

Daniel

“Hi, it’s *me...*”

It was Phoebe’s voice on the answering machine, and I got an erection, naturally.

“I was just wondering what you were up to tonight... I’m at home, give me a call.” She took a long languid pause. “*Bye.*”

Although Phoebe was one serious girlfriend and at least four flippant affairs behind my official emotional life, she still had the habit of announcing herself as “*me,*” which I found quite endearing. I flicked on the stereo and started to put the groceries away while I considered my options.

There wasn’t much to consider, really. Phoebe’s voice on the machine had caught me at just that time - late afternoon - when my thoughts turn inevitably to all things nasty and lustful. And the tone of her voice - I knew that tone so well - it just did it to me. I had no choice in situations like this. She had me. Which was fine. I wasn’t seeing anyone at the moment - well, I was seeing Liz, but that wasn’t really *serious* - and so there was no possibility of guilt or feelings of betrayal. I had a tentative arrangement to go over to my parent’s place for dinner but parental dinners could always be gotten out of. There was no reason not to call Phoebe.

I opened a bottle of beer and lit a cigarette, scooped up the cordless and the light blue ashtray on my way past, and settled down on the small back terrace. I repositioned the ashtray about sixteen times - bloody OCD, but we’ll get to that later. There was still plenty of light in the sky but you could tell it was late afternoon from the sound of the rush-hour traffic and the stereos turning on in the apartments throughout the compound. It was six o’clock and it was spring and it was Sydney.

My right hand punched in her number automatically.

“Hi...” That long, sensuous *hi*. My erection, semi-dwindled from the mundanity of shelf-stuffing and fridge-filling, replenished itself like a ship’s sail with a newly-snatched gust. “You’ve reached Phoebe. Am I here or not? You’ll never know unless you leave a -”

My thumb, again on auto-pilot, clicked the phone off. More options. Damn. I felt disappointed. When had she called? No idea. I’d been out since about ten that morning. She could have called anytime. She could have received a better offer. Anything could have come up. She could be out for the night.

Plus, it wasn’t in my nature to leave her messages. What if she had a boyfriend right now (she probably did) and what if she came home with him to my voice on the machine? I didn’t want to cause her trouble. She knew I didn’t mind - her messages were always discreet, at least to other

people - but we sort of had a one-way street thing going on. An answerphone understanding.

Plus, if I went upstairs and masturbated right now, I could forget all about it. Then I could go over to my parents and have a nice meal and a few glasses of wine and maybe watch a video on their big television and not feel the ragings of horniness that were my über-control at this moment. I could do the normal thing and not perpetuate this obsessive lustful confusion with Phoebe. Until she called again.

If only she was home I'd be able to avoid these decisions.

I sat and gave myself until the end of my cigarette to let the answer come naturally to me. When I finished my cigarette I gave myself until the end of my beer. When I hadn't finished my beer before I wanted another cigarette, I gave myself until the end of *that* cigarette. Then all of a sudden I had another beer.

Then the phone rang, and it was Liz.

"Hi, it's *me!*" she buzzed cheerily.

"*Hey!*" I energetically gave back.

Now I was in a real bind. I didn't really want to see Liz tonight - it hadn't been part of the plan. I wanted to let it sit a couple of nights, especially after such a full-on week-end. I wasn't necessarily ready for this to become a *week-night* thing. Plus, I had been sitting there for one and a half beers thinking about all the things Phoebe would be wanting to do, all the filthy things that she'd had in mind when she made that phone call. If only she was home. Maybe she was home now - it had been at least fifteen minutes since I'd made that call! But there was no way of knowing because now *Liz* was on the phone so there was no way I could use the phone to call *Phoebe*.

"So what are you doing?" asked Liz. The way she asked it, she sounded a lot like Phoebe. I perked up, and my pecker perked too.

"Not much," I lied. I was having a beer and a cigarette and a thousand dirty thoughts, which was doing plenty. "I'm having a beer and a cigarette."

"Aren't *you* the lounge lizard," she said. "How lovely."

"I just got back from the supermarket."

"Of *course*." I was liking her intonations more and more. She was in a frivolous mood. I loved frivolous moods. They made me horny.

"What are *you* doing?"

"I'm just lying on the *couch*..." Her mood lingered, then she checked herself. "I just got home from work a little while ago. I got away early. I'm just chilling out."

"A little glass of Chardonnay?" I asked. Get the flirt going again.

"No, not yet. Though that sounds *nice*."

"You should have one."

“Mmmmm.”

A pause, a dusky lull.

“So, uh -” She took a breath and a beat. “You want to do something tonight?”

“Uh, sure,” I said. It was casual - almost an automatic response - but it was out there now. Tonight I was doing something with Liz. I was committed. Wednesday night with Liz. Week-night something. Oops. New levels.

