

Wilting Roses

“It would be painless. A small bite in just the right spot, and you’d be just like me. Forever.”

Despite my burning desire to accept her advance in the heat of this moment, I push Constance’s body off of mine. I no longer feel her fangs brushing against my neck, nor do I smell her rose-scented black hair. As this vampiric girl I’ve been on three dates with tumbles over to my side, the candles illuminating the decaying walls flicker. It feels like there is a change in air pressure; the alluring mood I was so invested in has now suddenly halted.

She looks at me with wide eyes. “Lucy...” Her chilled breathing grows more rigid, and I think I can see by the glint in her eyes that she’s upset. She continues on; “I wasn’t actually going to- I... You’re the one who- you, ah...” Her words have a bite in them. I’m the one who what? I don’t understand her. Whereas before I was merely surprised, I’m now feeling more and more frustrated. I see her grow as overwhelmed as I’m feeling, and I’m so conflicted.

I don't say anything. I want to stay, but I jolt up from the bed, turn my back to her, and dart out of the room without a word. My bare feet hurt when they trample over the creaking wooden floorboards. The cobwebs in the hallway are blown by my passing off the shriveled wallpaper on either side of me. With tears blotting my vision, I can barely navigate through the abandoned house we'd made into our meeting spot each night.

I'm not upset because I don't want to be with Constance. I'm upset over how much I *do* want to be with her, and how *wrong* that desire feels. I was too readily accepting of being transformed, of giving up *everything* to be with her *forever*. That feels wrong because it's way too soon to make that decision, right? Does it feel wrong, maybe, because I'm just scared of dating a vampire at all? What do I even really know about this girl? What am I supposed to do?

“Hmm... Not sure...” My friend Michelle responds the next evening.

“How about you DON'T date a vampire.” I can tell by the way he jolts that Willie receives a kick under the table from Michelle.

I take a sip from my warm beverage, letting it relieve me a bit from how chilly it is outside. I admire the light, constant sprinkle of blood-red leaves decorating the golden sky behind my two friends, both sitting on the other side of the outdoor café table. The roses littering the ground wilt from the cold air around us; I wilt, too, from the crisp air biting at my tinted-red cheeks, and from the drama that plagues me so...

I shake my head. “Maybe you're right? I just- I don't know.” I rest my arms on the table so I can bury my face in my hazelnut-colored gloves. “I'm confused and I'm in love and I'm...” I groan in frustration, muffled by the cotton covering my mouth.

“In love? She’s not even your girlfriend yet, calm the fuck down,” Willie scolds. He shoots a glance at Michelle. “And don’t you encourage this dumb stupid idiot behavior.”

Michelle scoffs at him. “She is not dumb, she is not stupid, she is not an idiot, she is *young* and *infatuated*.” She turns to me. “It’s not like she’s dangerous, right? She wasn’t actually going to bite you.”

I can’t make eye contact with either of them. “I honestly have no clue. I shoved her away from me as soon as she brought it up.” I kick my feet forward and slap my forehead. “Why did she have to say that?!”

“I mean... Wasn’t that just the vibe?” Michelle cranes her head to the side, mellow-eyed and curious.

“Both of you are delusional!” Willie gestures his hands at both of us. “It isn’t a *vibe* to get turned into a vampire, is it? That shit’s permanent!”

“She was h-a-appy! C’mo-o-on...” I listen to Michelle drag her words, she’s definitely tired. Sure enough, she takes a large drink from her cup- the caffeine bomb she ordered looks more like some sort of girly-fied magical potion with how many sugary decorations it’s littered with. The contrast it has against Willie’s black coffee makes me smirk a bit.

Slamming her potion back onto the table, Michelle continues. “What I mean is that Constance was probably feeling just as heat-of-the-moment-like as you were. You said you want to be with her, right? You *really* want to be with her? I’m sure she feels the same.”

Now, I do look at Michelle. “You’re probably right. She’s so sweet...”

Willie sighs. “There’s just so much we don’t know about, though. I’m worried for your safety, Lucy. Your lovestruck ass was

about to do something *crazy*.” He leans forward in his chair a bit, and I look over to him. “What’s gonna happen if she makes you like her? Isn’t that something you need to think about first? Not heat-of-the-moment it, but actually decide if you want to do that? And learn, like, a bit more about Constance? Like... Dude. Does she eat people?”

Michelle crosses her arms. “Willie, she’s not an *animal*. And, Lucy has a good judge of character. Why can’t you be pro-love for our girl for once?”

“No, he might have a point...” I really don’t know much about Constance at all. Thinking about how easily I could’ve just changed my whole life last night... That’s *terrifying*. “What was I thinking..?” I stare at the table in bewilderment.

