

THE OVERTHINKERS

**Four people, figuring out sex, love and how
to get their lives together**

LISA PORTOLAN

BEN CHEONG

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leo

Music blared through the sound system. Techno dance tunes bounced off the sun-drenched, concrete walls. Giant, arched windows framed the scene, and beyond, the Sydney skyline loomed, omnipotent.

It was just like any place in Sydney, Leo thought wryly. Spacious, wide, purposefully distressed, urban, immensely cool and ... vacuous. Yeah, vacuous. Like the soul of it had been ripped straight out of the middle, leaving behind exposed bricks and a couple of influencers with nonchalant expressions and their army of Zombie followers.

It was the standard aesthetic for any bar, restaurant or gym in Potts Point. Masculine chic.

Every client in the gym at that moment was working out intently. Sweat glistening on their brow, muscles tensed. Trying to get the max out of their short workouts before they scooted off to work or play: the next item to be checked off in their jam-packed schedule. If you didn't have a schedule, you were a nobody. It was a whole heap

of noise, a whole heap of busyness. A lifting of weights, drinking of beers, tapping of emails, fucking, taking of phone calls and swiping of dating apps. Routines were obnoxiously full, as though every square millimetre had to be sucked out of the marrow that was life.

I examined them from a distance now, those men – part of the group, and yet distanced at the same time. They all wore the same gym gear uniform: shorts over tights, tees showing burgeoning muscles, socks pulled to calves. A sea of black clothing, perfectly styled hair, and vanity.

As I scanned the room my eyes snagged on broad shoulders. They remained glued there. A mountain of a man took long strides to the squat rack to warm-up. Purposeful. Intense. He had a barrelling chest and massive thighs, squeezed into the tightest of shorts imaginable. I could feel my mouth dropping open slightly. If I had been chewing gum, it would have dropped straight out, along with any shred of dignity I still possessed.

I liked a big man. Masc. The kind of guy who looked like he might snap you like a twig.

I strolled over to the squat rack, and took my place next to Adonis Man, casually throwing down my towel and beginning to warm up. He was already loading up an alarming number of plates. I watched him squat from the corner of my eye. Hearing him grunt made me weak at the knees and on my way to boner town.

Play it cool, Leo. Don't stare. But I was transfixed.

Be as cool as a cucumber, Leo, my internal dialogue continued. I loaded weights onto the bar, all the while ignoring Adonis Man. Of

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course, this elaborate dance of: stare, ignore, stare some more was commonplace. This is how gay men demonstrated interest and feigned disinterest at the same time. It had to be done. It was an art form we had all learned to master.

After all, how could I be sure he was gay? Straight was the norm, yeah, still now. So before you made your move you had to be sure.

Obviously, there was now *one* easy way to find out. To be certain. Grindr. One of the surest ways to confirm. Grindr was a thirsty man's (like myself) best friend and greatest nemesis. It was the best kind of relationship, and the worst, all at the same time. Entwined in this tiny black and orange app, available at the touch of my fingertips.

I pulled my mobile out of my short pocket and discretely tapped the app. Sure enough; there was Adonis Man. 0 km away. Boom. Gayness confirmed.

I stepped away from him briefly and scrolled through his profile. Now more intrigued by his digital presence, than his physical one, even though he was only a couple of metres away from me. His profile was carefully curated, with extremely hot pics, probably equally carefully (and laboriously) snapped by some unfortunate and patient friend. Standard Grindr profile.

His profile oozed every embarrassing stereotype Sydney gays earned for themselves. Literally, like a noxious gas. I could feel it filling my nostrils with its foul odour. Vapid, self-centred, cliquy. And so were Sydney gays. Like the days of our fucking lives.

Shirtless bathroom selfie with raised eyebrow, check. Bronzed boys at The Beresford shirts tucked, and muscles flexed, check.

Sitting in his underwear in a park playing with a puppy, check.
Posing in speedos in front of Uluru ... wait, what?