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, what do you feel like?” Ping-pong. I tried to stand the beer bottle so that the label would be facing me absolutely directly. Bloody OCD - but don’t worry, we’ll get to that. Eventually.

“I don’t know.”

Another dusky lull. I reached for a cigarette. Now I had to think of something to *do*. With Phoebe there would have been no such complications. We *knew* what we’d be doing.

“Want to see a movie or something?” I offered.

“I don’t know.” It sounded like no, that’s not what I want to do.

“Or grab a bite?”

“Mmm, could be nice.”

“Well, I’m just sort of getting it together...”

“Me too.”

These were those moments, when you were just beginning to see someone new, and you didn’t have a clue what their conception of a Wednesday night date was. Chi-chi restaurant or video and take-out? Pub or harbour walk? Gentle kiss good-night or sex on arrival?

“I’ll tell you what,” she said. “Why don’t you just come over here when you’re ready, and we’ll figure it out from here?”

“Great,” I said.

Sex on arrival.

I called my parents.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hello,” said my mother with that mixture of love and distractedness, the easy friendliness of total familiarity. “Coming round?”

“I actually can’t tonight,” I said. “Sorry about that. I’ve kind of got a date.”

“Oh?” The distractedness faded instantly. Then - her tactics so obvious! - she tried to re-create it. “Who’s this with?”

“That girl Liz I told you about.”

“The newspaper girl?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the name of that paper?”

“The *Sydney City Press*.”

“Never heard of it.”

“No, it’s mainly distributed free in pubs and cafes and cinemas and places like that. Mainly around here. You probably never run into it.”

“No, I’ve never seen it.”

“It’s one of these arts-based free papers, they’re all the trend -”

“Mmm... sorry, I’m distracted, I’m just watching this Susan Graham thing on the news. I know who did it, you know.”

“I’m sure you do.”

My mother was a total detective. She could solve any crime that came along. She inevitably proved to be right, once the thing actually got solved by the real authorities. It was a big joke in the family kitchen that they should just give my mother a call, make it easier for everyone.

“It was that neighbour. They know it was him. But they’ve got no evidence.”

“Why would he do it?”

“Affair. Money. Always the same.”

Detective she was, lawyer she was not.

“Anyway, sorry about that.”

“That’s okay honey. Pity I went out and bought your favourite thing. And your father will be very disappointed. And I barely see you anymore. But you have a good time.”

“I will mum, thanks. Speak to you tomorrow.”

“Wear a condom. Bye.”

We hung up and I grabbed one more beer to have while I was getting ready. The phone rang. Not Phoebe, I thought. No way. She wouldn’t call twice. She’d left the ball in my court.

“Dan, Sean.”

“Hey mate.”

“How are you man?”

“Great.”

“Cool. Look I was wondering what you were up to tonight mate. Darren’s around and we’d be into playing some poker.”

God, so would I. I loved poker.

“I can’t. What a bummer. I’ve got a date.”

“With that *Press* chick?”

“Yeah, Liz.”

“What a bummer.”

“Yeah, poker sounds just perfect.”

“Oh well, not to worry. Another time.”

“Definitely.”

“Or mate, does she want to play?”

Interesting question. Very interesting. Maybe I could go over there, have sex with Liz, and then we'd all end up playing poker. A perfect evening... sex, poker, booze...

"I don't know," I said. "I could ask her."

"Cool."

"Where would you want to play?"

"Your place?"

I laughed. "Of course."

"No, it's just that my room-mate -"

"Yeah, no, of course." I was in a lucky situation. I lived alone. No room-mate hassle for *me*.

"Cool. What time?"

Oops. Slow down.

"Well, I've got to see how this girl feels about it first. She may have other things in mind."

"Such as?"

Sean was wonderfully blunt.

"I don't know."

"Mate, if she's not into poker I don't see any hope for the two of you."

"You're right. If she's not into it I'll dump her tonight."

"Good idea. You're developing an appropriate attitude."

"I'm growing up."

"It's about time."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Mate, I watched *Apocalypse Now* again last night."

Apocalypse Now. I sat down with the beer that was meant to be for upstairs, for showering and shaving and dressing. I lit a cigarette. I could always be relied on to talk about *Apocalypse Now*.

Twenty minutes later and I was halfway through the next beer and finally ascending the stairs. It was after eight. Where had the time gone? Was I hungry yet? Certainly no longer so horny. Poker would be awesome.

And the phone rang.

I caught it on the upstairs phone, the one next to my bed. I could see the shower from where I was sitting. Must get into that, I thought. Must hurry up. I've got a *date*.

"Hi," said that voice. "It's *me*..."

