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The Different Shapes of Love

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

The work is an extract or part of a creative non-fiction book in the autobiographical genre. The book is based on the author's romantic relationships throughout her life to this point. The book follows a developmental journey as the author discovers who she is, what qualities are most important to her and what type of person she wants to end up with. The book describes different stages of relationships and the emotions one experiences, such as being very in love or very heartbroken, and touches on the author's experience in dealing with these emotions.

Preface

I chose to write a predominantly creative thesis because I am passionate about the autobiographical, self-development genre and find the exploration of different romantic relationships through writing fascinating. I have written about my past and present romantic experiences and discovered how therapeutic writing about one's experiences can be for the author. This made me curious about exploring the topic. Love is something most people can relate to. I wanted to write a creative piece of work where I could draw from my own truth and share with readers what I have learnt in my past (and present) relationships. I wanted my writing to be fascinating and relatable to readers and to take them on journey.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Mary Paul for her valuable guidance throughout the course of my MC thesis and my family and friends for providing readership feedback.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my work to the three wonderful people who have had an impact on my life and made writing this book possible.

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Critical Exegesis

There are three sections to the critical component of my predominantly creative thesis.

The first part involves looking at conventions of female autobiographical writing, how it often, (through different time periods), includes elements from the romance genre, and how my writing fits into this paradigm.

The second part explores an array of different academic sources on how writing about one's own experiences can be therapeutic for the author.

Lastly, the third and final part of the critical component highlights writing styles, techniques and approaches used in some recent successful non-fiction books that include examples of autobiographical writing on the topic of romantic relationships, as well as aspects of life journeys, bildungsroman or self-development. The section explains how I adopted aspects of these approaches alongside my own writing style to write my book.

Women's autobiography: How my writing is typical of women's autobiography

Introduction

In this section, I explore some conventions of female autobiographical writing, and how it often (through different time periods) includes elements from the romance genre, as well as how my writing fits into this paradigm. This essay/section will look at the claim that autobiographical writing by women tends to focus on intimate experience and in particular, romantic relationships. I will discuss the difference between autobiographical writing by women in past and present time eras, to further specify where my writing belongs.

The Autobiographical Genre

Autobiographical writing can be defined as “the biography of a person narrated by himself or herself” (Merriam Webster, 2016, para. 1). The term was coined by Robert Southey in 1809, to describe the work of a Portuguese poet. The article “The Genre of Autobiography: Definition and Characteristics” states that the word derived from the Greek words meaning ‘self’, ‘life’ and ‘write.’ Autobiography or autobiographical writing has been around almost since history was recorded (Letter Pile, 2016). Up until the eighteenth century, it was “the collective interest in the life's events of exceptional people such as writers, political leaders, and religious figures which entitled them to write about themselves” (Reading Italy, 2013, para. 5). However, with the romantic discovery of personal identity and the private dimension of life, autobiographers no longer needed to rely on these external justifications. “His own will to narrate his own self will suffice” (Reading Italy, 2013, para. 6). In *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Schwalm (2014) states that “autobiography as a literary genre signifies a retrospective narrative that undertakes to tell the authors life, or a substantial part of it, seeking to reconstruct his/her personal development” (p. 14).

For the purpose of this essay, I will refer to my academic research and creative thesis as in the genre of autobiographical writing. The reason for this is that although my personal writing is autobiographical in that it is an account of my life, written by me, it is not a full autobiography yet. It is part of an autobiography. This is because it does not encase aspects of my younger, or for that matter, entire life. For the purpose of my thesis, I have decided to focus on one aspect of my life – romantic relationships. Romantic relationships are always complicated and this intrigues me.

Also at this point in my well-organised life (I am 23 years-old) romantic relationships are the most surprising and puzzling experiences I have encountered. Writing about my romantic experiences and relationships has helped me to organise my thoughts and derive insight from my experiences. I intend to later develop this partial autobiography into a full autobiography or autobiographical book. Writing autobiographically as a way of organising one's thoughts also fits with the conventions of autobiographical writing as; writing about "how and why certain events took place," and instead of describing what has happened, autobiography "reflects on the impact of a certain event or events" (Henriksen English, 2002, para. 1). It "brings to life personal experiences," and "helps the reader discover pattern(s) of your life" and "reflects how you have changed as a result of an event or events" (Henriksen English, 2002, para. 2). I believe my creative thesis adheres to these typical conventions.

Lastly, in the journal article "Developmental Precursors of Romantic Relationships: A Longitudinal Analysis," W. Andrew Collins, Katherine C. Henninghausen, David Taylor Schmit and L. Alan Sroufe (1997) state that in autobiography, writers (particularly women) often write about romantic interests, first loves and relationships, such as is the case in my writing.

Gender Differences in Autobiographical Writing

There are differences between autobiographical writing by male and female writers. Women's autobiography only developed (with a few exceptions) in the twentieth century. Academic interest in how female autobiography differs from male autobiography has been associated with the rise of the second wave of feminism and the desire to know more about women's lives.

In the book *Women and Autobiography*, Martine Watson Brownley and Allison B Kimmich explain Estelle C Jelinek's theory that men's autobiographical writing is always a coherent whole characterised by linearity, harmony, and orderliness, while women's writings are generally full of irregularities. Jelinek (as cited in Brownley & Kimmich, 1999) states "Women's lives and texts represent a disconnected, fragmentary pattern of diffusion and diversity" (p. 24). Jelinek states that she is not surprised by this since according to her, women's everyday lives are nonlinear, diffuse and diverse.

In "Writing Differences in Male/Female Autobiographies: A Theoretical

Perspective,” (2016) theorists believe that in men’s autobiographical writing ‘I’ is at the center of every incident, well-defined, isolated and opposed to the world. Women’s autobiographical writing projected a dotted ‘i’ which is on the periphery, collective, relational and representative of a class. In her book *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, Shari Benstock (1988) states “The self that would reside at the center of the text is decentered and often is absent altogether in women's autobiographical texts. The very requirements of the genre are put into question by the limits of gender” (p. 25). This demonstrates how typically writing in the autobiography genre changes when written by men or women. It argues that women writing autobiographically usually focus less on themselves than do men.

The authors quote Friedman, who explains this. “The self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women” (p. 26). Friedman helps promote the argument that because a woman’s conceptualization of herself is different to a man’s, her autobiographical writing will be too. In the book *Women Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Sheila Rowbotham (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998), argues that “a woman cannot experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is defined as a woman, that is, a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture” (p. 75). Rowbotham supports the idea that women are more aware than men are of how they are perceived by the dominant male culture, other readers, and society as a whole. This undoubtedly affects their autobiographical writing.

In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Nancy Chodorow (1979) supports Rowbotham’s claims, explaining that a woman forms her identity in relation to others. Chodorow states “The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate” (p. 41). Bernice Johnson Reagan (as cited in Smith & Watson, 1998) supports this by stating that women have a collective sense of self and that their sense of self exists within a context of the deep awareness of others. Brownley and Kimmich (1999) elaborate on this, stating that women often write autobiographies “that emphasize relationships because they are accustomed to thinking off themselves in relation to others, as somebody’s daughter, wife or mother” (p. 1). An example of this is an autobiography written by the renowned Maya Angelou about her relationship with her mother. This also explains how she forms her identity as a daughter in relation to her mother. This focus on relationships also means that women’s autobiographical writing

typically “concentrates on private, or home life in contrast with men’s texts, which often foreground authors’ activities in the public sphere” (p. 1).

Similarly, in the book *Merely Being There is Not Enough: Women’s Roles in Autobiographical Texts by Female Beat Writers*, the author Heike Mlakar (2007) states “While men often put their professional, successful careers into the foreground, women are more personal and modest about their lives. Staying in the background of the text, they include their social contact, close friends, children, lovers, or relatives in their writings, while men idealise their lives or cast them into heroic molds to project their universal import” (p. 24). In “Writing Differences in Male/ Female Autobiographies: A Theoretical Perspective” (2016), theorists discuss how “women’s autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment of the history of their times” (p. 29). The article states how women tend to focus on their personal lives as opposed to their public lives, listing domestic details, family problems, close friends and the people who influenced them as topics in their autobiographical accounts. Of course, there are many accounts of women who have written about other topics, such as political life. However, Patricia Meyer Spacks, in discussing five most successful women’s autobiographies, states that even in these accounts, the five great women of public accomplishment – Emmeline Pankhurst, Dorothy Day, Emma Goldman, Eleanor Roosevelt and Golda Meir make their ‘personal’ more important than the ‘public’.

Historian Gerda Learner (1977) states that the times in which basic change occur in society and which historians regard as turning points are not necessarily the same for men and women. Perhaps this is one of the reasons the different genders write more about different topics in autobiographical accounts. For example, during the Civil War period, men’s autobiographies were published in significant number, whereas women’s autobiographical accounts have increased as educational opportunities for women increased. Also, the “periods of greatest productivity for women’s autobiographies have not been during revolutionary male times but during the high points of women’s history” (p. 30).

Lastly, in the journal article “Representation of the inner self in autobiography: Women’s and men’s use of internal states language in personal narratives,” Patricia J. Bauer, Lief Stennes, and Jennifer C. Haight (2003) point out that the differences in male and female autobiographical memory affect their recollections of events. The article states that adult men and women differ “in their affective qualities of their autobiographical reports” (p. 38). In the study, the authors tested whether gender differences in emotional content are apparent in memories of both the remote and

recent past. The findings showed that “girls and women refer to their own and others’ emotions more frequently than do boys and men.” The article continues:

When asked to recount life events, relative to men, women tend to provide narratives that are longer, more detailed and more vivid. One of the features that makes these narratives more vivid is the reference to emotional states and reactions of the actors in the event. That is, women tend to include more emotional content in their autobiographical memories, relative to men. (p. 28)

This is perhaps another reason as to why many autobiographical accounts by women include writing about personal topics such as romantic relationships. As women remember events differently to men, or have differing autobiographical memories, they can elaborate or make reference to emotional states and reactions of actors in the remembered events, and in doing this represent their inner self in autobiographical accounts. Because autobiographies speak in such personal tones, these records and narratives are rich in human interest, and thus a good platform on which to display romantic relationships. In the book *When Memory Speaks*, Jill Ker Conway (1998) describes how we as people “want to know how the world looks from inside another person’s experience, and when that craving is met by a convincing narrative, we find it deeply satisfying.” She explains that:

The satisfaction comes from being allowed inside the experience of another person who really lived and who tells about experiences which did in fact occur. In this way, the lost suspension of disbelief disappears and the reader is able to try on the experience of another, just as one would try on a dress or a suit of clothes, to see what the image in the mirror then looks like. We like to try on new identities because our own crave the confirmation of like experience, or the enlargement or transformation which can come from viewing a similar experience from a different perspective. (p. 5)

This illustrates why readers are drawn to autobiographical writing, particularly when concerned with romantic relationships.

Female autobiographical accounts often include elements of romance or conventions from the romance genre. In the book *Romancing the Self in Early Modern Englishwomen’s Life Writing*, Julie A. Eckerle (2013) argues that the two genres often are combined, by pointing to the “similarities in the way female autobiographers reference and incorporate romance in their life records” (p. 22), and

states that female-authored writing often seems to be modelled after romance or contains some elements of romance. In *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women's Lives*, Sharon Cadman Seelig (2006) supports this claim, remarking that "Women's autobiographical writings tend to be about personal encounters" (p. 111). Eckerle (2013) states that although the writers of many texts considered in the book operate within "the autobiographical tradition, it might be said that they also write within the romance tradition, since they adopt its discourse, give credence to its primary themes, and often support the happy ever after courtship narrative associated with the genre" (p. 23). This shows how these genres are often intertwined.

I decided to write autobiographically about my romantic relationships. In my writing, I share personal experiences from my past and present relationships. Most young females experience romantic relationships and will be able to relate to my experiences.

Although my writing falls into an autobiographical genre, it also includes elements from the romance genre. In "On Writing Romance," Leigh Michaels (2007) describes some key conventions of romance:

1. A hero and heroine fall in love.
2. A problem that creates conflict and tension between them and threatens to keep them apart.
3. A developing love that is so special it comes about only once in a lifetime.
4. A resolution in which the problem is solved and the couple is united (a happy ending).

For example, although my storyline narrates three different relationships, towards the end of my writing, the heroine (author) falls in love with the hero (Vince). There is a problem that creates conflict (Getting over the ex), and the idea of a once in a lifetime love and eventually there is the conclusion of a happy ending, where the author believes she has finally found the right man.

Many women authors combine autobiographical writing with elements from the romance genre when writing a book. Therefore, I believe my writing fits into the category of females writing autobiographically about romantic relationships.

In summary, my own writing fits into conventional female autobiographical writing in that it is not linear, I am inclined to write more about the personal than the public, and because of my female autobiographical memory, I often reference emotional states and reactions of the people in my narrative. I also believe I fit into female autobiographical writing category in that I write about relationships because I am accustomed to thinking of myself in relation to others, in my case, as a girlfriend. Although I understand Rowbotham's claim that supports the idea that women are more aware than men are of how they are perceived by society and therefore consciously or unconsciously often conceal emotions or actions they think might be unacceptable, I have tried to evade this and be as honest as I could – not filtering my writing for fear of how I may be perceived. In this consciously disclosing aspect I may also be more typical of contemporary/modern female autobiographers – as I suggest below.

Differences between women's autobiographical writing in times of patriarchy and the modern day and how mine fits into this

Although women have written autobiographically for a long time, the nature of women's writings has changed through different eras.

Patriarchy is a social structure in which men are considered to have a monopoly on power and women are expected to submit. In times of patriarchy (which is really an ancient system), for example, the Victorian era, which spanned from 1837-1901, a woman's place was seen as in the home, because "domesticity and motherhood were considered by society at large to be a sufficient emotional fulfilment for females" (BBC, 2001, para. 1).

Prior to modern times in the western world, most writers and artists were male. In the essay "The Autobiographer and Her Readers: From Apology to Affirmation" by Elizabeth Winston (as cited in Jelinek, 1980), the author states that from the 17th century to into the 20th, women, as they started to be writers and artists, "showed an acute self-consciousness of the criticism they often aroused simply because they were female" (p. 93). This meant they had a particular relationship with their readers as they negotiated a more active role in society. In the essay, Winston (as cited in Jelinek, 1980) argues that female autobiographies published before 1920 "tended to establish a conciliatory relationship with their reader, by this means attempting to justify their untraditional ways of living and writing so as to gain the audience's sympathy and acceptance" (p. 93). However, most women who published

autobiographies after 1920, when women gained the right to vote after the first feminist movement, no longer apologised for their careers and successes. Winston continues that women who “published their autobiographies after 1920 show a stronger professional commitment and belief in the value of their work than the earlier women writers” (p. 94).

Winston describes earlier women autobiographers as almost apologetic. For example, she describes *Lady Morgan's Memoirs* published in 1862, in which Lady Sydney Morgan (as cited in Jelinek, 1980) justifies the writing of her memoirs by addressing her target audience as “dear, kind, fair-judging public” (p. 94). Winston elaborates on this, arguing that before 1920 women autobiographers “consciously worked to establish a special relation to their audience,” as a means of justifying their ways of living and the fact of their writing. They understated their achievements, disclaimed interest in personal recognition or stressed the broad historical value of their life stories. Women felt the necessity to defend their decisions to write because it did not fit into a typically male-dominated cultural stereotype.

However, after the Women's Liberation Movement, or ‘second wave of feminism’ that began in the 1960s, female autobiographers “acknowledged more personal reasons for writing and affirmed their achievements without apology” (Winston, as cited in Jelinek, 1980, p. 94). More contemporary writers such as Maya Angelou have exhibited even more self-confidence in their autobiographical writing, for example, Angelou's critically acclaimed autobiography *I know why the caged bird sings* in 1969. In the article “Women in Literature – A Literary Overview,” Elizabeth Lee (1996) agrees with Winston's analysis and explains how this period was characterised by a self-discovery and some freedom “from some of the dependency of opposition as a means for self-definition” (para 6).

In contemporary times, from the late 20th to 21st century, women are less restricted and female autobiographers are unapologetic and more confident about their writing. Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar (as cited in Rocca and Reeds, 2013) claimed that later twentieth-century women writers have “somewhat overcome the authorship's anguish and guilt of previous generations” (p. 2). This continues into the 21st century and is evident in, for example, the autobiographical accounts of authors Miranda Kerr and Lena Dunham in my third critical section. Kerr is unapologetic about her success in the modelling industry and credits it as her own accomplishment, while Dunham is unapologetic about her choices in men. She is also unapologetic when writing about her sexual encounters as a young woman. This is because in

modern female autobiographical writing, women are more likely to write openly and honestly about their romantic relationships and intimate personal details as in more modern times they have become less defined by a male-dominated society and have more freedom to express themselves.

