

I was hoping the coffee shop would be more crowded. Alyssa had been waiting in my apartment today with stern frown painted on her thin face. It was the kind where her lower lip would ever so slightly curl over her upper lip. The wrinkles on her forehead drew deep lines connecting the freckles dotting her skin. Arms crossed, eyes looking in every direction but mine, and the occasional childish sigh serving as a cue for me to ask what's wrong.

I knew what's wrong, and I didn't ask. Instead I told her I wanted a fancy coffee, and asked if she wanted to talk there. This was the plan; to deal with it in a public setting. With enough people around, she wouldn't say anything she wouldn't want others to hear. She would bottle up the worst of her anger. She'd let out her frustration. We'd go home and wait for the silence to get boring. I'd tell her she's right – I'm sorry, and I love her. I'd kiss her neck. She'd cup my breasts. We'd fuck, and forget about it.

Instead the shop is practically empty. This isn't good at all. I'm not safe here – there are no bystanders. It's too intimate now. I'm trapped. I need a plan B.

The barista looks at me with a stupid, confused look on his face. I didn't hear whatever he said, I was too busy scanning the room for the safest table to sit at; the one likely to be the least private.

"Ma'am?"

"Shh!" I interrupt him, raising my finger to his face as I continue my scans. The table by the window, with the clear view of the television. That's the best spot. There are electrical outlets by the surrounding tables for anyone bringing their laptop. Perfect.

I turn back to the now wide-eyed barista.

"I'll have a medium caramel macchiato, please."

After a few seconds the barista repeats my order to no one in particular and turns to Alyssa.

She orders her skinny vanilla latte.

He once again repeats the order to no one and finally gets started on our order. Before Alyssa can say anything, I tell her I'm going to find us a seat (in the empty café) and vault myself toward my chosen target. As Alyssa pays for the coffee and waits to bring over our order, I fish out my phone and decide the best way to avoid eye contact with her is by playing a dumb game. I pick the one with the blocks – I'm really good at that one.

Already my finger taps and swipes are rewarded with a colourful burst of colours.

She comes back with our coffees. Still no bystanders. I try to stall. I already went to the washroom before we left, so there's still a good 15 minutes before I can use that one again.

"I... I have a text. Work stuff, can you give me a minute?"

The words escaped my mouth before I could even consider how lame they were. I lower my phone underneath the table. From her vantage point, I'm furiously tapping through a heated texting conversation. In reality, I'm still playing – swiping colourful blocks while tapping cute little cartoon animal faces.

“This won’t be long, I promise.”

Alyssa belts out another one of her I-want-you-to-hear-how-frustrated-I-am sighs.

“Listen, we need to tal-“

“Just a minute,” I tell her, hoping to delay the inevitable. There’s no stopping her now. At least I have an excuse not to make eye contact.

She starts listing out all of my sins.

I never clean up after myself. I don’t respect her family. I smoked in her apartment. And of course, there was the infamous day I didn’t lock her bike properly. The damn thing didn’t click, apparently. The bike was gone in less than an hour.

“...and what made it worse is you never apologized.”

I try to focus on the game and tune out her inquisition.

“...you didn’t even take responsibility for...”

The blocks spark, flash, and disappear to my movements. What might be a challenging puzzle to most is child’s play for me. My expert finger movements ensure a rapid rise to my score.

“...told me you lied about...”

I’m master of the world of colourful animal blocks. My taps and swipes mold this virtual world into sublime perfection.

“...so childish whenever you...”

My every whim is carried out dutifully by these fingers of mine. The colourful cartoon animals quake at their presence.

“...not even listening...”

The score quickly rises to a near-impossible sum. This has to be a new worldwide record. I am the grand duchess of block-tapping. No one could ever hope to match my level of superhuman reflexes and dexterity. This world is my canvas. I can effortlessly conform its image to my desires, like a master painter wielding his brush on an open canvas.

I’m not sure how long it’s been since Alyssa stopped talking, but by the time I noticed the eerie silence, she was already looking away from me in disgust, holding her cup of coffee close to her face by only the delicate tips of her bony fingers.

I put my phone away and breathe out. Rather than look at her, I focus my attention on my macchiato. The cup is somewhat warm – not hot, as I was expecting. I must’ve been distracted for a while. A taste confirms it: Lukewarm, sugary caffeine enters my system... more like a soft drink at this point than anything a grown-up would consume.

