

Novel Writing: Kate Elizabeth Russell Week

Day 1 – 10/01

As I'm pouring the 2% over the iced espresso (Bonnie drinks cow milk unfortunately), the front door opens and the bell rings to announce a customer's entrance. I turn my head and make eye contact with Dani, who has entered alone. She has a pink tote bag slung over her shoulder and pink wireless headphones covering her ears. The pinks match, and I wonder if it was intentional. Knowing her, it probably was.

"Hey," she semi-shouts. The espresso machine is grumbling loudly in my ear, and a jazz playlist I made is playing over the cafe's speakers, so a full shout would probably be more appropriate, but Dani is always hyper-aware of how loud she is. She never wants to disturb anyone, which is kind of her whole shtick, and I hate that it bothers me a little. *Be annoying*, I want to tell her. *Be an asshole or something*. Things would be so much easier if she weren't so kind.

"Hey," I respond. "No Bonnie?"

"Something came up," she says. She's walked all the way up to the bar and is resting both elbows onto the hand-off counter, so she's able to speak at a normal volume. "She says she's sorry," Dani adds. "But I'm still in!"

"Sweet," I reply. "Everything okay?" I dump the completed iced cortado in the sink as I speak and begin making Dani's go-to order: a lavender iced matcha with oat milk (Could an order *be* any gayer?).

"Yeah, it's sibling stuff."

"Gotcha."

Bonnie has two sisters, both much older than her. She doesn't talk about them often, but from what I've pieced together, Bonnie takes on the role of family therapist a lot of the time. This isn't the first time she's canceled plans because one of her sisters is having some sort of crisis.

"Take a seat. I still have two minutes left before my shift ends," I say, partly because this topic of conversation has come to its natural conclusion and partly because I can't stand it when people hover over the bar while I make a drink. Dani claims a table near the entrance of the store

and drapes her tote over the chair she isn't using. She pulls her headphones back up to her ears and scrolls on Instagram while I finish up her drink.

Red (of Red's fame) comes in for his 2:00 shift a moment later. We exchange small talk – every time we see each other, he asks what's new, but he never remembers what I said the time before, so it's difficult for us to move past the initial pleasantries. I tell him the stuff he needs to know for the shift – we're out of cinnamon scones, we need to bake more croissants, stuff like that –, and I clock out.

As I approach Dani I try to prepare for the conversation we're about to have. We don't hang out one-on-one really ever, or at least we haven't since her and Bonnie became official three months after we all met, so I'm not quite sure how to proceed. Part of me wishes she had just canceled when Bonnie wasn't able to go anymore.

"Ready," I say, tossing my backpack onto one shoulder and walking up to Dani's seat. I set down Dani's matcha and a straw on the table. "Where are we going?"

"Oh my gosh, *thank youuuuuu*." She takes a sip. "I swear you make it better than anyone else here does."

I shrug. "It's a hard order to mess up."

"I guess so." She takes another sip and looks up at the ceiling in thought, having returned to my original question. "I was thinking Sips?"

"Sounds good."

I haven't stepped inside Sips since I dropped out of school, and I definitely haven't missed it. It's located right by a few of the sorority houses, so it's where all of the sorority girls get their coffees and protein shakes and overpriced sandwiches. The few times I've been I've stuck out like a sore thumb, my oversized T-shirt and jeans uniquely un-styled. I'm sure Dani fits right in there.

When we arrive, I order the cheapest food item on the menu – a butter croissant – and Dani gets some fancy-looking panini. A quick glance at the packed cafe informs me that the demographic hasn't changed much in the past year. It seems like every laptop is decorated with a sorority sticker. We head toward a two-person table in the back, and as we make our way there, Dani waves and says a quick "hello" to three separate girls. All of them glance my way afterward, and I offer them a toothless smile, not having the energy to introduce myself. Dani is

clearly okay with that, because she makes no effort to make connections between me and her miscellaneous friends.

“So,” Dani says as we both set our bags on the floor beneath our feet. “How’s your week been?”

“Not bad,” I say. “Work’s work. What about you?”

“It’s been alright! I have a short due for one of my animation classes next week so I’ve been kind of stressed about that, but other than that, no complaints.”

“Nice.” I could ask about the short, but it seems like her immediate topic-change makes me think she doesn’t want to go into it.

“So what did you think of chess club?”

“Not much chess.”