Recent autobiographical writing by females includes uncensored language like 'bullshit,' which Dunham uses frequently, and shows how as time goes on women become more comfortable in telling readers about their experiences and much more likely to be accepted in their lives for a diversity of experiences. Westernised female authors no longer feel as though they have to adhere to certain codes of femininity whilst writing books, as they did in times of patriarchy. In conclusion, modern autobiographical accounts by women are much more honest and assertive than they used to be.

My writing is an example of modern day/21st-century female autobiographical writing with elements from the romance genre. I have been honest and assertive in the way I have written about my personal experiences. I credited my success in dealing with tough times to my own personal strength, and in that as well as with my relationship decisions discussed in my book I believe I was to a point unapologetic about my decisions and choices. Unlike Lady Sydney Morgan, I found I was not concerned about how I would come across to my target audience and whether or not society as a whole would be accepting of my story. Naturally, I would like readers (especially young women) to relate to my experiences, and empathise with me - but I have not filtered my use of language, or altered my stories or omitted certain aspects of my romantic life to persuade readers I am 'a good woman.'

In saying this, though, although traditional to modern autobiographical writing by women, my writing has also adopted some conventions of women writing in earlier times. I have old fashioned morals and values and ideas on femininity as well, so my book does not deal with sex or intimate moments of a romantic relationship. In this way, I believe my writing somewhat resembles autobiographical writing by women in patriarchal times, albeit for different reasons because I have chosen my morals rather than having them dictated to me. I also believe that although I was unapologetic about some things, such as my success in overcoming obstacles and making good decisions, at times I felt I had to justify my actions or behavior in certain relationships, which I believe comes through in my writing. Perhaps this stems from the same concerns or feelings of guilt that women had in times of patriarchy, or

perhaps it was my own selfish questioning of whether I did the right thing on some occasions.

Either way, I think it is clear that my writing fits into the category of modern day/21st century autobiographical writing by women, with the exception of the inclusion of some aspects or influences prevalent in women's autobiographical writings in times of patriarchy.

Conclusion

In summary, autobiographical writing is a broad term that includes a wide range of literature in which subjects write about themselves or their life stories.

There are significant differences between autobiographical writings by men and women, mostly in that women tend to write about themselves in relation to others, and often write about the personal more than men do. Research shows autobiographical memory is different for the different genders, allowing women to create more vivid narratives due to their reference to emotional states and reactions of the actors in the event, hence the reason women tend to include more emotional content in their autobiographical memories, relative to men.

Studies show how women's autobiographical writing has evolved from earlier time periods such as the Victorian era and times of patriarchy to the late twentieth century and modern day 21st century. This was mainly due to the restrictions on women due to patriarchal culture in earlier times.

Although my personal writing is relatively unique in that it at times combines many approaches to autobiographical writing, it fits largely into the category of 'modern women's autobiographical writing' on the topic of 'romantic relationships.'

Therapeutic Writing: Writing as therapy

Another aspect which drew me to writing autobiographically was the sense that this would help me process difficult emotions. This section looks at some theories and research on how writing about personal experiences is therapeutic/beneficial for the author.

Introduction

Writing about personal experiences has long been a way to explore and release difficult emotions. This writing takes different forms, such as autobiography, journal, memoir and expressive writing. This essay will examine how writing about personal experiences can be therapeutic and beneficial for the author. A simple definition of the word “therapeutic” is “producing good effects for your body or mind” (Merriam Webster, 2016, para. 1). The essay highlights views from esteemed theorists and experts in the field of writing for therapy, such as James Pennebaker, Janel Seagal, Karen A Baikie, Kay Wilhelm, Laura King and Stephen J Lepore. Although the essay will touch on how writing about both positive and negative personal experiences can be therapeutic for the author, it should be noted that there has been more research done on and evidence supporting the therapeutic value of writing about negative or traumatic experiences. The essay will focus primarily on how this writing can be therapeutic in terms of physical health and psychological well-being.

Writing about positive experiences

In the journal article “The health benefits of writing about intensely positive experiences” by Chad M. Burton and Laura A. King (2004), the authors state “Research has begun to explore a variety of writing topics that might be associated with health benefits that do not focus exclusively on negative experience” (p. 151). Burton and King (2004) describe a variation on James Pennebaker’s writing paradigm. In their later study, the authors describe how a sample of 90 undergraduate students was randomly assigned to write about an intensely positive experience or a control topic for 20 minutes each day for three consecutive days. Mood measures were taken before and after writing. Three months later, measures of health center visits for illness were obtained. The authors concluded that their research showed that writing about intensely positive experiences was associated with enhanced positive mood and significantly fewer health center visits for illness, compared to controls (Burton & King, 2004).

Writing about positive experiences produces positive emotions. Burton and King (2004) mention how Fredrickson's "broaden and build" model of positive emotion suggests the therapeutic value in writing about positive experiences and that positive emotional experience, (in contrast with negative emotional experience) "broadens the individual's attention and thought processes and presents an opportunity for building skills" (as cited in Burton & King, 2004, p. 152). Fredrickson and Joiner (as cited in Burton & King, 2004) have shown that positive emotional experiences relate to enhanced functioning as well as an increased capacity to benefit from such positive experiences. Estrada, Isen, & Young (as cited in Burton & King, 2004) suggest to the extent that writing "about an emotional experience induces positive mood, it might be expected to enhance individuals' coping skills and improve the efficiency of decision making" (p. 152). Burton and King (2004) argue "such a line of reasoning would suggest that experienced positive mood during writing might mediate the effects of writing topic on health" (p. 153). This argues that writing about these experiences has therapeutic value for the author.

Although there is evidence to suggest how writing about positive experiences can be therapeutic for the author, there are explanations as to why research on the topic has not been as extensive as studies on writing about negative experiences. One explanation is because although writing about positive experiences leads to a positive mood, the effect of positive mood on cognitive processing differs considerably to the effect of a negative mood, for example. Burton and King (2004) explain how positive mood is associated with more global, heuristic processing, sending the message that the individual needn't continue processing. They argue that this is one reason as to why writing about positive events is less likely to lead to analytically derived insight. Burton & King (2004) also state:

Negative mood is associated more with analytical processing and sends the message to the person to continue working on a task. From this perspective, it seems logical that writing about negative experiences would be associated with accruing insight and working toward a resolution.
(p. 152)

This would, therefore, be therapeutic for the author and illustrates why the opportunity for therapeutic benefits may seem greater for writing about negative experiences.

Writing about negative experiences - Physical and Psychological

Extensive research shows how writing about negative personal experiences such as a traumatic event, stressor, illness, relationship breakup or lost job is therapeutic for the author, both in terms of physical and psychological health. In the article "Finding a Voice, Revisiting a History of Therapeutic Writing," by A. D. Peterkin, A. A. Prettyman, the authors reference the Abreaction theory, a precursor to the talk therapy pioneered by Breuer and Freud, (as cited in Peterkin & Prettyman, 2009) which "posits repression of negative experiences as the precipitant of poor psycho-physical health outcomes, and conscious expression as key to alleviating symptoms associated with traumatic events" (p. 83). This illustrates the importance of writing about negative experiences to overcome negative experiences, and therefore psychologically benefit from the act of writing.

The most notable academic contributions to this field are arguably the findings by James W. Pennebaker, who has conducted extensive research on the therapeutic benefits of writing about one's experiences. Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm was an important contribution to the field of health psychology. He conducted a study where college students wrote for 15 minutes on four consecutive days about 'the most traumatic or upsetting experiences' of their entire lives, while controls wrote about a superficial topic. The study revealed various therapeutic benefits on both physical and psychological health.

In the article "Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing" the authors quote Pennebaker (as cited in Baikié & Wilhelm, 2005) who states "Writing about earlier traumatic experience was associated with both short-term increases in physiological arousal and long-term decreases in health problems" (p. 338). Baikié and Wilhelm (2005) mention that although immediately after writing about negative experiences, individuals usually experience a short-term increase in distress and negative mood, at longer term follow-up, many studies have continued to find evidence of physical and emotional health benefits.

Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) would agree, stating that although "Writing about traumatic experiences tends to make people feel unhappier and distressed in the hours after writing," two weeks after the studies, "experimental volunteers report being as happy or happier than controls" (p. 1246). In other words, although the short-term effects may be undesirable, the long-term effects, such as fewer stress-related visits to the doctor and improved immune system functioning, prove beneficial.

Physical health

Research on writing about negative personal experiences has also uncovered major therapeutic benefits on physical health. Baikie and Wilhelm's (2005) work highlights noted physical health benefits of writing about negative experiences. Davidson et al (as cited in Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005) found reduced blood pressure was a physical health benefit, while Francis and Smyth et al (as cited in Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005) discovered improved lung function. Francis & Pennebaker (as cited in Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005) discovered improved liver function, and Norman et al (as cited in Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005) listed fewer number of days in hospital. The above findings demonstrate substantial evidence proving the therapeutic value of writing on physical health.

In the journal article "Forming a Story: The Health Benefits of Narrative," by James Pennebaker and Janel D. Seagal, (1999) the authors state "Extensive research has revealed that when people put their emotional upheavals into words, their physical and mental health improves markedly" (p. 1244). The authors claim that writing has an impact on the immune system, stating "Four different laboratories report that writing produces positive effects on blood markers of immune function" (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1245). The authors discuss how other studies have also indicated medical benefits, claiming that writing is associated with lower pain and medication use. In the article "The Health Benefits of Journaling," Maud Purcell (2016) comments that another study by Pennebaker discovered that regular journaling decreases the symptoms of asthma and rheumatoid arthritis.

In the article "Culture and the Health Benefits of Expressive Writing," by Eric D. Knowles, Jessica R. Wearing, and Belinda Campos (2011), the authors support this by commenting that writing where individuals put their thoughts and feelings about traumatic events into words can benefit physical health by fostering insight into the personal meaning of stressful experiences. Additionally, "meta-analytic evidence now confirms the effectiveness of expressive writing in reducing the negative physical effects of stress" (Knowles et al, 2011, p. 408).

Knowles et al (2011) summarise that although the "mechanisms behind expressive writing's benefits are not fully understood" several theorists have amalgamated around the ideas that disclosure improves physical health by helping individuals to find meaning in stressful and traumatic experiences (p. 408). Knowles et al (2011) state:

On this view, negative feelings associated with a stressor tend to persist in consciousness – adversely affecting health – until the individual assimilates them into his or her worldview and life narrative. This account of the expressive writing process hinges on the notion that people gain meaning and insight by putting their experiences into words. (p. 408-409)

In other words, until stress is dealt with properly, as for example in ordering and writing about it, it will remain a strain on physical health. Writing helps individuals get past this and relieve or deal with the negative physical impact stress can have on the body.

In summary, there is a significant amount of theoretical work with evidence supporting the statement that writing about one's experiences is therapeutic or beneficial in terms of physical health.

Psychological well-being

More research on the topic has also found multiple therapeutic benefits on psychological well-being. Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) remark that "writing has helped people to resolve long-standing issues about relationships at home and work, and to put into words feelings that have been too sensitive to describe face-to-face" (p. 343). The authors note respected theorists' findings on the psychological health benefits of writing about negative experiences. Park and Blumberg (as cited in Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005) discuss findings such as feelings of greater psychological well-being, while Lepore (as cited in Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005) lists "reduced depressive symptoms before examinations" (p. 343) as a psychological health benefit, and Klein & Boals (as cited in Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005) discovered "fewer post-traumatic intrusion and avoidance symptoms" (p. 343).

Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) state that:

The act of constructing stories is a natural human process that helps individuals to understand their experiences and themselves. Constructing stories facilitates a sense of resolution, which results in less rumination and eventually allows disturbing experiences to subside gradually from conscious thought. (p. 1243)

This shows how writing about experiences can be an individual's means of dealing

with or getting past a particularly difficult emotional experience.

Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) elaborate on how the process of writing is therapeutic for an individual's psychological well-being, stating "A broad explanation for the effects of writing is that the act of converting emotions and images into words changes the way the person organises and thinks about the trauma" (p. 1248). The authors explain that part of the distress caused by the trauma lies not just in the events, but the individual's emotional reactions to them. By integrating thoughts and feelings, it is easier for the person to then construct a coherent narrative of the experience. Once formed, the event can be summarised, stored, and forgotten more efficiently.

Peterkin and Prettyman (2009) provide evidence to this, stating that writing or the creation of narratives is a psychological activity which allows individuals to process their experiences. For example, narratives may be involved in focusing attention, interpreting events and turning experience into memory. The authors explain how by writing and forming stories about personal experiences, individuals can organise their thoughts and feelings about a negative experience in a structured format, which allows them to more easily let go of negative emotion surrounding the event. The authors explain how, as stated in Pennebaker and Seagal's article, this will also help individuals to forget the negative experience more easily.

In the journal article "The Costs and Benefits of Writing, Talking and Thinking About Life's Triumphs and Defeats," by Sonja Lyubomirsky, Lorie Sousa and Rene Dickerhoof (2006), the authors describe an experiment by Frattaroli, wherein a meta-analysis of 146 students, Frattaroli (as cited in Lyubomirsky et al, 2006) found a positive and "significant benefit of both writing and talking about negative life events (p. 693). Much like Pennebaker and Seagal (1999), Lyubomirsky et al (2006) describes how "Writing tends to involve organising, integrating and analysing one's problems with a focus on solution generation or at least acceptance" (p. 693). Lyubomirsky et al also credit the creation of a narrative as a key component in the therapeutic process. "The highly structured nature of language and syntax invites organisation and analysis that occur in the process of creating a narrative, which often leads to searching for meaning, enhanced understanding, and identity formation" (p. 693). Lyubomirsky et al (2006) describes how once the structure and meaning of an experience are understood, the individual gains a sense of resolution and control and is better able to manage his or her emotions about the experience. Purcell (2016) discusses the effect that the act of writing has on the brain:

The act of writing accesses your left-brain, which is analytical and rational. While your left-brain is occupied, your right brain is free to create, intuit and feel. In sum, writing removes mental blocks and allows you to use all of your brainpower to better understand yourself, others and the world around you. (para. 5)

Purcell (2016) lists some major benefits that writing about experiences has on psychological well-being. For example, she states that writing helps the author to clarify their thoughts and feelings, know themselves better and solve problems more effectively.

Purcell (2016) continues, stating that writing about one's experiences also helps to reduce stress. Writing about negative emotions such as anger or sadness, for example, helps release the intensity of these negative feelings, thus allowing the author to feel calmer and better. This shows how writing about one's experiences provokes self-reflection, which can often be therapeutic for the author, giving them a better understanding or sense of self.

In the book *Writing Works: A Resource Handbook in Therapeutic Writing Workshops and Activities*, by Gillie Bolton, Victoria Field, and Kate Thompson, (2006), the authors support this, stating how writing about negative experiences can be self-empowering and help authors to find themselves, gain new insights or reveal things they didn't know they knew. In the journal article "Journal Writing for Life Development," by Dorothy M Epple (2007), the author also remarks that writing about experiences has been a "springboard for personal growth and the creative process and that psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, including Freud (1935, 1965), Jung (1965), Milner (1935/1981) and Progoff (1992)" (p. 290), who have all utilised journal writing and autobiography for personal insights, creativity and the development of their own theories. In the book *Freud's Literary Culture* by Graham Frankland, the author quotes Freud. Freud (as cited in Frankland, 2000) referred to his own autobiographical study as follows: "Two themes run through these pages: the story of my life and the history of psychoanalysis. They are intimately interwoven," (p. 212). This shows how one can draw from the therapeutic aspect of writing about experiences because of the understanding and insights writing can provide.

Epple (2007) refers to studies on the therapeutic benefits of journal writing specifically by Nichols (1973), Pennebaker (1999) and Wiener & Rosenwald (1993).

These studies all revealed the “most frequently reported benefits of the journal included an increase in self-awareness and acceptance, the ability to express feelings, and help in centering the individual, as well as fostering a relationship of friendship to oneself” (Epple, 2007, p. 290). Epple explains how the process is therapeutic. “Through dialogue in the journal, one speaks of conscious plans and experiences, but hears the symbolic messages, the wisdom, the intuitions and the inherent possibilities that life reflects from the written page” (p. 292). She continues, stating that writing helps one “link the conscious and unconscious in an integral unity, bringing a new awareness that restructures the prior conscious view and moves one forwards in life” (p. 292).

