

## She Spoke To Me (I Swear It)

By Francesca Kyanda

She spoke to me. I swear it even today, I remember sitting in that classroom, my hair bullied into a braid crown, feeling like fire because of course, the A.C. had to be broken in first period English on the last day of school. My knee bounced under my desk, my entire body made into a question mark. Apparently, we had some kind of guest speaker today. It was fine by me, I wasn't about to sit through another reading of "Macbeth" with awkward pauses and stutterings over the old English consonants. Whatever speaker would come, I would listen and wait for the clock to dismiss me to the next boxed-in classroom.

My classmates were cranky and proud of it, flapping their hands towards their faces and taking selfies on Snapchat, appearing and disappearing like the dandelions they were. I was alone, with my headphones over my ears, listening to some obscure music from my playlist, mostly Jeremy Zucker and AJR, some Jon Bellion...no one would know them first listen, but it was the perfect set-up.

The speaker did arrive, making herself poetry on this sweltering summer day. She was all crocheted braids that made me want to sit up and whistle because black girls appreciate hair differently, her crop top with the perfect rendition of Shuri from "Black Panther". I reapplied Chapstick in case the urge to whistle overcame me, not like I just holla at girls, but she actually looked my age. Word. This kind of day would be the kind to be journaled about, to sift through memories and the sounds of the room in order to pin it down perfectly, knowing that re-reading the entry on a random day would bring back the exact memory.

I think the teacher said something before the girl started speaking, but I didn't hear much, just some bits and pieces like "spoken-word poetry" and "applying to HBCUs". This, I know, was when I sat up straighter, looked girl dead in the eye like we knew each other. Surprisingly, we stared at each other, a blush probably coming over my light brown cheeks, no color coming over her medium brown ones. She wears some kind of lip product making them red, bigger than usual. We black girls have big lips, but she didn't bite her lip or bother to fuss with the color. I think she knew that it was perfect. I

think she knew that she'd changed me today. In the end, I had to look down, thoughts biting away at me.

My journal was a fat thing, beautiful too, like the plus-size models I followed on Instagram. It was good to be living in an age when the two words could stand next to each other and hold hands like the proper girlfriends they were. They dated in real life, took pictures in public, kissed when people watched because yes, they were together—and proud of it. This was evidence that I existed, a testament to who I was, even though I preferred my words on paper and in clever tweets instead of actual speech bubbles spoken to girls I didn't dare approach. It wasn't like I was scared or nothing, it was more of an expectation for me. Some other girl could take deep breaths and be scared to talk to *me*, not the other way around. Maybe she had a journal too? Something to remind her that she was living here and now?

Yes. Yes, she did. In fact, she opened that very notebook and began to read.

Spoken-word poetry wasn't some kind of distant planet for me. I'd seen the videos on YouTube, attended some events around the city a few times. I'd never performed or nothing, but I wrote and wrote all the time. Poems had to be formed from thoughts, experiences, otherwise, it felt like nothing happened in life—this life of test scores and eating lunch alone in various English classrooms, entering writing contests and winning a smattering of ribbons displayed at home.

It felt like coming home when this girl began to read. She wasn't practically loud like all the other slam poets I'd seen before. Her body was a period, not hard exclamation point or ambivalent question mark, no, she stood and she read because she probably knew that I was paying rapt attention to her. I didn't get to pin down the poem that came from between those rosebud lips into my journal. I had a feeling that this would be something I needed to hold raw in my hands, like fresh honey dripping off a honeycomb, something sweet to sink my teeth into on the saltiest days.

She talked about her body, how it'd been made sin for so long. She talked about the melanin that settled over her some days, then pulled hot and tight on others. She talked about the struggles of hair, making me chuckle under my breath. I could identify with the coconut oil mishaps, the smell of apple cider vinegar in the shower as hair fought its way down the drain. She talked about how shirts would pull too much across her boobs, which she had a lot of. This wasn't a creepy observation, I could tell from experience

that making herself stand straight and tall was a challenge when slouching was just more comfortable. She talked about her writing and words and everything in between. No one else seemed to be that impressed with all the heart she'd just spilled out to everyone else, but there was a handful of weak claps, some halfhearted snaps. I snapped loudest out of anyone, and you beamed at me like it was the only recognition you needed. You handed out flyers for the next citywide slam, encouraged with your not overtly loud voice to come and support some local talent, maybe become some local talent. Okay, fine, your passion was cute, all bubbles popping in the summer breeze all over your face.

