

Boy, Bye: Or, On the Ethics of Ghosting

Ghosting—when one person stops texting or communicating with the other with no explanation or excuse. It happens all the time, with friends you’ve met or people you connect with on dating apps. No one seems to like it, and lots of people really hate it. But are there times it’s permissible to ghost? Or is it permissible for some people to ghost, even if it’s not okay for others to do the same?

Imani is a first year college student. She wants to meet people, or maybe to start dating someone new. So she downloads a few dating apps over the weekend and starts swiping. A week or so later, she’s decided that online dating isn’t a good fit for her. She’s overwhelmed with school, and wants to make sure that she’s prioritizing her wellbeing. But also, she’s tired of the way that a bunch of guys treat her online—sometimes they’re demeaning or make inappropriate jokes, some send unsolicited explicit pictures, some just talk about themselves and don’t think to ask her any questions. In the week she’s been active online, she’s made a bunch of matches on her different profiles. She’s started conversations with a handful of guys already, and logs in to look at a stream of unread messages.

Imani decides to talk about it with her best friend, Jake. She tells him that she just wants a clean break, but she’s conflicted. It would feel like a relief to go in and delete all her profiles in a few clicks. She’s sure she doesn’t want a relationship with any of these guys. And she doesn’t feel up to the task of messaging everyone she’s connected with to explain what’s up with her before going offline (she hasn’t met anyone in person yet). But she’s wondering whether it would be ok for her to just delete her profile without replying to anyone beforehand. She’s been ghosted before and it sucks. It usually leaves her wondering if she did anything wrong or if she’s an interesting person to talk to.

Jake tells her not to worry. He has dated online for a while now, and he ghosts girls all of the time. Sometimes it’s because he’s overwhelmed or busy, sometimes it’s because he feels like there’s just not a connection, and sometimes he just is interested in another match more. He tells her that he basically ghosts everyone who he’s never met and doesn’t click with, and even some people who he has met in person. “So don’t sweat it, just ghost them all,” Jake says.

After talking with Jake, Imani can’t decide if she feels any more sure. On the one hand, she didn’t find what she was looking for with anyone—and felt upset by a bunch of the people she did match with. But on the other hand, there’s three people she can think of who seemed really kind and thoughtful, and she can see herself interested in people like them in the future. She’s just not sure that Jake’s reasons seem like good ones for her to follow.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there a difference between what Jake has done and what Imani wants to do? Does it matter that Imani is often treated poorly and disrespectfully, while Jake often ghosts because it’s convenient?
2. More broadly, how do gender norms and dynamics affect the way that individuals should approach dating? Do the same rules apply to everyone? Or is it permissible for some people to behave in certain ways while it would be impermissible for others to do the same?

