



Well, blokes, I think it's time for dueling pianos.

ANOTHER NONPROFIT

What he does, man, is eke his way into their social circle in such a way that it seems the social circle has eked its way into him. Because being near him is a privilege, that's how he makes it seem, and for the type of clients he takes on, those privileges are highly thought of. The black ponytail puts off every third or so client out of the gate, but before long his unselfconsciousness reins in even the skeptics and makes them think, like I did, and like they all do, how their own nonchalance doesn't hold a candle to Mario's simultaneous social fluidity and trueness to self. What they don't know, and what it took a lot of doing for me to find out, is he'd rather be holed up in his room reading *The Atlantic*. You'd never know from watching him raise beers, place his hands on women's backs, smile with his two rows of perfect, square teeth, shoot pool like a piece of shit and not give a damn, but it's true. He's a thinker.

Like I said, he works it as a nonprofit. His clients tend to be unaware that they're clients, in fact, until later in the game if dropping that particular knowledge is deemed prudent. Mario has always been of the opinion that his best work is done entirely incognito. Not that he's pretending to be somebody he's not. It's him out there directing the flow at all times. It's just that the sort of calculated element remains unrevealed. The calculated element being, though, strictly preliminary, which is why he can claim amnesty insofar as authenticity is concerned. He has to find his clients somehow, for Christ's sake.

Which process has become quite a bit more standardized now than it was at first, as I understand it. Kind of plodding at times, to be honest, where he's playing executive and we get to do the bottom-skimming logistical labor. When Mario first got into the business, he

simply met a few folks whom he thought needed changing, and as a sort of personal project went about trying to edify them. First fellow had initials for a name, as I recall, some A.J. or something like that. Let's call him A.J. That sounds workable.

So our man A.J. is something of a gentleman when he's at the workplace, eating lunch with his compadres, going to the grocery, the like. Mario knows him peripherally, friend of a friend, at first, but then they get to hanging out. You know how friends are made: in a sort of extended flash of blinding light. We could be friends in twenty minutes, you and me, that's how it works, nobody able to see it while it's happening. So soon enough they move beyond the handshake lunch and the bumping into each other about town and they end up out at the bars together where friendships are really cemented, right, such that you and I, we're in the right place for this kind of thing. You're having a beer, tiptoeing on the boundaries of everyday bullshit and then you slip into something that matters and all is lost, or all is gained, depending on how you look at it.

Except here's the thing. Mario's got tolerance like Jesus himself. Can drink like a shark, a whale, name me a bigger fish, and while he's having an even better time than he was before it's really because everybody *else* is drunk, and he gets to forget his own lucidity a bit. And so while our man of the hypothetical name, A.J., throws down beers with the group of them at a sticky lacquered table, and the geist goes from bitching about the nine to five to giving a buddy an empty beer cup to piss in because the bathroom line boggles the mind, Mario, between the fun of course, because you can tell, can't you, that he likes to have fun, is observing A.J. grow from a quiet, deferential bloke into a drunk, uninteresting bloke, if you want to put it that way. Which is to say that this fellow Mario's sure has some inner substance has imbibed to the extent that his best attributes are lost and his worst, muted during the daylight hours, basically come out. Now, A.J.'s not calling anyone a whore, or breaking barstools, or carrying women out of the place over his shoulder, or anything like that. This is not

violent drunkenness by any means. Mario practically wishes it is, though, as it's sad watching the guy, someone with veritable potential to *have a good time* throwing it down the tubes by giving free play to his anxieties and submerging into himself, more or less, breathing and staring at the ever stickier tables before him, with an occasional venture outward by way of shouted accord or disagreement. And everybody's bullshitting all together by that point so Mario doesn't let himself get bogged down, he keeps with the flow of the night, and before he knows it, despite his bodily homeostasis, he's lost track of time and they're at some other bar where this girl is sipping rum out of some skinny boy's navel, and there's consensus that it's time to go, so they admit defeat and get in cabs and say it's a night.

