Plotting in the Secretarial Pool

Angie Pelekidis

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol32/iss2/5
“Here’s what you do,” Kathie tells you. She rolls her chair away from her desk and closer to yours, covertly scanning the large office space you share in the basement of Montauk Middle School in Borough Park, Brooklyn. Last year, you were evicted from your office on the first floor so that that space could be used to create additional classrooms to house an ever-expanding population of students. Kathie’s glance returns to you once she’s established that no one important can overhear her. A boy named Anton sits in one of the wooden chairs lined up against the wall on the other side of the long counter that divides the room. From where you sit, all you can see is the top of Anton’s head, but you can hear his sniffles. A few minutes earlier, Marian, the school nurse, had brought him down to the basement to wait for his mother to pick him up. Kathie is unconcerned with his presence and keeps talking. “Set up a fake online profile on that dating site Bern’s using. Find a picture, maybe of your cute niece. The one from her 18th birthday party where she’s wearing a short white skirt and heels, right? You’ve been a secretary for what, ten years? So use all your skills to write this profile. Call yourself something like “Girliegirl1983.”
You feel, for a moment, like you should be writing this down, in shorthand maybe. Like it's Principal Melman dictating an important memo you need to forward to all the teachers, who buzz above you between their classroom cells while below them you and Kathie do the drone-work of school secretaries. Kathie's fifty-three and twice divorced. A woman of the world. She's taken you under her wing ever since the break up with Bern, who teaches English at Montauk. Leaning back in her chair, Kathie hoists one leg over the other then grabs hold of her ankle to keep it in place. In this position, her thick thigh tests the seam and tensile strength of her poly-rayon pants. You look away from her to the counter where an open box of chocolate-covered donuts, courtesy of Kathie, offers itself. But you've already eaten two this morning with your coffee and can't afford to have anymore. Not with the seven pounds you gained in the last month.

She goes on with her plan. "Girliegirl is twenty-four years old and your opposite: petite and thin, curvy yet athletic. You know the type. Bern's fantasy girl. She's young, dumb, and up for anything. And not complicated like he said you were, remember?"

How could you forget that, or any of the other reasons Bernie gave you when he broke up with you five months into it. You were too demanding and you suffocated him. All this after you called him four times in two days. But you had legitimate reasons for doing that. You needed to know if he liked celery in his tuna salad for the lunch you were preparing for both of you. And if he needed you to pick up his dry cleaning on your way home since it was more convenient for you than him. Gosh, you were just being nice.
A nod from you gives Kathie permission to go on. “Then you wait. You delete all the unwanted winks and emails that come your way from men as deluded and dishonest as he is; fifty-year-olds who think they’ve got something to offer a woman half their age, men desperately reaching back to their youth by reaching out to you. You wait for his username, ‘Mrknight,’ right? to show up in your mailbox. When it comes, you spring like a cobra after a rat.”

Kathie’s clawed hand lashes out. You blink involuntarily, as if she’s going to hit you.

Her face relaxes from its almost-snarl and looks thoughtful. “If he doesn’t take the prettily packaged bait, wink at him. If that doesn’t work, email him. Find one little thing in his profile that Girliegirl has in common with him and send him a short, chatty note. Something like: ‘OMG! I don’t believe you only drink German beer! Me too!’”

Kathie’s voice and body rise as she says this, and she wiggles her upper body in her chair before settling back down into her Buddha-like torso. “That’ll be enough to show your interest without sounding desperate. No guy, not even Bern, likes a woman who’s needy.”

Inwardly you cringe. Three months into your relationship you wanted to see him during the week and not just on the weekends, maybe even stay over at his place instead of only yours. That’s when Bernie told you he needed to take it slow. Because he still wasn’t sure about getting into another serious relationship only two years after his last one with Harriet West, the school’s former history teacher (who was now married and a stay-at-home mom). It had ended when she cheated on Bernie with her current husband. That
type of heartbreak took a long time to recover from, he told you, and you couldn’t help but understand, having experienced it for yourself on numerous occasions in the past.

You watch Kathie as she unhooks her leg to squash a gray-brown spider that crawls out from under her desk. She wipes her shoe on the floor then looks up at you. “He responds and you write back. You exchange several emails and write things like, ‘I can’t believe all the books you’ve read. You must be so smart.’ Make it the type of writing that drives an English teacher like him crazy when it comes from his students but that he forgives instantly in someone like Girliegirl. He’s gonna think he can teach her a thing or two. Life hasn’t jaded her like it has women our age.”

You’re nearly twenty years younger than Kathie, but don’t point this out. You think about Bernie’s profile, which you’ve memorized by now, though each time you read it feels like a knife in your heart knowing its purpose. Sure, what Kathie’s advising is one huge lie, but does Bernie really “give 100% of himself when he gets it back?” And is he “truly ready for the real thing” like he says? Or is it just that what he had with you was a “fake thing?” A not-quite-real thing? Too bad it was all real to you. Would you be feeling this awful if it wasn’t?

“Miss? Can I have a donut?” Anton asks. The tall counter turns him into a disembodied head that talks in a nasal and faint Eastern European accent.

Kathie rolls her eyes at you, but before she can make some sort of snotty comment, you take a napkin out of your desk drawer and walk over to the counter. “Here,” you say, handing the boy a donut wrapped in the napkin.
“Thanks, Miss,” he says.