Writing about romantic experiences or relationships can also have great therapeutic benefits on psychological well-being. In the article "Promoting positive emotions following relationship dissolution through writing," The American Psychological Association (APA) (2016) discusses how going through a breakup can have negative effects such as "depression, loneliness, distress and a loss of self or sense of who they are as a person" (para 1). Pennebaker (as cited in APA, 2016) states "Expressive writing or journaling is an intervention that is well-suited to coping with breakup due to its focus on cognitive processing, simple format, and successful track record" (para. 2).

The APA (2016) article centers on Gary W. Lewandowski's 2009 study where participants were required to write about the positive aspects of a breakup. Participants reported experiencing increased positive emotions regarding their relationship's end and did not experience an increase in negative emotions. The increased positive emotions included "feelings of comfort, confidence, empowerment, energy, happiness, optimism, relief, satisfaction, thankfulness and wisdom" (Lewandowski, as cited in APA, 2016, para. 4). Lewandowski (as cited in APA, 2016) explains how focusing on and writing about the positive aspects of a breakup have more beneficial results as opposed to coping by venting. Positively focused writing can help those who have recently experienced breakup purposefully take a new perspective and reinterpret the breakup in beneficial ways. This demonstrates how writing positively about a negative romantic experience can have a therapeutic effect on individuals coping with the end of a romantic relationship.

In the journal article “Mending broken hearts: Effects of expressive writing on mood, cognitive processing, social adjustment and health following a relationship breakup,” by Stephen J. Lepore and Melanie A. Greenberg (2002), the authors

describe a study where male and female undergraduates were randomly assigned to an experimental group, in which they wrote expressively about a relationship breakup, or to a control group, in which they wrote in a non-emotional manner about impersonal relationship topics. The findings indicated that “expressive writing has a wide range of social and emotional health benefits for individuals coping with stressful events,” including increased positive “mood, physical health and social functioning” (p. 547). The authors label expressive writing as a convenient method for individuals to confront and work through unresolved feelings and thoughts related to stressful events. The above examples provide evidence to how writing about negative experiences has therapeutic benefits on the author’s well-being.

My Experience

My own personal experience in writing on the topic of romantic relationships and breakups confirms the evidence and arguments advanced by these theorists and studies. I have personally experienced the therapeutic benefits of writing about both negative and positive personal experiences, evidenced by both physical and psychological health benefits. Writing about my positive experiences in past and present relationships helped me appreciate the experience, but process it and turn it into a memory. However, I believe writing about negative experiences benefited me the most because, as with Pennebaker and Seagal’s 1999 study, I constructed a narrative that helped me understand my experience and myself better.

For example, I wrote about my feelings of grief after a breakup. However, I did not include this piece in the creative part of my thesis:

Breaking up with Ben was indeed a loss for me. At the time it felt as if someone had died, because a very influential and important force in my life was suddenly gone. The guy who was my neighbour, the guy I saw every day, talked to every day and at a time texted non-stop, was suddenly no longer around. As I was still very much in love with him at the time of the breakup, for months and months after it was still a huge loss. For the first time in my life, I experienced real, agonizing, loneliness and pain. I felt depressed and couldn't see any silver linings.

The writing process allowed me to organise and remember events in a coherent fashion while integrating thoughts and feelings. This gave me a sense of predictability and control over my life. Once my experience had structure and meaning, the

emotional effects became more manageable.

Constructing the stories facilitated a sense of resolution and allowed some troublesome thoughts about negative experiences to subside gradually from my conscious thought. As described in Lewandowski's (2009) article, I too experienced loneliness, distress and a loss of self or sense of who I was as a person. However, I agree with the studies by Pennebaker (1999) and Weisner & Rosenwald (1993) as, after writing about these experiences, I noticed an increase in my own self-awareness and acceptance, the ability to express feelings, and how it helped me become more centered as an individual. Epple's (2007) journal article mentioned how through dialogue one speaks of conscious plans and experiences, "but hears symbolic messages, the wisdom, the intuitions and the inherent possibilities that life reflects from the written page" (p. 292). This resonated with me as writing about my experiences helped me discover new insights about the experiences and myself, and helped me deal with everything in a healthy way. During one relationship, for example, I noticed myself losing weight and becoming extremely fatigued. After writing I noticed how I felt almost refreshed and at peace. My psychological well-being improved as I was able to process events and move on, appreciating the good memories and letting go of the negative ones that at times still affected me. Because negative events require cognitive processing, writing allowed me to process my thoughts and deal with these experiences, therefore relieving stressors and improving my physical and psychological health.

Conclusion

In summary, there is ample evidence to support the argument that writing about both positive and negative experiences has therapeutic benefits for physical health and psychological well-being.

Findings show how writing specifically about negative experiences has major therapeutic benefits on both physical health such as such as reduced blood pressure and improved liver function, as well as on psychological health, for example, by giving an experience structure and meaning and thereby making the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable.

Research has revealed that although writing about negative experiences may result in negative short-term effects, such as an increase in negative mood, the long-term effects are beneficial and worthwhile. As mentioned before, a broad explanation

for the beneficial effects of writing “is that the act of converting emotions and images into words changes the way the person organises and thinks about the trauma” (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1248).

As an author, I can bear witness to the therapeutic benefits of writing about one's experiences on both physical health and psychological well-being. However, my inquiry does not stop here. The usefulness of writing for the writer's psychological and physical health can be related to the communicative quality of the writing in that part of the writer's task in structuring and expressing her story is to make it relatable and vivid to her readers. This leads me to the final section of my critical inquiry – the question of making aesthetic choices about how to tell a story and the influences of other writers.

Self-development and autobiography: Some contemporary examples that influenced me

My final section details the example texts that have influenced my writing.

Research Material

Having decided to create an autobiographical work about recent events in my life, I researched a range of autobiographical literature, focusing primarily on an assortment of best-seller books. All these books are autobiographies or memoirs written by famous celebrities or well-known persons. Dunham is a well-known American actor, producer, and director. Kerr is a supermodel, Nayyar is a successful actor, and Agassi was a tennis star. Their books have credibility because all these authors are well-known and have been successful in their respective fields. However, unlike in earlier time periods, as stated in the first critical section, autobiographical writing in contemporary times is no longer limited to only famous people. It is a writing form that can be exercised by anyone and is particularly popular with women writers who are no longer apologetic about expressing their diverse life experience.

Research - The literature/books

Not That Kind of Girl by Lena Dunham is a collection of autobiographical essays, lists, and emails, roughly arranged in a sequence to form a memoir that shows a young woman growing up in the late 20st century. She discusses being in love, feeling alone and other emotions young women may experience.

Treasure Yourself by Miranda Kerr (2010) is sub-titled with the phrase “Power thoughts for my generation.” The supermodel’s book is a collection of her thoughts, memories and life lessons that are aimed at putting readers on the path to self-improvement. Its primary theme is one of ‘self-development.’

Yes, My Accent is Real by Kunal Nayyar is a book about the life of the actor who plays the Big Bang Theory’s character Raj. The book is a collection of essays written in a humorous fashion.

Open by Andre Agassi (ghostwritten by Pulitzer Prize Winner J R Moehringer) is an honest autobiography. It discusses the author’s life to date, detailing his childhood, career as a professional tennis player, tournaments, rivalries, relationships

and drug taking. Agassi discusses how he learnt from his past as an athlete and uses his book as an outlet of self-discovery. He acknowledges the journey he has travelled through sport and openly discusses the sometimes private details of his past. He discusses what he has learnt from playing the sport and living the life he has. In an online video, he labels the book as "An attempt to share what I've learned" (The Telegraph, 2009).

Approach to writing

I wanted to write about my romantic experiences as a young woman, presenting a combination of the best and worst experiences, the emotions tied to them, and lessons learnt. After reading these books I attempted to combine some aspects of the different authors' approaches and styles of writing with my own personal style. I decided to write (part of my book) autobiographically about romantic relationships and focus on a target readership of young women.

The books had three major things in common, which I wanted to emulate. Firstly, they were **'relatable'** to a wide audience in the sense that readers could **identify with the author**. Secondly, all the books were **fascinating in their description of characters, relationships or events**. And thirdly, a major theme in each book was the author's **journey** throughout all or some part of their life.

The authors' writing styles were aimed at allowing readers to feel as though they could **'relate'** to the author and his/her personal experiences. This was done in a variety of different ways, such as by creating humanly flawed characters in their writing, which helps readers **identify with the author**. Dunham and Agassi, in particular, had very honest writing styles.

Dunham's writing, in particular, is 'relatable' because she makes connections with the audience by being frank about her own self-doubts and shortcomings and establishes a relationship with the reader by being honest about her sometimes unattractive qualities, rather than hiding them. She highlights the flaws in her character to make herself realistic so that readers can identify with her. Dunham's writing is precise and she states exactly what she means in each sentence. She is candid in retelling stories about her youth and writes in an unfiltered way. For example, the first line of her book is "I am twenty years old and I hate myself. My hair, my face, the curve of my stomach" and "I dress in neon spandex that hugs in all

the wrong places” (2014, p. xiii). Dunham’s book is filled with unapologetic cursing and crude phrases, such as “bull-shit” and “Have a nice life, bitch” (p. 146).

Dunham also uses language and vocabulary relevant to her target audience of young women, such as slang, so that they can relate to her writing. Dunham’s accurate descriptions draw on common, everyday experiences, such as “I went through the brief phases of being a good student” (p. 172), which ensures that readers can relate to her character. Often students start off well at school in the beginning of the semester, but as the year goes on, it is not uncommon to lose some motivation. Dunham highlights this in the example above.

The title of Agassi’s book expresses his ideas on writing it. Although his brutal honesty makes the book very humorous at times, such as when he writes phrases such as “Nick the dick” (Agassi, 2009, p. 89) or describes how he once put a stuffed panda “ass-up” (p. 93) on Nick Bollettieri’s chair to prove a point to him, it also gives his writing an air of sincerity. He is genuine and tries to accurately depict his life as a professional tennis player. The authors’ explicit/ honest writing styles make their books ‘relatable’ and allow readers to identify with the authors.

Kerr’s ‘humble’ writing style is what makes her book ‘relatable.’ She describes lessons learnt and offers subtle advice by using phrases such as ‘in my opinion.’ Her subtle advice-giving style gives readers the impression that they have a choice of whether to follow her suggestions as opposed to demands. She is down to earth and openly discusses her experiences and mistakes. Kerr is a successful supermodel and this gives her *opinion* credibility as her career achievements and success illustrate that she is talking from experience. Her voice comes across as subtle because she doesn’t profess to know everything, and offers *suggestions* to her readers for ways to improve their own lives. Kerr also makes connections with readers through her use of inclusive language such as ‘we’ and ‘you,’ in sentences such as “But in my opinion you are worse off if you remain silent...” (p. 22). This enables readers to feel as though the book speaks to them personally.

Agassi’s detailed description of his own emotions and feelings throughout his book makes readers recall familiar moments of their own, such as being confused about a relationship or being in love. An example is when he describes one of his first encounters with Steffi Graff, his wife today. He describes a situation before they started dating, where he sent her flowers but received no response. He describes how he waited anxiously until she finished her first tennis match to call her about it. He

even tipped off the ferry captains to phone him the moment she boarded the ferry, so that he could know when she would be back at her hotel for him to call her. “I know her room number because I can still see my damn flowers sitting dejectedly on the patio table” (p. 288). Readers can relate to this situation because most people know what it is like to be so in love with someone that they act a little bizarre. It is not uncommon to be paranoid, excited, nervous or over-anxious at the start of a new relationship. Agassi describes this perfectly. Throughout the book he clearly describes his emotions towards all aspects of his life. For example, those challenging situations such as firing and hiring someone:

I phone Perry at Georgetown and tell him my problem. What problem? he says. You want to work with Gil? So hire Gil. But I've got Pat. The Spitting Chilean. I can't just fire the guy. I can't fire anyone. And even if I could, how do I then ask Gil to leave a high-profile, high-paying job with UNLV – to work exclusively for me? (p. 11)

Agassi humanises himself to readers by being honest about his emotions and shows readers that he experiences the same conflicting emotions as they do.

Lastly, Nayyar’s writing is ‘relatable’ because he writes (often humorously) about everyday topics such as romance, embarrassment, sport, school, university and cultural heritage. These are topics a wide audience of readers recognises. Nayyar describes part of his journey through life, detailing what led him to his career and how he met his wife, for example, in the chapter “And then I fell in love” (p. 208). Everyone goes through some sort of journey in their life, and dealing with decisions such as what to do for a living and who to marry are universally applicable to everyone.

All of these books are **fascinating** to readers primarily because of the authors’ brilliant description of characters, relationships or events. Character description was especially prominent in Agassi and Dunham’s books, and as it is the characters in stories that make books interesting, I was more drawn to these two.

Dunham, for example, uses rhetorical devices such as comedic irony, imagery or metaphors to provide detailed character description. One example of a metaphor she uses is “The way my parents talk to me in a slightly higher register than they talk to my sister, as if I’m a government worker that snapped and, if pushed hard enough, might blow up the hostages I’ve got tied in my basement” (p. xiii). This gives a very

clear idea about how her parents think they need to treat her – with caution and care. The metaphor cleverly describes both Dunham’s character and the family dynamics in her household. An example of how Dunham uses imagery to describe her character is when she describes moments such as when she was at home after the birth of her baby sister - “I spent Grace’s first night at home wailing ‘Intruder! Return her!’ until I exhausted myself and fell asleep in an armchair” (p. 149). The example is effective in allowing readers insight into Dunham’s childhood jealousy and sense of being displaced. Readers enjoy knowing that even the most successful people have bad times.

Agassi, like Dunham, also uses rhetorical devices such as imagery to provide detailed descriptions, especially to describe his important relationships throughout the book. He adds in detail and depth to enable readers to more fully understand the relationships, but also leaves them wanting more information. For example, he describes a time when his first wife, Brooke Shields, came to see him play a match after they had divorced. It was around the time where he had just started dating Steffi Graff, his wife today. Brooke asked Agassi why he was so dressed up, and reluctantly he told her he was going on a date with Steffi. Agassi went on to describe the encounter.

I hoist my tennis bag. She walks me into the tunnel under the stadium where players park their cars. Hello Lily, she says, putting a hand on the gleaming white hood of the Cadillac. The top is already down. I throw my bag onto the backseat. Have a nice time, Brooke says. She kisses me on the cheek. I pull away slowly, glancing at Brooke in the rear-view mirror. Once more I drive away from her in Lily. But I know this time will be the last and that we will never speak again. (p. 315)

This description shows Agassi’s recollection of a complex relationship in his past. It allows readers to visualise an important and pivotal conversation taking place and to think about the relationship. It also captures the significance of that moment perfectly. Throughout the book Agassi continues to provide excellent descriptions about different aspects of his life.

As mentioned in the first critical section, autobiography is a popular genre because people are fascinated by other people’s personal experiences, as they can relate to others whose experiences touch their lives. Agassi and Dunham in particular made their books **relatable** and **fascinating** to readers by being vulnerable through

their honesty about their experiences and writing direct, unfiltered accounts of their lives. Therefore, my first goal was to focus on creating a book, or part of a book, that was both **relatable** and **fascinating**.

All four of the books showed the author's **journey**, whether in a mental state such as self-development, or physical state such as career development. I liked the idea and decided I wanted my book to take readers on the journey of my life through my romantic experiences to finding 'The One.'

There were also other aspects I wanted to emulate from the different books:

I sought to postulate an underlying theme of self-development. I decided to emulate Agassi's approach to writing about how his experiences helped him to develop as a person. Agassi focused mainly on experiences surrounding his sport and I wanted to focus on experiences surrounding my **romantic relationships** and how these helped me develop as a person.

I sought to structure my book in an original and visually appealing way. Both Kerr and Nayyar did this by breaking up their writing with quotes, illustrations, and lists. Kerr, for example, includes lists such as "Getting Personal," (p. 25) which contains questions to readers about themselves to provoke self-developmental thought. Nayyar's book consists of short chapters containing a collection of short personal essays. He often inserts lists or song lyrics such as "So I'm lonely again" (p. 135) between them. I liked the personal touch that these authors' approaches created and attempted to follow suit with my book by breaking up my essays between chapters with messages and song lyrics. Even though a large portion of the book is dedicated to stories about his past and present romantic relationships, Nayyar does not write in-depth descriptions about this. For example, he describes breaking up with a girlfriend – but doesn't describe the relationship, who she was or how she made him feel. In this respect the book was too light-hearted for my liking and therefore I only emulated the structural aspect of his book.

Conclusion

In summary, I sought to underpin my writing with the use of underlying themes of self-discovery, self-empowerment, respect and growth. I wanted it to deal with powerful emotions such as being in love, being heartbroken and being confused. My personal writing style is naturally open and honest, and I hope I have created a

fascinating, relatable book that allows young women readers to identify with the author. Most books were written in the first person and therefore I decided that this would have more effect in autobiographical essays. I decided to write in a style that combines aspects from all these authors' approaches with my own personal writing style.