Michelle grabs my hands. “Fine, yeah. You got ahead of yourself, she did too. But that’s no reason to just abandon everything. The run isn’t dead, girl. She likes you; she likes you so much! And I doubt she’d ever want to do anything to hurt you.”

I see Willie’s eyes narrow as he speaks up. “I’d be willing to bet she just wants to eat Lucy.”

Now Michelle’s glare is shooting lasers through Willie’s face. “I’m willing to bet she loves Lucy, and needs her in her life, and wants to be with her forever, and-“

“Alright, I get it!!!!” I shoot up out of my seat- I almost spill my drink by accident. A few passersby look over, embarrassingly enough, so I sit back down and collect myself. More calmly, I say, “You’re both just looking out for me, and I appreciate that. Aren’t you both just making things up about her, though?”

Both of them calm down quickly. Willie’s the first to speak up again. “You’re right, but here’s something I’m *not* making up: isn’t she, like, way stronger than you? How can you know you’re safe around her?”

That's a valid point. I'm sure Michelle thinks so, too; she responds, "That's true, yeah." Then, after a pause, "Isn't that always the case, though?"

I'm a bit puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Whenever two people are together, one person's always stronger than the other. That holds true for any relationship."

I think Willie's able to accept that idea. "I guess I'm usually the stronger one whenever I'm seeing a girl," he says, "so I never thought too hard about it."

"You? Seeing a girl?"

"I've never heard of you landing a date."

"I am killing both of you."

I laugh, but I can't get over the feeling in my stomach. "It's just... Willie, you're right that I need to dial it back a bit and be cautious. Michelle, you're right too, I'm having fun with Constance, and I shouldn't just leave at the first sign of an issue. I'm just upset over how little there is to go off of. I know nothing about vampires. I didn't even know this was a thing until recently."

I think Willie might be having a change of heart, because he sits up straight and sighs. "Michelle, how does a promiscuous deviant such as yourself get over the fear of being with someone stronger than you?"

She shrugs in response. "I mean, of course even *I'm* careful about seeing someone new. In the end, though, I just have to trust him."

He turns back to me. "That's just it, then. You've gotta get to a stage with Constance where you can trust her. Figure out if she feels genuinely about you, and if she wants to work things out, too."

Michelle nods. "Right, yeah. If she's trying as hard as you are, then you two should be able to overcome a problem like this."

I'm starting to realize what that problem was. While I'm watching Michelle take another long drink, I speak up. "I think I get it now. Both her and I overcoming a problem, working together- that lines up. It's not me versus her, it's me and her versus the issue."

Willie shrugs in acceptance. "That's a nice way to put it. I still want you to tread lightly, though. Not just because she's a vampire, but because you've only known her for such a small amount of time."

I wince as Michelle tosses her empty cup over my head, aiming for the trash can behind me. She misses. As she gets up to retrieve it, she says, "Fair enough. There's a way to be both, though. Both strong as your own person, and also willing to open up to someone you're seeing."

Willie gets up, too. Did he not take a single sip of his coffee? "As long as you're rational, I trust your judgement."

I see that the sun is setting- Constance is only awake at night. I look towards both my friends. "I'm glad I talked to you guys about this. I'm ready to talk to her, too, now. Thanks."

Noticing it too, Michelle grabs Willie's beverage from his hand. "Did you not drink this at all? Why the hell did you buy it?!"

Willie puts his hands in front of himself in defense. "I just didn't finish it!"

"Did you just want to look cool by drinking black coffee? Holy shit!"

"Gets no bitches, stacks no paper, has no caffeine tolerance..."

"I am killing both of you!!!!"

The cold air doesn't reside much once I re-enter the abandoned house, but the chilliness of the interior somehow feels a bit cozier. As I make my way through the dusty corridors once more, I think about Constance. I think about what I heard in her voice when she considered biting me, and I can't bring myself to believe she held any malicious intent. The Constance I know isn't someone who'd force herself onto me. The way she conducted herself that night scared me a bit. She's just as capable of making a mistake as I am, though.

I'm sitting on the edge of her opened coffin when she awakens from within it. Her eyes flutter open so gracefully, and despite the conflict at hand, I still feel joy when I see her gaze back at me with such endearment.

"You came back?" She asks me.

"I'm sorry for making you think I wouldn't."

She sits up. "... I'm sorry, too. I must've scared you with such an intense proposition."

I shake my head. "Not really. I scared *myself* with how much I liked the sound of it."

She notices how uncomfortable I am sitting on a wooden casket, so she gestures that we move to the bed in the other corner of her room. We sit on the spot we'd laid on the night before.

After a moment of silence, she speaks up. "I'm scaring myself, too. I don't think I'd like to wish this existence on anyone, especially someone I like."

I give an unsure smile; I still feel troubled regarding that subject. "How long have you lived?"

