

Instead, You Lie

By Francesca Kyanda

When she asks you if you really, *really* like her—and she will ask this—tell her the truth. Tell her that you think she is beautiful, funny, passionate, but you can't see yourself having any kind of romantic future with her.

Instead, you lie, tell her that you're 'pretty sure' that you have romantic feelings for her. Watch her eyes break open like exploding firecrackers, the rock sinking further into your stomach as she hugs you and kisses your cheek. Ignore how close she is, how she smells like lotion and a bit like peppermint.

She'll want to hold your hand in the hallways. In fact, she will initiate it all the time, not to the point of annoyance, but you come to expect it after a few days. Sometimes you look at your fingers intertwined with her, how her skin is darker by a few shades, how her hand is much smaller—and less sweaty—than yours.

She'll catch you one day and kiss your palm like you're a princess. Your stomach becomes washing machine, becomes flipping a pancake in mid-air. She probably sees the look on your face and furrows her brows, asking if you are okay with this, really. This will be yet another catch for you to come clean.

Instead, you lie, say that you're nervous, that it's been a while since you've held a girl's hand since any girl has wanted to be this close to you. You swallow and swallow and swallow, not sure of what is going down.

This girl will go as far as to flirt with you. You like the attention, you can freely admit that, and you even flirt back. You enjoy the bright moon slice of her smile, the flutter of her lashes as she says something witty and blush-inducing (on your end, not hers). It is one of the only parts of the relationship that you enjoy, the part that feels equal. You're texting back and forth during second-period Spanish and there is the question again: if you really are okay with how all of this is going. She cannot see your face, how you grind your lip between your teeth.

Instead, you lie, tell her 'of course, I couldn't be happier' with a few blue heart emojis to show her that you're serious. You ask tentatively why she is so persistent in finding

flaws in an otherwise lovely relationship. You already know the reason. Girls do not like to be lied to, to be taken advantage of or played with, especially when it comes to emotions. You know that you are in the wrong, that she is an amazing girl who deserves an amazing girlfriend. The girlfriend, she thinks, that you are. You've seen the way she looks at you sometimes: curiosity, longing...fear. Every time she spoke, you waited for the confession to jump from your lips, but it never did. It was blanketed in chatter about her classes and secrets that she tells you, "Huh...I've never told anyone that before."

She will go to great lengths to make you smile. She tells more jokes, and you learn how to anticipate her stories in the slit-mouth silence of the early mornings. She writes you poems, handwritten and typed, and you begin a collection. There is so much evidence that she is falling in love with you. She'll look at you when she thinks that you're not looking at her. You become quite flustered with the whole idea, the idea of someone falling in love with you. It scares you, it fascinates you, like a flickering flame that you want to ease your fingers towards.

Instead, you lie, trying to elicit smiles and flirtation from her too. You notice that she is shier at first, but she begins to gain a rhythm, one in a tangled song of her genuinely growing feelings and your false ones. You try to pry them in the direction you want, you try to love her the way she loves you, but it just grows faker and faker every day.

Problems begin to arise. Your girlfriend's life gets busier with her AP course load, her debate practice every week, her babysitting for a slew of siblings you wished you had. Her texts become less and less frequent. She is no longer as pretty as she was in her flowery dresses and try-hard outfits so she can look good for you. One day, she falls asleep on your shoulder, her braids a bird's nest and her flannel shirt swallowing her frame whole. You feel she is pulling away, then become confused by your insecurity about this. She asks in sleepy stupors if you hate her, if you're mad that she has other things to fight for besides you.

Instead, you lie, the words slipping so easily out of your mouth. The other words—the honest ones, they'd hurt her too much. They'd shatter her. You tell yourself that you're just trying to protect her feelings, her glass heart that she has offered to you.

You catch her off-guard when she asks for the millionth time what is the matter and you tell her the truth.

This time you *don't* lie. The truth spills out of you like a glass knocked over by a careless hand. *I can't do this anymore*, you tell her. *I don't have these feelings, I don't love you the way you love me*. And you see it immediately, how her heart begins to break, how her eyes begin to fill. Her jaw clenches and she says nothing. The slit-mouth silence feels hard for a while. As soon as you're off the bus, she runs from you, yet you're the one left crying.

When you see her again, she will not smile for you. She will walk right past you. She will still love you, but she will not love the lie you concocted to protect yourself from being accountable. If only you didn't lie so much.