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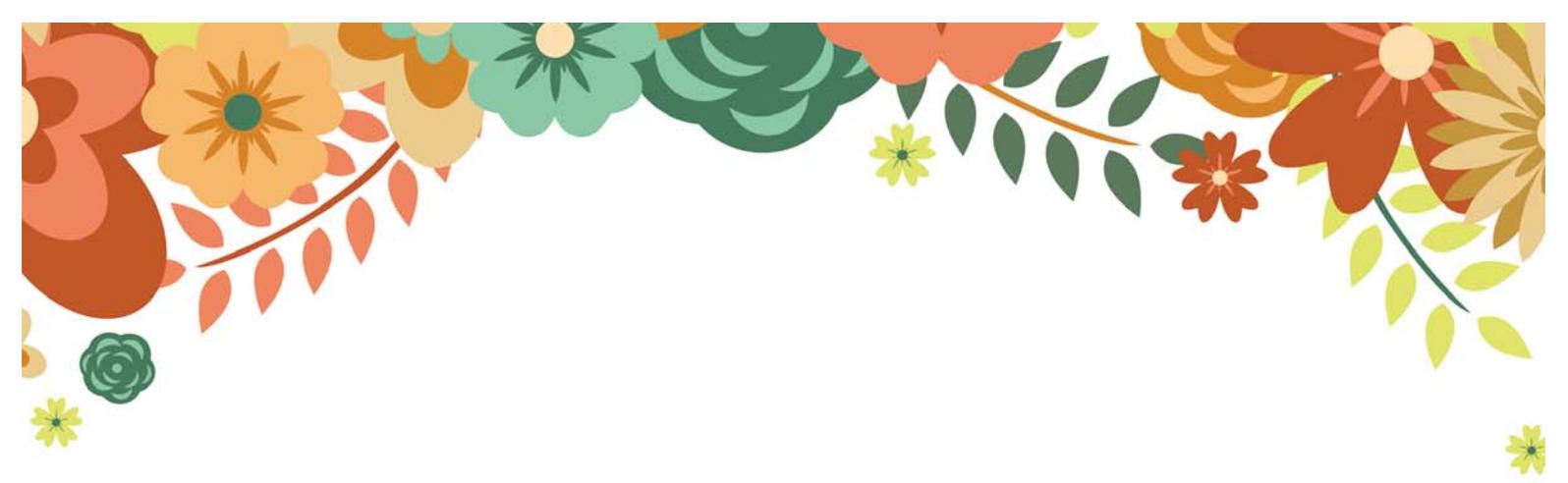
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Creative Part:

**THE DIFFERENT SHAPES
OF**

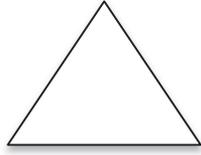
Love



Looking back at a photograph

Looking at a photo from my 21st birthday, I smile as I think about the way things have turned out. The way my story has unfolded. I'm a big collector of photographs. And this photo is especially sentimental to me. It is a photo of three guys and myself. I can't stop thinking about it. The guy to the far left is a serial pretty boy – he was my first real crush. He's pretty superficial and a bit of a player, so not really my type at all. I have good thoughts about him though because he introduced me to the guy beside him. Next to him stands his friend, a tall guy with black curly locks and kind eyes. I can feel my mouth curling into a bigger smile. Then there is me, looking pretty happy with myself. The last person in the photograph fills me with pride and admiration. A guy in a blue checker shirt stands tall. His blue eyes aren't the only things that tell me he is special. At the time I had no idea. He's in a league above the rest. He had a quiet but strong presence back then. It's fun to look back at these memories, these snapshots in time... but I sigh again. One person is missing from the mix... A very important person. Although time has passed, and my heart has healed, I can still remember what it felt like at the time. It's not easy to forget the disappointment of always being let down. I imagine the face of the handsome redhead. I miss him. Well, at least I did at the time this photo was taken. But looking back I guess it was a good thing he wasn't at my birthday. Things definitely happen for a reason. Looking at this photograph I know that things worked out well for me. I was lucky. But all I can say is I never saw it coming. I put the photo album away. It's funny how things work out sometimes...

Jake



He had curly black locks, which sat just above his shoulders. He was a tall, slim guy with thin lips that twisted into a slightly crooked grin, and eyes that smiled at your soul. This guy had such a pure and beautiful way about him and such a good heart and soul. Jake was the kind of guy you would want as your friend – because you could rely on him. He was pretty different to most guys. He was not a jock, but not a nerd either. He liked badminton and played a wicked guitar. As the middle child from a family with three kids, he was the most responsible person I'd met. At 20 years old, he was very independent and did pretty much everything for himself. I didn't really like his friends, but at least their qualities didn't really rub off onto Jake. He had a wonderful family, and his mom made the best risotto I had ever tasted. His sister was kind of a hippy and his brother was a computer nerd, but with them, this was a term of endearment, and I loved them both. Jake had a strong sense of values. He was honest and caring. And so funny. He had a goofy sense of humour which came not necessarily from the jokes he made, but from the way in which he made them. If I had to think about his best quality, though, it would have been being himself. Jake was just Jake... and I think that's what I loved most about him. I met Jake at a party.

The first time we met

I had been competing in amateur and professional tennis tournaments around the country and after 6 weeks was ready to return home. I still wasn't sure whether or not I wanted to become a professional tennis player. Just before I left I had developed a crush on a guy called Cameron. I used to wake up so excited in the hopes of receiving a message from him, but eventually, I realised he was not my type of guy. He was charming, but he was a player. After he told me he had kissed a few girls since we had met, I started forgetting about him.

When Jake, one of his best friends, had added me on Facebook months before, I had accepted because I knew Cameron. In the time I was overseas, Jake had started talking to me. I really enjoyed our conversations. He seemed like quite an honest guy, and I found it refreshing. I didn't like him, but I remember a time when I started looking more forward to messages from him than from Cameron. We had never met in person, but we planned to. It seemed like we could be good friends. He was also going to a party at Cameron's, where we planned to meet when I got back from France.

When I arrived at the party, Cameron gave me a huge hug. I was confused because, despite all his talk about other girls, it really did seem as though he still liked me. I was not interested anymore.

And then, in walked Jake. Cameron told me he had arrived. All I saw was a matt of dark blackish hair. Suddenly my stomach felt butterflies. That was weird. I hadn't even met the guy. I think he saw me, but he walked right past and disappeared into the kitchen. I thought it was a bit odd since we had been talking every day. It felt like we were almost good friends. After a little while, he came to introduce himself. He definitely knew who I was.

"Hi, I'm Jake." He extended a hand. I smiled, noticing his kind eyes. We chatted for an entire five minutes, and then, he left. I didn't think much of it. He was probably just going off to hang out with his other friends at the party. The night ended and we all were on our way out.

"Hey, is this yours?" Jake asked, handing me a water bottle.

"Yes," I smiled. He probably thought I was a weirdo. I was definitely the only person who'd brought a water bottle to a party. "Bye Jake."

"Bye Whit."

That night Cameron kissed me goodbye on my head in front of Jake, who waved goodbye. I left the party and went to sleep off my jetlag.

* * * *

The next morning I woke up to a message from Jake. "I'm so sorry I didn't speak to you for long. I was just really nervous to meet you."

"Why?" I replied.

"You are really pretty! And I was shy." He was so direct. I blushed behind the computer screen. "I come to your gym now. So maybe I'll get over my nerves and come say hi sometime."

I Laughed. "Cool."

A few days later we met at the gym by chance. And a few days after that. I started to wonder if it actually was a coincidence or not. I trained at certain times of day, and Jake seemed to know that. When I would do my stretches he would casually wander across to my area. We'd chat for a while, but it was strained and difficult. It was not the same as from behind a computer screen.

I went home that night and got a message: "It's really difficult talking to you. I can't seem to get words out."

"I know! Me too. But why? We talk so easily here." Jake and I continued to chat on Facebook for a while until eventually, he plucked up the courage to ask me to hang out. I told him no. I was starting to like this guy, but something still told me no.

Finally, a few weeks later, he asked me out in person at the gym.

“Hey, Whit, do you maybe want to go out tonight? Just as friends. Come on, please.”

“Erm...” I laughed nervously. “Sure Jake. Okay.”

So that night I went home to get ready for my date. Because it was definitely a date. My mother was not impressed as she thought I was still too young to date, but after begging, she finally let me go. I spent ages picking out an outfit that was just right for the occasion. I wore sneakers. SNEAKERS. On my first date EVER I wore All-star sneakers. It’s amazing I got a second date. I waited nervously for 6 pm. He was on time. I had butterflies in my stomach and was extremely excited. I think I knew why too. I liked him. I *really* liked him.

He picked me up at my house and I jumped in his green station wagon. It was an older manual car and he stalled it by accident. I saw the embarrassment on his face and giggled. He took me to a burger place near his house and ordered two fish burgers for us. He didn’t know that I wasn’t a salad eater, so when he was not looking I tipped half of the contents of my burger out into the bin. The rest of the burger was delicious, and we had a really good night.

Later Jake dropped me off at home. As I was about to get out the car he leaned over and gave me a big hug. It was such a good hug. We stayed like that for a while, and then I said goodnight and left. Best night ever.

Sometimes songs bring back strong memories or remind you of feelings you had a certain time in your life. I clearly remember lying on my bedroom floor listening to this song and recognizing it as the turning point for when I started to fall in love with Jake...

“When you say Nothing at All” - by Ronan Keating

*It’s amazing how you
Can speak right to my heart.
Without saying a word
You can light up the dark
Try as I may, I could never explain
What I hear when you don’t say a thing*

First Kiss... Almost

Now one thing you should know about me is that I had never been kissed before. I'm pretty old-fashioned in my ideas on life, and never wanted to kiss someone just for the sake of kissing them. I wanted to like them a lot and I did not want to kiss someone I wouldn't consider a future with.

After our first date, Jake and I had been enjoying each other's company more and more. My mother was very strict though and I was only allowed to see him a few times a week. My curfew was 10:30, which I thought was very early for an 18-year-old. So Jake made any excuse to see me. We hung out at the gym and he helped me with a difficult IT assignment.

That night was the third time Jake had invited me to his family home, but I was still nervous whenever I went. I wanted to make a good impression. My feelings for Jake had grown immensely. He treated me well, spoke to me nicely and gave me the cutest compliments. He was the nicest and best person I'd met in my life so far. We decided to watch a movie – I think it was that one with Cameron Diaz in it, and Tom Cruise. I forgot the name. I didn't like it that much. I remember Jake used to wear a beanie sometimes, to tame his considerably wild curly locks. I thought he looked much better without it. We joked around and I laughed as I tried to pull it from his head as he pulled away. We had so much fun together.

We watched the movie, and as time went by I noticed how we were sitting right next to each other. It was getting warm. Or maybe it was just me. I was so nervous. We had a blanket over our legs, and my hand was resting in one of the folds. The next thing I knew, he had slid his hand over mine, and we were holding hands. I didn't look at him. I just smiled. I think both of our hands must have been sweaty. But I didn't care. It was the best feeling ever. His hands were warm and felt like love. We continued watching. We held hands for the entire movie and at the end, as the credits started rolling, I felt Jake move a little closer to me. I knew this could happen at any time. I was scared – for SO many reasons. I had never kissed anyone before. I didn't know how. He leaned in towards my face. I really wanted to kiss him – and then, at the last second, I turned my face away. *I turned my face away!* He kissed my cheek.

I felt awful. Later that evening, on the car ride home, in fact, I texted him. I knew why I had turned away.

“Jake, I really, really like you. I don’t want you to think that I don’t. It’s just I am not ready for that yet. I’m sorry.” Immediately I got a reply. He was so relieved that I had texted and said that it meant a lot to him because he was worried I didn’t want to kiss him back. He said it was no problem at all and that he did not mind waiting at all until I was ready.

In time it had actually made us stronger because it was something we could laugh about. We were both so nervous and it was good to know that we could figure things out together.

Was that a bad thing?

Jake and I had been going out for three months. He had asked me out very soon after our first kiss. I said yes instantly. Since then we were inseparable. I didn’t see him every day because of my mother’s rules, but that was okay because we became very close from constantly talking on the phone and texting. Soon it came time for my family’s annual trip to South Africa, our home until I was 12. I missed him the moment I stepped on the plane.

I think the top qualities I wanted my boyfriend to have were kindness, good morals, and honesty. Jake had everything, but at times I wondered whether his moral values were aligned with mine. He was very decent, never swore around me, and treated me with the utmost respect – but, somehow, I sensed we were a bit different. When I went to South Africa that year, I found out how.

I got a message one morning saying “Er, Whit.... I think I did something bad. I’m really sorry but I only thought afterward that it might be something you would be upset about.” I freaked out, reading further. “I was out with the guys at Liam’s batch. You know the one right? And it was kind of late at night, maybe 11, and Cameron wanted to go skinny-dipping.”

Immediately I started fuming. Cameron, Cameron, Cameron! – I know I used to have a crush on him, but he was seriously an idiot. Ever since Jake and I started dating, I got the impression that he was trying to cause trouble between Jake and I. Cameron would make little remarks about how Jake used to get very drunk, and how he was only refraining from drinking because I didn’t like it. Cameron knew my values and knew that I didn’t like the idea of a boyfriend who got drunk, or the idea of someone who was promiscuous. So he tried to create the impression that Jake was, or

had been. I knew that Jake liked to drink sometimes, and I didn't really mind. I just didn't want him to be drunk around me. Maybe Cameron was just jealous of my relationship with Jake... but this made me even madder because after all HE had been the one who had moved on first and kissed about a thousand girls when I was in France. When I heard that Cameron had suggested something like skinny-dipping, I was furious. He had gone too far. I read the rest of Jake's message. He wanted to call me.

Jake and I chatted for about an hour. He explained to me that he hadn't meant anything bad by it and hadn't realised it was wrong until after it had happened. He had realised that because of my morals I would probably be upset by it. That's when he started worrying and immediately sent me a message. I wasn't worried about the swimming naked part, to be honest. But I cared because a girl was present. A GIRL.

I was so upset and agitated. "How could you not know that was wrong?" I asked indignantly.

"I'm sorry Whit, I really didn't think it through. It was late so it was dark. I didn't see anything. I promise." He told me he had stayed away from the girl and that he of course didn't look. I believed him, naturally. I mean, if he wanted to lie he could just have not told me about it in the first place. I had no reason to doubt him. But still, I felt sick inside. I would never have done that. I put the phone down and sighed. I was put in a tough situation. It clashed with my morals and hurt my heart. I just didn't feel good inside. But, I decided to forgive Jake because of his honesty, and because I believed that I knew his heart. He had good intentions and would never do anything to hurt me. Now he knew where I stood, I knew it would never happen again – and it never did. I trusted him completely.

When he said "I love you"

We had been dating for nearly five months, and things were going great. We had battled through a few cultural hiccoughs, becoming stronger for it and had finally reached a perfect place in our relationship. He made me so happy. Jake was the kindest person I knew. He had a huge heart and every time I looked into his brown eyes my heart melted. I was the happiest I'd ever been. When we went out, we were always touching. His hand was always holding mine. We were inseparable, and

everyone knew it. He was big on public displays of affection and showing the world how much he loved me.

One day I skyped my good friend Mikaela. She was studying her degree at a college in North Carolina. She had earned a tennis scholarship and as soon as she could took off to the States. We had kept in contact and she remained one of my best friends. The day we were skyping was coincidentally Jake's birthday. I was excited about the gift I had bought him and told Mikaela all about it.

"He's going to love it," she said. "Hey, has he told you yet?"

"Told me what yet?"

"Told you that he loves you."

I paused. Then I laughed. "You are too funny Mikaela. Not yet!"

After the call ended, I sat back in my chair for a second. Up until now I'd never thought about it. I knew I really, really cared about the guy. But how do you know when you love someone? I thought about our five months together. We had a great time together and had shared many amazing memories. He was my favourite person on the planet. Hmmm...

That night I went to Jake's house, excited about his birthday. But Mikaela's question was still in the back of my mind. Why hadn't he told me yet? Was that something I should be worried about? Love should be felt though right? I was a little confused, but I put the thought out of my mind as we celebrated.

At the end of the night, Jake and I lay on his bed, chatting about life like we always did. I was going back to France soon, this time for 10 weeks, to compete on the French Tour again. We both knew it would be a long time apart. We started talking about it. We started talking about long distance. It was difficult, but Jake was adamant we could get through it easily. Then Jake said he had a song to play me. As we lay side by side, holding hands and listening to the lyrics of "Love will always win", I knew we would survive long distance. I felt it in my heart. And I knew he did too.

