

## Champagne Problems

*Zach Pryor*

*A good friend will always stab you in the front. Oscar Wilde*

The lights of the nightclub flash blue, pink and green. Sweat puddles underneath Todd's arms and trickles down his back. Pushing through a crowd of inebriated men, he finds a spot in the middle of the dance floor. A remix of Dua Lipa's 'New Rules' shoots through the speakers and propels everyone into frenzied revelry. He takes a sip of his drink and sways to the song.

Against his will he'd been dragged to Circuit by Joshua and Ethan – only he can't see them anywhere. They'd spent Friday evening celebrating Ethan's birthday eve, sinking too many espresso martinis and vodka sodas.

He searches for the neat quiff of Ethan's hair. Maybe he'd want a kiss? Maybe he'd want to come home? Todd pushes this out of his mind and concentrates on dancing – Ethan was off limits.

The chemical stench of amyl nitrate wafts around him. He closes his eyes, feeling the music quiver through his body. When he opens them a bald man with a thick beard is in front of him. Grinning, winking, watching. Todd grabs him by the waist and pulls him close. Their lips touch, resting their mouths together, then tongue. It's soft, contagious, the taste: sweet, sticky, smoky. The beard coarse against Todd's clean-shaven chin. They break, Todd grinds against him, his hands on the small of his back.

Wanna get out of here? the man whispers into his ear.

Todd tries to spot his friends. Joshua's ahead storming out of the club, his floral shirt easy to spot against the sea of black. Ethan? Lost to the sea of men.

He turns to the stranger and says, Absolutely. I'm not here to fuck spiders. Though resplendent and sunny, the lingering ghost of winter is pressing into the day's edge. Summer is next month and with it will come tanned, speedo-clad men

at the Prahran pools, designed to make Todd feel worse about his pasty body. Though residing in “the world’s most liveable city”, he’s lucky it’s afforded him a life of quiet freedom.

There was that vote for marriage equality a few years ago. Rainbow flags decorated the streets of Melbourne and the gays celebrated. Well deserved, Todd thinks. But Todd also thinks marriage is an institution, and he isn’t ready to be institutionalised. His medication to ward off HIV comes in the form of a small blue pill, his biggest concerns are where he’ll get his morning coffee from, mortgage repayments, and trying to remove the stubborn seven kilos that appeared overnight the minute he turned thirty.

He jolts awake.

Another nightmare about Adonis men sunning themselves in Greece. His sudden movement cause Sally to let out a small bark. The little ball of grey fluff at the edge of his bed shakes and settles back into a slumber. Todd gets to his feet, stretches out and readjusts the gold chain around his neck. As he does every morning, he studies his stomach. Now thirty-two and despite three “gruelling” workouts per week, it still wiggles. He pokes it in anger as he makes his way to the bathroom. The tyre around his waist he could almost live with, but the minute he saw receding hair he would put his head in the oven.

He hopes the shower will take care of the dull ache of his hangover. Todd took the man home, and they fucked with Todd imagining the man was Ethan. They came together, sweat intermingled, shared a joint, and then the man left.

After his shower, Todd put on his favourite black pleated pants and white tee. He steps onto the balcony to feel the sun. A gentle breeze causes the hairs on his arms to stand on ends. He needs breakfast, coffee, and then he must prepare his place for Ethan’s birthday soiree. Last week he’d offered his apartment as a venue, assuming it would be tame as most twenty-ninth birthdays generally were.

He looks at his phone, Ethan's already messaged: *Joshua's in a mood. He's absolutely fuming. What did you say to him last night? No drama tonight, please xoxo*

Todd rolls his eyes. In the six years he's known Joshua, there's a level of histrionics from every interaction.

Come on, Sal, he calls, and she leaps off the bed. He leashes her and grabs a windbreaker on his way out the door.

Sitting in the cafe, Todd counts out his tasks: flowers, wine, antipasto, present. Not balloons, this wasn't a child's event – even though Joshua would be in attendance. Three years ago, Ethan held seven events across the city on different days (with each event requiring a different outfit), one gathering with their group of five seems intimate by comparison.

God, where did the time go? Little Ethan approaching thirty. The last one to cross the threshold. Even then, still a year from the glittering decade. His birthday's a superb opportunity for the group to get together.

It'd been months since Ethan, Joshua, Chester, Lucas and he were in the same room. A year ago, they wouldn't have gone three days without seeing each other. Todd believes his job is to blame. It'd become something of a cruel mistress, pulling him to Sydney for days on end away from Sally – all in the name of quantitative data and statistical modelling.

