

Wanna be Charismatic?

Hey, wanna learn how to become more charismatic? Pro tip number one: Be what they want you to be. Find what they want, and make them believe that you can offer it. Pro tip number two builds off of pro tip one: show off what they like, hide what they don't like. To be honest, the whole idea of "being yourself" is kinda naive. Everybody wears a mask; the big thing is how people see that mask.

Trust me, reputation is everything. It's how you get into people's good graces and how you get your foot in the door. You heard adults saying, "It's not what you know, it's who you know," right? Take me for example, last summer, I was doing a snazzy PR internship at Bank of America cause I charmed the right people at an alumni networking dinner. There was a smidge of natural charisma, sure, but you gotta put some effort in. Before that night, I got my best suit out, went out and got a fresh cut, rehearsed some conversation starters with my girlfriend, researched the attendees, shoved my stress down to my toes, you get the picture. You gotta make sacrifices, but it's worth it.

College life is all about routine. I get up and get my curls perfectly neat and fresh, have breakfast with some guys from my suite, engage with whatever degenerate stuff they bring up, and go to class with my trademark friendly smile, do class, grab lunch, do homework, eat dinner with my Girlfriend, and pencil in a date on the weekend. Everyone's happy, my private life is kept private, and I keep my rep.

Today is no different. I'm chilling in class. It's an intro filmmaking course, took it cause I know some guys who said it was an easy and fun gen-ed, and I need the credit. Lecture's boring, but I can just tune it out and plan for the rest of my week. There's a party I have to help set up

for Friday, and Saturday's movie night with my girlfriend, not looking forward to that one, she's picking the movie.

I tune back in to hear the announcement of the first project, a little video about you and your partner. Sounds easy enough. After the Professor wraps up her explanation, I'm immediately poked in my shoulder by Amir. He just happens to sit next to me. I introduced myself to the dude at the beginning of the semester, and he stared at me like I was some kinda eldritch monster, so we don't really interact all that much. I do see him whizzing through some super mathematical engineering work in class sometimes.

"Wanna be partners?" He asks.

Let me give you some more advice, free of charge. You know, when you adjust your behavior depending on whether you're around friends, family, or professors? Try applying that on a more specific scale. Remember tip number one: Be what they want you to be.

Finding what they want you to be takes some practice, but you gotta size them up and read their body language. Amir's an easy example, dude's disinterested as all hell. He got his cute little eyes half-lidded and slightly frowning as if the thought of partnering up with someone was physically draining him. His head goes up to about my chin, his arms are crossed, and he frequently adjusts his glasses. Pretty obvious that he's your typical introverted, antisocial nerd. These guys are typically scared of being confronted or put on the spot. So, you'd wanna be a chill but assertive guy when working with them. If I don't have any buddies with me in a class, I like working with people like Amir. If you just wanna get a project done with no conflict, introverted, insecure weirdos are the best. And being honest, I just want the credit.

"Sure, man, when are you available?" I reply. I flash my trademark friendly, full-toothed, pearly smile.

“How’s Thursday?” Amir blurts out.

I give him a thumbs up.

“Good, meet me at the library at Seven. Get a storyboard done by then.”

I take a step back.

“Ha, pretty tall order there my guy. Didn’t know we had an aspiring director here.” I respond.

Amir scoffs and rolls his eyes. “ I’m doing this for the credit. And I don’t really give a rat’s ass about how good your storyboard is, as long as it isn’t about roofies or negging or some shit, I don’t care.”

I send my shock and irritation to my toes and wiggle them around in my socks, my hands creep behind my back. I try to smile at him, less teeth this time.

Amir pulls out his phone, he taps around before shoving it into my hands. The create contact screen flashes at me. At the top, *BRONSON* mocks me in the name category.

I huff under my breath, typing out my number and correcting my name.

“Name’s *Brody*. See ya on Thursday, dude.”

Amir nods in agreement and places his phone back into his pocket. He looks completely unbothered, as if he didn’t just make himself look like a spoiled child. He turns around and leaves the lecture hall, marching on like I was an inconvenience.

Fucking shitbag.