Suddenly, without any warning, he said it. "I love you Whit."

“I love you too Jake.”

Going the distance... Long distance

I went to France again to compete in tennis tournaments. This had been a long time coming, and Jake and I were prepared. He had helped me set up Skype, and he had ensured we could communicate through many different channels. I was going to get a French sim card and also had Facebook and email if all else failed. But, ten weeks was a long time. I was worried that the distance and separation would be tough. To be honest, my main concern was not the distance, it was the fact that I didn't trust Jake's friends.

In France, my feelings had multiplied in a matter of weeks. We had said ‘I love you’ and every time I looked into his eyes it told me everything I needed to know. I knew Jake was one of those people who you could just tell was a good soul. Through his eyes I could see his soul. He radiated light and goodness. I know it sounds cheesy, but it was just a feeling I got that was hard to describe. He was a good guy. The best of the best. He had such a lovely way about him, and that just made me love him more. I can't remember Jake ever having a bad word to say about anyone, ever. He just wasn't like that.

In France I had fun playing tennis all day, but it was weird living in a sort of isolation – because that's what it was. When very few people speak English, life gets very quiet and even though I could hear people talking around me all day, it was lonely. We talked every day on Skype for hours. On one of my days off, when I was recuperating from a tough three-setter in the sun the previous day, I remember having a conversation that started in the morning, and by the end of it Jake had watched me make breakfast and lunch. We had been chatting for six hours straight. It was so easy to talk to him.

But long distance had its challenges. As well as the obvious sadness of being away from him, I found that my emotions were intensified, big time. I felt more in love, more happy, and sadder. I was extremely happy to talk to Jake, but extremely sad when we had a disagreement. Everything felt more dramatic. And the worst part was that whenever we had an argument, we were apart. Long distance is not ideal, and I remember crying and crying whenever something hurt. Being jealous about

something was the worst! Jake went to a few parties while I was away, because I obviously still wanted him to have fun and not stay at home waiting around for ten weeks. I wanted him to hang out with his friends. But, it freaked me out knowing that when I was sleeping or playing tennis he would be out with some slutty girls and guys, surrounded by drinking, alcohol and sometimes the occasional drug (because there is always at least one idiot with a drug), and I wouldn't be there. It is scary seeing things happen, but it is a lot worse not seeing what is going on. I trusted Jake, but still, I thought the worst sometimes and it played with my mind. Luckily for us though we got through all our fights unscathed.

I will never forget those hours staring into Jake's big brown eyes, or more importantly, what was said without words in those moments. I remember how much my heart grew, and how much stronger we became from going through that. I didn't tell Jake what date I was arriving back in Auckland. Even from the airport in Bangkok I was trying to fool him by messaging him from Facebook to make him think I was still in Paris. I was so concerned about surprising him I actually missed Katy Perry walking right by me in the airport. But you know what, it was all worth it.

My hand shook as I knocked on his front door. I waited and somehow I think he just knew. Within a second the door flung open and he grabbed me in his arms. He lifted me off the ground and hugged me for what felt like ages. I remember how much we were both shaking. I remember because I had never shook so much in my life before. I was so nervous, so excited, and so happy.

The Green Eyed Monster

When Jake and I had disagreements we were respectful with what we said and how we discussed our issues. We were quite mature and never swore at each other - although if I'm honest I raised my voice a few times. Mostly our fights involved talking, hugs and few tears sometimes. But everything was worked out in the end.

Jake and I had just come back from a party at Cameron's house. There was alcohol, laughter and a lot of stupid jokes. Something I noticed about Cameron was that he liked to appear the 'big man.' He was the leader of the pack and everyone knew it. Cameron swapped girlfriends like kids swap stickers, but I noticed every time he had a new one, he made a point of discussing their 'hotness.' It was strange,

but whoever he brought back to the group, would be labelled as ‘extremely hot.’ I didn’t mind it at first, until he did it around my boyfriend. All the time.

I saw the girl, bleach blonde hair, short skirt, face caked with makeup – you know the type. Not a classy looking girl to me. But somehow, with Cameron’s method of brainwash, I thought she looked prettier and prettier every time I saw her. Naturally, my train of thought shifted to my boyfriend. What did he think of her? I got worried.

So I asked him, “Do you think she’s pretty?”

He replied honestly, as usual. “She’s alright. Cameron thinks she’s good looking.” The green eyed monster took a hold. Jake must have seen the look in my eyes because he quickly added: "You are much prettier." I felt a bit better, but somehow it still bothered me.

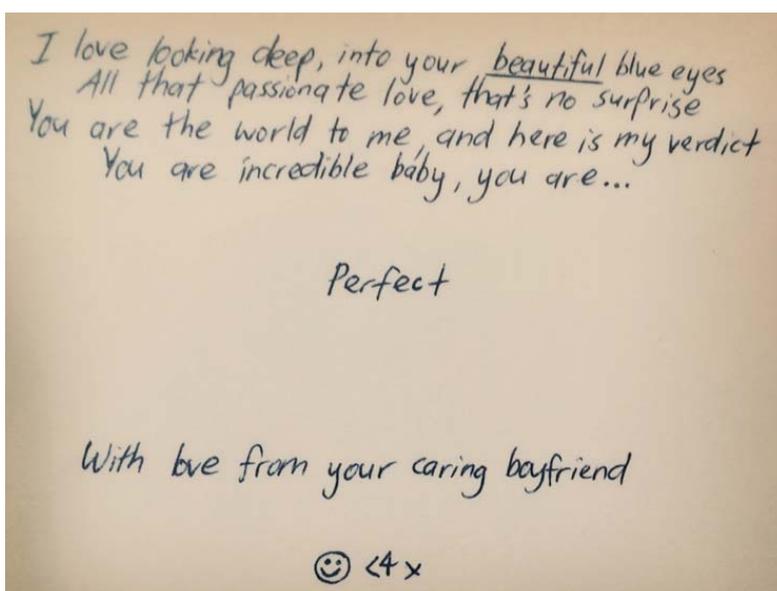
A few weeks later we attended another party. But soon after we arrived Jake had to drop me off at home so that I would not miss my curfew. Afterward he went back to the party. Cameron’s girlfriend was there. I was worried. Although Jake made it clear that I was the love of his life and that he only had eyes for me, I’m a girl. We get jealous. And what made things worse was that I knew the type of girl Cameron’s girlfriend was. She hugged everyone. And when she got drunk she became extra touchy feely. Not with my boyfriend! I didn’t think it was fair that Jake went out partying with other girls in that environment and left me at home.

I texted him, letting him know how I felt, but he didn’t really understand why I was upset. He thought I was overreacting and said that it was what all the other guys did. And that everyone was friends. I believed him, but I just didn’t like it. So I just went to bed. The next day I woke up with many missed calls, voice messages, and texts. Jake had left the party and said he was sorry. He didn’t fully understand what the big deal was, but he did not want to hurt my feelings or disrespect me in any way. I was still fuming. And hurt though. I was new to this, after all.

The sun rose and set and I was still upset, and still not replying to his messages. Clearly, he was worried and confused about what to do. He had apologised countless times, but I was not having it.

Around seven that evening, he sent me one final text. “Whit, I am so worried about you. I love you so much and I didn’t mean to hurt you. Please talk to me. If you don’t reply, I will run to your house in the middle of the night in my funky trunks (togs) to show you what you mean to me. I don’t care what I look like to anyone but you.” I smiled as I read the message. It was sweet. But, for some reason I still did not reply. I did, however, wait. I was curious, because a. Jake was not a runner at all. And b. He lived very far from my house, well, far if you are running, and are not a runner.

He arrived at my front door, huffing and puffing as though his lungs were about to give in. It was midnight. I met him outside in my bright pink dressing gown, frowning. There he was, my very sorry boyfriend, standing half naked in my driveway, with nothing but funky trunks on. He began to talk. My heart melted. He was still panting. I couldn’t believe that he had run all this way just to prove to me how much I meant to him. He never wanted to let me down, and if he accidentally hurt me, he never did it again. He loved me too much. I fell so much more in love with Jake that night. I saw the love in his eyes and how hurt he was too. And my fears melted away. I never had to worry about Jake and another girl ever again. He understood how I felt and I understood how he felt. Even though we had different views on what was acceptable in this situation, we understood each other. And more importantly, we understood what we both meant to each other. Nothing was going to get between us – or so I thought.



Part of a poem Jake wrote me...

Meeting Ben

I walked nonchalantly into the video store that day, holding my freshly made spring rolls I'd bought from the Asian cuisine restaurant next door. I was by myself and just wanted to rent a movie or two to relax. After selecting my choices I walked up to the counter and put my spring rolls down, sighing. It was then that I looked up at the guy who was helping me.

“Hello!” He said in a very friendly manner.

“Hi,” I smiled. He seemed nice.

“You seem tired.”

“I am. Long week,” I laughed. We began to talk. And talk. And talk. He was extremely interesting and fun to talk to, and the more we talked the more I began to like him. I recognised him as a guy who lived in the same suburb as I did, only a few houses down from mine. I had seen him before, skateboarding in the road, playing basketball with his friend and walking his dogs. I think my mother had met him before and had even introduced us once as we drove past.

“You live just down the road, don't you?”

“Yeah. You're my neighbour.” He knew me.

“Do you want a spring roll?” I said. “They're the best!”

Cautiously he took one.

“My name is Ben, by the way. I don't know if you remember. I know your name is Whitney.”

After our conversation I realised that we had a lot in common, which was strange as I never really had a lot in common with anyone. Our values and morals and the ways we liked to have fun seemed to match. I seemed to do things differently to many people. We both loved sport and didn't drink or go to many parties, and we were both born in South Africa and loved animals. After our conversation I smiled as I realised this guy and I could be good friends. He was someone who got me. He

seemed to be the boy version of me. Ben was a bundle of fun and so we became fast friends.

I made a habit of checking in at the video store whenever he was working. When we chatted hours flew by and I can recall being so extremely, completely happy. This relationship was platonic, but it was slowly becoming one of my favourites.

My friend Ben

On a sunny day in early December, my best friend Nicky and I sat on the trampoline in her yard. My 19th birthday was coming up and we were finalising the 'guest list.' We had all our good school friends coming, as well as some of my tennis friends, who were staying at mine because of the annual tennis tournaments which were conveniently held near my house. December was usually a very busy and exciting month for me. As we sat in the sun, we realised that the guest list only had 3 guys names on it, one of which was my boyfriend Jake.

"We have GOT to make some more male friends," Nicky said.

"Nah...We are fine!" I laughed.

"Hey, what about inviting that guy you met, the one from the video shop?"

"Ben?"

"Yeah... you said he's a nice guy."

"Well yeah, he's awesome. But I've only been talking to him for a month. He might find that a bit strange?" I knew that Ben and I had an extremely good connection for having only properly talked to each other for the last month. We just got along so well. Nicky and I giggled about how he would probably be freaked out by some random girl he's never actually hung out with asking him to her birthday party with only a close-knit friend group. Nicky pushed me, insisting I text him.

"Do it. Do it! Push send." Reluctantly I sent Ben a message. "Ahhhhh I can't

believe you just did that you loser.” We sat there giggling for the next few minutes. But later he replied and we had another guy coming to my party.

* * * *

We headed to Portofino’s, an Italian chain restaurant run by a Macedonian family. The city branch was a little fancier, so we had a chance to dress up. My favourite part about going out was by far the journey. As I now had my license and didn't drink alcohol, it was usually my job to drive my friends around. I liked to make their driving experience an unforgettable one. My car was littered with rainbow coloured CDs, containing hits from the 80s and 90s, as well as songs by Britney Spears or Katy Perry. Although my friends disapproved of my taste in music, no one could resist singing along to classic hits like “Macarena.” I blasted the music as loud as the speakers would go, so the drive to town was a blast! I had also invented (or so I thought), a little thing called car-surfing. Everyone except the driver would sit on the window sills, hanging out the sides of the car, holding onto the ‘oh shit’ handles. If you saw a little silver clown car with about 4 people in it and 4 people outside of it, I probably just drove by. My car was the fun one, where everyone was dancing and screaming out lyrics to songs. About 15 people were coming to dinner, so unfortunately, not everyone could drive with me.

As Ben knew no one yet I reserved a spot for him next to me. Nicky and some other friends piled into our car too, and Jake offered his green station wagon as the second car, taking everyone else. As we arrived in the city, Janie had the brilliant idea of playing a game called ‘Chinese Fire drill.’ We were all up for that. The game went like this. When you reach a red light, you turn the car off while each passenger jumps out, running around the entire car as fast as they can. The aim is to return to your original seats before the lights turn green. So, before we had time to think of it, we hit a red light. And we ran. I don’t think I had ever laughed so hard before in my life. We were on a big city street, packed with other cars on both sides, as well as pedestrians scattered all over the place. Our friends in the car behind us must have thought we were going mad. We made it to our original seats just in time to see the light turn green. I turned the car back on and we sped off. In hindsight I think we were lucky that there were no cops around.

We arrived at the restaurant and I held Jake’s arm to steady myself. Walking on cobblestones in high heels is not an easy task. Nicky, who was also wearing high heels, was unable to grab someone to steady herself and was clawing at the air and

stomping around on the rickety ground like a T-Rex. It was hilarious to watch. She caught my eye, giving me an evil stare as if to say 'I know what you are thinking – shut up.' I giggled.

After our meal a few of the girls decided they wanted to stay out and go clubbing.

“Do you mind Whit?”

“No, not at all.” Our group halved. Jake kissed me goodbye and drove home. He had work the next day. He was so responsible, and whenever he had work the next morning he would make sure to get to bed at a reasonable hour the night before. The rest of us packed into my car again and drove to my house.

It was getting late and everybody who had come home ate some cake and then got ready for bed. Except for me and Ben, who finally had a chance to talk. The night had been so busy we had hardly spoken. My family was asleep, and one by one everyone else fell asleep too. Ben and I carried on talking though. I walked him outside as not to disturb the peace. We stood in the fresh night air, chatting about the most random things. I can't remember one thing we chatted about that night. All I remember was that we didn't stop. Eventually, the others returned from clubbing in the early hours of the morning, and we said goodbye. As I turned off the kitchen light before going upstairs to sleep I saw an envelope with a card on the table. It had my name on it. The envelope contained a voucher to the cinemas and had a card written by Ben... I wonder why he didn't give it to me. He was probably just a bit shy...

Movie Madness

Jake and I had just celebrated 1.5 years of dating, and my life was great. I also didn't realise it at the time, but Ben was actually the best friend I had ever had. We spent time together almost every day and as Ben lived a few doors away from me, and we both had two dogs for pets, we would often meet up after dinner and take our dogs for walks. Being neighbours was great for our friendship because it was easy to arrange to spend time together. When Jake went to his part-time job at the local grocery store, I could hang out with Ben. One night I arranged to see Ben while Jake was working, but Jake's work rang in to tell him they were training someone and he did not need to come in. Jake, who had been overworked, decided not to go.

“Hey baby, can we hang out tonight?” He texted.

“Oh dang,” I replied. “I made plans with Ben actually. How about you come with?”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course baby. I don’t think he’ll mind.”

So we went to see *The Hunger Games*. Ben and I drove together and met Jake at the mall. Jake gave me a quick kiss hello. I was happy to have my boyfriend and best friend together. They hadn’t really hung out much at that point, despite having gone to the same school. They were quite different people and had different hobbies. Jake was into gym, guitar and video games, while Ben was more into ball sports, cycling and driving fast cars. They certainly had different friend groups from their school days too. Jake hung out with Cameron and his bunch, who liked to play music, party, and drink, while Ben hung out with an array of different people, some from sports teams, others from Church. Ben was chattier, while Jake was quieter until you got to know him.

I’d wanted to see the movie for a while. In the movie theatre Jake sat to my left and Ben to my right. Jake and I shared popcorn, while Ben and I shared sweet treats. After about an hour, my neck was getting a little sore from turning left and right to talk to them. It was a bit like a tug of war. But it was a fun night, and the movie was good.

Jake held my hand as we walked out of the cinema. “Thanks for letting me come with guys.” He lifted his hand in a parting gesture to Ben. “I’ll see you later man.”

Jake gave me a kiss goodbye.

As Jake was about to walk away to his car, Ben said, “You guys can just go together if you want?”

Jake and I looked at him, a little confused. “I’m driving you though,” I said.

“No but it’s okay, you can go.”

