

Safiyah Young  
Professor Culler  
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## **Cheater's Guilt**

Sometimes, I really enjoy my life. This isn't one of those times.

As I profusely apologize, I couldn't help but think about the simpler times in life. For example, ten seconds ago... before I spilled boiling hot coffee all over Jack Townsend in the middle of the communications building.

"Oh no! I am so sorry," I cried as I held onto the poor man's shoulder with a death grip, "I have a napkin in my bag."

I threw down my tote bag and rummaged through it for old Chipotle napkins as Jack mumbled something incoherent.

"If you have something to say to me, at least say it clearly Jack," I said without much of a second thought.

"I *sai*dddd," Jack dragged out the word as if *I* was the annoying one, "that you should stop acting nice to me when you can't even pick up your phone to answer my calls."

"It may surprise you, but I would've helped anyone that I've spilled coffee on."

"Doesn't mean you're not being nice."

"I'm not following your logic." I deadpanned.

"Look. You know I'm sorry. You said you wanted time to think about an adult way to speak to me without wanting to kill me--"

"-murder you in your sleep, coat your corpse in simple syrup, and make a time lapsed video of the maggots feeding on your sweet, sweet rotten flesh and anonymously post it on Facebook for your mother to see."

"That," Jack audibly gulped, "My point is that I gave you time. It's been almost three weeks. Can we just talk?"

"My people will get in touch with your people," I said as I held out a bundle of napkins to Jack.

The next thing I knew, I heard the sound of Italian leather clicking past me and down the hall. I looked down at my battered down Reeboks and a dry laugh erupted from me. Damn that man and his effortless sense of style.

Defeated, I threw the unused napkins in a recycling bin and took a seat on the ground nestled in between the recycling and trash. I decided to reflect on the situation. Surely it couldn't be as bad as I remember.

I walked into the communications building with my coffee.

Check.

I turned around the corner of the hallway in the communications building with my coffee.

Check.

I caused a head-on collision with the 6 foot 2, American Eagle model, Aerospace Engineering student, who was around the corner of the hallway in the communications building with my coffee.

Check?

Give or take a few key attributes. Like the fact that he loves drinking vanilla oat milk, or that he has a literal trust fund, or that he's technically my boyfriend, or that I hate his guts. Give or take.

I walked away from the interaction slightly mortified and slightly more pissed off. Then, I realized I was without my coffee. That man is such a taker.

That's exactly what I told Leah at *Bachelor* night.

"You know what, I think you're coming from a place of hurt though," Leah replied.

"Leah, when someone cheats on you, they become the villain."

"No, no I agree. At the same time, you've been together for years, and you haven't made that comment before."

"No, but-"

"Let me finish," Leah cut me off. "I know you're mad and the world's most natural debater, but hear me out."

Lilia came up to me and Leah's private corner of the dorm.

"Hey guys, so sorry to interrupt, but you haven't cast your votes for who's getting a rose. Just put them in the rose bowl before the commercial ends." Lilia said. Lilia is ridiculously kind

and always hosts the best *Bachelor* nights. She went off to refresh her perfect little charcuterie board and pulled out more Trader Joe's wine for the other girls. She had her shit together. Lilia is who I aspire to be one day.

I eventually cast my vote in the aforementioned rose bowl and felt someone walk up to me. Lilia.

"Who should I vote for?" she asked me, whispering close to my ear. I just shrugged. She scribbled something on the slip of paper and I watched as her fiery red hair obscured her face. I love her hair.

"How's the Jack situation?" she asked me in another whisper as if the other girls didn't know about "the Jack situation".

"Fine," I downed the rest of my wine, "Excuse me, I'm going to get more."

"Oh no, I'm the host! Let me do it!"

Before I could tell her that I could walk three steps across her tiny dorm to pour my own damned drink, she plucked the glass out of my hand and left. I stared at the screen and pitied the fool who will end up with this bachelor. The girls all swear that they are in love with him, and he claims that he is too. It's simply stupid. But I guess I get it now... being in love with a cheater. Maybe I'm the stupid one. At least these girls are getting paid.

Lilia handed me back my glass, it was almost full to the brim.

"I figured you'd need it." She winked and sat with the others.

Eventually, the show was over, the wine was all gone, and the charcuterie board only had those distasteful multigrain crackers and mini pickles left. Jack loves those mini pickles. I smiled to myself out of the sheer necessity to not cry. Maybe I'm hurt. Maybe I'm mad. Maybe I'm just drunk. Either way, this is ridiculous. I pull out my phone and text Jack.

*Meet me at the plaza. Tomorrow at 11.*

His response is almost immediate.

*How about something more private? I'll come to you.*

I hate men.

*Fine.*

Another immediate response.

*I love you.*

I hate him.

Slowly, people filtered out of the room with excuses of sleepiness and stress pushing them out the door. As usual, it was just me, Leah, and Lilia.

“Want to watch a movie?” Lilia asked.

“Sure, but I might fall asleep. I’m drunk, mad, and tired.” I replied.

“I’d love to, but I have to go tonight. Important business to attend to.” Leah wriggled her eyebrows causing the room to erupt in laughter. She gathered her things and soon left. The room got quiet without Leah’s presence. I slip off my shoes and steal some of Lilia’s pajamas that smell like lavender laundry beads. As I climb into Lilia’s bed, I mull over what my plan is for Jake tomorrow.

“Lilia?”

“Yeah?” She called back as she scrolled through a library of movies on her tv.

“Have you dated anyone?”