Wanna get more charismatic? One of the most important skills you have to master is self-control. See, Amir has a very grabbable waist. It would be easy as hell to pick the rat up into my arms, bend him over my knee, shove him under me, stretch him however I want, pin him against the wall, you get the idea. But, obviously, that wouldn’t look very good in the public eye. So you

gotta keep that animosity on the inside. Let it out when it's necessary, okay? Shove it in your brain, toes, or spine, just make sure nobody notices it. Appear calm and collected. Stay approachable, open, lower their guard, don't show them any vulnerability. That's how you win in social interactions.

Sure, there can be some... challenges. Like, if there were a rare occurrence of you misreading someone. But stay adaptable, bounce back. Never let them know that they get to you.

The day goes by as usual. Class, Class, Lunch, Homework, event planning, and now dinner with my girlfriend Jenny. She's alright. She's attractive. We started dating about a year ago after she asked me out at a party. It would've been stupid to reject her; just about every guy I knew wanted her badly.

Jenny takes a bite out of her salad. She types something on her phone.

"Ok, so I got the perfect thing for movie night." She says. She turns her phone towards me. It plays a trailer for a film called *Hollywood Dirt*, which assaults me with cheesy pop music, bad southern accents, and abs shots. It's a pretty... charged movie compared to the romcoms she typically chooses. It makes me a little uncomfortable.

Saturday movie nights were an idea I came up with to keep the relationship calm and under control. The pick alternates between us as a way to keep everything fair. It's not the most exciting thing to do on the weekend, but if I can give up some hours at the gym or time prepping for the coming week to make sure she's content, then it's all cool.

I give her my trademark. "Looks like a cute film, babe. It'll be a nice way to destress after this week."

"How busy is it?"

“Got some stuff to do for a PR writing class, mostly research and writing a feature. And then I gotta start shooting for a project in that film class.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Isn’t that film class, like, notoriously easy?”

“Yeah, but my partner is... interesting, to say the least.”

Jenny chuckles. “What? Are they like some film nerd? Like they’re so passionate, they take like an hour to get a shot or something?”

“Nah, he’s an engineering major with no social skills.”

Jenny shudders. “I’m praying for you.”

I let out a chuckle. “It’ll be fine. Plus, I know I got a banger reward waiting for me.”

Jenny giggles a bit and moves a lock of hair behind her ear. She finishes the rest of her salad. After closing the lid, she gets up and creeps towards me. All good.

“Well, I got my own stuff to do. See you Saturday!” She plants a kiss on my cheek.

She then rests her hand on my own, then she makes eye contact. I can’t help but raise an eyebrow.

“Brody?”

“Yeah, babe?”

“You know you can talk to me if you need a shoulder to lean on, right?”

The hairs on the back of my neck start to stand up. Why are we having this conversation now?

“I know, I know. I’m good, I promise.” I respond. Doing my best to keep my tone normal and friendly. Nervousness is just going to invite more scrutiny.

Did last week not go well? I picked out *Hot Fuzz*, wanted to see something lighthearted with a strong friendship aspect. Did she hate the film? It’s pretty bro-ey.

She also did wanna have sex, and I declined again. That's a pretty... sore spot in our relationship.

Thankfully, she nods and lets go. She finally takes her leave.

I let out a sigh of relief. Everything's cool, everything's intact.

It's about 10:30 when I get back home. Now I finally have some private time. I plop down on my bed and curse into my pillow. Unfortunately, my phone starts to buzz, notifying me of a text:

980-243-2424

Hey, It's Amir. Forgot to text you and stuff.

Reminding you about us meeting on Thursday. At 7. I'm not doing this shit on my own... I literally can't, so don't flake.

Also, use Canva or something similar for the storyboard. Or not, I don't really care about how. Just do it.

This motherfucker. I hate the fact that I have to add him in my phone.

Me

It's cool man, I'll whip smth up by Thursday.

Amir

Good. See ya.

Goddamn, dude really needs to learn some social skills. Man, I never met someone so irritating. I roll off my bed and drag myself to my desk, slapping a blank sheet of paper onto my desk. If he doesn't care about this storyboard, then I don't care about this storyboard. It's just a minimum of three shots per person.

I draw three large squares. Then I stare blankly at the paper.

I got my Advertising and PR stuff to talk about, valuing connections, loving my family, intramural soccer, there's Jenny, but nothing's really coming to mind, we're just together.

There's no cool party stories on my mind. What do I want to show these people?