Point being that a few mornings later, at a show they both end up at with the mutual friend and related compadres, Mario inquires of A.J., or whatever his name is, whether he had a good time the other night. A.J. takes a second to even remember what the hell Mario is talking about but then he emits sounds of recognition and says that, *Oh yeah, it was a fun time, locally brewed beer is always good.* Mario doesn't remember the beer, he says. And A.J., in a moment of inexplicable, bald honesty, comes out with, *You know, to be honest, I'm not really sure how to have fun at things like that. So, the beer was good. That's what I remember.* Mario's a pretty convincing guy, is my take on it, such that he's going to get a bloke like A.J., who he's basically talking to one-on-one for the first time, telling him his deepest anxieties and all that. Look at him. Charisma, sure. But trust, that's what he gets from people. And that's the element not everybody's got.

And so, hell, this is the Eureka moment for Mario, who, as I told you, likes to have his beers and fondle his women but most of all is cycling through stuff in his head at any given moment and, truthfully, has a pretty acute aesthetic conscience, is struck by the sheer *sadness* of A.J.'s admission, and resolves, then and there, though more likely it was over the course of the next few days, when he had a chance to get permeated by it, to show this kid what fun is, to release him from

the choice between crippling self-awareness and oblivion. Because, as Mario had discovered from some fine-tunings of *himself* a bit down the line, those aren't the only options available. There's something, he'd tell you, and he told me, that at this point he came to classify as, as this A.J. kid had put it, *fun*, a state where you're simultaneously lost in the moment and present to enjoy it. Not flow, exactly, but an ability to both have a fucking great time and *know* you're having it, and remember it, and count it as one of the many experiences *you* have had, instead of that shameful alter ego that comes out when you've had a few too many and start slurring your speech at women you wouldn't think of talking to during the daylight hours.

And with this self-knowledge, Mario was equipped to essentially *save* this A.J. bloke, sorry piece of mess that he was, and he went about the same basic procedure that he subsequently ended up going about for every client, nearly a fool-proof thing, or the sort that at least works ninety-nine percent of the time.

Christ. You probably want to know how I know all this. *I* would, curiosity having killed the cat, et cetera. I can't blame you, my man. The truth is as soon as I was on board, Mario briefed me, like he does with all of his what he calls secretaries. Kind of a fruity name, I know. We're not secretaries, more like partners. Part-time. By no means all-absorbing, pro-bono as it is. But you want to do *some* good, right. So when opportunity comes knocking at your door, you take it.

He tells us because he wants us to know the story behind it all, is why. He believes in the mission. He believes in his methods, too, because to a certain extent the methods *are* the mission, insofar as the feelings that he inculcates are tied with the only barely physical states of being that are regularly achieved by each of us, but it's the mission that drives the thing. He says every organization's got to have a mission. Simple enough that it hardly needs to get said.

His methods, though, and that's why we're here tonight, not in a God-put-us-here metaphysical sense but in a why-we-physically-walked-down-the-cobbled-brick-road-and-stepped-into-this-particu-

lar-micro-brewing-bar sense, are time-tested. He, and I, to tell you the truth, never get bored of them. Even though same thing every time, every client. Give or take a beer, an hour.

After he has done the eking about which I informed you, the finding his way into the peripheral vision of the client for which we secretaries — partners really, like I said — give him administrative support, and has made sure he's on calling-and-asking-to-hang-out terms with the client, he sets a date on the calendar with careful precision, in one of his post *New Yorker* hazes, and this becomes the date. He text messages the client on the Wednesday before the date — early enough to guarantee availability but late enough to be nonchalant — and notes that he and a few friends are heading down to Morgan Street that Friday night, and would he like to come. All quite a bit less fancy than that, of course, this being a text message and this being Mario, who despite his seemingly cold calculations is flying by the seat of his pants too, to a certain extent, just like the rest of us. Invariably, the client will be available, and will text back after a suitably nonchalant interim that *Yeah, sounds kickin*, or some such noncommittal but in fact, if you read between the lines, fairly amped declaration of his consideration of the prospect. And invariably, the client will text that Friday afternoon asking for details, which he's worried about because of Mario's half carefully calculated, half simply negligent radio silence over the preceding day and a half. Mario shoots him back a meeting spot, and by the time the client shows up we're all out already — we being Mario's compadres, a ragtag bunch most of whom double as secretaries and/or partners — nursing beers and clicking our tongues around in our mouths at the women who walk by. When the client arrives, past the dirty glass windows of the bar's doors — and look at the things, I swear to God they never wash them — we're quick to assure him that we've only been there for about five minutes and this three-quarters-full thing in front of us is emphatically our first beer, and to ask him what kind he prefers. This isn't always one-hundred percent true, of course, because the majority of us have day jobs with

long hours and sometimes you just have to get in there and have a couple the second the day is done, but it's harmless. When he wavers as to choice of drink, we wave him off and get whatever's the fourth on the brewery's chalked-up list for the day. Bringing it back to the table, we toast.