“Try not to make a mess,” Kathie tells him as he sits back down to enjoy his snack. “Where was I? Right. Eventually he’ll ask Girliegirl for her number or send his. Of course you can’t talk to him. So what you do is suggest meeting over coffee at the Barnes and Noble on Seventh Avenue in Park Slope. There’s plenty of hiding places to watch him from in there, and he’ll agree. He’ll show up all eager to meet this girl who he already imagines in his bed, as his trophy date for the end-of-term party. Just imagine his face as the whole thing goes down.” Kathie nods her head slowly and satisfaction contorts her mouth into an ugly purse.

You study her closely, the puffy skin under her eyes, the deep lines across her neck and forehead that no amount of makeup can conceal. You remember that at least one of her husbands left her for another woman. She looks tired, and suddenly you want to weep for her, to hug her tightly. Because you’re afraid that one day you may become her. Except you can’t even get someone to actually marry you. You hear your father’s voice in your head, warning you that time is passing, that you’ll be thirty-five soon without having produced a grandchild on whom your parents can transfer their hopes, since all your potential has led to a job as a school secretary, not even a teacher. You are unthin, unmarried, unlovable, and unlike your good-looking older sister, the CPA. Everything is un, but you are not unkind.

The sound of ragged sniffing intrudes on your thoughts, and for a moment you imagine it’s you, but then you remember Anton sitting on the other side of the counter. When you look over at him, he’s using his forearm like a violin bow below his nose. Chocolate

Pelekidis 123
smudges around his mouth make him look like he’s made out with the donut, and you have an urge to take another napkin and clean his face. Bernie was once that young. What did he look like then? And what kind of boy was he? One who loved books more than sports. Who was teased for being overweight and wearing glasses. A lot like you.

Kathie points an accusing finger at your head, and you defensively smooth down a long strand of your ash brown hair. You’ve been growing it for years and it’s the only beautiful thing about you. “Make sure you wear your hair differently than you normally do. Get those dead ends cut off so it looks healthier. I’m just saying. Put on some sunglasses and a hat, maybe even a raincoat. Watch his humiliation as he checks his watch, looks toward the entrance over and over, and eventually gives up on his fantasy.”

Can you do this? Is it in you? This morning as you circled around the school trying to find a parking spot on Borough Park’s crowded streets, you braced yourself for the day ahead, which was filled with the potential that you might see him in a hallway, though you made it a point to never leave the basement, not even during lunch. After you parked your car, you saw a short man in a trench coat walking toward the school and thought it was him. And you felt sick from the fear that he would turn around. You ducked behind a tree to avoid that possibility, hiding from Bernie while wanting nothing more than to be with him. It occurred to you then that this must be the feeling mothers have when they give their newborns up for adoption.

Kathie is still talking. “Imagine what he looks like on his way home. He might even cry a little. He’s a crier, right? Oh stop! Don’t
feel sorry for him. Did he feel any pity for you? When he was canceling dates at the last minute? When he refused to hold your hand or claim you as his girlfriend at the Christmas party? Didn’t you hear him tell his buddy Sal you two were keeping it “caz?” Or how ‘bout his flirting with the new teachers fresh out of college the last time we went out for happy hour, like he had the slightest chance? You saw how cocky he got. All you’re doing is bringing him back down to earth.”

Kathie slowly lowers her hand, palm down, until it’s only a foot off the ground. You look away from her set face to your niece’s graduation picture on your desk. With Gabby’s slender waist and long legs, she has all the weapons she needs to win the dating wars. She will never have to resort to the type of strategy Kathie is outlining. Men are already pursuing her as though she is a celebrity, a situation you have never experienced, only shy overtures as if the man was half embarrassed of his attraction to you. And you are so jealous of Gabby that you hate what you look like even more than you normally do. But even worse, you hate her too. And the God that made you so average.

“When he gets home, he’ll find one last email from Girliegirl waiting for him. It’ll say, ‘You really should use a more recent photo.’ And that he’s blocked from ever writing to her again.”

Kathie must see from your expression how cruel you think this is. She puts a hand on your arm and softens her voice. “Think of it this way, you’re teaching him a lesson. To lower his standards. Nothing ‘gainst you but you know he doesn’t deserve a Girliegirl.”

That may be true but you know him better than Kathie does. Remember the time you went out to dinner at that nice Italian

"Pelekidis 125"
place in Sheepshead Bay? Had that waiter actually been rude when he took Bernie's steak back to be cooked more? Or had Bernie used this as an excuse to leave the man a bad tip? It's hard to say. You tend to think not, which is why you snuck back into the restaurant using the pretense that you had to use the restroom in order to put another $5.00 under the saltshaker. You can almost hear Bernie telling Sal about his online adventure with Girliegirl: "She was obviously psychotic. I'm lucky I got out of it."

But maybe inside he'll admit this isn't the truth. Maybe in time he'll even realize what a mistake he made ending it with you. That he was fortunate to have someone who loved and desired him in spite of his paunch and the fifteen strands of hair on his head. Someone who enjoyed cooking for him, sleeping with him, listening to him vent about how stupid his students are and how crazy his fellow teachers. He'll come to you, a humble man desperate to have you in his life again. One who recognizes you as the type of woman he needs.

"So are you gonna do it?" Kathie asks you, an expectant look on her face. You realize she sees herself in you, and Bernie has become all the men who have ever hurt her.

You shrug, which Kathie takes as a no. She snorts out a contemptuous breath through her nose. "Whatever," she says, turning back to her desk, writing you off as a fool.

You smile at Anton and ask him if he'd like another donut.