Double take. That was kind of unexpected, but gruesomely expected at the same time. Pic four of this jacked, tanned man, depicted him casually posing in front of Uluru wearing hiking boots, and yes, a pair of red speedos. Ugh, the image made me gag, and not in the way that I liked.

The caption that followed the image was: thoughtless.

“Throwback to Alice Springs, such a beautiful place in our country. Truly humbling. #gay #gayboy #aussie #muscles #holiday #wanderlust #boysontour.”

It was a grim mix: utterly foul. An Indigenous sacred site, the word “humbling”, the speedos and the trite hashtags.

He was a Basic-Potts-Point-Gay. BPPG. I had an acronym for them. Because there were so many. I found myself using the descriptor so many times, that it had required an abbreviation.

The letters dropped out of my mouth now, “BPPG.”

My hard-on dropped.

But I couldn't stop. I had to see more of his profile. Now I was really transfixed, in the worst possible way. It was like staring at the sun, knowing you would likely be blinded in a couple of seconds.

I looked at his bio. Equally distasteful.

“Rosé drinker. Sun chaser. Obsessed with my friends and my speedos.”

I mean, at least there were no spelling errors.

But then the next sentence stopped me dead in my tracks. It was a

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familiar one. I had seen it all too often on Grindr, Tinder, Hinge ... I'd even heard it in conversations with gay men. You would have thought that having heard it and read it a million times over would render the phrase impactless. It hadn't.

It winded me.

Every. Single. Time.

"No Asians. Just a preference."

Five words. Like taking five bullets.

"Ugh, what a dick," I said under my breath.

He didn't hear me. Adonis Man. But he dropped the bar with a loud bang, and I felt myself startle from it. He collected his towel, and wandered off, leaving his weights discarded on the ground. He was *that type* of a guy. Self obsessed. Couldn't even bother picking his own weights up. He was comfortable in his knowledge that some (Asian) lackey, like me, would collect those weights after him.

Okay, I did work at this gym, but I wasn't on the clock at this *exact moment*.

"Double-dick," I muttered as I started cleaning up after him.

Yeah, I was a trainer at this hedonistic, elitist, metro-chic gym. And an Asian. My parents were Chinese-Malay. They had wanted me to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or even just an accountant. They'd wanted me to live near them in western Sydney, where I would be surrounded by other Asian doctors, lawyers and accountants. Instead, I'd decided to become a personal trainer and live in the gayest suburb in Sydney. Not something my dad would be racing to email maa maa about.

A sting whipped my hamstring, as someone playfully struck me with their towel. I swore loudly, more to shake the thoughts out of my mind, than anything else. I turned around, and was greeted by a cheeky grin.

Benji. The only straight guy in the gym, also my best friend. His pretty blonde hair flapped around him perfectly. He tried to tell me that he came to this gym because of the half price membership I'd struck him, but secretly, I thought he did it to get "wokeness" points.

"I just saw a guy who had Leo written all over him," he said gesturing towards Adonis Man. Clearly, he knew me too well.

"He's not into me," I said, trying to sound flippant.

"Not with that attitude he won't be," Benji joked.

Benji didn't get his privilege, and he was sort of too nice to be reminded. He didn't realise what he had going for him. He didn't realise that he was the norm, and that people didn't see him as different. They didn't look at him and notice anything at all. They didn't mentally clock that he was Asian. Or gay. Or anything else. Just maybe that he was handsome. He slid under the radar completely. Although things would be easier if he were gay ... I pressed pause on the thought.

We met at orientation day at uni ... before I'd dropped out to pursue muscles and fitness. We'd been inseparable ever since. An obnoxiously strange but similar duo. Benji got me and didn't get me all at the same time. Like we converged and split apart simultaneously.

"His Grindr profile says – No Asians," I said matter-of-factly, trying to keep the smarting tone out of my voice.

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“What a dick! That’s so racist.” He looked offended. For me. I felt like rolling my eyes. He had no idea.

