

THE GIRL IN LOVE WITH

by

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“I don’t want you to love me more. I *need* you to love me right.” I say to Biodun in a desperate plea. It is desperate, because I have grown tired of what our relationship has become, of the underlying resentment that has developed over the past few months. Perhaps, the resentment had always been there, and I hadn’t noticed until a million little things had become too big to endure, magnified by my attempts to ignore them or worse brush them away like I had done in the beginning. In the beginning I had been happy to be with him and so many people (his family, my family, his friends, my friends) had constantly pointed out how lucky I was, how wonderful it was to be with a guy like Biodun. When he ordered me a hundred roses on Valentine’s Day my coworkers had oohed and aahed about how sweet my boyfriend was and my single friends had proclaimed “God when?” but my second thought after appreciation was how I had told him that my favourite flowers were peonies, and how he seemed to listen when I had mentioned it. When he surprised me with a weekend trip to a luxury spa, my mum had been impressed with the romantic gesture, and I would’ve been too if he hadn’t booked it for the same weekend as my best friend’s baby shower. When he bought me designer clothes my sisters fought over who could borrow them first and I had fought the discomfort over having to pretend to like items that were more provocative than I preferred to wear.

But again, I brushed it off, I allowed myself to look at the positives, to be appreciative of the gestures and most importantly of him. So, I let these million little things go, him ordering for me at restaurants when I was perfectly capable of doing so myself; signing me up for bake sales

at church even though I hated baking; scheduling and paying for all my beauty appointments because he liked me to look “more feminine”. But I sucked it up. Again. And again. And again. Because how do you explain to people that you don’t want a boyfriend who seems to want you so much? How do you explain to people that you hate the nice things he does for you because they seem to be more for his benefit than yours? How do you explain that your perfect boyfriend isn’t perfect for you?

You don’t and I didn’t, so I held back. I restrained myself and bit my tongue not wanting to jeopardize a good thing, not wanting to chase a good man away when they were so hard to find nowadays. I tried to focus on the positives, on the things I liked about him: his smile, his hugs, his humour, his confidence, but no matter how many things I could list about him that I liked, there simply weren’t enough things I loved. There weren’t enough obvious reasons to leave but there was too little to compel me to stay. So why had I stayed so long? So quiet and unable to demand more- to want more? I think I always knew I needed to demand more, that I needed to want more for myself, but my fear outweighed my needs. I was afraid of what people would say. I was afraid of how it would look. I was afraid of leaving him. I was afraid of him leaving me. I was afraid of life without him. I was afraid that he was the best that I could get. I was afraid of being alone. Fear is such a powerful drug and it’s even more potent when it’s encouraged by external forces and so many people unknowingly and occasionally knowingly incited it within me about the relationship.

A few days after we returned from celebrating our first anniversary in Paris, the fear of all that could go wrong if I left him was overshadowed by the uneasiness I felt about staying in an unfulfilling relationship. Paris had been the definition of a romantic getaway: the perfect weather and perfect food and perfect pictures had all been detailed on my Instagram, but the

truth was the trip had only been perfect on paper. We had both agreed to celebrate our first big milestone as a couple with a trip but that was as far as our agreement ended. I had wanted a tropical location somewhere in the Caribbean where we could relax; sipping Margaritas by a pool, eating dinners on the beach with the ocean's waves as the perfect soundtrack but Biodun hadn't wanted that. Biodun had wanted a European excursion where we'd sightsee in the day and leisurely roam the streets at night after a dinner of local delicacies. I had been determined to not acquiesce as easily as I did when we made decisions (realistically, when HE made decisions) about our relationship so I had repeatedly vocalized my preference for Mexico or Barbados or Costa Rica or anywhere that suited my taste for an anniversary celebration in the Caribbean. Biodun had seemed annoyed at the fact that I was rejecting his vision which he had expertly packaged as "our vision" for the trip. He had cut me off mid explanation of why the Caribbean topped Paris on my travel bucket list and said,

"Derin, why can't you just let me do this for you. Do this for us. Do you know how many girls would love to be whisked away to Paris by their boyfriend?"

It was a rhetorical question, one that many others had posed to me over the course of our relationship, "Do you know how many girls would love to have a guy like Biodun?" "Do you know how many girls would love to even have a boyfriend half as romantic as yours?" "Do you know how many girls would want to be you?" In that moment I wanted to be these mysterious and elusive girls, these faceless women that weren't in a relationship with Biodun, but I disregarded these thoughts, because even if he wasn't right about these girls, he probably wasn't wrong about them either and we booked the trip to Paris because whatever Biodun wanted, Biodun got.

I didn't have a horrible time in Paris, it had truly been spectacular, but I hadn't been able to relax during the trip. Despite my charming words and smiles and laughter I was acutely aware of how it wasn't me, of how I wasn't myself because I was so focused on playing the part of 'The girl in love with Biodun'. The girl in love with Biodun snuggled up to him in the taxi that took us from Charles de Gaulle to our hotel; a stunning five-star property that had cost an arm and a leg but was pocket change to Biodun. The girl in love with Biodun kissed him passionately with the Eiffel Tower as the perfect backdrop. The girl in love with Biodun held his hand throughout the two-hour tour of the Louvre and marvelled at art she had only ever seen through pictures online. The girl in love with Biodun told him she loved him during their anniversary dinner at a Michelin star restaurant. The girl in love with Biodun told him "he was the best boyfriend ever and the love of her life". The girl in love with Biodun would never have wished she could take those words back as soon as she said them because she knew they weren't true. The girl in love with Biodun was me and also not me, she had once existed even if briefly and somewhere along the line of being "The girl in love with Biodun" it had changed from the truth to an act- a portrayal that seemed easier to continue than to part with.