She’s still looking away from me. It’s obvious I’m supposed to say something, but I wasn’t really paying attention. Now it’s a game of Minesweeper. If I make the wrong move here, we explode. If I somehow

pick the right block, the board opens up and reveals where the danger zones are. This is where “I’m sorry” won’t work. It never does. Even if you really mean it. It’s too hackneyed and typical. It’s too obvious. If you want your apology to sound sincere, you need to be more creative.

I take a deep breath, followed by another sip of my sugary drink. I extend my hands toward her side of the table and look down.

“You’re right,” I tell her. “I’ll try to do better.”

Maybe next time I’ll just weld her stupid bike to the railing.

Still, she doesn’t move or say anything. I’m supposed to say more. This is where things get more challenging. If I say too much, it becomes a plea. It would be up to her to forgive me, and I’d have no power over the outcome. If I say too little, she’ll think I don’t care enough to make things right.

There’s no time for thinking. I need to make this look good.

“I’ve been selfish, I know it.”

A risky move, but I’ve at least gotten her attention now.

“I wish I could take back the past few months, but at least now I can promise you that I will change. For you.”

Nicely done, now just wrap this up.

“And I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I put you through. I love you, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy again.”

Okay, good. That should do it.

Alyssa doesn’t respond. Her face has changed from resentful to skeptical. It wasn’t enough. I need to do more.

“Anything, I swear. Just tell me.”

Nothing.

“Can you please just tell me? I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

Wait.

“You never tell me what you need. I’m trying my best but you won’t meet me halfway.”

No.

“Have you ever asked what makes *me* happy? Or is this just about you?”

Stop.

“I want us to be happy but you never tell me what’s right. You only ever tell me what I’ve done wrong – and how much of a spoiled bitch I am.”

STOP.

“I can’t take it. If I’m so terrible, why are you here?”

God dammit.

“You never... why can’t you...”

I finally manage to stop myself somehow, but the damage has been done. My hands are shaking at this point, and I loudly sniffle what must be a pint of mucous accumulated in my sinuses.

Alyssa furrows her brow and holds her head as if she was just hit by a stone. The coffee shop is still empty, and the loudest sound in the room is my own breathing. I’ve once again relinquished my own power to her.

I take another sip of my now-ice cold sugar water. I close my eyes hoping the sickly-sweet taste of caramel syrup and free-trade coffee could somehow whisk me away to a festive tropical island where sweet drinks are passed along like water. I could cheerfully gulp down my vaguely-tropical drink among the locals, who cheer, dance and sing in a picture-perfect sight of the island’s serene simplicity and the indomitable, carefree spirit of the poor-but-happy peoples off the forgotten coast of the isle of... wherever.

“Jilly...”

Alyssa’s voice hints at a mixture of concern and disappointment, shredding through my perfect tropical fantasy. I’m back in reality, trapped.

I look up at her expecting the finishing blow – her last strike to finally put me out of my misery.

Instead she says nothing. She rests her hands on mine, which still haven’t stopped shaking.

Whatever it is I wanted to say comes out as an incoherent, drooling sputter. My cheeks are tickled by the tears streaking my face. My nose is now running like a spout. I’ve become a gross monster with no control over her wretched body.

And her... her bright red hair, her green eyes, her immaculate skin and her perfect freckles and her thin face... she holds my ugly, monstrous hands and says nothing. We sit like that for what feels like hours.

Alyssa finishes her coffee and stands up from her chair. She looks down at me and asks quietly if I want to go back to the apartment with her. I do, but I don’t know how to tell her.

Instead, the dumb words that come out of my mouth are: “I need to be here by myself.”

She eventually nods and walks toward the shop door.

“I love you,” I tell her. My voice is dry and cracked, there’s no way of knowing whether she heard it or not.

She exits the door, and I’m left alone. I take another sip of my drink, before popping off the cap to the cup and peering inside.

The caramel, coffee and cream have mixed together to form a floating, colourful swirling shape in my cup. I stare into the spiraling form, hypnotized by its pattern. It’s as if I’m gazing at a new galaxy from

afar, locked within the vision of an expansive void... alone only to my thoughts and the indecipherable complexities of the experience.