She laughs. “Yeah, that tends to happen. I hope it didn’t scare you off.”

“No, it didn’t. I had fun.” I say this on instinct, but I realize as I’m speaking that maybe I genuinely mean it. Maybe it was the people-watching of it all. I kind of enjoyed it.

Day 2 – 10/02

“So you’ll be going next week? Is that what I’m hearing?” Dani looks giddy. She tilts her head as she speaks, a habit I noticed when I first met her and found endearing, but now the frequency with which she does it gets on my nerves.

“We’ll see. I’m not sure if I’m even free.”

“Are you still dating that old guy?”

“Which one are you referring to?” I genuinely can’t remember which one I spoke to her about last.

She shrugs. I guess she can’t remember either.

“There’s one I’ve gone on a few dates with, yeah.”

“That’s rare, right? Isn’t it usually a one-date-and-done kind of thing?”

“Yeah, usually.” I smile at her use of the phrase one-date-and-done. It sounds like the PG version of hit-it-and-quit-it. Both apply to my usual habits.

“This guy’s different, though. We haven’t – done that. Yet, at least.” I’m not sure why I say it. I am curious to hear her response, though.

“Oh...I see.” She furrows her eyebrows in contemplation.

“You *see*?”

“Give me two seconds to process, jeez!” She grabs one of her legs and tucks it under herself. She’s always sitting like this – tucked into herself like a roly poly. I wonder how she keeps her posture so straight, then remember she grew up as a dancer. I self-consciously straighten my back and grow a few inches.

“I do *talk* to these guys on dates, too, you know? It’s not just sex?”

“I *know*, Nell, jeez, I know. That’s not what I was saying.”

I know I’m giving her a harder time than I should. It *is* incredibly strange for me and a Tinder guy to remain celibate after a few hours of meeting each other. But also, like, just call me a whore, why don’t you Dani. It shouldn’t surprise you *that* much.

“So, do you like him?”

I shrug. “Generally.”

“Is he hot?”

“I’ve fucked worse.”

“But is he, like, your type?”

“Meh. I haven’t really thought about it honestly.”

“You’ve been on multiple dates with him but haven’t thought about whether or not you’re into him?”

“We’re more, like...friends. I think.”

“...Friends.” Her face warps with disbelief.

“Yeah.”

“You met on *Tinder*, Nell.”

“I know that. I think he’s just a lonely guy who, like, needs a friend.”

“Aw. That’s sweet.”

“Is it?”

“I mean, yeah. If you also need a friend.”

“I *have* friends.” I snap on instinct, then remember a second later that Dani and Bonnie know better than anyone else that I don’t really have any other than them. “I do,” I say again, this time more for me than for her.

“I wasn’t implying anything. I just meant, like, as long as you’re also enjoying his company.”

“Yeah, I am. I don’t know. I haven’t really figured it out yet.”

She moves her hand from the iced matcha I made her to rest it on mine across the table, and I know from how disingenuous the physical contact feels that she’s hoping to pivot the conversation. I’m already skeptical when she says, “You don’t need to have anything figured out right away.”

I nod, knowing more is coming.

“What did you think of Bridget?”

Wow. So this is a setup.

I play dumb: “Who? Chess club Bridget?”

“Yes, chess club Bridget. Bridget with the cool nose piercing.” If I didn’t already know that Dani was trying to set me up with Bridget, her usage of the word ‘cool’ would have given it away. Dani is not the kind of person to think a nose piercing is cool. She doesn’t even have her ears pierced, and wears clip-in earrings from Claire’s for special occasions.

“So cool.”

“Be serious!” She rests her head on her hand with her elbow resting on the table, tilting her head once again. “Do you think she’s cute?”

“I’m literally straight, Dani.” This is a recurring joke I recently started to say every time Dani or Bonnie try to set me up with a woman.

“Shut up.” We both laugh, then she pauses before adding, “Well, she thinks you’re cute, so if you’re interested, let us know.”

Us. Dani is guilty of this more than Bonnie is, but they both do it a bit too much for my liking. They’ll use ‘us’ instead of ‘me’ when only one of them is there, like they’re an old married couple or something.

“I’ll let you know,” I say, eager to change the subject. I think about telling Dani that Bridget isn’t my type, but that would lead to a conversation about what my type in women is, and answering with ‘your girlfriend’ probably wouldn’t be a great idea. “How are you and Bonnie?”