“Happens all of the time, Benji,” I said, shutting it down quickly. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t my fault either – but somehow it felt like it was.

An awkward pause passed between us as I continued picking up and re-stacking Adonis Man’s weights.

“What about that other guy you were kinda seeing?” I heard Benji say.

Straight-guys were always pretending that they understood. That we could just talk about boners, and fucking, and dudes, and it was same, same. But it always sounded like they were holding their breath when they were asking the questions. Like they were swimming underwater and were hoping they could come up for heterosexual air in the next breath. It was awkward for them. I got it.

Benji was kind of different, I’d known him for years, he was well versed in the gay-scene. But he would never really be, *one of us*. Maybe that’s why gay men usually chose gay friends. I didn’t want to be that person. It felt weird and insular. Besides, I liked Benji.

The other guy I’d been “kinda seeing”, was a Daddy. In every sense of the word. 50 years old, dad bod, and he loved to wine and dine me. Everything I could have hoped for, minus the wife. I hadn’t told Benji that. He wouldn’t get it.

“Good. I’m seeing him tonight,” I responded.

“So, are you officially dating him? Like, you’ve kind of been seeing him for a year, right?”

The straights: they had their own little rituals. You dated someone for a year and you were “official”. It was all neat and pretty and tied up in a little bow. I was envious of it sometimes. Like right now. Other times it seemed trite and over produced, like a script that was handed to you, that you had to follow, regardless of whether or not you were the right actor.

The truth was, I had been sleeping with the Daddy for over a year ... and it had progressed into more than just fucking. We spent time together, we laughed together, uncontrollably sometimes. He had a sense of humour. He was ironic. Yeah, I liked him. More than he liked me maybe.

But that was tricky.

He showered me with attention. He gave me all the time in the world and he was always there when I needed him. Most of the time. I liked to believe that was the case. I felt so weak. Like the tiniest bit of attention shook in my direction, produced this devotion. I was his. Completely.

I knew it was wrong. His wife would occasionally come up in conversation. I could feel his guilt. I could see it on his face. It turned my stomach.

He said he was going to leave her. That we were serious. That it would be over soon. That we could be open about it. That I could introduce him to my friends ... soon, always soon.

But it felt like a pipedream.

“Calm down, Benji,” I quipped, ignoring the narrative in my head. “I don’t understand why straight people want to label everything. It’s not a competition.”

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That was safer ground for me, and for him. He rolled his eyes and went back to his workout. Unstacking the weights I'd just spent ten minutes stacking.

Fucking privilege.

I went back to my workout. Lifting, squatting, planking. I went through this routine so many times, it was almost meditative. I caught glimpses of Adonis Man out of the corner of my eye. I tried to ignore him. But that big physique was like a magnet. Soon there would be a little satellite of moons orbiting around it. And I would be one of them. Only a lesser one – like a mini-moon to a moon.

At a certain point, I realised he was looking in our direction. Despite the “No Asians” slight, I tried to catch his eyes. Like I said – I was weak. Then I realised he was looking at Benji. No surprises there. It happened all the time. He was the “Aussie Boi.”

He slid into a much-loved gay stereotype. Perfect smile, blonde hair that fell almost to his shoulders, and a slightly built frame. I hated him for a second. He had no idea what he had going for him. No idea.

I watched him struggle now on the rowing machine. Fucking hopeless. I felt myself smile. No upper body strength whatsoever.

He looked up and caught my eye, knowing that he had been caught out. He winked at me cheekily. That's what happened when you looked like Benji, you didn't care if you were shit at things. He could get away with it. I couldn't. I had to be perfect. I had to be ripped within an inch of my life, comedically funny, and always on ... and still people said, “No Asians.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I plucked it out. Francesca. Another lunatic in the mix.

“Where are you love?” read her text.

“At the gym. Where else?” I speedily texted back.

“Come home. I’m bored. I need some entertainment.”