I was still confused. We had driven in my car. That made no sense. “No, it’s okay Ben, we’ll go together.” I waved goodbye to Jake and turned to Ben. Something seemed different about him. He looked a little paler and the expression on his face was one I hadn’t seen before. I could tell he was upset, but I had no idea about what. As we walked to my car, on the other side of the parking lot, Ben did not say a word. He was walking rather fast.

“Hey, what’s going on with you?” I asked, grabbing his arm.

“Nothing Whit,” he said defiantly.

“Ben!” I stopped walking, “what’s the matter?”

He turned to me and said, “It was our night. Jake wasn’t supposed to come with.”

“I thought you wouldn’t mind? He is my boyfriend. And I thought you got along well with him?”

“It’s not that Whit. It’s just, I felt like the third wheel. It felt like the whole night whenever I tried to talk to you, you were already talking to him. I mean, my friend Grant has a girlfriend and when we go out together they never make me feel like the third wheel. They never kiss in front of me or anything like that.” I was confused. Jake and I had hardly given each other more than a peck or two the entire night. How could someone I thought was so similar to me, and someone I found so normal, so balanced and so nice, have a problem with this? I thought the whole night had been a blast, so I was surprised he didn’t feel the same.

“Okay Ben, I’m sorry I offended you. I didn’t mean to. I don’t fully understand why you feel this way, but I promise in the future I will try my best to not make you feel like that again, ok?” We drove home together in near silence. When we got to his house he got out and gave me a hug.

“I get it, it’s your boyfriend. Just next time please consider my feelings.”

"Sure," I said, and drove around the corner to my house.

As I got ready for bed I thought about the night's events. Something just didn't seem to add up. The one thing though that really stuck in my mind were the words "It was supposed to be our night." Our night? That's so weird. Shouldn't a person only have 'our nights' with someone they are in a relationship with?

My important talk with Ben

At about 8:30 pm I ventured out into the dark. I was walking to visit my Ben. I was wearing a crisp white shirt, stockings, and boots, as I had just come from a photoshoot with my photographer friend. Ben and I were on speaking terms, but things had been weird since the movies with Jake, so we had arranged to meet and talk things over. I felt nervous. At first, I didn't fully know why. On the walk over I was listening to a song by Calvin Goldspink - "Don't fail me now", or something like that. We gave each other an awkward hug and continued around the corner to sit down on the icy concrete curb, side-by-side.

We sat there in silence for a while. Then I apologised again. He looked at me, but I was surprised to see it was a different look. He had never looked at me that way before.

"You don't need to worry about it..." he said slowly, "you don't need to be sorry." I looked at his expression, which had changed from nervous to sincere.

"Whit, the reason I acted so strangely the other night, and the reason I have been a bit distant is because I think I have developed feelings for you..."

"Oh..." I was completely shocked. "You like me?"

He paused. "Yes... But I think it is more than that... I think I love you..." Astounded at his revelation, I started to shake. I didn't know what to think. I cared about him so much, but I didn't know how I felt. I had a boyfriend... But, what was this feeling in my stomach?

"I don't know what to say..." I paused. "I love you too."

“Don’t ever let it end” - by Nickelback

*Well, I’m tired of pretending
But I’m terrified of it ending
I know if not for you there’s nothing I could do to ever let it end
And I know you feel the same way
Cause you told me drunk on your birthday
And as you pulled to me
You whispered in my ear, “Don’t ever let it end.”*

*Don’t ever let it end
Don’t ever let it end
Don’t ever let it end*

Meanwhile...

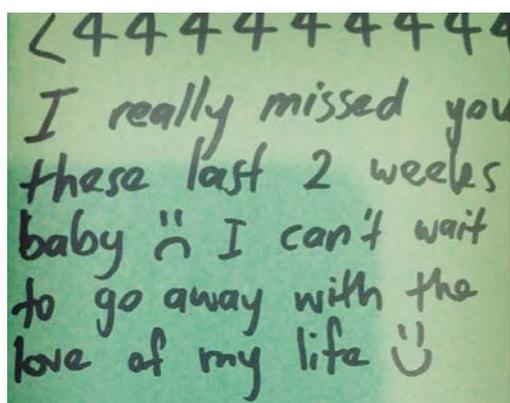
I had decided to go on holiday to Cairns in Australia with Nicky, my hilariously funny, outrageously inappropriate and very embarrassing friend.

This place was a great escape from reality. I needed it. This picturesque part of Australia was relaxed, with a calm beach, minimal shops and other tourists enjoying the heat. The humidity was close to the worst I’ve felt though, coming in second only to places like New York. My hair was so frizzy it was almost recognizable as a lion’s mane.

Although I was used to going away on holiday, for some reason this trip felt very long to me to be away from home. At first I could just not put my finger on it. Although I was enjoying myself thoroughly - visiting crocodile farms and eating fruity sorbets and gelato ice-cream, something was missing. My first thought was that maybe it was because I was missing my boyfriend Jake. But that wasn’t it this time. After all, we had survived the 10-week challenge when I was in Paris playing tennis, so five days was a breeze. He texted me lots in Australia and I enjoyed replying to his messages.

Ben was also texting me a lot. Except the messages were lengthier and there were many more too. I don’t know exactly what I was feeling, but it was almost as though I missed him more. Nicky had commented on how my face lit up when I

received messages from him. I loved Jake though... But then again, I wasn't as excited to get his texts. What was this feeling? I didn't quite know. Ben and I just had such a great friendship. I remember listening to Train's song "drive by" and staring out the car window wherever we went. I can't remember what I was thinking, but all I know is that after that holiday something changed. Or maybe it had already and I just wasn't aware of it yet.



Part of a card Jake wrote for me while I was away

Soon after my trip to Australia, I went away again – this time to America with my family. I was still confused. Although I genuinely loved Jake a lot, sometimes when I thought about the future with him a part of me felt a little unsettled. There was a flicker of doubt in the back of my mind. We came from two different cultures and sometimes I thought that maybe we were too different. I almost wished I could have met someone who was the same as me in terms of culture and morals. Jake was just plain, calm, cool Jake. Nothing wrong with that. He was perfect in terms of kindness, personality, and character, and his values were flawless. But I believed that although he was perfect in the general sense, he might not be perfect for me. I guess somewhere in my heart I just felt I could love someone more.

* * * *

After two weeks, Jake joined us in the States. He had told me months and months before about the fact that before we had met he had looked at naked photos of girls before. It had bothered me a lot, but as the past was a part of his life where we had never met, talked or hung out, it had nothing to do with me. It affected our relationship at the time, but after a while I realised that since we had been together he had treated me perfectly. I believed that it should not necessarily be the biggest issue in a present relationship. But then we travelled to Las Vegas. The sidewalks on the strip were littered with promo cards of topless women – stars were covering their boobs, but somehow seeing this made me revisit that awful time long ago when Jake

had told me about everything. It was then that the issue was brought up again and became a problem. I think the fact that I had developed some feelings for Ben was part of it. One of the things I really loved about Ben was that he was so pure in my mind because he, like me, found the thought of looking at naked photos of random people disgusting. It made him furious. He had very good morals, and morals were something I always had my doubts about with Jake.

We were eating pesto pasta at the California Pizza Kitchen in the Mirage Hotel, one of my favourite restaurants there, and suddenly I began to cry into my pasta. Overcome with emotion I sprinted in my heels through the hotel lobby, locking myself in the bathroom until Jake arrived. We talked through the bathroom door and after crying our eyes out, somehow Jake and I huddled up together on the bathroom floor and worked things out... but I was still not feeling great.

America had taken me by storm. It was big, beautiful, bold and vibrant. This was where I wanted to live someday. The question now though, was with who?

Game time

I bounced the ball on the ground dramatically. Each bounce thundered out vibrations into the crowd. I hoped that the vibrations would call him. I wondered if he was there. Didn't look like it. I looked around a last time. My boyfriend Jake looked back at me, smiling. He was sitting next to my mom, who as usual was not smiling. She was sitting there with her lips pursed and her sunglasses on, even though it was night time. She was also wearing her black jacket, like she did at every tennis match I play. I wonder if she was in mourning because I didn't seem to win any at the moment. I played for the highest interclub league in the country, at number one. So, needless to say, I was getting thrashed.

It was a beautiful spring night at Cornwall Park, the trees were glistening with droplets of water from an earlier sprinkling and the last rays of light were fading between the branches. A romantic pinkish orange sunset set the atmosphere for the match ahead.

I sighed as I lost a game. The exhaled air was only 20% in disappointment about that. 80% was because Ben was not there. After telling Jake I had begun to develop feelings for Ben, I promised him to keep my distance for a while and not see

Ben as much. But somehow I guess I hoped Ben would show up anyway. I wanted him to. But it was already 4-1. I walked to the other side of the court, trying to shake the thoughts about Ben from my mind. As I was about to return, I heard a rustle of leaves from behind me. Approach shot, attack down the line. She beat me again. I clapped my hands on my racket and lined up just inside the baseline for the next return. She had a powerful serve but I thought if I could take it early I could use the power against her to take her time away.

The leaves rustled again. I was pretty sure that was no bird. I started a new game. I was serving. I managed to win the next point with a cool angled forehand winner. I tuned my ears into the trees. I swore I could hear the faint sound of clapping. My heart skipped a beat and I purposely missed a ball being fed back to me to go and investigate. I let it run along the fence near the trees. No one was around.

I listened very carefully and whispered – “Ben, is that you?”

“Yes! I told you I’d come. Now focus! Good luck!” I smiled broadly. So many emotions were going through me! I felt warmth and love and happiness. Suddenly my body was filled with a strong burst of adrenalin, fed to my soul from the fiery redhead. I always felt more ambitious when he was around. I don’t fully know why, but he had an intense and electrifying quality about him that always made me want to be the best that I could be in terms of generating any sort of success. He was so supportive of my goals and often when I went to training at 630 am he wanted to tag along too. I felt like he cared not only about me, but what was important to me.

I started trying again. Focussing, wanting to win. I won the game, then after much struggle the set, then the match. Done and dusted.

Jake wanted to drive me home. I didn’t expect him to be at my match, as he had told me he was busy that night. I think he wanted to surprise me. As much as I cared for him, I felt extremely bad for Ben, who was still sitting in the tree. I couldn’t even say hello properly. I wanted to at least chat with him after my match, especially after he had made such an effort. But I could not exactly at this stage tell my boyfriend that Ben was in a tree.

So I waved to the tree as I left, texting Ben goodnight and thanking him for coming. I felt awful.

The breakup

Jake seemed to just become a better and better boyfriend each day, but, months later, I realised something was missing. I still had some confusing feelings for Ben, and even though we saw each other less, they didn't seem to disappear. It bothered me so much that Ben was so moralistic and much more similar to me than Jake. It also bothered me that although Jake treated me perfectly, I still felt I could love someone more. Then, suddenly, August arrived. One of my friends was turning 21 and had invited me to her birthday party. It was a burlesque themed event. My best friend Nicky would, of course, come with me, but because of the situation between Jake, Ben and I, things were quite tense. Neither of them felt comfortable with the other, which was fair enough. Jake felt hurt that I could care so much about another guy, and Ben felt awkward because he was the outsider. He felt he was causing problems in my relationship with Jake. So he felt guilty.

“Who do you want to take with?” Nicky asked me one night. Suddenly, I became hysterical. I started crying. I was devastated, panicky and frightened. Things just changed. Something inside me felt different, unsettled – because I had just realised something... Jake was not the one for me. The defining moment in my realisation of this had just occurred. My best friend had asked me who I would choose, who I would prefer at the party – and if I was being honest the person I wanted to choose was not my boyfriend. I am the type of girl who makes my significant other my world. When I am in love, I would never ever prefer being around anyone else, ever. The person I am in love with is my first choice for everything, the person I need, want and live for. Jake used to be that person to me... but for some inexplicable reason, he just wasn't that person to me anymore...

I tried to think logically about why this was. Was it just because of Ben? Was it because Jake and I were culturally different? Or could I just love someone else more? Instantly, I knew what I had to do. It wasn't fair on Jake for me to be with him. He gave me his whole heart, and he was so wonderful he deserved a girl to do the same for him.

Crying, sobbing really, I texted him. “Jake, we have to meet, now.” His pleasant reply made me cry even more. He was completely unaware that I was about to shatter his heart. We met at the stadium...

He got out of his car and jumped into the passenger seat of mine. “What’s up?” he asked. His was clueless. He looked at me with big brown eyes and smiled his sweet, sometimes goofy smile. I burst out crying. He hugged me. “What’s wrong?” He asked, concerned. As I looked into his soft brown eyes, I knew he didn’t realise what was about to happen. Struggling to say the words through a waterfall of tears, I finally got them out.

“I want to break up.” The words hit Jake like bullets. His expression changed as his face dropped.

“Whaaa? Why? Baby?”

I was honest with him and told him how I realised that we should break up. I told him I felt awful but that I needed to make the decision. He started crying, and it hurt me deeply. Until today, seeing Jake cry had to be one of the saddest and most awful things ever. Knowing that I was making him so upset was close to unbearable. I hugged him and we sat there crying together for a while. He sunk back into his car seat, taking it all in while silent tears continued to flow.

Eventually, he got out of the car and went to sit on the pavement by the grass. We both couldn’t stop crying. Although it was nearly four years ago, I can still remember that night, because it was easily one of the worst of my life. I didn’t know if I was making the right decision. All I knew was that I had thought about breaking up a few times before, and I knew if I didn’t do it then I might not have plucked up the courage to later on. I tried to comfort Jake, but eventually knew I had to go. We had to part ways... I gave Jake one final hug. I squeezed him, and he squeezed me back. We sat like that together on the pavement for a while. I could feel his heart beating against mine. I could feel his warm tears on my face.

I finally got up and walked away. Seeing Jake sitting on the ground with his head in his hand was heart-breaking. Ringlets of black hair covered his hands.

I went to bed that night with a heavy heart. I thought about myself. I thought about the decision and why I had made it. I thought about Jake. That was the most difficult part. A fifteen-minute drive away, Jake was probably distraught. And I could not go to him to give him a hug and make things better this time...

Coffee with the best ex

Months had gone by and things were still tough with Jake. He was still very sad about the breakup, but because time had passed we could at least talk to each other. Although we weren't friends, we still respected each other and tried to in some way stay in each other's lives. We had arranged to meet at a local restaurant where we used to go for coffee sometimes. I was now going out with Ben, but Jake didn't know it at the time. Whenever I saw Jake I gave him a big hug and for a moment we would stare into each other's eyes with warmth and admiration. We still loved each other, just in different ways. I was no longer in love with him. But whenever I saw him I felt a pang of sadness because I knew that a big part of my life was now over, and I knew it had been a great part. Jake was truly one of a kind.

We chatted and caught up for about an hour, talking about university, work, future plans and a little about the past. It was pretty normal in the sense that things weren't awkward. Jake wouldn't let it be – he was just not like that. We still got along so well. I still know today that Jake is someone who could calm me in an instant. I felt like when I was with him our hearts understood each other, even though we were different people with different interests, we had the same heart.

After our chat he walked me to my car. He had insisted on paying for coffee too. It always amazed me how decent he was and how he could still be such a gentleman to me even after we had been broken up. As we neared my car, he hugged me tight and I drove off, feeling somewhat better about where we stood.

A few days later as I went outside I saw a small parcel on the ground. I took it to my room and opened it. I burst into tears. It was a turtle dove. When we had been together we watched *Home Alone*, where the woman gives the little boy a turtle dove as a parting gift. The woman had said that if they each had one they would remain in each other's heart forever. Jake's note explained he had got the gift when we were together, but he still wanted me to have it. He ended the note, "You will always be in my heart Whit."

My relationship with Jake could best be described as a triangle, because by the end, there were not only two people involved anymore...

Lessons learnt from Dating Jake

1. There is only room in a relationship for two people

I should have realised that my friendship with Ben wasn't fair on Jake. Jake had many female friends, but he only saw them when I was around. Because Jake was very trusting, he wasn't threatened by my friendship with Ben. The problem though was that I hadn't realised how close Ben was becoming to me and how my feelings were changing. The lesson I learnt from this is that personally, I don't believe a girl should spend so much time with a guy friend when she has a boyfriend. I should have stopped to think about how I would feel if the roles were reversed. In hindsight that would have hurt. Although you can be happy with someone, spending so much time with someone else is tempting fate.

2. 'Mr. Nice' is not necessarily 'Mr. Right'

Jake was one of the best people I had ever met. But a lesson I've learnt is not to doubt my instinct, and to know to trust my heart. I realised that 'Mr. Nice' is not necessarily going to be your 'Mr. Right.' Just because someone is seemingly perfect, doesn't mean that they are perfect for you. You can't decide to be with someone just because they treat you well, because choosing to have a life with someone is so much more than that. I'm not saying Jake was only nice and nothing else, because that would be the biggest injustice to him. But I realised that if I had my doubts, maybe they were there for a reason.