Having passion as a teenage girl was a dangerous game, as I'm sure she knew. Maybe not that dangerous, because as I closely examined the flyer, memorizing the colors and brightness of them, I turned it over and there was a small note and phone number scribbled on the back. Wasn't much now that I think about it, more like "Hey, I saw you peepin' hard at me while I performed, down to talk anytime, if you're down too". I didn't know if I was, but it seemed like too great of an opportunity to pass. I'd think about it, for sure.

I didn't have much time to do that, though. She stayed for a bit after you finished, using this time to walk up to me and say that her name was Jasmine and that she was watching me while I wrote during the piece and that "Thank God you were the only one who paid attention, looks like it was worth it." She complimented me on my shirt, purple with "Wakanda Forever" printed across the front. I thought that I couldn't blush at first, now my face was flaming, and it wasn't just because of the air-conditioning. I couldn't tell if she was actually interested in me or if this was flirting to pass the time. It was the last day of school after all; surely she had someone else to holler at—or even someone hollerin' at her. I would if I was the hollerin' with no shame type.

I've never been a believer in actually love stories. I didn't like that kind of thing, didn't know how to figure it out. There were other girls who cried over breakups like it was the end of their damn lives when honestly it wasn't. It was liberation, in fact, to be able to handle your own business without any interference. I preferred to keep it loose, casual. I gave numbers when prompted, rarely texted if I got one in return. It wasn't like we were out here checkin' for our husbands and wives; we were lonely and wanted someone to fill that void for us, like checking off the box on a government form.

She didn't believe in them, either, not for the time being. The bell rang and everyone shuffled out of class, but I lingered in my seat for a minute, wanting to memorize the white of Jasmine's smile. She told me she was a junior, like me, and that "maybe you and I could talk sometime". Then she slung her backpack over her shoulder and walked out of the room. Most people would've said 'swaggered' or 'strutted', but not me. She did walk out of the room, I didn't really pay attention to the rhythm. I grabbed my journal and headed into the thick of the people in the hallway.

The texts we exchanged afterward were rather sporadic. They came in the forms of short, sweet poems, probably supposed to be that hit, that sip of addiction that we were both looking for. It wasn't like there was nothing real in me and Jasmine, this little dance that we were doing, but it felt good to have someone to talk to. My thoughts remained in my head for a majority of the time, but Jasmine and I could get into it if we wanted and wasn't that how people were supposed to be? Just vibing as they wanted, never doing anything too-too risky. Nothing like falling in love or whatever.

The texts became even more and more spaced out as the summer picked up. Road trips, visits to see family, long walks so I could forget that I was real and not a fictional character, we were both busy but kept up with the flirting, with the tentative thinking about each other. It wasn't anything too deep, I kept telling myself, and it worked. I didn't fall, but I also didn't plan for the next part.

Jasmine was a hopeless romantic. How I missed that tiny, huge detail is honestly beyond me. The only lack of reason I possessed was in my poetry, otherwise, I could remember that people weren't just song lyrics and cute aesthetics; they were flesh and blood and bone and pain. Too bad she'd forgotten that. She'd taken the memory of our first kiss—kind of sloppy, a bit odd but nice though—and trivialized it, made it fairytale instead of the Frankenstein that it actually was. It was funny how two people could share a moment and remember it in two entirely different ways.

She was in love. With me. She'd basically told me this in the poems we'd exchanged, the ones that were about us, our relationship, how she felt. I didn't understand it at first, but re-reading them made it all clear that Jasmine had it bad for me. I didn't have it bad for her like that, though, not all intense and "I love you" kind of thing. Girl was pretty, no doubt, and making out was great—we were good at it—but I couldn't imagine making it a reality, making us black girlfriends. Black had nothing to do with it, neither did

girlfriends. It was the two of them together that made me squirm. Okay, fine, maybe I have commitment issues. I write poems. I read books. I watch way too much TV and spend a lot of time on YouTube and Tumblr. I don't date. Her intensity scared me, but I was mature. I told her I wasn't feeling her like that, told her that I was flattered by her confession but she shouldn't expect me to change all of a sudden because of it.