It was easier being the girl in love with Biodun than the girl without Biodun, because maybe I enjoyed the comments about how perfect we were together and how wonderful he was more than the judgement I would face if I voluntarily left the relationship. Maybe I felt guilty. Guilty and ashamed of the fact that I *had* wanted to be with a man like Biodun. A great guy that was generous and romantic and assertive, but sometimes a great guy could also be the wrong man and what had once seemed like a special connection was feeling more like a sham. Our relationship was beautifully constructed, filled with all the right things but never able to be the real deal, because beautiful things were not always perfect; they did not always translate the way

they had been intended to and we had been lost in translation for a long time- for longer than I cared to admit.

Paris had been a defining point in our relationship but also the breaking point for me. On the plane back, as I sat in the cushioned first-class seat - Biodun fast asleep beside me, oblivious to my internal turmoil - I felt unsettled. The effort of playing the role of “The girl in love with Biodun” had taken its toll and I felt exhausted, a mental exhaustion that had me jittery throughout the flight and I yearned to feel my feet on solid ground to settle the storm that was brewing inside me. The jig was up. I could no longer pretend and the fear of missing out on being with the right man no longer outweighed the fear of regretting being with the wrong one. If I could not truly be in love with Biodun in one of the most romantic places on Earth then things were past the point of no return, the relationship was irredeemable. There were two things that I knew needed to happen now that my mind was made up: firstly, I needed to do it sooner rather than later, time and patience had never been my friend in the relationship, and the longer I waited to end things the harder it would be to actually go through with it; secondly, and most importantly I couldn’t tell a single soul about my decision to end things. As much as my family and friends have my best interest at heart, I couldn’t trust that they would approve or even support me breaking things off, especially after the picture-perfect portrayal of the Paris trip.

“Hey baby, we’re here” I was pulled out of my thoughts by Biodun’s voice and wondered if he could sense the emotional disconnect. If the way I sat, right by the door staring out into the window, hands clasped together rather than enclosed in his, legs facing away from him that this was the beginning of the end. I looked over, leaned in, and kissed him – a final farewell to us. Before he got home that night, I sent him a text, put my phone on DND and unknowingly to me had my last good night of sleep for a month.

I can't do this. What we have isn't real and if it continues it won't end well for either of us.

Please don't call or come here. Please respect my decision

I typed and deleted the last sentence that I knew was too selfish to send.

~~Please don't hate me~~

There is nothing Biodun doesn't do to try to get me to change my mind. He calls and calls and calls and even resorts to calling me on Instagram when I block his number. He sends flowers, cloying bouquets of red roses and fragrant peonies, shows up at my house and pleads with my friends, parents, anyone that will listen to get me to reconsider, to get me to see reason. My mother nearly collapses from disappointment after she finds out about my decision, she wails that my father's family have cursed me, that her enemies have succeeded in transforming me into a spinster. All my father does is turn the TV volume up when she starts her antics. My friends are shocked. They ask if he cheated, if he was abusive ... if he was secretly gay. People ask and talk and ponder but nobody asks if I'm okay all they do is talk about how *not* okay Biodun is. And it starts to get to me, I start to question my decision, to doubt if my reasons for leaving are solid enough and wonder if I truly have not been targeted by an insidious spirit. And so, the doubts make me cave, I accept an invitation for us to see each other. I choose a neutral place, a random coffee shop close to my house that's busy enough to not be isolated and not too rowdy to prevent us from hearing each other.

"Hey, it's good to see you" Biodun looks weary, his eyes are somber, devoid of the casual confidence they usually exude, and I feel a pang of compassion for him and wonder "Is this the damage I have caused?"

"I know why you wanted this meeting, and my decision hasn't changed. We aren't right for each other" My voice is strong and clear as my fingers tremble against my lap. The barista approaches

and drops our drinks – black coffee for him, camomile tea for me. He must sense the seriousness of our conversation and he promptly leaves.

“Derin. Baby. Please” Biodun leans closer, and I lean back – a solemn see-saw between sweethearts turned strangers.

“Just tell me what I’ve done wrong. Tell me how to make this right. I will do anything. I love you so much. What more can I do to show you how much I love you?” he’s on the verge of tears, and I realize that I have to say something, I have to give him a reason – the real one, not the generic statements I’ve been repeating for the past month.

“I don’t want you to love me more. I *need* you to love me right.” and the truth rushes out as a desperate plea, because I am tired, I don’t want to prolong his heartache while also nurturing mine.

“What does that even mean? What have I not done for you? What have I not given you?” His tears are gone and his forehead wrinkles in frustration.

“That’s the problem, you have given me so much. You have done so much, but mostly not what I wanted or needed from you or for me.” My voice wobbles with the weight of my words and I temper down the emotion – I don’t want to cause a scene.

“So where do we go from here?”

“We go towards a future without each other. I know it’s not what you want to hear, and it wasn’t what I wanted when we first got together, but a relationship is only as good as the two people in it, and we aren’t good for each other.” I stand to leave, and he grabs my wrist.

“If you leave, this is it. I won’t call or text you ever again. There is no going back from this” and as I look into his eyes, I know he means it. That if I walk away from him there is no walking back together.

“I know” I free my wrist from his grasp and walk away from a promising past towards a foreign future.