“No, not date.”

“So you haven’t been in love?”

“I’m not sure. Definitely infatuated, but I don’t think I know what love is. Sometimes I wonder if people our age are even allowed to truly love or if it’s the fact that these feelings are new that we jump to a conclusion that could be false.” She’s still scrolling through movies.

“Yeah, I guess you make a point.”

“Did you love Jack?”

“I still do. I think.”

“You think?”

“I think.”

I’m not even sure what I mean by that. I soon forget my thoughts as I see a cruise ship sailing on the screen. Nat King Cole’s “L-O-V-E” fills my ears and my heart instantly warms.

“Is this ok?” she asks.

“It’s my favorite.”

“I know,” she replies. A slight air passes her lips, like a quiet chuckle. I don’t know how to respond so I just stayed mute.

I try my best to watch the movie, but it doesn’t take long for me to feel my eyelids get heavy with sleep. I glance out the window and see a flurry of wind picking up leaves and leaving them scattered along the sidewalk. Lights from faraway buildings litter the sky like stars. I wish I was outside. It’s perfect.

I’m half asleep when I notice Lilia turn off the movie. I think she thinks I’m asleep so I play the part. I even throw in a light snore at some point. She eventually crawls into bed beside me- the tiny dorm bed cramped with one too many bodies occupying it. I fight the urge to flip around. It’s awkward and quiet. The sounds of drunk feet pressing into the asphalt and light wind rustling through trees combine to fill the room with some kind of ambient noise. In a desperate attempt to avoid the awkward air, I try my version of counting sheep: listing the episodes of *Gilmore Girls* in order. That ultimately fails and I have no choice but to tap into my inner Mother Nature. I match my breathing to the lulls and murmurs of the sounds outside. I hear Lilia’s breathing slow and I daringly peek an eye open to see if she fell asleep.

This must’ve been the wrong choice. I’m met with two eyes staring back at me. Somehow, I can’t break the connection. I can’t pull away. Like a challenge, I stare back. Her hand rubs up and down my arm and I noticeably flinch. Hard. I mutter a sorry that I’m not sure she even heard. Either way, my reaction causes her to immediately drop her hand.

I’m drunk so-

I put her hand in mine and we lay for what seemed like forever. We talked about random superficial things (“Do you seriously listen to Weezer?”) and hidden secret thoughts (“I can’t imagine a life where I didn’t hate myself in some way.”) in no particular order. We must’ve talked for hours... or perhaps just one. Time was irrelevant. There was never room for a pause in the conversation. We talked over each other but in a comfortable manner. It was reminiscent of my talks with Jack. I hated that... I think?

“My family hates me,” she said.

“I doubt that’s true. You’re like perfect.”

“That’s not true.”

“Ok.”

“You’re perfect.”

“Oh,” I muttered. I don’t know what to say. I’m the type of person who never says the right thing. If anything, I tend to make things worse.

“It’s ok if you don’t know what to say,” she whispered.

Her red hair is messily thrown atop her pillow. Her green eyes are once again looking straight at mine. Somehow, they look different- darker, even.

“Kiss me,” she whispered. I thought about it.

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can, just kiss me.”

“You know I’m with Jack.”

With that, she sat up quickly.

“Forget him,” she cried, “He *cheated* on you and you still claim him.” I’m confused about where the sudden animosity came from. A million questions run through my mind and yet it draws a blank.

“That’s not fair,” I retort, sitting up like Lilia.

“It’s only fair!”

“No, it’s not. You don’t understand what Jack and I have been through. I love him, Lilia. You can’t just get over that in a flash.”

“You should. You need to.”

“I love him. Jack loves me. What do you not understand?”

I could feel my eyes burning with the threat of tears. I hate crying.

“He may love you, but he sure as hell doesn’t respect you. If you can’t figure that out on your own. I can’t respect you. What kind of person-“

I’m drunk so-

I smack Lilia. I didn’t think about it, I just did it. My hand has that tingly feeling bubbling through it. She’s holding her cheek. Her face is as red as her hair and she just stares at me in shock. Her stupid expression makes my body shake in rage. All I hear is a ringing in my ears and my conscious telling me to leave. I slide off the bed and start to grab my shoes. The walk across her tiny dorm room feels like the longest walk of my life. I can feel her stare blazing holes into my back and I’m waiting for her to say something. I know it’s coming.

My hand is on the door when I feel her hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t go,” she said.

“Let’s try ‘I’m sorry’ first.”

“I’m *not* sorry, but I don’t want you to go.”

I turn around and we are face to face. I can smell her breath from here. It’s hot and smells like wine still. She glances down at my lips and I do the same out of curiosity. I don’t know what to do, so I don’t think. I’m drunk so-

“Kiss me,” I tell Lilia. Her lips meet mine- hard. I stumble back to the door, my back pressed against the cool wood. All of my senses are on edge. My hands run through her hair as I do with Jack. I let my head fall back like I do with Jack. I kiss Lilia like I kiss Jack. I can’t help but think that I miss Jack. I kiss her anyways. I pretend to not think of Jack. I pretend that I’m not becoming Jack. Next thing I know she stops. She doesn’t leave. Our mouths are open and connected. As we swapped air, reason flooded my brain. I could feel hot tears trickling from my eyes and landing on Lilia’s face. She doesn’t say anything, she doesn’t move. We stand like that for what feels like forever. Eventually, she steps back, rests her hands on my shoulders, and looks me in the eye.

“You love Jack.”

“I love Jack.”