

Imbroglio

When I'm still in the apartment by the time she gets home from work – sitting there on the couch attempting to look like that's exactly what I should be doing – another argument ensues. *What are you still doing here*, is the gist of it, and when I remind her that it's my place too – that we moved in here together, that I have just as much right to be here as she does – she closes her eyes for a moment and her shoulders drop and she exhales loudly through clenched teeth, exasperated. It's a look I know well, and it means something unpleasant is happening.

'The nerve,' she says finally, and I repeat the phrase, mimicking her, because I know that she's right – the *nerve* – and I can't think of a suitable retort. As soon as I say it I feel childish, realising that the argument has only just begun but already she has the upper hand.

I told her I'd be gone when she got home.

It was all agreed upon in an unusually civilised manner, the culmination of weeks of talking and fighting and crying over what's become of us. We both agreed some space would do us good.

That was what was said, but really we know that we arrived at this brief accord only so the messy business of breaking up could properly begin. It was an equitable solution, but when I woke up and started packing my things I felt a sudden urge to stop. I decided I didn't want to go after all – and why should it be me who leaves?

So I spent the morning deciding that when she came home from work I'd be sitting here waiting for her. That was the plan.

When I hear her key in the door, the sound of the coat rack wobbling as she hangs up her things, surely thinking that she's come home to an empty apartment – to *her* empty apartment, she's thinking – I pick up an old magazine from the coffee table and sit there on the couch pretending to read, as if our long discussion last night never happened. I don't know what kind of reaction to expect, and for a moment I think: *shit, maybe this is the wrong way to be going about things*, but the time for such realisations was several hours ago, so I play dumb when she looks for an explanation.

I act like I'm the reasonable one and she gets more and more worked up. I stay sprawled on the couch, flicking through the magazine while the conversation continues. This seems to

upset her even more, the fact that I'm not taking things seriously, so I keep on reading, thinking that the more agitated I make her the more in the right I'll be.

But I can see she's distressed.

I can tell that all day in work she's been thinking about things – about me and her and how it's all gone so wrong – and that she'll be tired from dealing with it all, sad and emotional, but at least (she'll have been thinking) she can come home to the apartment and have some peace and quiet for a change.

Now, she looks flustered and worn out.

Again, the thought crosses my mind that perhaps being here isn't right, that it's cruel and antagonistic given our agreement, and given that I do still love her (that's never been in question, despite everything, despite recently hating her too – and showing it) but it's too late to go back on it now; I'm there in the apartment and we're having the fight, so the only thing I can do is try to win the damn thing. Not that I think there's going to be a winner – I'm not that naive. I know well enough how these things work, and I can tell it's all going to end in tears, probably for both of us.

So it continues.

'Why are you doing this,' she asks me, close to crying. I consider the question, and the answer is I don't know why, but I can hardly tell *her* that, so instead I say: 'doing *what?*' and the whole imbroglio continues along its nasty path.

We sit in silence for a while, for what feels like an excruciatingly long time, each on opposite sides of the room, me pretending to read the magazine with my legs stretched out on the coffee table (in a pose attempting to suggest that none of what is happening has affected me in the slightest) and her staring into nothingness across from me, lost in misery and almost huddled, wiping away an occasional tear.

I steal glances at her now and again, making sure she doesn't notice me taking an interest in anything other than what I'm pretending to read. She looks like a wounded animal. The whole ordeal I've created is really getting to her now, and it softens me to see her in such a state.

I think about reaching out to her – saying something reassuring, something nice, giving her anything that could be considered an olive branch – so we don't have to sit here like this, bathing in each other's animosity.

But I can't think what.

This morning, when I finally decided to stop packing my things and wait for her to come home, my mind was convinced that this was the right thing to do – in fact the *only* thing to do – and that somehow it would roll back the last few turbulent and angry weeks and months. I wonder now about my capacity for decision making.

I realise, suddenly and stupidly, that I'm being difficult, that I should do something to get back on the right side of things, and do it *now*. But something inside won't allow me to fully admit this realisation. I need to display confidence in the rectitude of my behaviour; I need her to think she's being irrational.

I'm thinking about this when she breaks the awkward silence.

'Why do you have to make everything so difficult,' she asks, and it's like she's able to hear my thoughts. It reminds me that she's always had a knack for knowing exactly what I'm thinking, and it pulls a little at my heart.

The question – emitted thinly through tears with a breaking, heartbroken voice – doesn't hold any malice or antagonistic weight; it's simply a question, a pleading request for some explanation of my behaviour.

I have an urge to give her this simple thing.

But instead, almost nonchalantly, still flicking moronically through the magazine that I've already flicked through several times without absorbing a single word or image, I say: 'Maybe if you weren't such a cunt...'