I take a deep breath and slump in my chair. I stare at the ceiling as I weigh my options. No worries. I'm not lame or anything, but you don't wanna look too boring, or too egotistical, too much like a party animal, too emotionally vulnerable. You need to convey the perfect image of yourself, no matter if the audience is a recruitment manager for your dream job or some random nobodies wasting away in a giant lecture hall.

I scribble down some shots relating to my PR work, family, and soccer. A nice balance of respectability, approachability, and personality. I look like a competent person with a sense of sincerity with a decently interesting hobby.

After drawing out the last few shot ideas, my mind drifts to Amir. Honestly, I don't miss the mark on people that badly. Sure, I got the antisocial part down pat, but I didn't anticipate how... aggressive he was. I'll level with ya, the irritating motherfucker caught me off guard. I wanted to beat his ass so badly I was about to break character. That's how bad it got.

How can someone just have no decorum? The ability and audacity to just say whatever comes to mind without any care for those around you. It's confusing. Everyone wears a mask, that's the truth of the world. Nobody likes an obvious asshole. It's why you have to be friendly and helpful to get recommendations from other people, it's why politicians lie about wanting the best for others, it's why everyone asks: 'How was your day?' knowing full well they don't give a shit. Not caring about what other people think is stupid. You never want to have your negative traits full front and center; you never want someone to think about you negatively. That's how

social interactions work. But Amir just ... didn't bother. He's like a true crime documentary, I can't help but be morbidly curious.

I wonder what he's gonna put on his storyboard. How would someone like him curate an image to a large audience? Dude's probably gonna gas himself up by talking about how hard his homework is or something. Typical engineering major. Then he's probably gonna transition into something super dweeby like some weird ass manga collection or Star Wars figurines. After that, a close up on his face as he wastes away in his room playing a dating sim while gooning to the characters. I just know dude's a virgin, he'd melt away if I touched him. Like face contorted in pleasure if it was me, not even like an absolute bombshell supermodel type girl.

I blink for a bit and massage my temples. Got a little too imaginative there. Small piece of advice: Make sure to check yourself when those intrusive thoughts come in. Don't think too much about them, never act on them. I'll repeat that last part: *never* act on them.

But that's enough for today. I slip my storyboard into a folder and change into my night clothes. I collapse into my bed. Luckily, I don't dream about Amir.

The next day passes by in a blur. Same routine, same practiced interactions, no clout lost. The only outlier is that I think about my film class for more than five minutes. Since I doubt the shooting is going to take that long, I'm gonna make Amir into a little PR project. If he's gonna partner with me, then I'm gonna whip his ass into something more presentable.

Seven o'clock hits just as I swagger into the library. I spot Amir in the study room in the corner. Amir is typing away at his laptop, he glances at me with his usual disinterest before moving his eyes back to his laptop. I open up the door and slide in, flashing my pearly whites extra wide. His scowl ain't bothering me.

"You're late." He says.

“Relax, dude, it’s 7:03,” I reply, keeping my composure. I know his game now.

I plop my things down. In one graceful swipe, I take out my storyboard and present it to him. He snatches it from my hands and looks over it.

He snickers. “This is the most sauceless, people-pleasing object I’ve ever seen in my life.” He hands it back to me with a smile.

I shrug. “I thought you didn’t expect anything from me. What you got Mr. Auteur?”

Amir turns his laptop around with pride. I lean in to see a storyboard detailing his aspirations in working in auto engineering, how he values his individuality after spending his life around ‘people who try to squander his potential’ and his long-time obsession with a movie called Slaxx, which is apparently a movie about a killer pair of pants.

“Huh, you’re very... open about yourself,” I say.

Amir raises an eyebrow. “Not really.” He replies. He digs through his bags and pulls out a zoom recorder. “If that’s open to you then what are you hiding?” He smirks.

“Hey man, just giving you a compliment.” I say, a little too defensively.

Amir stares right at my face, eyes surveying me like I was prey.

After a while, his eyes fall back into their disinterested state. “We’re just gonna get sound out of the way today. Then, we can cut it up and match the useful bits with the shots we take in editing.” Amir continues.

“Ha, look at you, making me look like a slacker,” I say. Sincerity leaks into my tone.