3. Sometimes you have to be Cruel to be Kind

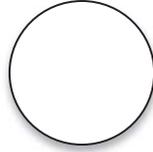
When I broke up with Jake I was kind to him because I wanted him to know that I still really cared about him. That was why I didn't tell him about Ben for a very long time. I should have been more honest with Jake from the start and told him that I started dating someone else. I thought I was protecting him but instead keeping Jake in my life and not telling him about Ben made it harder for him to heal and move on. I only realised this later, because when I finally did tell him he seemed to move on and start a proper life without me.

It also hurt Ben. Even though we both agreed on not telling Jake that we were dating yet, I saw how the situation took a toll on our relationship and contributed to our eventual breakup. I believe all your energy should go to the person you are with.

Actions speak louder than words and I think, even though Ben knew I loved him, sometimes the time spent seeing Jake was very scary for him.

I tried to find a balance between not hurting Jake's feelings and keeping my new boyfriend happy, but Jake was constantly sad and Ben was hurting. It was a difficult time in my life. Feeling stressed, sad, confused and guilty is not a good combination. I learnt that sometimes one has to be cruel to be kind.

Ben



They say there's a thing called 'love at first sight.' I don't know if I had that with Ben, because I was dating someone else when I met him for the first time. But, I do believe in the spark. From the first moment I talked to Ben, I knew he was different. Instantaneously there was magic, a spark, a deep connection that words just can't do justice. Something that I loved about Ben was how he loved me. He seemed to love me for all the things I loved about myself. He seemed to know me better than anyone ever had.

Ben was a fiery and lively redhead, with boyish charm and good looks. He always wore a black t-shirt and jeans, a little like a young Bryan Adams. His hair colour was one I had not seen before - a mixture of ginger and auburn with curls that did not seem to want to be tamed. I loved his chiselled, manly jawline and perfectly high cheekbones. He had the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen – green, with a few flecks of brown- soft eyes, the kind of eyes that steal your heart (or stole mine). The kind of eyes you'll never forget. He lived a few houses away from me and he was sporty like me and could run like the wind. He had the innate ability to pick up any sport and master it almost immediately. His dad used to be a triathlete, so Ben must have inherited his good genes. His sport of choice was cycling: he was passionate about it and loved every minute of training. I remember him telling me his favourite song was one from Empire of the Sun. It had some bit about doing it for the "thrill of it." He said he always played that song before cycling up this huge hill because it motivated him to get to the top. That was something I really admired about Ben. He was very ambitious. He had dreams and worked very hard to achieve them. Ben had similar values to me and we had deep and meaningful conversations all the time. He studied engineering at the same university as me and worked at the local video store. He loved Cold Play and The Great Gatsby and was sentimental like me. Ben talked a lot and was great at expressing his feelings. I think that's one of the reasons I fell for him so fast. Something I would learn in time though, was that there was much more to Ben than met the eye.

Meeting her...

I was in shock. I stopped in my tracks, picking up that old skateboard I had ridden to Grant's house on every weekend for the past 6 years. I just stared. I had never seen anything like this before. There was a girl on the roof of a house, directly opposite from Grant's. She must be the new neighbour because I'd seen a moving truck a few days ago. She was reading a book that was resting on her knees. I wondered what that book was. I was so curious. She flipped the page and delicately tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. Her hair shone like gold in the sun, giving her the appearance of an angel.

I stared for a few moments before being snapped back into reality by Grant's loud voice.

"Bro, what are you staring at?"

I glanced away and then back at the girl. She was still unaware I had been watching her.

She was in another world.

"Oh, her?" She's new. She likes to sit on the roof like that. Pretty hot eh?"

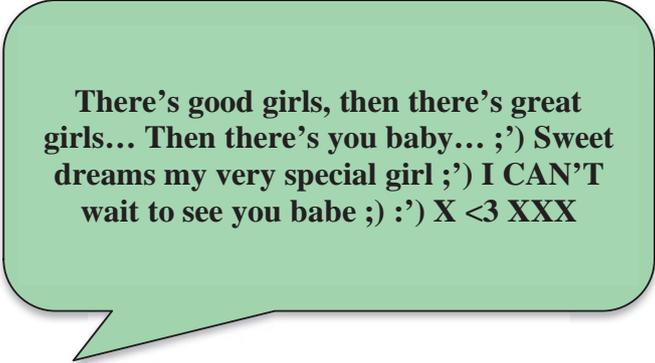
I stared at him, bewildered.

"Hot?" "She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

Grant looked at me with a surprised expression on his face. I knew why. I'd never said that about a girl before. I never thought it. I had never met someone who had caught my eye - until now. It felt like the strangest feeling had come over me.

Who was this girl? I had to know. Hopefully in time I would get to find out.

A text he sent me when we were dating for three months



There's good girls, then there's great girls... Then there's you baby... ;) Sweet dreams my very special girl ;) I CAN'T wait to see you babe ;) :) X <3 XXX

A Complicated Valentine's Day

Ben and I were dating! For the first few months, the situation with Jake was a little complicated. The happier I felt with Ben, the more guilty I felt about Jake. Ben shared these feelings. We both felt responsible for hurting Jake, and neither of us knew what to do. We discussed it and finally decided to keep our relationship a secret until Jake was visibly happier and had moved on. Unfortunately, this was difficult because as Jake didn't realise I had another boyfriend, he would occasionally send me texts and do things that caused my current relationship with Ben to take strain. Ben and I were constantly watching over our shoulders. We didn't hold hands in public because we feared someone who knew Jake might see us. I couldn't put any photos on social media and when we went out to dinner with groups of friends I felt I had to act as though Ben was one of them.

When we eventually decided that the time had come to be 'official,' Ben presented me with a ring with our names "Whitney and Ben" engraved on the inside. I thought it was the sweetest thing. Finally we were going out. Unfortunately, when things start off as complicated as they did with us, they sometimes stay complicated - at least for a while.

On Valentine's Day Ben and I had planned a quiet evening at my house. I had bought his present, written his card, and picked out the perfect outfit. 5 pm. Time to get ready. I look at my phone as the screen flashes. Jake. I wonder what he is calling for.

"I'm coming over quickly. I won't be long." He hung up.

Oh hell. I quickly texted Ben, “Wait up. Jake is coming over. I’ll let you know what happens. I’ll see you soon.” Ben was understanding and replied calmly.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. It was Jake. “Wait here,” he said. I saw my persistent ex-boyfriend rush around the corner. The next second he appeared, having changed his attire. He was wearing a tuxedo top and holding a bunch of beautiful flowers and chocolates. My heart sank. I started tearing up. “Even though we are broken up, you are still my Valentine,” he said, half smiling.

This was Jake. He fought for me until the end. He had kept sending me texts, asking how I was, letting me know he still loved me, despite me having broken his heart. He still treated me so well. I think that’s when you know someone truly has your best interests at heart. That’s when you know they have character.

Jake didn’t stay long, but he did kiss me goodbye. After he left, I sat in silence for a few minutes. The tears began to roll. I gathered myself up and texted Ben – I can see you now. Just give me five minutes.

Ben lifted my spirits. He had got me the cutest little teddy bear, but although I was thrilled, the night had a sad undertone. We both felt bad for Jake, and I could tell that Ben was hurting too. No one likes to see someone else caring for the person they love, let alone have to put up with someone else kissing that person. It was a tough situation, but he handled it so well. I felt awful because technically kissing Jake was cheating on Ben... but it didn’t feel that way because I didn’t have romantic feelings for Jake. Somehow though when Jake looked at me with his big, kind eyes, I could not bear to hurt him even more. Ben understood, but he was still upset. We hoped that eventually things would just fall into place so that we could have a normal relationship.

6 months a Princess

When we started going out Ben treated me like a princess. When we saw each other he treated me with the utmost respect and kindness. He was always interested in what I had to say. He always wanted to know what I was doing, if I was happy, what my plans for the future were and most importantly, how he could help me achieve my goals. He almost seemed to be less concerned about his own wellbeing. He put my

happiness before his own. Although Ben worked very hard to achieve his goals, I believe he genuinely cared about my life more than his own, and that was one of the reasons I knew it was love.

Ben never let me down. He was always there when I needed him. He helped me study for my exams, even though he was busy studying for his engineering degree. When I needed his help, whether he was busy or not, he would drop everything to help me - even when he sometimes got in trouble because of it. I knew I could depend on him, and that was an amazing feeling.

He came up with sentimental ideas and symbols for our love that made me love him more. Instead of texting hearts <3 we used a symbol he made up - <8> - because he said it was a double heart. These things became so important to us, and he would make sure I knew how important I was to him. Once he got a ring made for me with the symbol. But it was the way he gave it to me that was special. He had sewn two teddies together and explained that the one was him and the other was me – and that he was holding me. At the back of the bear were pieces of ribbon, holding a ring.

I saw how he looked at me and I saw how much he loved me. He was always holding me. He always told me how special I was and I always woke up with a good morning text about the size of a short story. I think I fell in love with him because of how he treated me... Many times after tennis coaching I would return to my car to find a note in the door handle saying 'Look under the wheel.' I would only to find a beautifully decorated cupcake or a smoothie. He knew exactly what I liked and loved to spoil me.

On my first birthday we were together he got a cardboard box and filled it with all my favourite things – my favourite movies, a voucher to my favourite clothing store, a teddy bear and personally embroidered t-shirts with funny quotes from things I had said since we'd been dating. We liked to celebrate every month of being together, so once a month he would make an effort to make my day more special than usual, by bringing me flowers, a personalised cupcake or a sentimental card.

Bryan Adams...

"You look really beautiful," Ben said to me as I got into his car.

He looked at me as if I was the most amazing person on the planet. His eyes always lit up whenever he saw me, and it made me fall more and more in love each time. When we were together it felt like there was a bubble of love around us, blocking out the world outside. I smiled and kissed him on the cheek. One of my dreams was coming true and it was all because of him. Anything I wanted, he always made sure I got it. That was one of the things I loved most about him.

One evening at a party, we saw a single, pure red rose.

"Do you like it baby?" he asked.

"Yes, it's beautiful," I replied in awe.

"It is. I'll get it for you later." It was like a fairy-tale. I thought he was joking.

* * * *

Later in the week, I received a text. "Baby, go to your car ;)". I ran outside, excited. The night air burnt my face with an icy chill, but I only felt warmth inside. I stood in my driveway where the outdoor light drew my silhouette onto the garage door. I realised I didn't have to look far. On the ground next to my car was a white envelope. Placed on top of the envelope, was a breathtakingly beautiful, single, pure red rose. My mouth opened in disbelief, then a grin settled upon my lips. I picked up the display and stuffed it into my dressing gown's pocket so that my parents wouldn't see as I went back indoors.

I rushed upstairs in haste, skipping every second step, and jumped onto my bed in excitement. I carefully opened the card. It wasn't very long. But it had the words displayed: "I said I'd get it for you, baby." I smiled again, turning the card over. Out slipped a ticket. I shrieked. A single Bryan Adams ticket rested in my hands. He was one of my absolute favorite singers, and this was a ticket from a sold out show that I had been trying to get tickets to for weeks. "I love you baby" was written on the back of the ticket. I don't know how he got it – but he did. I loved that about him.

* * * *

After the show, we drove home together. All I could think about was how much I loved this guy.

The movies

We loved going to the movies. Something amazing about our relationship was that we seemed to do things differently to everyone else. Whenever we went to the movies, we would take a blanket and snuggle up as if we were at home. The best part about it for me was that we sat in the same chair. We were both quite thin so that was not difficult to accomplish. We sat like that for the entirety of the movie, laughing and giggling at the jokes in the movie, and stuffing our faces with popcorn and chocolate, which, by Ben's discovery, went well together. We always held hands and I felt so close to him at those times. Once for a laugh I even made him carry me down the stairs in his arms. He complained how silly he must have looked. Seconds later an old woman appeared, tapping him on the shoulder.

“That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever seen,” she said.

“See, you should do that more often,” I giggled to him after she had left.

In romantic comedies, every movie is created to instill a sense of wonder in the audience about how lovely and well suited and perfect the couples were for each other. We watched countless movies with whirlwind romances and happy endings. But one thing that I always found intriguing at the movies was how even with the specifically chosen actors, the well thought out lines and the script aimed to leave the audience thinking one thing in unison ‘awwwww,’ our relationship was much, much better. I could not believe just how magical real life had become. Our romance was better than the movies. I couldn’t believe I had found my real prince charming. And he was better in real life. I was so in love.

I didn’t see it then, but in time I realised that, like all those movies, our romance had a timeframe. It was not exactly 88 minutes, it was a little longer than that. But it didn’t last forever. Just like the movies, the credits had to roll sometime. And I was in for a big surprise...

A text he sent me one night after the movies...

I love YOU so much baby <3 You're the most lovely creation this world has seen :) You are stunningly beautiful, beyond words!!! <3 <3 <3 and I can't believe you actually want to be with me :) xXx It's something I struggle to come to terms with cs you're the MOST amazing person I have ever met or know of!!! Ur heart is pure and kind :) <3 and I really can't imagine my life without you no matter what I convince myself to say at times... I LOVE YOU <3

Why don't you text me back anymore?

It was Autumn and Ben and I had been together for just over 6 months. The Summer of our relationship had come to an end and now, like the leaves falling from the trees, so were his true colours. One of the best things about our relationship was that at the start, even since we had been friends, we shared everything with each other. I knew him inside out and he knew me better than anyone ever had. He did everything for me and in many ways, he was the best boyfriend.

I started noticing small changes. I knew Jake had been a strong influence in our relationship, as he was still contacting me on a semi-regular basis. Sometimes when I ran into Jake at the gym he would ask to kiss me. When I saw the hurt in his eyes I would sometimes give in to a small peck. I knew it was not right, but I hated seeing how hurt he was. I would tell Ben when this happened and it would really hurt him. It was still taking a toll on us and we had begun to fight often about it, not coming to any particular conclusions about how to sort the problem out. It would have been easier to tell Jake about Ben, but Ben did not want to hurt Jake either. I didn't know what to do. We both knew it was unusual to have anything to do with an ex, but Jake was not just an ex to me, he was someone I cared a lot about. Eventually, I decided to be cruel to be kind and told Jake that I didn't think it was appropriate for him to kiss me anymore. But I think the effects had already taken a toll on Ben.

My mother was still very strict on me and I was only allowed to see Ben a certain number of days in a week. I usually saw him every day though (in secret)

because he went to the same university as I did. Lately, I noticed how he had become more distant. He would take longer to reply and say, 'I'm just in class, I'll reply soon,' texting me over two hours later. I didn't think much of it at the time. I felt as though for the first time in our relationship I was the one making more of an effort. I decided that now it was my turn to put in the effort. I asked him to hang out more, texted him good morning first, and replied immediately.

I noticed he had also become vaguer in telling me about his day. He used to mention the classes he was in or friends he was in them with. I would get messages like 'I'm at uni.' Instead of telling me where he was going for lunch or who with he started saying, 'I'm going to get lunch.' Instead of telling me he was out at the movies with a certain friend, he would just say 'I'm going to the movies with a friend.' I wanted to know where and when he was going, what movie he was watching, or who he was going with at least. I had gotten used to it. I mean, that's normal conversation, isn't it? I felt like he was cutting me out, but I put it down to him just being busy at university, so I let it slide.

One night we went out to dinner with his family and his sister's boyfriend. We had to meet them at a Thai restaurant a little while away from our houses. We drove together and on the way, I brought up the fact that he had been a bit distant lately and that I wished he would tell me what was going on a little more. I don't know how the fight escalated, only that it did.

"Why aren't you being kind to me?" I said.

"Kind? Like Jake?"

I had had enough of arguing about Jake. I hardly saw him ever anymore. But Ben still fixated on him whenever we fought. The problem with being friends with Ben before dating him was that he had seen me dating someone else. He had listened to me say wonderful things to and about someone else. I could tell it bothered him. He couldn't ever seem to separate that that was then and this was now. He was acting unreasonably and we were late for dinner.

"I didn't say that Ben, but yes, like Jake." I was angry and said the wrong thing.

"You are always finding something wrong with me! I can't do anything right!"

I could see he was upset so I took a different approach, softening my voice and trying to explain that I wasn't angry, just confused that he used to act differently. But he was so defensive. I realised that there was more to his anger than he was letting on. Suddenly he was shouting. He pulled the car over to the side of the road and got out, leaving me sitting quietly while he walked around, kicking the ground. Finally, I got out and said:

“You're just not being very kind to me.”