Not that the "work" conversation ever mattered. No one could quite figure out what he did. Even he didn't know half the time.

He eats his eggs on sourdough and scrolls through Instagram photos of his group together. So many memories over the years. It seems a shame they're falling apart, like a woollen jumper unravelling. The gang's conversation through their group chat had dimmed, only sharing the odd meme each week. Maybe face-to-face would change that, and they could all pick up where they left off.

After brunch he ventures out onto Chapel Street. It's a well-manicured zoo. Throngs of people in Lulu Lemon, fake-tanned men sipping mimosas, lots of lap dogs. Todd ducks into the markets to purchase some bright purple hydrangeas that will pop against his new cream couch. They're also Ethan's favourite – he loves how the little flowers make one big burst of colour resting on top of a bed of green leaves. Todd gets two bunches, and the lady wraps them in brown paper. In the deli he picks cheeses, dips and cured meats and then makes his way to Country Road, where he selects a throw pillow for Ethan's bedroom.

He's exhausted by the time he gets home but goes about tidying up his place while Sally naps on the couch. When he's finished, he rewards himself with a glass of prosecco. He opens Grindr. Three-hundred metres away, a man with a buzzed haircut and a small mole above his top lip strikes up conversation. After several back-and-forth messages, the man sends through a range of revealing photos, including his veiny, thick erection. Not the bloody worst. Todd hardens but puts his phone down.

He'll resume the chat later. The birthday party awaits.

Chester and Lucas arrive first. Sally barks and Todd greets them with a kiss. It'd been five years since Joshua introduced him to this couple. Though, as time wore on, he got the impression Chester and Lucas only put up with Joshua because of the group and they weren't that interested in maintaining an actual friendship with him.

The last time he'd seen them, they'd been bickering about something Chester had said to Lucas's homophobic father. Lucas cross and Chester unrepentant. They'd left dinner in a hostile mood, and Todd heard from Lucas the next day about how Chester didn't respect his family. They'd been together seven years. Five years too long with Chester's short fuse.

Lucas here had to book an Uber that took us to the wrong apartment building, Chester snaps. He's flushed pink and removes his houndstooth jacket.

Sorry, I was distracted. I've been busy tidying up after you all day, Lucas barks.

And I've been busy cooking your meals.

I can always just get takeaway.

Can I offer you boys a drink? Todd suggests.

Sure. Can you turn this shit off? Chester asks. Give me your phone.

He doesn't wait for a reply, but snatches Todd's phone and starts skipping through the Katy Perry tracks Todd had lined up for Ethan. Then says, You've got a few messages from some guy on Grindr.

Give me that, Todd replies. Your drinks are on the bench. He motions to two flutes full of effervescent liquid. He notices the man from earlier has sent through more images and an updated status: *Top, Looking, Now.*

Lucas takes his flute, catches his reflection in the hallway mirror and adjusts his hair. Chester takes a seat on the couch and seems more interested in Sally than anyone else.

The buzzer trills through the apartment and Todd goes to let Ethan and Joshua up. Sally barks again but doesn't move from the couch, happy with the attention she's getting.

Joshua and Ethan were roommates. The two people he'd turned to when his last fling ended: Joshua turned up with a bag of coke, Ethan took him shopping for designer sneakers. Though, did they enjoy living together? One day Todd's hearing Ethan complain about how Joshua never does the dishes, and on the other day's he's listening to Joshua's diatribe about how aimless Ethan is with his "redundant job" as a waiter. Todd always wants to defend Ethan from Joshua's cruel, elitist jabs, but he just keeps his mouth shut and nods along as they share their respective frustrations.

Neither of the two new guests knock, instead Joshua announces his arrival by bursting open the door and screeching like a banshee.

Chester rolls his eyes as he gets to his feet.

For fuck's sake, Lucas mutters under his breath.

Ethan and Joshua stride into the living area. Joshua's haze of cologne is so strong Todd imagines his ivy wilting as he walks down the hall. Ethan looks chic in a crisp white shirt and white jeans. Chester pecks the two on the cheek and Lucas pours them a welcome drink.

Happy birthday, babe, Todd gives his friend a hug and hands him his gift. Ethan beams as he opens it.

This is perfect. Thank you, Ethan smiles, holding the gold pillow in his hands, and gives Todd a small kiss on the lips. He blushes.

Did you forget his gift? Chester turns to Lucas, who shrugs. Chester groans. Yours is coming. Lucas left it at home.

When the other two are out of earshot Joshua corners Todd and looks at him with a dark stare, his eyebrows almost touching creating a sharp crease.

Are you going to be nice to me tonight? Joshua asks.