Amir snorts. He prepares the recorder. He plugs in a pair of headphones and slides them over his head. “Alright, I’m just gonna have a normal interview with you. Then we switch. Try to at least sound interesting, all right?”

I scoff. “I can do that in my sleep. How about you try not to sound like an asshole all the time?”

Amir rolls his eyes and presses the play button. “All right then, let’s start with all that Ad/PR stuff. Why that?”

“For advertising, it’s simple. I like talking with people, finding out what they want, and figuring out the best ways to appeal to them. It’s nice to be able to solve the puzzle that is a person. On the PR side, images are everything. The world’s set up like that. But there’s a fun challenge in creating and maintaining a narrative, controlling the way everyone sees this thing is like a grander version of the puzzle of a person. You get me?”

Amir nods, his eyes are the most alert they’ve ever been. “Moving on to family.”

I smile a bit.

“They made me who I am today. Mom’s the hardest-working lady I know. She has her own bakery now. I got a younger brother, he’s in high school, following in his big bro’s footsteps. Been a role model for him all my life. And my pops, heh, they say I’m a spitting image of him. He’s amazing. did Marketing when he was in college. Works as a salesman, and he’s good at it. Dude can sniff out potential customers like a bloodhound and secure a sale in an instant! I’ll admit, I kinda wanna make them proud. I’m representing them out here, ya know?”

“Well, that’s nice,” Amir mutters under his breath. Jealousy coating his words like fresh paint. “Alright, soccer.”

“Eh, I like soccer. Played it in High School, wasn’t planning on going pro, but team sports help those communication skills. And it keeps you fit, of course. Intramural gets pretty heated, though. Last year’s championship got rough; three people got their shins kicked. It was so crazy, you’d think they were playing for a million bucks. “

Amir stops and saves the recording. He reviews it before nodding and flashing a thumbs-up.

“Aight then, your turn, dude.” I say. He hands off the headphones to me. I press play.

“Alright, tell me about those engineering plans, my guy.” I start.

“Uh, I guess I just liked cars and I like putting stuff together. Dad taught me how to do engine repairs and all of that when I was younger. I tinker around with my own car when I don’t have anything else going on. Guess I wanted to move up to being the one to make the cars.”

Amir’s eyes wander all over the place. His tone was softer than usual, and I caught him fidgeting with his hands a couple of times. He’s kinda cute like that. Might teach him about the toe trick after this.

“Good, good. Now I wanna hear about Slaxx. Killer Jeans is a wild premise.”

“That’s kinda it. It’s better than you think. There’s some stuff about capitalism, child labor, consumerism. Like, there’s unironically decent writing. But I like it because people getting murdered by pants is hilarious.”

“Ha, I got movie night with my girlfriend on Saturday, might pick that for next week. Or maybe I could convince her to watch it for this week, not a big fan of what she chose, it’s some cheesy romcom.”

“How’s that?” He blurts out.

“My girlfriend? It’s going good. She’s chill.”

“Uh-huh.” He replies. Mouth curled into a skeptic frown.

“What’s that for?”

“What do you like about her?”

“Dude, why do you care so much?”

“I’m just curious. Answer the question.”

“Fine, she ... has a nice sense of style. She’s nice, isn’t all that high maintenance or super clingy.

“Wow, had to make you think on that one didn’t I?”

He makes eye contact with me. The room feels like it got ten degrees colder out of nowhere.

“We wouldn’t be in a relationship if I didn’t like her. Whatever idea you have, is ” I say. Desperately sending any frustration, anxiety and panic to my toes.

“I see you messaging her in class. Well, more like responding to her. She asks you stuff, and you give her the most PR like answers ever. Like you’re leading her on. And here you are, complaining about spending time with her.”

“My relationship is none of your fucking business.”

Amir snickers. “I’m just saying, maybe women aren’t your thing.”

Without thinking, my hand rockets forward and grips Amir’s shirt. I pull him closer to me, his eyes wide in shock. I hate that they look adorable.

“I’m not like that. Get on with the interview. I don’t care if I have to beat whatever relationship trauma out of you; we’re moving on, and you’re never going to speak a word of this in here or wherever parasites like you crawl around at.”

Amir’s eyes morph from shock to spite. That stupid fucking shit eating grin crawls back onto his face.

“Never said you were, y’know *gay*. But if the shoe fits.” He says. Smiling at me like he’s got me all figured out.