And there I was, the entertainment. That’s what my purpose in life was reduced to. Sadly, I lapped it up. Like I said, I would take the crumbs. Anything to make me feel needed or desired.

“Bitch, let’s go,” I called to Benji. “Sleeping beauty is awake.”

I checked my watch – it was after 4pm. What had she been doing all day? Sleeping likely. Should I be worried about her? She’d been getting worse lately ... sleeping longer, eating nothing, smoking up a storm. But that was just Francesca being Francesca. I discarded the idea quickly. No need to worry. We were all one step away from a breakdown anyway. Teetering on the precipice.

Benji clicked into gear, jumping off the rowing machine, Olympic sprint style fashion, leaving a slick sweat stain on the seat. He didn’t mop it up with his towel, just headed to the change rooms.

I stared at the sweat and tried to turn my back on it. I tried to walk away like Adonis Man and Benji, like I had no one to answer to, like there would be someone else mopping up behind me. I couldn’t.

I sprayed the seat methodically and wiped it down. Fucking gross.

benji

“Hurry up!” Leo called over his shoulder at me, as he rode his bike up Oxford Street.

He had convinced me to ride our bikes down to the gym and back to shred some extra kilos. I didn’t need to shred any extra kilos. I probably needed to up my cardio skills, though. I let my feet spin idly around, without putting any real effort into it.

I was fucking tired. Not only had we ridden our bikes down to the gym, but then we’d done some hectic weights session. I’d spent the entire time trying to keep up with Leo as he’d squatted, planked, lifted, like a machine. He was built, like really built. I was just some skinny dude. At a certain point, I’d had to take to the rowing machine to get away from his vigorous work-out. Then I’d found myself thinking that Asian guys had it easier, that they were naturally athletic. Was that a racist thing to think?

Christ! I think it was.

I came to a stop now. Foot leaning against the pavement, one hand still resting against the handlebars of the old bike. I was sweating profusely and completely out of breath. Despite the copious amounts of deodorant I had sprayed, I smelt. I sniffed my shirt now. Yeah, I definitely smelt.

In front of me lay the ascent up Oxford Street towards Leo and Francesca's terrace in Paddington. It was an easy forty-five degree angle. I didn't have it in me.

I caught sight of Leo's face ahead of me. I ignored the annoyed expression stuck to his features.

"Use your feet!" he called to me, like it was a novel piece of advice. Ironically, of course. How fucking rude.

Something about the taunt resonated with me. Okay, so he was physically bigger than me, he could lift more than me, he was beyond ripped ... but you know I still had a bit of chutzpah. I could feel an intense look crowding my usually indolent features, as I snapped into activity. My feet pumping hard, at an extreme pace. I was buoyed by some sort of intense grit and fortitude. Like Leo's consistent slights on my physicality and fitness level, were equally levelled at my manhood.

But who was I even kidding? I wasn't a man. I didn't even know what a *man* was exactly. I didn't even know if you should aspire to be a *man*. Not anymore, anyway.

It was toxic, right? Or parts of it were toxic.

Was I toxic?

I passed him now, kind of in slow motion. My thin limbs belligerent, fighting gravity. I widened my eyes at him, semi-crazed, like I was

throwing down the gauntlet. It was the worst kind of challenge: desperate, frantic and completely unfounded. There was no way I could beat Leo in any kind of race.

“I’m leaving you behind mate!” I wheezed back at him, almost ploughing into an oncoming pedestrian. A Harajuku-type, with socks pulled up to her knees, a unicorn backpack and a beret. She skirted out of my way nimbly, a panicked expression crossing her pretty features.

It was a virtual bike-slalom. I weaved in and out of the crowd unskilfully. We should have been riding on the road, but I wasn’t made to navigate a heavily trafficked Sydney street. I would have made for person-pancake in no time. My very fibres meshed and ingrained into that hot-bitumen, forever trapped, physical keepsakes, reminders that as a twenty-one year old man, I was poorly equipped for life (generally). Not Leo, he would have been fine.

