

“I love you.”

He is staring into my eyes, smiling, expectant, and all I can feel is shock that he said it. Though why I’m surprised, I don’t know – since we began this relationship, it’s been written all over his face every time we’ve been together, in the way he talks, the things he says, the worries he expresses. Deep down I’ve known how he felt. But do I know how I feel?

And now it’s my turn, and he’s right there, just a hand’s breadth away, waiting. I’m supposed to return the sentiment. But can I? Do I?

Sure, I spend time with him. We talk about class, about life, about whatever random thing comes up. And sure, I have fun. Usually. Except when I feel awkward – which is way more often than he does. Except when he says something I don’t like, but I can’t bring myself to chastise him and make it a big thing when it isn’t, really. Except that all those little things are combining and eventually they will be a big thing, and I’ll have to say something.

But usually it’s fun. We talk about whatever – we used to have great conversations about anything and everything. But since we’ve started this relationship, they’ve been safer. About class, vacations, even the weather (I mean, really?). And when he asks about the future, I’m uncomfortable. Because in my mind, the future doesn’t necessarily include him. I have no idea what it will hold, and in many ways that terrifies me. But I haven’t confided any of this to him. I act nonchalant, cavalierly proclaim that I’ll “figure it out.” Which I hope I will. But in his mind, the future includes me, whatever that future holds. And that makes me uncomfortable because I can’t say the same. I don’t think this will last forever. I don’t think I want it to.

His life is not profoundly interesting nor emotionally taxing, but I know that he shares everything with me, and would be willing to share his deepest thoughts and emotions, perhaps already has. But I have not. I share with him, yes. I tell him some of the important stuff, and I relied on his presence for comfort. But I confide more to my best friends than to him. I have not, and do not know if I can, bear my soul to him in the same way I can to others. I don’t think he’d understand. I don’t think I can truly be myself with him, because he worries too much, he wants to protect me too much.

And he’s still there, waiting. Expecting me to say it. And it’s getting awkward now because I haven’t said anything yet. He is beginning to look uncertain; his eyes question my silence. I look down, because I can’t bear to keep eye contact. I am suddenly uncomfortable standing so close to him. I know what is expected. But can I say I love you? Can I refuse to say it? Can I tell you how I feel, or don’t feel? Will you understand?

Let me live my life. Support me, but don’t tell me what to do or not to do; don’t worry about me incessantly. That is not what I need. And because you don’t see that, I don’t think I can be who I am with you. In fact, I have lied to you – white lies, it is true, but still lies. Mainly about why I can’t hang out, which has begun to feel like an obligation rather than a choice. And why must you always ask me what I’m doing when I say I can’t hang out? Doesn’t the fact that I said I have “plans” or “things to do” imply to you that I don’t have any desire to be more specific? Can’t I have my privacy, without having to lie to you? Because I don’t feel comfortable saying that I simply want to spend some time with others, without you.

Before we started this, I spent hours with you, but only once every few weeks. Now, I see you three or four times a week. And it is too much. Your little quirks have gotten on my nerves. But I spend far more time with other friends, and the same has not happened. Sometimes (more and

more often) I'd rather be with them than with you. I have discussed these feelings with them, not with you. I trust them implicitly; I am willing to tell them my deepest secrets. They know me as well as I know myself. I don't feel that with you. I know you, but you don't know me. I don't think you can know me; you wouldn't understand. Your life is too different, your personality too unlike mine. They say opposites attract, and it seems it was true, but now our opposition is a barrier for me. Yet you don't see it; you don't feel it. You think it's fine. You think we're both happy, because you think I think like you. But I don't. I am only part of myself with you, the shy, well-behaved girl who always does what is expected of her. But I am also the stubborn, passionate person who is willing to stand up for what she wants, who will put herself on the line for her friends, who will risk offense and personal consequences when she knows she's right, who will get righteously angry and do something about it, who is not always politically correct and who breaks some of the rules. She is what I strive to be, what I am becoming. I am both of these people, it is true, and the former tempers the latter, often for the better. But I am only the latter with those I trust, those who truly know me. And I am not her with you.

It is still my turn. You are still staring down at me, waiting. And I know that I can't do it. I know that I don't love you. And I know that the girl you love, she is not me. She is only some of me. And for a while I have pretended to be just her, at least when I'm with you. But I can't be just her anymore. I need to be me. And being me means being without you.