This is unexpected.

That word leaves my mouth sounding alien and nude, a word I know she despises (as do I) and then hangs there between us like a wave about to break. There is a thick, heavy silence, tinged with disbelief. She lets out a barely audible gasp, as if she's struggling to swallow the infected air between us.

I'm as surprised as she is.

I keep my head down for a moment, not wanting to see her face or show my own. I slowly raise my eyes towards her – guiltily, I can tell, like a dog – and find her staring straight back at me.

It strikes me then that I no longer know who's winning the argument, though I have a strong suspicion it's not me, and nor is it her: *There will be no winners here.*

Her face is a contorted mixture of disbelief and abject pain, an ultimate look of betrayal. I am sickened by this image, horrified that I'm its maker, and I feel nauseous.

Next, the tears come – not the tears that were already there, but thick-flowing streams.

She begins to sob.

Despite this – despite the tears and the anguish in her twisted expression – she still looks pretty (why must she always look so damn *beautiful*?) and I have a strange drooping sensation deep in my chest.

I don't know what to do next.

She stares at me, incredulous, and I hold her gaze and know that, though the only emotion I'm feeling is remorse, my face is full of anger and hatred. I know I must look ugly to her – I *feel* ugly – but I try desperately not to flinch or give any indication of regret. If I could I would take it back, and I know that I *could*...

But I *can't*, so the only option is to feign ignorance of the harshness of the words. But she looks shattered by them.

A long period of silence follows, broken only by the sound of her sobs and the absurd scratching sound of magazine pages being turned. She gets up suddenly and moves towards the door. She moves quietly, a weightless quality to her gait that I haven't noticed before.

'Where are you going?' I say limply, in an almost pleading sort of way, and she ignores me. I'm embarrassed by my tone, given my previous outburst; I feel like consistency is key and I've lost it.

I'm expecting the door to be slammed, but she shuts it softly. I can't shake the feeling that she does this on purpose. There is less dignity, I think, in a slammed door, though I'm not sure why. All I know is that her delicate exit makes me feel even more aggrieved. But the feeling passes: I realise that how a door has been closed is the least of either of our worries, and at least I realise that much.

There's an opportunity just after she leaves – perhaps my last – to follow her and give some sort of apology, a grand gesture of some sort. Instead, I shout: 'Sleep well, darling,' in a tone dripping with sarcasm. I don't mean to say it – or to say it like *that* – but I'm not in control of myself anymore and I suppose, being honest with myself, I *did* mean to say it like that; I just don't know why.

Jesus, I whisper loudly to myself, *you're a dick*, and I don't know what to do next so I tear the magazine to shreds and throw it in the compost bin, knowing how much she values the correct recycling of disposables.

An image arrives in my head of this time last night – of the long chat that ended so amicably – and my mind is assaulted by the comparison until it flits along to the next thing.

The next thing – the next logical step – is to get drunk, so I go to the fridge.

In the fridge there's a six-pack of beer (mine) and a single bottle of a particular Mexican beer (hers). It's the only beer she likes. She doesn't drink often, or much when she does, but I know the simple pleasure a single beer after work sometimes gives her.

Out of spite (there's no disguising it) I take her beer instead of my own. I don't understand why the thought of drinking it while she's in the next room crying gives me such satisfaction, and as I sit down and stretch out my legs – as I'm taking my first sip – it strikes me that this is probably the last time I'll ever borrow (or steal) anything of hers again.

And I picture her face when she comes home from work some evening and goes to the fridge and finds her last precious beer isn't there where it should be, and knows that I've taken it out of meanness.

Jesus, you are one hell of a dick.

I drink the beer, but I can't enjoy it.

My eyes fall upon the inflated mattress that leans upright in the corner of the room. I've been sleeping on it for a week, having decided one night that doing so would somehow make her realise what she'll be missing when we finally split, and it only strikes me now how ludicrous it looks standing there, half deflated, limp and lonely; there is no sadder sight, it occurs to me uselessly, than a sagging plastic mattress in a young couple's living room.

I wonder what she's doing in the bedroom – whether she's still awake, whether she's crying – and it occurs to me that I could go to her now and attempt to fix some of the damage I've done, attempt the reconstruction of our faded happiness – or at least retreat from some of my cruel behaviour.

I know that this is something I can do, something I *want* to do.

But as I begin re-inflating the mattress – the sound of slowly escaping air somehow mocking me – I know that I won't. I won't give this simple thing to her, or to myself. And while she cries herself to sleep, mere metres and a skinny wall between us, I too begin to cry.

The more I pump – and the more the mattress hisses – the more I cry.

And I find I can't stop, because I don't know what it is that I'm doing, or what I'm going to do now.