“Oh, we’re great,” she says. No hesitation, and I don’t know why I’m surprised. I live with them, so I’d presumably witness all of their arguments (or at the very least overhear, because their walls are concerningly thin), but the worst I’ve heard is the playful teasing that

they do all the time, which is done with love. “Yeah, honestly nothing to even say. We’re doing good.”

“I’m glad,” I say, and I will myself to believe it. I want her to be happy, and I’m glad that she is, because she’s been nothing but kind to me, but I can’t help but wish it was someone else bringing her that happiness. “You guys are super disgusting and smushy sometimes, but you’re also, like, perfect together.”

“That means a lot,” she says, and I can tell it really does. “Sometimes I feel like I don’t... look like I...fit with Bonnie. Or, at least, like other people feel that way.”

I nod in understanding. They are a bit of a mismatch – the height difference itself is a lot, with Dani being four inches taller than Bonnie, but also their styles could not be more different. There’s also something perfect about the pair of them, too, though. The more you look at them together the more it just makes sense.

“I think the only person whose opinion actually matters when it comes to that stuff is you two. As much as that probably doesn’t help. All the moments I’ve made fun of how straight she looks flash in front of my face as I respond to her. I want to tell her I’m sorry. I didn’t realize she thought so much about that stuff. I also don’t want to make a huge deal out of it, though. Most of the times I brought that stuff up was just to Bonnie, so bringing it up is maybe unnecessary. Still makes me feel bad, though. “I’m sorry you have to deal with that,” I add.

“It’s not your fault.” She lets out a small chuckle. “And it’s also, like, fine. I know Bonnie and I are fine. My family just teases me about stuff sometimes.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again.

“It’s *so* fine. I don’t even know why I brought it up. I’m also, like, really lucky. In terms of, like, family stuff. As much as they tease me, they also are, like, generally okay about the being-gay thing.” I see her withdraw from the conversation a little, and I wonder if she talks about this stuff often. She seems hyper-aware of getting her point across in a way that will make it impossible for me to misunderstand, but she doesn’t need to be that careful. Everything she’s saying makes perfect sense to me.

“You’re still allowed to complain. Like, just because things could be worse doesn’t mean you can’t talk about how you feel.” I wish I were better at being consoling. Bonnie is so great at this kind of stuff.

Day 3 – 10/03

“Yeah, I know, thank you. I’m sorry for even bringing it up. You’re just really easy to talk to, and sometimes I feel like I overload Bonnie with this kind of stuff.”

I am hyper-aware of the fact that I am now definitely blushing to an embarrassing degree. Her saying I’m easy to talk to makes me happy because I can’t remember the last time someone other than Bonnie has told me that, but also, I am flooded with guilt. This seems to happen every day now, where I’ll remember just how bad of a situation I’ve gotten myself into and have to process it all over again. “You’re really easy to talk to, too,” I say, though I haven’t really opened up to her that much. It just feels like the right thing to say.

“Thanks. We should hang out more. I’ve always told Bonnie I wish we were closer.”

And that’s the final nail in the coffin. My coffin. I’m such a shitty person. I barely even bring up Dani when it’s just Bonnie and me hanging out, and Dani spends her time with Bonnie talking about how she wants to be closer to me. I’ve been delusional enough that I’ve convinced myself that Bonnie also doesn’t bring Dani up around because maybe there’s something underlying there between us, like she maybe might someday view me as more than a friend. But I’m sure that’s just her taking the cue from me, knowing that for whatever reason, I never want to talk about Dani. Bonnie is my best friend, and I’ve put no effort into supporting her relationship. I’ve practically avoided Dani and done everything in my power to stay an arm’s length away from her while simultaneously living in her house. I don’t even pay rent. Jesus fucking Christ.

“What?” *Shit.*

“Jesus Christ. I want to be closer to you, too.” I need to stop saying things out loud that are meant to stay in my head. Maybe I’m going insane. Maybe I’ve been going insane this whole year, ever since I fell in love with Bonnie, ever since I even met her. Everything’s becoming so much harder to deal with lately. Nothing’s changing but I just keep waiting for it to. But waiting is killing me, I can feel it weighing me down as I walk, keeping my brain eternally foggy.

“Are you okay?”

“I need to go home. I’m sorry.” I wipe a tear that’s burrowed its way into one side of my nose. As I do so, I realize the tear is one of many, and I can’t seem to stop breathing in. I’m hyperventilating a little bit. Or maybe I’m just hyperventilating a normal amount. I don’t know how someone could hyperventilate a little bit.