She smirks. "I'm 23, as old as you are. I was bitten a year ago. I have a lot of time ahead of me, though."

“Oh, wow. I guess you didn’t strike me as the type to be in her early 500s.”

The joke falls flat and we go silent again, which bugs me a bit. I’m not even sure what the problem is anymore- nothing? Everything? I ask her, “Hey. What’s wrong? For both of us, I mean. Let’s recap.”

I can tell she’s confused, but open to work with me on this. “Well, to recap... I’m worried that I upset you last night. I’m also a bit scared of myself, and how readily willing I was to do that to someone- not that I was going to if you said no! But, I mean, I would’ve. If you’d said yes. That’s... A lot.” I’m glad to hear such an honest answer from her.

I try my best to voice my own thoughts as well. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m happy you’re not a crazed lunatic. It sounds like you thought really hard about everything you’re saying.”

“I did think, but I didn’t in that moment last night.”

“Neither did I, not really. I just got confused, and I ran out on you. Oh- that wasn’t because I was upset with you.” I think about that for a second. “Well- I was, a little bit. I thought you were mad that I rejected you.”

“No! I was just as confused as you were! I was upset with myself, not you.” I nod my head, and she keeps going. “Maybe it’s not something I should just come out and say, but it’s scary to think of how much power I have over you. I’m new to this vampire stuff, too. Hurting you is the absolute last thing I wanna do.”

I smile sympathetically at that, remembering the conversation from earlier. “Yeah, that thought crossed my mind, too. I think what’s most important is being aware of that issue- I’m glad to know that you are. And, I guess as long as we both keep it in mind, and we both trust each other, then a difference in strength isn’t an issue at all.”

She's unsure, and I can tell. She asks, "How can you trust me after so little time?"

I hold eye contact with her. "How can you trust anyone after any amount of time? Of course I'm gonna be careful around someone I just met, but in the end, it's kind of a leap of faith."

She seems to accept that answer. I keep talking. I ask, "Do *you* trust *me*?"

She says, "... I do."

"And do you want things to work out between us?"

"I do!"

"Then we've already got the most important things! If both of us are honest, respectful, and aware of our differences, then we can work together to overcome issues like this."

I'm happy to see a smile creep up the sides of her face. "This is a very confusing time for me, and I've already come close to doing you wrong." She asks, "You're sure you want to work things out?"

I hold her hand in mine as we talk. "I'm sure I want to *try* to work things out. If times are confusing, that means that you're thinking about everything. And if you're thinking about everything, then I can't bring myself to be upset with you, because it means that you're trying your best to figure yourself out." I lean a bit closer and add, "Figuring you out is what I'm trying to do, too."

She's close to my face, and our foreheads are touching. I'm feeling happy that we're talking. "And what if you figure out that I'm bad?"

"Then I'll figure out that you're bad. I won't let that possibility stop me from trying."

Her smile is a bit shaky, so I squeeze her hand a bit tighter. I ask her, “Why are you so hard on yourself? Why are you convinced that you’re bad?”

She’s frowning now. “I mean... I’m a vampire...” She looks down, breaking eye contact.

I grab her chin and lift her face back up to meet mine. Shit, this is so embarrassing... I let go of her chin... I keep looking at her, though. “How does that make you a bad person, like, inherently? Do you eat people?”

“My aunt works at a blood bank! I have a food plan worked out, and I think I only need to eat once a month, anyway.”

I’m a bit relieved to hear that, which I think is a reasonable response to finding out that the girl you’re seeing doesn’t eat people.

I’m ever-so-conscious of how close our faces are, I can feel her cold breath. She could bite me at any time if she wanted to. “You don’t harm anyone, and the thought of doing so last night stressed you out a *lot*. If you had any intention of biting me, or eating me, you would’ve. I can give you the benefit of the doubt and believe that you’re at least a semi-decent person.” I add, “That self-consciousness is sweet. It’s why I’m starting to like you so much.”

She suddenly throws herself backwards, landing on her back in the surprisingly freshly washed bed sheets. I watch her squeal into one of her pillows and kick her legs up and down, and she’s so cute...

She glances at me and says, “You’re the one that’s sweet. How can you be so calm about this dating arrangement?”

I laugh at that. “I’m not calm at all! I think about you every day and I worry all the time about what could go wrong.” I lay down with her and add, “I’m done worrying, though. Let’s just stick together and figure everything out. Again, as long as we’re honest about our issues

and our feelings, I think we're both rational enough to work through shit."

She orients her body towards me so that she can wrap her pale arms around me. "Can I be honest about how I feel?"

"Of course..."

Her smile melts away any tension I had left in me. She says, "I'd like you to be my girlfriend."

Our laughs send the candles flickering throughout the house, and as I embrace her, she smacks her fangs clumsily against my teeth. Outside, the roses bloom.