I was making a serious go of it, and Leo was still behind me. We sailed by the enduring gay bars, which were slowly filling up as that afternoon drifted apathetically towards evening. My feet kept pumping. My heart pounded in my chest. I was still ahead of him as we passed St Vincent’s; the grey building lurched like a ship out of the equally grey cityscape.

He didn’t catch me until we were at the Paddo Inn, which was actually quite a distance from where we had started. I was kind of shocked by my physical prowess. Of course, by then I was in the full throes of an asthma attack – I fished out my Ventolin, and started puffing away like it was the end of days.

A group of girls stood out the front of the bar with fancy dresses on and too much fake tan. They were smoking and drinking, wine glasses inelegantly clutched in one hand, and durries in the other. They were stuck in that delicate space between tipsy and drunk. It was a fine-line. They might topple over unexpectedly at any point, and then there would be vomit and tears. I ignored them, as they pointed at us and stifled laughter, tottering on their heels.

Okay, they were laughing at me. I took it on the chin. Maybe I did look silly? So, what?

“Mate, what are you even doing?” Leo said, clapping me on the shoulder as I struggled to breathe.

“What are you on, the Tour de France or something?” he joked as he rode past me.

Breath kind of under control, I followed a couple of clicks behind. Unperturbed.

We turned down Paddington Street, the pretty back street they lived on, lined with Victorian terraces and Porsches. I took one side of the pavement and he took the opposite, the width of that tight street dividing us.

“She’s not the chick for you,” he called from across the road. Here it was, I knew it was coming. It was a regular feature in our conversations. Why I should forget Francesca Moore, and move on with my life. I didn’t respond. I’d come to learn that his arguments were reliably standardised, and there wasn’t much deviation on key messages. In addition, there was no reply on my end that could stem the outpouring of negativity after its genesis. It was like it came from

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a main vein, or even an artery. You had to be a surgeon to apply the torque effectively.

The thing was he lived with Francesca. They were tight. I'd met Francesca *through* Leo. We were kind of like his two best friends. But he objected to a potential hook-up between the two of us. This was strange – and while the arguments he ran kind of made sense, there was something about it that was not quite right. Something kind of ... curious.

“She’s not the type of girl who dates guys like you. You’re too nice for her,” he called.

Yep, I'd heard that before. Too nice. I still didn't quite know what that meant.

How was this “girls don't like nice guys” chronicle still alive and kicking? I didn't get it.

“Explain to me how this ‘bad-boy’ category is still a thing? Isn't it toxic?” I replied, ducking my head to avoid a low-hanging branch from an overgrown Magnolia tree.

I could sense he was rolling his eyes at me. There was lots of eye rolling that went on in our conversations. One statement; eye roll. Another statement; eye roll. It was like we were talking two very different languages. It was a wonder we were still friends. Leo would say it was because I liked having a gay best friend, it ratcheted me up the “woke” chart. I would tell him that wokeness was kind of derogatory, that it was cultural appropriation of the worst kind, and he would roll his eyes. Again.

Truth was, I liked him. It was hard talking to other guys. They

didn't say much. They didn't say anything, really. You couldn't tell a dude you'd just had an anxiety attack, or that you were worried about dying. No way. Trust me, I'd tried. They just thought you were a freak.

But Leo didn't mind. Not at all.

"She's not the type of girl who cares about carbon footprints, and toxic masculinity. She's the type of girl who likes fancy cars, and guys that wear Huaraches, and went to a private school."

"I could get myself a pair of Huaraches." As though this was the most pressing part of the argument that needed to be addressed.

"That's not the point. She's like a completely different girl to the one you imagine. She sent you a couple of texts, and you've had a few conversations, and you've projected this aura onto her. Like you've imagined this dream girl, but she doesn't exist. Francesca Moore *is not deep*, I'm not saying she's shallow or anything. She's one of my closest friends ... she's just got a plan. And you wouldn't fit into that plan." He finished off with a flourish, like he was making a speech at the Oscars. Like I said, I'd heard it all before.