“Don’t be sorry. I’ll go with you.” Dani grabs her bag from under her chair and drapes it over her shoulder. “Was it something I said? I’m really sorry.”

I’m looking down into my lap because I don’t want to look anywhere else. I’m trying to breathe out, but every time I try to adjust my breathing at all, I suck in and gasp for air repeatedly. My right hand accidentally makes contact with a cup of iced water on our table which wasn’t there a moment ago, and I wonder if a worker brought it over to us. I wonder if I’m making a scene. I hope the sorority girls haven’t noticed. I wonder if they’ve ever felt like this.

I take a sip of the water and feel a little better instantly, but it still takes me at least five minutes to actually get up from my seat. I continue staring at my jeans, ignoring the world around me, as I breathe in and out, in and out, in and out. I realize a moment before I decide that I’m ready to leave that Dani has walked around to my side of the table and has placed a hand on my shoulder. I’m glad that I didn’t realize that earlier because it definitely would have freaked me out.

“Sorry about that. We can go home now,” I say.

“Okay, yeah, for sure, let’s go,” says Dani. I lead the way so that she stops talking. I can see it in her eyes that she isn’t sure we should go, and I want to prove to her that I’m fine, because I am. That was just a moment of weakness. I’m completely okay.

I also don’t want her to help me because I’m an awful person and I’ve been a horrible friend to her. Her kindness is an extra punch to the gut.

“So, what are you doing for the animated short you have due next week?” I ask, walking so quickly that Dani struggles to keep up with my pace. Smile and nod, smile and nod, breathe, breathe, smile.

At work the next morning, Wren is wearing a different shade of lipstick than she usually does. I don’t know much about makeup, but I know enough to be able to tell that it is *not* her color. She’s usually so consistent with her makeup and clothing, and far more put-together than I am, so I wonder what caused the change. Then, I remember that she’s going through a breakup, and everything makes a lot more sense. I’m sure she’ll realize in a week or two that she looks a little clownish – I say lovingly –, and she’ll be thankful that she didn’t do something more drastic, like shave her head or get a tattoo of “persevere” written in Mandarin.

“I like the makeup,” I say to her, partly because I feel the need to acknowledge the change, and partly because nothing else comes to mind, and I have to say hello somehow.

She blushes. I can tell she’s not quite sure about it. “Aw, thanks. It’s definitely different.” She laughs.

“It’s cool. Works with your eyes.”

Day 4 – 10/04

I’m not sure if that’s actually true, but I’ve heard Dani tell her female friends that in the past. Wren thanks me as she ties her apron around her waist.

I’m not sure what makes me say it, but a moment later, when I’ve handed off the iced latte I was making for a regular, I ask, “So, how are things?”

Actually, upon further reflection, I know exactly why I say it. My conversation with Dani yesterday made it very clear to me that I am basically friendless, and as much as I do like doing my own thing most of the time, I should probably make friends outside of two people who are in a relationship with one another, always leaving me as the third wheel. Wren is a safe choice. As much as I definitely saw her at her worst at the chess club meeting, I think she’s really cool. Cool in a way that I wish I was cool, if that makes any sense. You can see it in the way she interacts with customers – there’s an ease with which she approaches the world, one I’ve never been able to even fake.

“Things?” She smiles. “Things are alright. How are things with you?”

Is asking ‘how are things’ a strange thing to say? Her sheepish smile makes me question it. “Same. No complaints.”

She doesn’t respond right away, and I wrack my brain for something else to bring up – how do people initiate conversations? It seems much harder than I remember it being with Dani and Bonnie. I kind of forget that there was ever a time when us three didn’t already know pretty much everything about each other, but that time must have existed. We had to get there somehow. I open my mouth to ask how she’s liking her sophomore year, but before I can get a word out, Wren says, “So I got a call from Benji last night.”

“No.” I set down the rag I was using to wipe down the counter. Wren smirks at me as I do it. “Well? Did you answer? What was it about? You can’t just leave me with that!”

“Hi, how are you doing today?”

I turn my head to see that a customer has walked up to the order counter. I didn't even hear the bell ring. The man orders a vanilla latte and I start to make it as Wren rings it up for him. A moment later, I watch him walk over to a table in the corner and set his stuff down. As I measure out the milk, I say, "You just love suspense, don't you?"