What the fuck are you talking about? Todd replies.

You are such a cunt, Joshua hisses. Last night you were on one and you saw me talking to that guy and you ended up going after him. Stealing him away from me.

I didn't know you were even talking to that guy.

Please, Todd. You always do this. Whatever, I'm over it. You're ruining Ethan's night, Joshua walks past him.

Todd grits his teeth, pours another drink, and finishes it.

Can I talk to you? Ethan looks uneasy as he approaches Todd and motions to the bedroom. Todd follows.

What's up? Todd says and sits down on his bed, Ethan joins him.

They met five years ago through Grindr. It started as a date, but they ended up chatting for hours about Real Housewives of Melbourne and Drag Races and the gay scene. They realised they were definitely *just* friends. But Todd can't help regretting how things could have ended up; he's always thought Ethan was cute, particularly those dimples. He's protective over him in a way he isn't over the other boys. Yes, they'd slept together several times throughout the years – a drunken end of the night thing, when they were both horny and needed to get off. None of the other boys knew.

He sits close to Ethan, hands trembling.

I slept with Lucas, Ethan confesses and looks down at his feet. He's wearing a pair of green loafers and his ankles are on display. A pang of disappointment rushes through Todd.

You what?

I slept with Lucas, Ethan repeats. On Monday. We were catching up, and we both got drunk.

On Monday?

We both have the day off work. One thing led to another, and I fucked him.

How did this happen?

I'm sure you don't need details. I haven't told anyone. Joshua would freak if he found out Lucas had cheated on his boyfriend – you know what he thinks about adultery after his parents, Ethan says.

Todd gets to his feet and paces, I need a second.

He leaves the room, hands shaking. He grabs another glass of bubbles and drains it in one gulp. Ethan follows him out to the living room. Todd wants to seem debonair and charmingly unconcerned, but heat prickles at his cheeks, turning them red. Todd stares at Lucas and back at Ethan.

Don't, Ethan grabs Todd's arm.

I'm shocked. This will ruin our entire group, Todd whispers. He wriggles himself free from Ethan's grasp, walks over to Lucas and crouches down next to him. Can I talk to you?

Sure, Lucas says, nonchalant. They walk to the bedroom.

Ethan just told me, Todd folds his arms.

I've been meaning to tell you. I haven't seen you and I didn't want to put anything into a message, in case Chester sees my phone. Lucas looks crestfallen.

Todd, distracted by the canvas on his wall of the outline of a woman with olive leaves woven through her hair, looks back at Lucas, frowning. How could you do this to him?

I don't know, it just happened. Ethan and I were chatting, drinking, and then we were talking about how I haven't had sex in a year.

A year?

We just sort of stopped. You know how it is.

No. I don't.

That's right, you've never had a serious relationship.

I've also never cheated on my partner, Todd bristles like an angry dog, then realises, This isn't the first time, is it?

No. Some guy at work early last year. I just can't with Chester, Lucas says.

Then why the fuck are you two together?

Because it's easier than not being with him.

You're too lazy to leave him—so you'll just hurt him instead and hope he leaves you?

I need to talk to someone about this, Lucas pleads.

You need to talk to your boyfriend. You're wasting his time and I'm done with this conversation, Todd leaves the room and pours another glass of prosecco.

He pictures Ethan and Lucas taking off their clothes and kissing and rubbing up against each other. A headache sears across his forehead – stinging, throbbing. A singular pain.

Lucas emerges from the bedroom and resumes his seat next to Chester on the couch. All of them continue catching up on life and drinking, but Todd's mood has changed. It's no longer just a birthday party for Ethan. It's a farce. A reminder of how far they've drifted. At a loss, for a moment, as to the what to do or where to go next, Todd stays in the kitchen and watches his group.

The hydrangeas on the coffee table are mocking him. He wants to rip off every single petal and throw them over the balcony. All these small, petty boys, with their silly, solipsistic lives. Joshua screeching, the others chuckling or sniping. All of them bitching about each other behind their backs. Backstabbing, bickering, boring. This entire dynamic is toxic and exhausting. He hates them. He bites down on his lip and blood fills inside his mouth. His phone vibrates.

More messages from the man: *I'm keen.*

Todd replies: *Be there in five.*

He pockets his phone, drains his glass and walks into the living area, fists clenched. All of them meet his eye except for Joshua, who looks away petulantly. Todd stares at Chester, clears his throat and then tells them:

On Monday Lucas fucked Ethan.

The news catapults the boys into a silent submission, a second that stretches to infinity as they all hold their breath, waiting for someone to speak.

He heads to the front door and leaves.