"And how do you know so much about her?" I asked. He pretended they were best friends but sometimes he said things about her that weren't so nice. Maybe he just didn't want his two closest friends hanging out. Maybe there was some jealousy involved.

We were close to the terrace now that they rented together. The sudden knowledge of her physical proximity made my chest constrict, and my palms start to sweat. She had a strange impact on my bodily condition. Like there was a direct correlation between her person and my frame. Like they were tied together by an invisible string.

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I didn't convey this to Leo, he wouldn't have been impressed.

"I live with her," he muttered.

I glanced across the road at his brilliantly rubicund face. Dark hair shorn tight, and his hard jaw-line. He was a nice looking bloke. I didn't get why some gays had a "No Asians" policy. Seemed weird. What I did know was that Leo had seen a whole heap of dick, and that was it. His carnal knowledge of women was virtually non-existent. He'd never had sex with a woman before ... sure he lived with Francesca, but what did he really know about women?

Then I got stuck in a mental loop. What did I even know about women? Nothing. I had limited carnal knowledge of women. I'd slept with five of them, that was it. I was twenty-one years old, it was not lost on me that my number should have been higher. But then that was toxic too ... the idea of racking up "numbers".

"She's the type of girl who will make you take photographs of her for Instagram," he continued.

I smiled, kind of thankfully, because I hated my personal mental spirals. Besides, it was funny the first time he had said it; on the tenth occasion it still brought a tight smirk to my lips. Maybe I wouldn't mind taking a few photographs for her for Instagram. It seemed like a fair exchange; in fact it seemed like an uneven one. The thought of sharing a secret with her, of being in on her jokes, of being touched by her ... yeah, I'd be willing to take some photographs of her for Instagram in exchange.

The sky arched over us now, shifting in colours as sunset started to descend, like a giant peach. In this transitional stage it seemed to

promise something about the evening that was to come. Something infinite, or even, something epic.

I didn't tell Leo that either. He wouldn't have appreciated the poetry of that late Saturday afternoon description. In fact, he would have taken it as another sign that my heart was beating way too fast for Francesca Moore.

"It's not just one or two photographs bro," I could hear Leo continuing in the background. "It will be like fifty to a hundred. From every angle. It'll drive you nuts. And then it's not just about taking the photograph, it's about what the photograph *represents*."

Oh yeah, they had come to it. This was Leo's *coup d'état*. The photograph and what it *represents*. This is when Leo revealed her inner workings, and how deeply twisted they were, or how incompatible they were with my own.

Do I dare ask?

I got off the bike now. We were only a couple of metres from their place. I could feel my skin twitching, and a certain nervousness start to take shape. I raised an eyebrow at him as I passed his bike.

"So go on, tell me, what does it represent?" I said more to calm myself than to actually hear the response.

Leo followed suit jumping off the bike, overly eager to provide his Freudian analytics on this girl, who really neither of us *knew* at all.

"What it represents, Benji ..." He paused dramatically at the gate ready to provide his prognosis. Use of my name noted to provide weight to the verdict that was to come. "Is exceptional vanity, lack of substance and of authenticity."

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“She’s one of your best friends,” I reminded him.

“I know. But nobody’s perfect.”

“I’m worried about what you say about me,” I said wryly.

“Don’t worry. I dish out all sorts of shit about you too.”

I wasn’t surprised. Leo told it how it was, but he was the kind of guy that had your back. When it counted.

I held my breath as he turned the key in the lock. I was obsessed with this girl, and it was by no means in a good way, I knew that much.

