Chapter 1: How I Met My Wife

Since moving abroad, I've dated mostly in Colombia and Rio, almost always with no shared language. People often ask why I prefer dating in South America. I usually answer that my primary love language is physical touch, and in my experience the women I've met here are openly affectionate from the first date. The signs that she's into you are also so clear that a socially awkward nerd can detect them. It's a long glance or someone grabbing your face and kissing you.

No story illustrates this better than my longest relationship abroad. Let me set the scene.

A friend had invited me out for drinks on a random weeknight. I'm not much of a night person or a drinker, but I enjoyed spending time with him, so I agreed. I got hungry and bored at the original place, so I went across the street to have dinner alone at the bar. While I ate, I noticed a group forming. I imagined it was a birthday party. It kept growing, so I sat back and enjoyed one of my favorite hobbies: people watching.

Eventually a stunningly beautiful woman joined the group, and that's when I really started paying attention. I even remember her outfit: a white top and very blue pants. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I kept watching the social interactions and thinking about how I might approach her.

Remember, I'm a socially awkward kind of guy. I was certainly not going to walk into a group of thirty people and tell the most beautiful woman what I thought of her. I sat at the bar with a drink for a while, working out a plan. After a minute, I figured it out.

By carefully observing, I noticed one man in the group was very outgoing and friendly. He was always smiling, and everyone greeted him warmly. I watched countless people leave their conversations with him smiling and happy. At first I was a bit jealous. Wouldn't I love to be that kind of person? I assumed it was his birthday, but the joy seemed like more than a simple birthday could explain.

My idea was simple: buy this guy a drink. He was obviously the life of the party and gifted at bringing people together. (Whenever I try to plan an outing for something special, it's usually just me and my best friend joking about why the rest of our friends are lame and won't join.) Buying the girl a drink could come across as too forward, and I had no way of knowing her relationship status or whether she was with anyone in the group. Buying a man a drink seemed like a much safer option.

Executing the plan was slightly more challenging. I don't speak Portuguese, and I wanted the guy's preferred drink sent to him, with the bartender telling him it was from me. I think that's

fairly common in America or USA, but not so much in Rio. I struggled to explain what I was doing to the bartender with Google Translate. Eventually I was 80% confident he understood, and I waited patiently as my plan started to unfold.

It was a bold move. To this day, I've never randomly bought a drink for a stranger of the same sex. I watched the server deliver it, trying not to stare. The handoff took noticeably longer than I expected, which I assumed meant it was hard to explain. Eventually I saw a gesture in my direction, and I felt relief that my opening move had landed. Now it was time to wait and see what would come of it.

[T], being the incredible human he is, instantly separated from the group to come over and greet me. It was a huge relief that he spoke English. He was extremely charming, well-spoken, and friendly. That's when I realized I had bought a drink for a gay man. The plan was working, just not on the intended target.

T and I chatted for a bit, and he invited me to join their group, which I did. I was one step closer to meeting her. Now I just needed to integrate into the group and make my move. I talked with people who spoke English and passively observed the group dynamic. When I saw T speaking with her and another woman, I made a point of being introduced. It fell a bit flat. She greeted me warmly but quickly went back to her conversation with her friend. I figured she wasn't interested and kept my distance.

After a while, I noticed she went to the bathroom. We crossed paths, smiled, and made eye contact in the mirror while washing our hands. I took this to mean she was open to talking, so I simply asked if she spoke English. She said no. I whipped out my phone, and we began exchanging small talk by passing it back and forth, sort of like live-tweeting a date. It made me more comfortable, given my years of online dating, but this was a much more enjoyable version of it.

Some context I only learned later: kissing in public is fairly common in Brazil. If you have a good connection, public displays of affection are encouraged. I jokingly tell first-time visitors it's the equivalent of a handshake with more bodily fluids. These aren't pecks; they're full-on tongue battles. And if you don't kiss a woman quickly, people often assume you're gay.

The back-and-forth went on for a while. We joked that everyone thought I was gay because I'd bought T a drink, and I confessed it was a ploy to get an introduction to her. After about thirty minutes of flirting through Google Translate, she asked, seemingly out of nowhere, if I wanted to kiss her. I smiled, said yes of course, and we made out. I'd wanted to the whole time. I was just too into the conversation to think of it.

And yes, if you're asking yourself, she did eventually become my wife.