I'd first met Phoebe at a party. Well, seen her. I'd first developed the intense desire to meet Phoebe when I saw her at a party. I'd first developed an almost obsessive need to meet Phoebe when I saw some guy going down on her in the empty kitchen of a crowded party.

This was years ago, in the summer before I started my third year at Uni, and everyone I knew seemed to be about twenty-one. Now it seemed that everyone I knew, everyone I passed, everyone I met, *everyone*, seemed to be about twenty-eight. This was a weird phenomenon of life, a weird phenomenon of Sydney. Everyone was always my age.

It was about one in the morning, maybe earlier or later, it didn't matter, everyone was still there and no-one was thinking of leaving. There was ample booze, but I was thinking ahead to that disastrous moment when there wouldn't be, so I'd sculled the bottom third of my beer so I could go get another, make sure I got my fair share. I suppose I was a little drunk and my thirst was increasing exponentially. I was even contemplating getting some of the beer out of the fridge and hiding it in a high cupboard, creating a little secret stash. I used to do things like that and occasionally still do. Is booze everybody's monster? I used to think so. Now I'm not so sure. More of that later.

The loud buzz of the party was greatly softened by the right-angled corridor that lead to the kitchen from the living room. We were in a Paddington terrace, the home of Craig's elder sister. It was Christmas time. It was summer and it was Sydney. There was a door to the kitchen as well. I assumed that there'd be a sub-set of party-goers in the kitchen, keeping close to the fridge, keeping tabs on the booze and keeping near the remains of the hors d'oeuvres. Gossipers and whisperers, people talking about people who were in the main room. Kitchen-dwellers. But when I opened the door and poked my head in - doing reconnaissance, planning my beer-snatch - there was only Phoebe, sitting on the kitchen counter, her back to me. Well, at the moment there was only Phoebe. Preoccupied, shuddering Phoebe.

The fridge was between me and the counter, between me and this preoccupied anonymous girl. She looked busy. I figured there was no need for any pithy comment, any friendly greeting. I figured that the beer-job was a goer. No worries. But what was she doing? I was instantly and savagely curious. My fantasies cut to the chase. She couldn't be.... she isn't....

But she was, which I plainly saw, halfway to the fridge. She still hadn't turned, hadn't clocked me. Why would she? She had better things going on. She had some bloke buried under her summer skirt. Her legs were wrapped around his back. One shoe on, one lying on the floor next to his left knee. Him totally anonymous to me, just a haunched pleasure-giver. She was beautiful to look at. He was a haunched, anonymous lucky bastard.

I was thrilled.

Then my thirst and my mission returned. The distraction of this beautiful event, this bold and daring assignation, kept clouding my

planning. Must get to fridge (*look at that, I can't believe it there are a hundred people fifteen feet away*) must get a nice cold beer (*she's loving it, she doesn't care if people see this*) must also put some away for later (*she knows I'm here, she wants to be looked at*). I was frozen in place. I was actually - it hit me like a rocket - staring. I was potentially, if anyone saw me right now - a sleaze. I was a sleazy voyeur.

Get beer, get stash, get out.

I edged towards the fridge. Two steps to go now. The first loud moment would be opening the fridge door, and that wouldn't be *too* loud - it was a fifty-fifty gamble. The next loud moment would be that reverberating clanging that the fridge makes as you remove a beer - that a fridge *always* makes, even if it's the *only* beer. That was a loud noise, a guaranteed cunnilingus-interrupter. Then, of course, the bottle-on-bottle, which was a goer, because there were still plenty of beers (hopefully!) It all added up to a lot of noise. I had no hope. There would be a *moment*.

Back to planning.

The Clever Plan struck me suddenly, a single clear wave of inspiration. It was perfect, seamless, a triumph of strategy. No sweat! I was home and hosed. Beer, soon, for me, thanks to The Clever Plan.

The Clever Plan went like this: I would proceed to the fridge. I would open it. I would get my beer. And if the noise interrupted, if this beautiful girl turned around or this anonymous lucky bastard surfaced and stared, I would reply, charmingly smiling,

"Don't mind me."

Ingenious!

But now to put plan to action. I had to co-ordinate everything, the walking, the opening, the smiling, the right level of "it's all fun here" in the voice. Had to get it right. Had to pull it all off *smooth*.

Not that it was my problem. In fact, you're probably thinking, what are you worried about? It's a party. People are going to be going to the fridge. They know what they're doing, and they're doing it in the kitchen. It's their problem, their little game. Not your problem.

But I knew it was. Because I'd already sneaked. I'd already watched. They would know. They would know. They would. They'd sense it. I was exuding it all over.

The fridge seemed a mile away, and I was distracted again, not moving, The Clever Plan receding, watching this amazing activity, this awesome spectacle.