This is where tactics kick in. Mario drinks tremendously slowly. It's no difference for him, of course, because as I've told you he can drink like a megachurch at Communion and stay as lucid as he likes. The rest of us take his cue, though it's always hard to match his snail's pace. And one of the many unwritten, un-really-thought-about rules of drinking with your buddies, you'll note, is that you try to match their pace. When you sit with a table of blokes and look at their eyes, from time to time you'll each of them eyeing their buddies' glasses and taking a sip or holding back to even it up. It's no cold calculated thing. It's like Mario's scheming. Sure he's *doing* all this, per se, but it's all only half-conscious, and it's more etiquette than anything else. It's just that instead of trying to gauge himself off anyone else, he's inviting people to gauge off him.

And then two beers in — and this is what shocks everyone, each time that we do it, even though we know what's about to happen — just as we've begun to warm up our systems and consider doing slightly stupid things, Mario slaps his hands down on his thighs and says, *Well, blokes, I think it's time for dueling pianos*. And if we're shocked, having seen it twenty plus times, God knows that the client is shocked, with this two-beer declaration that a bunch of *dudes*, for Christ's sake, are about to go dancing. And not in the male-bonding misogyny of the street's basement clubs, even, but in the unhip dueling pianos bar just down at the end of the next block.

At least the client thinks it is unhip. The bar itself is key to the plan, and Mario chose it, insofar as he chooses anything, wisely, because it looks like the kind of place where your grandma'd go to cut the rug but really, inside, it's funky and has walls of uncovered brick and in front of the two flamboyant pianists there is a wooden dance

floor, some shoddy lights, and a few leather chairs and then a bar, all of which take up maybe the size of your second apartment, not that I know your personal living history, just grasping for a comparison factor here. The bar hums, to put it briefly, and you wouldn't know it from the gaudy neon sign that hangs above the brick staircase into the basement.

The client is generally ice cold by this point. He's got a little alcohol in his blood, but it serves mostly to compound his anxiety and make him feel like a fuck-up, and so he is eminently grateful when Mario heads to the surprisingly unpeopled bar and orders another round from the tender. On a platter, with the panache of a Paris waiter, Mario carries the requisite number of beers to the edge of the dance floor, where there's inevitably a leather chair vacant. He sets it down there, and we use the chair's arms as props for our drinking and goofing around. It's all a warm-up, see, by this point, and we all know what's going to happen, except the client, and there's a sense of energy that builds up, what with the crowded small basement, the Elton John tunes, the clinked necks of the beers, the swiveling hips just inches away, the carbonation making its way leisurely through our esophagi, whatnot. We stand there, bullshitting, moreso than usual because nobody can hear each other anyway, and we kill our beers, nice and slowly, torture them really, draw and quarter them. When they're dead, we look at Mario. This time, there's no call to action, nothing of the sort. There's only his own swivel out in the direction of the dance floor, doing the John Travolta from *Pulp Fiction*, subtle but engaged, his pointed toe digging a hole in the wood paneling. And we follow, a dearth of glances between us. We don't even look at the client. The idea is to show him that this is just what's done. Three slow beers in. Very little chemical alteration in the brain. And he's thinking, *Oh shit oh shit oh shit*, until he realizes he'd be more embarrassed standing on the sideline *watching*, and so he creeps his way onto the dance floor and swivels a little himself.

Before you know it, we are dancing like lunatics, karate-kicking

and Elvising and doing all this unstylish, fun shit, straight in the center of the dance floor, shone upon by the hot lights and working our way toward sweating our balls off, even if it's the winter. Mario looks like a complete jackass, in his own respectable way, and the rest of us dance like wooden Indians caught fire. The client sees this bizarre casting off of self-awareness and, due paradoxically to his *own* self-awareness, which tells him he'll look like a jackass if he doesn't look like a jackass, ends up having a pretty fucking rollicking time himself.