We entered the terrace. It was cool and dark, like most terraces were. I always took in all of the details, like there were prompts, messages, secrets about her that could be unearthed from her home. There were fairy lights strung over the fireplace and a vase of freshly cut sunflowers on the dining room table. The place was clean and messy all at the same time. A jumper was flung unceremoniously over a seat, nail polish remover and cotton balls hung about on the table, as well as a dirty coffee cup, but otherwise the place was fresh and well-kept. I swept my eyes around quickly, taking in every detail greedily, thieving intimate information about her. Were the cotton balls hers? The jumper? It didn’t look familiar.

There was an unfinished painting propped up on a chair at the end of the dining room. It was a portrait of a woman with pale skin and dark eyes. The eyes were complete but the rest of the face was a muddle of uncertain, sketched lines. It was like most of the bones were there ... but the rest, just didn’t exist. It had been that way for a while. At least six months. I wasn’t sure if Francesca intended on finishing

it. Maybe it was supposed to be that way – incomplete. There was something kind of haunting about it that way. Leo caught me staring at it, and must have taken it as a sign of my unrestrained infatuation for the artist.

“You know she’s with someone, right?” Leo said to me, as he dropped his keys on the dining room table. He looked uneasy when he said this. Leo was so transparent and a terrible liar. I nodded my head in return. Yeah, he’d told me about Hamish Chiel a hundred times, and I’d seen him on her Instagram account ... but there was something that felt uncomfortable about that story, I just didn’t know what it was.

He held my eyes for a moment, like he was trying to convey something. I wasn’t quite sure what it was.

The moment passed and he looked away.

“Francesca!” he finally yelled. “Francesca, we’re here. Benji’s here too.”

He was summoning her, from wherever she was in the house. I assumed upstairs, in her bedroom. I’d been up there once before, to her room I mean, ever so briefly.

I smiled, tight lipped. Nervous. She was coming now ... and even though I had wanted to see her, the idea of it made me feel anxious. Panicky almost. Like I might do or say the wrong thing, and blow this. But what was I even going to blow? She wasn’t interested in me. She barely knew I was alive.

I heard *her* fluttery movements on the steps. She had a light but erratic step. A strange combination of grace and clumsiness. I knew

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it was *her*. My instant reaction would have been to look straight in her direction. Instantly. But I tried to control it. I tried to act cool. I waited. I counted slowly in my mind. One, two, three ...

When I finally looked up she was standing near us. A playful smile on her face.

“Hey guys,” she cooed coolly. She rubbed her eyes, they looked swollen. From sleep? She touched me on the shoulder lightly. An implied intimacy. I could barely hear her speaking. She was wearing a crumpled midriff and shorts, she must have slept in them. A length of her stomach was exposed, and a protruding hip bone. It was so close to my face, I could almost taste it.

“Finally you’re here,” she said to Benji, throwing a playful arm around his shoulder. “I’ve been so bored without you.”

Momentarily I was jealous, about their intimacy. Why couldn’t she be bored without me? Why couldn’t I be an intrinsic part of who she was? Something she needed?

“Do you guys want a coffee?” she said as she headed into the galley kitchen.

Again, I knew the space well. Fridge first, covered in strange magnets which they liked to collect. *They*, it was like they were a thing ... a non-sexual entity. Then on the left-hand side was the granite bench top, the coffee machine, the sink, and the oven and stove at the end. On the right-hand side: a messy vision board, the pantry, and a cupboard filled with disorderly glasses and mugs.

“No, thanks,” I managed. I couldn’t stomach a caffeinated beverage. There was way too much adrenalin coursing through my body as it was.

“Why don’t you find something to wear for tonight?” Leo said to me. “You can borrow something of mine.”

Dan’s party. I hadn’t forgotten. Leo was trying to get rid of me – clearly. He wanted to talk to Francesca privately. Probably about the “No Asians” dude at the gym. I got it. But it made me feel like the third wheel.

I watched them disappear into the kitchen together. Their casual and perfect intimacy interlaced together.

Maybe that was the problem with intimacy – sex. If you had no sex, you could have intimacy. If you had sex, it blew intimacy to bits.

I was jealous.