Remember tip number 2. Show off what they like, hide what they don't. You have to make sacrifices. You don't want your true self out there; it'll just create baggage. You don't want baggage. People don't want baggage. I'm not letting a defect destroy everything I built up.

My mind is screaming at me to create some excuse to leave, or steal the recorder and book it, or just punch his lights out. Anything to permanently end this conversation. Instead, I shove him back into his chair, he slumps into it.

I take the headphones off. Amir stares at me like he won the lottery. I fucking hate how persistent he is. I hate how fucking blunt he is. I hate that he's not like anyone else I've met. I hate that he interests me. I hate how irritating he is. I hate that I feel a sliver of attraction to this overgrown rat.

"Ha! Knew you were hiding something!"

"Shut up."

Amir scoffs. "You're not special.

"It's not that simple."

"I'm gay too, and I'm not threatening people over it. If they think that's weird, then fuck them. It's my life."

"Unlike you, people actually like me."

Amir laughs. "If you think they're gonna abandon you after figuring out that you're gay, then they don't like you. They like the palatable, fake version of you."

I grunt. "I'm not hiding from every single person in my life."

"So, your family knows then?"

I go quiet.

Amir shakes his head. He picks up the recorder from the table. My eyes zero in on the screen, indicating that it's still running.

"Delete the-" I blurt out.

Amir scoffs. He waves the recorder around like he's dangling a carrot on a stick. "I gotta get out the audio we have. So, it's going on my hard drive. Think of it as an incentive to get your shit together."

My body freezes for a second. Everything goes black, like I've been sucked into a dream. My mind starts playing through multiple scenarios. He slips it into the video for the class, he sends it to Jenny, he finds a way to get to my parents, he gives it to anyone I have a connection with. It all reaches the same conclusion: ridicule, ostracization, and failure.

"Delete it, now" I say, voice low again.

"For fucks sake, you're not tough-"

Moving like a puppet on strings, I sock Amir in the chest. He lets out a raspy gasp and hunches over. It's music to my ears. I wrestle the recorder out of his hands and push his little body to the ground, kicking him in the shin for good measure.

"Y'know, you look cuter that way," I say. I can't resist a malicious grin. He deserves it. He's an overly smug rat all day, and now he's threatening me. I'm protecting my rep, sue me. "Now, let's get all of this unnecessary material out of here, then we'll record the rest of this *properly*."

I turn to delete the recording. Only to notice that the SD card is missing. Persistent little shitbag.

I outstretch my hand towards Amir, who's still on the ground, motioning for him to hand it over. Only to get a middle finger for my troubles.

Before I know it, I'm on top of him trying to strangle the motherfucker so he can give me the card. He's taking too long. His eyes still stare at me with that irritating defiance.

"Stop being stubborn and give it to me!"

"Or what? You can handle being a murderer but you can't bear the thought of being gay? Newflash buddy, you're still gonna like dick after I'm gone." He manages to rasp out.

I ease up a bit. "I'm not gonna actually kill you."

He gasps again. "Sure...cause you like me so much."

My hands shoot away from Amir as if he turned into fire. Amir gasps for air again, he crawls over to his bag to retrieve a water bottle, gulping down the contents inside.

"I'm going to be entirely honest with you. You're pathetic." He says, eerily calm. The words resonate through the tiny study room. He snatches the recorder away from me and stomps out of the room. I sit there for a second, before my legs autopilot me out of there. The rest of the night is a blur, as if my legs teleported me back to my dorm.

I slam the door behind me and mentally thank myself for getting a single. Then panic comes back to me and I find myself laying on the fluffy, white rug my Dad bought for me. The softness doesn't calm my nerves. Desperate for a distraction, I unlock my phone. Unfortunately, the whirlwind of emotions managed to pull my focus on that.

My secret was found out, Amir has info on me, I almost killed him. Holy shit, I almost killed him. I get mad but never like that. Fuck, he's right, I'm a psycho.

Why can't I be normal? A dude who doesn't fucking flip off the handle, a dude who has to shove every emotion they feel into their toes, a dude who's sane enough to want the cute popular, cool girl over the scrawny weasel like guy that insults him every other sentence.

I chuck my phone into the corner of my room and start bawling. Fuck it, I need this.