The women take care of themselves. This is not something Mario needs to organize beforehand, though he could, he's got that sort of pull in the land of beautiful women. It's just luck, I guess, or the consistently right collusion of circumstances—a group of decently good-looking blokes, a casual bar that's not too worried about appearances, the pheromones that Mario must carry in his back pocket or somewhere—that we usually end up finding a group of women and dancing with *them*, cutting off the potential gay vibe of the whole endeavor right when it was about to begin. And be assured, please, that it's not *grinding* that we end up doing with these girls, because though we all assume that each other is in possession of the so-called proper anatomical machinery, we've no need to grope one another's until the off-chance that somebody takes somebody home and gets down to business. The kind of dancing *we're* doing, and they're doing too, totally into it, is the nearly Spanish flirtation type thing, where you hone in on somebody and they hone away, or you grab their hand and spin them for no reason at all, or you just rock out in the same general vicinity and look at how odd the other person looks, swinging their limbs around, but how sexy, too, because you can tell there's a brain in there controlling their weirdness, and it doesn't look like all the other ones. Sexy to *me*, at least.

This is the night. This is how it works. From time to time, one or the other of us will go grab another platter of drinks and we'll dance with those for a while, but always the alcohol is peripheral to the fun we're having, an accessory devoted to keeping the high even though

the high is going to be more or less there anyway, and nonetheless eventually the client will speak up and *himself* go buy a round for the bunch—and let no one say we’re not a nonprofit, we bought beers for *him, too*, for Christ’s sake—and though by this time we’re usually six beers in or so, this is over a period of like four hours, such that it has no time to sink in and blur the vision, or fuck with the memory, or soften the impact of the to be frank with you kick-ass time we are invariably having, and so self-awareness has been cast off and oblivion not reached and the client realizes, the goal is, that there *is* a middle ground, that active relaxation doesn’t have to consist of getting absolutely sloshed, that, in our man A.J. or whoever the hell’s terms, there *is* a such thing as fun.

Though the client’s specific reactions don’t always follow such a tight pattern. The goals happen, we think, to all of them. But these realizations come in different forms. Some clients end up taking one of our girls home with them, a chick impressed with his coherence even in the midst of having a good time, and he, vice versa, too. Some clients just plug away the rest of the night until we’re ready to go, and hop in a cab with us and hightail it back home to collapse in bed. Some clients take up smoking, sort of inexplicably, trotting outdoors every half-hour to share a chain of unprecedented fags with whoever’s out there. It’s bad for your health, but whatever gets the job done, is what we say.

Me, it was this quasi-religious experience, almost a fugue state. I was like all the rest, right, coming off a sort of obsession about being nonchalant but finding it hard to make the jump between everyday engagement and that thing we call fun, because my actions are very *tick, tick, tick* and everything has its place and knows where it lies, including my own states of being. And I always found that quite a *pleasurable* thing, really, because think of the sense of control it gives you, being able to say *This is where I am* and comprehend what that entails and know the future and the past. Or at least this was fantastic up until this concept of *fun* came around and started inhabiting the

circles I was around and, if you pay attention, all circles. And so suddenly people were spending time at bars and going to parties and looking forward to the weekends where I was taking my pleasure from the everyday predictableness and order of the week. Except that pleasure didn't extend to Saturday night. My body still wanted something, its consistent knowledge of what it was getting itself into during the week and all the dopamine that got released by way of that not sufficing and what was missing, I'm not afraid to tell you, is that sort of spiritual, fluid, non-schematic pleasure that my body couldn't get out of the stuff that I thought made me happy. I didn't know what it was then, of course, but when my brain would say *Boy, I'd like to relax tonight and watch a movie with the girlfriend* my body, or something more than my body, some sort of transcendent set of human particles, would be pushing against it saying *No, no, there's more*, and my brain knew that was there and pushed back, and it said *But when you go to these keggers and things you're just sitting around a table drinking beer having a boring time and talking about shit that's unimportant or you're getting fucked-up and ending up one of the stragglers at a party that died a long time ago and you end up stumbling home and puking in your bed*, and so I was always in discomfort after about seven p.m. those penultimate two days of the week. And ever since, this was high school and then college and now, hell, I'm twenty-eight years old, I didn't want to go out to bars and get obliterated but then again I did, too, or I made myself, because I knew come eleven p.m. I was going to regret it if I didn't. Then, Mario showed up.

