I’m satisfied, I twist the cap back on and open up the pack of nuggets. “For the record, I was kidding. Thank you for this.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket and for the first time since waking up I am reminded of the gravity of the situation, how four hours ago, my life was very different than it will probably ever be again. I quickly grab my phone to check who it was that texted me.

It’s Dani: “Did you get home? Bonnie didn’t text but I have your locations obviously and you know I worry.”

Then, another text, sent just a minute after the first one: “I hope you had so much fun! Send pictures!”

“Fuck.”

“Put the phone away. Eat.”

I grab a chicken nugget and eat it without any barbecue sauce, then regret my decision. Still chewing up the nugget, I think of Dani’s text and begin to cry once again. Shocking, because after the Charley’s bathroom, I didn’t think I had any tears left in me. But I guess I do, because they’re streaming down my face, and I can see in the rearview mirror that they’re drawing thick, black lines down my face from my running mascara.

Gary doesn’t say anything more, and he doesn’t ask me to explain. I am so grateful for him at this moment, so happy to have swiped right on his goofy face, so glad that we’ve been able to become important people in one another’s lives. Every part of my world seems to be crumbling right now, but Gary was still there to pick me up when I needed it. He’s still here.

I lean across the center console and press my head into Gary’s chest, no doubt getting makeup on his already beat-up T-shirt. He hesitates, but a moment later, wraps his arms around me to hold me in an awkward car hug. Neither of us have ever been good at physical contact, and this is no exception, but it is also, somehow, perfect. I’m sobbing, crying like a baby and

focusing on my breathing so that I don't hyperventilate, but Gary is holding me and breathing deep and slow, so things aren't as bad as they were an hour ago.