Oh, boy. It was at that moment that I would wish that the Earth would swallow me whole. Jasmine went off on me. She ranted in blue iMessage bubbles that she was tired of not being prioritized in my life. She didn't want to play around and flirt anymore. She'd given me what I wanted, why wouldn't I do the same for her? She made it sound like I'd committed actual sin, even though I'd told her that I wasn't about romantic relationships like that.

So I blocked her. I admit, her strong language and the length of her texts scared the crap out of me. I just needed to defect back to my normal routine: not talking to anyone, spending time by myself, writing my poems and short stories, trying in vain to forget my existence. How could someone like me be a romantic interest for someone like Jasmine? The girl was funny and sharp and all that type of stuff I should look for whenever I want to be about a girl. It was just the timing that wasn't working for me. We were in high school, and I needed the freedom to not be part of a duo, part of a label I was confident that Jasmine would slap on my forehead. Come school time, she'd want to be holding hands all the time and parading me around as her girlfriend, and I wasn't about that, not now.

She knew all of this! Cross my heart. I knew how girls weren't good with miscommunications, so I'd made sure to make my intentions clear from the beginning: companionship, fun, nothing serious. She'd understood that too because that's what she was checkin' for. I wasn't someone to be romantically interested, hell, I was too in my head to focus on much at all. I kept people at a distance and then I could forget that I was alive. People made me remember. Girls like Jasmine *made me remember*.

Ugh. I wasn't in it for the drama, and now that's all that was happening. Jasmine lived without me, although she made it sound like it was the most horrible existence, tagging me in her passive-aggressive stories that said things like "Funny how people use you for their own benefit, haha, JK" with smiling emojis that felt menacing. God, it was weird. She was in my DMs like it was her job or something. She was an unrelenting hurricane,

and I was in the thick of the storm holding onto my measly umbrella like it was going to help or whatever. Flirting and the occasional poems, maybe a kiss or two if I felt like it. Nothing more, nothing less.

Thinking back on it, trying to understand Jasmine's point of view, maybe I led her on, made her hope for more. I hated myself for weeks afterward. How in the world was I supposed to handle real potential relationships if I was messing up one that was supposed to be low-impact and low damage? Ideally, we would've somehow lost touch over the summer, one of those 'that's how life is sometimes' things to look back on in the abyss of my loneliness. Just because I purposely isolated myself didn't mean that I didn't want a companion, at least sometimes.

It wasn't meant to be. I expected that. When our second semester of junior year started, I found out that we were in the same creative writing class. Funny how I'd forgotten that part about her amidst her apparent raging love for me. She was sitting in the back writing and there was an empty seat next to you. I sat there, against my better judgment, keeping my headphones on and head down. I knew that if she glanced beside her that she would explode and I'd have to move. I made my body question mark like the first day we met again and prepared for the worst.

She glanced at me. There was a hint of something in the small, shy smile she gave me. That was Jasmine from before. Now, I wasn't sure that I could trust myself to be impartial to her after our summer fling. She was a fling to me, and I was her first love. The contrast was something I'd thought about a lot, written enough poems to publish a collection about. Maybe I would.

"Hey." She placed that word like a flower between us.

"Hey."

"How're you?"

"I'm okay, you?"

"Me too."

There was nothing else said for the rest of the time. Sure, I saw her around the school, laughing with friends, having all these adventures by the looks of her Insta stories. She'd glance at me once in a while and we worked on the occasional project, but our

relationship didn't go beyond the walls of the creative writing/English classroom. I was glad, I had a lot of coursework to focus on and got a job at the library to finance college, more notebooks and an upcoming AJR concert. Life was good and still and free of the passive-aggressive drama that was my brief relationship with Jasmine.

There is a theory that I think about a lot: the theory of the multiverse. Out there in the universe, there are more universes that span the length of humanity's lifetime. In a different universe, I'd be more willing to bend to Jasmine's will to make her happy. In a different universe, we could've been two black girls falling for each other and dating by the time the new semester started. In a different universe, I would've known what to say to an unexpected "I love you". That's the thing about alternate universes: something for sure would be different. Always. It's kind of in the rules of the universe.

But we were in this universe. She loved me, and I didn't love her back. It wasn't poetry or a short story or a song lyric, it was just life. There were times where I couldn't find the words to pin it into a lined journal page, and this was one of them.