And the sounds of the party rushed in as the door flew open behind me.

I turned my head sharply - an involuntary response - to see one of the hostess' friends barging on into the kitchen, no doubt with a similar mission to my own. I turned my head just as sharply back, turned my

eyes right into the gaze of hers, of Phoebe's, her sharp gaze boring into mine, me a deer in the headlights -

- her a smiling unknowable, a giggling naughty schoolgirl.

She very quickly swung her legs off the bloke, who was suddenly exposed and very sheepish. He sort of scrambled in no particular direction, except to hide his face from me while he wiped his mouth. She remained sitting on the counter, her bare legs dangling, one shoe off, gazing at me. The girl at the door blundered in, oblivious, unable to see the bloke on the floor, perhaps a little surprised that the room was so quiet, so devoid of conversation, perhaps a little unnerved by our peculiar positions, me in the middle of nowhere in particular, looking stunned and guilty under the gaze of this counter-bound girl.

"Hi!" the invader suddenly squealed. "How are we all doing?"

"*Great,*" said Phoebe in that voice that one day I'd come to know so well.

Things happened in a rush after that. The wet-mouthed floor-crawler didn't know what to do for a while, so he sort of hid in a corner. Phoebe - the girl I didn't yet know was called Phoebe - remained calm and cool on the counter, staring at the invading girl, staring at me. She reached to a pack of cigarettes near her on the counter and lit one. Below the counter, away from the other girl and invisible to her, Phoebe's feet, one shoe off, and a bloke, gone beet-red, hiding.

I leapt into action.

"What can I get you?"

"*Love* a beer," said the invading girl, still nearer the doorway than us.

"You got it." I swung around and opened the fridge. Now I could make as much noise as I wanted, so I made too much, a big display. I grabbed a couple of beers out of the fridge - still plenty left, yay! - and twisted them open. Quicker than Flash I was around again, facing the invader, moving strongly towards her, handing her her beer. I'd headed her off and now blocked her path. No sweat. Sweet manoeuvre.

"Cheers," she offered.

"Cheers," I said, took a swig - *yum!* - and swung to face Phoebe.

"And what can I get you?" I asked.

Go on, leave, I willed the invader.

"I'll take one too," said Phoebe.

"What are your names?" said the invader.

"Daniel," I said.

"Phoebe," said Phoebe.

"I'm Purcell," said Purcell.

"That's a nice name," I bluffed.

“And *this* is Randall,” said Phoebe. She turned and looked down at the floor on the other side of the counter. “Would you like a beer, Randall?”

“Love one,” squeaked Randall from the depths behind the counter.

“Oh!” chirped Purcell. “Hi Randall!”

“Hi!” came back Randall’s voice.

I hit the fridge, the perfect halfway mark where I could see everything. As I grabbed two more beers I looked over to Phoebe, the floor, Randall. Phoebe was extending her bare foot towards Randall’s squatting body, staring at him intensely, smiling. Then she quickly looked up at me, caught me looking. I shot a look back at Purcell, who looked very curious and was edging into the room.

“How’s the party out there?” I attempted too loudly.

“Put it on me,” said Phoebe, quietly.

“Great!” came back Purcell.

I gave her a smile, turned back to the fridge, couldn’t help but check out the floor, check out Randall looking at me sheepishly.

“Go on,” said Phoebe to Randall.

I let him off. I turned back into the fridge to open the beers, a bit unnaturally perhaps. Give him a break, and a chance. I took my time to twist the tops of, as much time as you can to a ten-second activity, then very slowly and deliberately closed the fridge door and turned back into the room with the new beers.

“More beers,” I offered.

“Thank you,” said Phoebe to Randall.

“Where are you, Randall?” squealed curious and slightly weirded-out Purcell.

I glanced down. Phoebe had both shoes on now, her legs still dangling. The red was receding from Randall’s face and he was smiling.

“Hi,” he said, as he popped up from behind the counter like a cunnilingual jack-in-the-box. “I’m Randall.”

“What were you doing back there?” said Purcell.

He thought fast:

“I dropped something.” Clever man! I snortled. That kind of try-to-disguise-it laugh that rips your throat. That made Phoebe snortle too.

Oops.

“Ah,” said Purcell.

“Cheers!” I tried. It worked.

“Cheers!” everyone chimed in, Randall perhaps a little ahead of the others.

I got Purcell out of there and back into the main room, let Randall relax a little. Phoebe didn’t seem like she needed to relax. She’d enjoyed

every minute of the encounter. She'd pushed it. She'd relished in it. And as I tried making small talk with Purcell and Craig and Craig's sister Adrienne, all I could think of was Phoebe's eyes and the look she had given me when she caught me, *me* in the act...

Phoebe...