I was as hesitant as ever when he asked me to come out, and this particular night I was fucking *tired*, more so than usual, and I was really on the verge of calling it a week and sitting on my couch for the rest of the night playing with my canutzens and feeling pitiful. But regret came out of the future and nipped me in the neck and so I rose and threw on a button-down and went downtown. Turned out that these blokes were cool, his compadres, though I felt out of place, their comfort with one another, the nicknames, et cetera. And we were

drinking so slowly, I didn't understand why we were here, what the *telos* was, if this was awkward just for me or for the whole crew. And then he proposed the dueling pianos bar.

In my head at first it was like I described to you. A dueling pianos bar? For Christ's sake, who are these people. My concerns went unvoiced. We went to the bar. As per the plan, I didn't want to dance but I *had* to, at the behest of me looking like a tit if I *didn't* get out there, because everyone was.

And by the end of it, true to form again, I'm bringing out platters of beer out of companionship rather than out of the need to fuel the high, I'm dancing like a maniac, there's this whole circle of people on the dancefloor and we're all at the center and simultaneously none of us are at the center, and no *decisions* were being made, that's the beauty of the dancing element of it, that in its flow to a rhythm that doesn't cease but every three or four minutes or never if you've got a good set of piano players it leaves you no time to consider the silliness of what you're doing. And for me, in my brain, there were these little flashes, little joys, when I'd look in the eye of some girl or when Mario'd do something particularly bizarre, but for the most part I was just dancing, man, that's all there was to it. And at the end of the night—we're talking like four hours after we went to the second bar, and by this time we're half on the leather couches half on the dance floor—we're all in the same mental place and we say, fuck-all, it's late, and/or early, let's get the hell out of here.

And so we do and by the time I get back to my home it's nearly light out and the following day is lost, of course, something I might have bemoaned before, but not now, and so what I do is simple and nothing different than normal, except when I collapse into my bed, the room isn't spinning, I'm coherent, my legs hurt, and my soul feels nourished. Not so much nourished, I guess, as not empty. I was so used to it feeling empty, it needing to get refilled by the stark routine of the week's days. But as I kicked it to sleep on *this* night, I had the mental presence to think for a bit until my eyes closed for fourteen hours, and

I *didn't* feel empty, at this particular juncture, and, I don't know, it just seemed like whatever I had to do the next day wasn't so important. So I woke up at five in the evening, called up another friend and went to dinner, went over to his place and had a few beers with his comedy troupe, and took my leave to prepare my body for the week. And it's like all those interactions, and all those following them, became sort of natural. Or, put it this way. Life became *easy*. It's perpetually hard, we all know, but the things previously of anxiety were no longer so *robust* as they once were, and I said what I wanted to say, and was aware of myself, but didn't let it stop me, and it started to seem like people began to like me more, too, though some people clearly thought I was a little off, but I felt *on*, in a way that those people weren't getting, like *I* was the one who knew.

A month down the line, I got another call from Mario. I hadn't seen him since that night, figured he had better things to do, no big deal. And he took me out for pizza, with his blokes, and without a dash of hesitation explained his scheme. I was fairly floored, you know, to find myself a client for something I'd never signed up for, but soon the sensibleness of it struck and I was simply happy to be scarfing a meat lover's and a Hawaiian with these fellows despite the organizedness of their enterprise. And I told them that. I sort of glowed with positive reviews. Had Mario's set-up been the public sort, they might have asked me to do a testimonial. As it is, they asked me about the secretary and/or partner thing. And I said yes, you know, because how fucking cool.

And I'll tell you what. No matter who the client, no matter if another secretary is needed or no, Mario follows up. He calls his clients about a month post, and arranges a sort of low-key event, a dinner, without the party element, with a few mutual friends. He gets your social groups back together. And then you dine, and he and his posse – and now I'm in that posse, believe it or not – get to see the results. And invariably, the client is better for it. Somehow both quieter and more outspoken. Funnier, though not funny. Oddly sort of now

there, as they weren't before.

Anyway, don't know whence the genius, how Mario keeps it up, the chief that he is. But he does. He's the authentic article. Beer? ■