Wren laughs. "I can't lie, I am loving drawing this out."

The steam wand screams as I start to steam the milk, then lowers to a steady gurgle. I love the sound of milk steaming. "Whatever, don't tell me then," I say, knowing Wren is going to fold.

"I didn't answer. I was asleep when he called so I just woke up to a voicemail."

"What time did he call?"

"Like 3 AM."

"Was he drunk?"

"More likely high. He sounded high."

"How high? Like, do you think he'll remember it?"

"Do you want to know what he said or not?"

"MEDIUM LATTE FOR JASON AT THE BAR!" I lean against the dropoff counter and turn to face Wren again. "Sorry, I just want all of the context."

"He was probably, like, an 8 out of 10. On the high-ness scale or whatever."

"Got it. Moving on. What did he say?"

"It was bullshit. He wants to get back together. It didn't work out with Peter."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Have you answered?"

"Nah. Blocked him."

"*Woah*. Big step."

"You thought I'd take him back?"

Yes. I kind of did. "No, of course not. It's just, that's a hard thing to hear and not, like, overthink things. You know?"

"Yeah, for sure. I definitely had a moment of, like, 'maybe he just made a mistake,' 'maybe he deserves another chance,' whatever. But, like, he *lied* to me. It wasn't even that he

wanted to be exclusive with Peter; it's that he set everything up with him behind my back. You know?"

"Yeah, totally. It was a total dick move. I'm glad you're not letting him confuse you."

"The voicemail was so embarrassing, too, dude. He was like, 'I'm gonna regret saying this, but –'"

"Never a good start."

"Exactly."

"Well good for you. And maybe you don't feel this way because you care about him and stuff, but I'm glad it didn't work out with the other guy. Karma working its magic."

She laughs. "It's weird, but as much as I was obviously a mess the night it happened, as soon as, like, a day had passed, I felt such a weight off my shoulders. I'm kind of excited to be single now."

"I'm glad. Being single is great," I say, even though I would ditch singlehood in an instant if Bonnie asked me to, and also I'm kind of dating a guy my dad's age.

"Is it? You don't seem too convinced."

I've got to get better at making sure my internal thoughts stay internal. "No, it is. I was just – I was just thinking."

"Gotcha." She laughs. Every time she laughs, I'm not sure if it's with me or at me, but it's a little contagious. She's so fucking joyful, and I can't tell if I'm annoyed about it or jealous of it. She just got out of a three-year relationship less than a week ago and already has the clarity necessary to mentally move on. And I know the relationship was polyamorous, so maybe that's a little different from monogamy, but still. I can't *fully* imagine how I'd be in that situation, because I've never been anywhere near that situation, but I think I'd be a mess.

After work, I get a notification that Wren followed me on Instagram. I guess I'm not so bad at making friends after all. When Dani and Bonnie ask how my day was, I fight the urge to bring it up, just to prove to them that there's parts of my life that they aren't aware of. But then I realize the irony in telling them, which would still leave nothing outside their knowledge. I keep it to myself.

I'm a bit embarrassed to admit I'm really excited for my date with Gary today. So much so that I put in the effort to plan my outfit the day before, and it's not the usual tits-out style I go

for when hanging out with Tinder men. It's an outfit I genuinely like – a purple sweater and a long white skirt. I wear purple earrings I found in the back of my jewelry box and, as much as I usually don't care about what I wear, it really makes everything go together nicely. "You look ready to buy some books," is what Gary says when I hop in the passenger seat after locking Bonnie and Dani's door.

"Incorrect. I'm dressed to *window shop* some books. Books are expensive." Gary laughs.

We're headed to Barnes & Noble, and not the one on campus – the one in the neighborhood I grew up in, a little under two hours away. Gary and I were texting the other day about our favorite memories from childhood, and I mentioned the Scholastic Book Fair, which happened once a year through my school. That got us talking about bookstores in general, and when he asked if I'd like to go with him to the Barnes & Noble that was home to some of my dearest memories, I couldn't say no.

We've got a real father-daughter thing going lately. I've changed his name in my Contacts from 'Gary Tinder' to 'Gary Nelson,' his actual name, which is a big step. Most of the time, I try to block out the fact that we initially met on a dating app – the thought of him swiping right on me after scrolling through my profile genuinely makes me ill –, and he seems willing to ignore that as well. He's a good listener, and he makes conversation really easy.