“There's always something wrong!” he said angrily. Next thing I saw, Ben slammed his hand into the dirt ground extremely hard.

“Oh my gosh are you okay?” I screamed. That looked beyond painful.

“Ahhhh.” He complained.

His hand wasn't cut open, but it must have hurt because the ground was cold and solid. His behaviour was bizarre and it just didn't make sense. It was a normal evening – and I couldn't believe just how out of hand things had gotten. I grabbed a bottle of water, pouring it on his hand to try and soothe the throbbing. His behaviour was erratic and so unlike him. He wasn't acting like the guy I met at the video shop, he was acting like someone with anger management issues.

We sat in the car for a while until his hand felt a bit better. We drove the rest of the distance to the Thai restaurant in silence. We were late and his family was clearly unimpressed. I sat next to Ben as he made up some lie about why we were late. I didn't realise it then, but he told that lie a little too convincingly.

A text he sent on a happier day

You really are the one and only holder of the key to my heart <3 And I wake up every morning and I can't believe I am with you!!! My perfect girl! ☺ :0 I love you, for YOU! :) xXx Can't wait for Thursday cutie :) I'll call your mom and ask if I can make Thursday our Friday :P ☺ x I want to take you out for dinner! Xxxxxxx Anyways, goodnight gorgeous girl :) xXxxx <3 sweet dreams :) kisses goodnight... I love you!! xXx <3

Betrayal

Things were becoming more and more complicated between Ben and I. At times we argued over everything, while other times we laughed and smiled as though we were still the perfect couple.

Although our personalities suited each other well, we fought a lot because we had different views on some important things. One of these differences was our views about loyalty and betrayal. It is important to me to be with a guy who I know has my back. I need to date someone who I know will take my side in front of other people. I just want to know that someone would choose me above anything or anyone else. If I make someone my number 1, I expect to be his. To me, that is what loyalty entails.

Ben's view on all of this was different. He believed that if I had a problem with something he did, it should make sense to him too. He thought that if something seemed fair to him, based on his judgment and reasoning, or if he could explain why something should be okay, it was – like when it came to hanging out with girls.

Ben was friends with two sisters, The Jensions. In the past I had become a little jealous when he talked about them because he had told me that the younger sister had liked him for a while. He also said that he used to have a crush on the older one.

“When we were younger, she was scouted by a modelling agent. She looks a bit like Taylor Swift.”

I had had no problem with their friendship until realising that he had used them to try to make me jealous. I knew he was jealous of my first boyfriend, but that was no reason to play silly games. It was a bad move on his part because after that, whenever he wanted to see them, I wanted to be present.

One day we were watching tv together. I was supposed to go to Fiji with my family the next day. Somehow we got onto the topic of the girls, and our conversation took a turn.

“When you're gone,” he hesitated, “the Jensions want to come over.”

“So you want to hang out with other girls without me?” I said a little too aggressively.

“Whit, come on. They’re JUST FRIENDS.”

“Just friends?” Truth be told in my heart I believed they *were* just friends. But, after he had purposely tried to make me jealous a seed of doubt had been planted in my brain.

“You shouldn’t be hanging out with someone you used to like and someone who used to like you!” I said.

“Whit, hey you know I was just being silly and trying to make you jealous. The younger one probably didn’t like me and I exaggerated my crush on the older one. Whit, you’ve seen photos, you have nothing to worry about.” But jealousy had consumed me and suddenly they appeared as a threat. Maybe one would try something with him. I didn’t know which one to be more concerned about.

We argued for quite some time, and eventually Ben told me I was being silly and shouldn’t be bothered by it.

“So you’re going to see them without me?”

“Um... yes. I don’t see why not.” I was devastated. He could see the hurt in my eyes and still chose to see them. This made me even more suspicious.

“So what now? You’re fighting to see them? They must be SO important to you.” I wasn’t happy with him seeing them *alone*, without me. Especially not at night time. “You can’t see them.” Asking hadn’t helped so I tried telling him what to do.

Suddenly we were yelling and screaming. He stormed off to his car. In my anger tears were rolling down my cheeks. HE was the one who caused the situation. He had caused me to be worried about these girls, by TRYING to make me jealous. Who does that to someone they love? He wasn’t even patient enough to earn back my trust.

I followed him back to his house, heartbroken. I couldn’t believe he was prepared to choose seeing other female friends over me. Defending them and fighting for their relationship rather than ours was a huge betrayal. We shouted at each other

all the way to his front door, where his mother appeared with a concerned look on her face.

“What is going on here?” she said in a strong South African accent. Usually, I am able to contain myself in an argument, but I was so upset that I just carried on fighting in front of her. Then something happened that I will never forget.

He betrayed my trust and shouted:

“You have always hated them. Why do you have to call them sluts all the time?” Check mate. One thing about family friends is that the whole family is friends. His parents were friends with the girls’ parents. And that comment had not only allowed his mother into our personal business - but now it was now two against one. Ben had told me about some of the things that the girls had been up to at concerts and university.

“We don’t talk about The Jensions that way in this house. You shouldn’t say things like that. They’re decent girls.” She looked down her spectacles at me. I could see Ben in the background smiling smugly. I couldn’t believe he was framing me like this. He was aware that my dislike for them was the by-product of his immaturity months before. I had even met the younger sister, who was quite lovely. I was fuming because I hadn’t said a word about them. He had!

My blood was boiling. Slowly, I felt myself losing composure even more. Ben’s mother, as overprotective as she was, was a decent person. She had good values, and I knew she had no idea about the girls’ lifestyle. Ben obviously wouldn’t have told her. Well, two can play at that game, I thought to myself.

Before I could stop myself, I blurted out something I can’t remember, exposing one of the sisters’ wild antics at university. The smug grin disappeared from Ben’s face as the shock hit his mother square in the face. He could not believe what I had just revealed. The creases in his mother’s forehead deepened and I realised I had crossed a line. Ben had backed me into a corner and I lashed out. I wasn’t proud of what I said, but at least it wasn’t a lie. The worst thing I’d ever done was in confidence, agreed with him that their actions *were* indeed slutty. How dare he use that against me? After all, he was the one who told me all of this! I was livid. I left in a huff, ready to go to Fiji the next day. Ben had thrown me under a bus. He had sided

with other girls over me. And he could not have cared less that I was hurting, despite having caused the situation with the girls in the first place.

* * * *

The next morning we were supposed to leave for Fiji, but my father had hurt his back, so instead, my best friend and I travelled there for a girls' trip a few days later. I didn't tell Ben as I still did not want to talk to him.

Nicky and I had a blast. We drank Sangria, tanned by the pool or the ocean, ate ice cream and gossiped about our old classmates.

A few days later I got an email: "Thanks for letting me know you went to Fiji with Nicky. It's over." I started stressing. So, instead of going out for dinner, I spent the last night in Fiji trying to convince him via email that we could work things out. Nicky and I must have been a sad sight - two girls, one hugging the other in a crumpled mess on the bed, makeup done and ready to go out, with their heels on the floor. Every time I went on holiday this was what happened. As if the betrayal from the previous week hadn't been bad enough, he continued to wreck my holiday. But we did not break up. Once I returned to Auckland and went to see him, we smoothed things over as usual.

The car story

Basically, I am a little bit of a reckless driver. Safe and reckless at the same time. Safe+reckless = lucky. Yes, that's accurate. I like to drive faster than most people, and constantly feel as though people are racing against me, which of course is not true. But I am careful and aware of other drivers. However, I had run into a bit of bad luck. A few months ago I had crashed my mom's Mercedes. I was listening to music and looked back at my boyfriend in the back seat. To make matters worse, my autistic brother was in the front seat (he's the family's golden boy, and this was the first time I had actually been allowed to drive him around in the car). To add to this, the car I crashed into was a Lexus. Luckily the Lexus emerged with barely a scratch, even though the rich drivers seemed quite irritated and took down our number. Unfortunately for us, my mom's whole bonnet was beaten up. It had felt like a tap, but there was more damage than I had expected. Needless to say, she was furious. But my bad luck didn't end there...

A month later I drove to university. I had an early morning class at 8 am. I was driving around in my little silver Getz this time. The windscreen fogged up quite badly and was quite difficult to clear and I was going to be late. The sun was glaring through the fogged up windscreen so I drove slowly but carefully down the road. It was the same road that I had crashed my mom's car on the first time. I drove carefully on... and CRASH. I ran my car into the back of a truck. I must not have seen the traffic light turn red. The truck was white, so I had not even seen it in front of me. I jumped out of the car and apologised to the driver profusely. I had broken his back light. A man with worn out clothes smiled at me with kind eyes.

“Hey, don't worry about it. I think your car is more damaged anyways. Are you okay?”

“Yes thanks. Do you want my number?” I said as he walked away. “I might have broken your light.”

“No, it was like that before.”

It always amazes me at how often rich people make such big fusses over nothing. They think their money defines them or makes them better than someone else. I came face to face with someone who clearly was not well-off, yet he was more concerned about my well-being. Sometimes it's difficult to understand why some people are rich and others are poor. I guess if wealth was determined by the size of people's hearts things would be a lot different in this world.

I drove around the corner, forgetting my lateness, and parked my car to assess the damage. I got out and nearly fainted. The bonnet was completely destroyed. Not again! I called Ben. Ring ring. No answer. ANSWER, come on.

Finally, a groggy voice answered, "Hey baby, what's wrong? Are you ok?" After hysterically explaining the problem to him, he said, "I'll be there in 5." Somehow it was going to be ok. Ben is an engineer. He was actually an engineering student, but to me, he was a qualified genius. I trusted in his abilities completely.

I waited, tapping my fingers on the dashboard in nervous anxiety. When he arrived with a worried expression on his face and hair pushed to one side, I smiled. I

couldn't help it. He subtly shook his head from side to side, grinning too. He took one look at the car.

“Oh boy.”

“Oh boy? Don't say that! That's not good.” We drove the car to a garage and started looking online.

“The bonnet needs to be replaced. I can try to bump it out and back into shape. But I think it's too damaged.”

First, we drove to a paint place to get the right colour mixed. We bought a spray can of paint the exact silver colour of my car. After Ben tried to bump out the bonnet and sprayed paint on it, we realised that it was not working. Our plan A had failed, so we turned to plan B. By this stage I was seriously stressing. My parents would be so angry if they had found out I had had a SECOND crash in a month.

“Right, we need to get a bonnet.” We looked at panel beaters and called up different car dealerships. Nothing worked. No one had the colour bonnet we were looking for. Finally, one came up in a place about an hour's drive from where we were.

“What colour is it?”

“Silver.”

“Thank goodness!”

We had one problem. I had to get to tennis coaching, my part time job. I had already skipped my university classes and I couldn't not show up for work.

“Don't worry about it. I'll sort it,” he said. He was a lifesaver. He drove all the way across town. During coaching, I gave him a quick call. Nightmare. The bonnet was not silver – because it wasn't painted. Oh no. Ben said he had a plan.

After coaching, I got a call from my mom. “Where are you?”

“At tennis.”

“Why is Ben driving your car? You didn’t ask if you could lend it to anyone. Get home now.” My mother had seen Ben speeding around the corner, probably because he had seen her too and tried to drive away before she noticed the problem with the bonnet.

I called Ben. “Almost done,” he said. The bonnet looked as good as new. He just needed to let the paint dry first. “We have one more problem. We need a gloss finish to coat the bonnet. It sort of looks like matte paint, not shiny like the rest of the car.” We had run out of time, the shops were all closed. But there was still light in the sky.

Ben picked me up in his car, dropped me off home and sped off again.

“Where’s your car?” My mom asked angrily. “Tell him to get home now.” But I begged Ben to not bring the car in the sunlight.

“Your mom just texted me. She’s mad. Are you ok? What’s up?”

“I think she’ll be fine. I’m just reading and eating grapes.”

“What?”

To this day he hasn’t forgotten how he was driving around frantically like a chicken with its head cut off, when I was relaxing.

About 20 minutes later, when the sun had set, he brought the car home. My mother was still angry, but luckily in the lost light, she did not notice the different bonnet. We would make sure the car would get a gloss layer the next morning.

* I ended up telling my dad I had crashed the car and then, after he told me he couldn’t keep a secret from my mom, I had to tell her immediately too.

But, that’s not the point of the story. The point of this story is that Ben is a rock star.

Text fight

It was almost midnight and we were arguing over text. For the last few months I had felt as though I was walking on eggshells around Ben. I avoided upsetting him because a fight would lead to him telling me the six words I dreaded the most. “I think we should break up.” Somehow I stayed with him anyway.

The fight started because I had questioned his reasons for not texting me back for half the day. For the last two months, he had hardly texted me. He had started a new job which kept him busy, but even when he was at university, or at home, he hardly sent me more than two messages in a day, where he used to send around fifty.

I really struggled to get to sleep when we were fighting. I was wide awake. So I decided to try something different. The text conversation was going in circles so I snuck out of my house and went to his house to say sorry. I didn’t care that he *had* changed, or that I thought he was in the wrong. I was in love and I didn’t want to fight anymore. I climbed out of my window and carefully, quietly, tiptoed on the roof to the other side of the house, as far from my parents’ room as possible. I jumped onto the fence and jumped down again onto the ground. As my feet landed on the cold concrete driveway at the front of my house, my ankles jarred. But the burning in my ankles was short lived and I quickly ran to Ben’s house. I texted him “Hey, look outside.” A face appeared at the window.

“Go home Whit. We will talk about this tomorrow.”

“No, I want a hug. Let’s sort it out now.”

“No,” he said, my parents will wake up.

“Well then can’t you just let it go?”

“No Whit. Sometimes you just have to wait. GO home or I’ll text your mom.” I was shocked. The guy that I loved so much was forcing me to go home, after I had made such an effort to keep the peace and work things out. I didn’t even know why our conversation had turned into a fight in the first place. Humiliated, I walked back home in my pyjamas, really upset. Either I was losing touch, or he was, but one thing was for sure, something had changed. He was not treating me well anymore, he was not treating me with respect.

Texts in tougher times...

The most important thing to me is that I'm a good person. The person, whose opinion I value most, just told me that I'm not... I'm not sulking... I've got nothing to say to you...

Seriously, I did not just say that Ben, I don't understand? It's just I didn't think you could hurt me so much BECAUSE you are SUCH a good and nice person. But you have. You've hurt me SO much :(. Those texts were cruel and THAT was mean.

The big fight

Ben and I had been dating for the past 8 months. He was my best friend, my confidant, my biggest supporter and the person I trusted more than anyone - but things had been difficult. I couldn't help thinking how much things had changed since we first started going out. He used to be so kind and carefree. We still had a great relationship except for one thing – the way we fought. I don't know exactly how it started, but our fights had been getting worse. The only serious thing we fought about was Jake. Jake was more present in our lives than he should have been – than I should have let him be. I still felt torn between being with Ben and protecting Jake's heart. Ben had been acting more distant than usual and although I knew he was in love with me, things just weren't the same. He didn't seem crazy about me anymore. And to make matters worse, I honestly believed that he was starting to do things to purposely hurt me.

The last few fights had been awful. The worst part was that we both had crossed lines. Sometimes I got so frustrated at his intentional cruelty that I'd scream at him, and he would swear at me. We would both swear. I am ashamed to say that sometimes when I was blind with hurt I would say things like "You little shit." And "You're such an asshole!" We would both say things we didn't mean. The problem with that is that once the words are out, they're out. And every time one of us said something bad, it broke down the relationship a little more. I was starting to lose

respect for him. And I'm sure the fact that he swore at me, and I still didn't leave him said it all – he was losing respect for me too. At times I would be crying, tears streaming down my face, sobbing and hiccupping out why I was hurt. And he would reply: "Stop crying. I make you so sad! We just shouldn't be together."

At times he would laugh, sneer at me, or tell me I had nothing to cry about. I could not take it anymore. It was hurtful. Who does that? I thought that if I became calmer and handled our fights better, he would too. No such luck. He still swore, drove away from me in a huff, called me names and treated me badly.

On top of everything, his telesales job was stressing him out. As if that type of job isn't soul-killing enough, the hours were horrendous. He started at 6 and ended at 2 am. I was constantly worried about him driving home because he was out so late.

"Please, just let me know when you get home," I asked.

Every night for some strange reason when the clock struck 3 am, I would sit up bolt right and check my phone. When there were no messages I would get very stressed, guessing the reason he could have for not replying. I would call and text to no avail. Was he okay? Had he arrived home safely? Was he working overtime? I hope he hadn't raced his car home. Was he mad at me? If so why? What did I do? These thoughts would keep me up for hours. I just couldn't read him anymore. I was a nervous wreck. Finally I'd get to sleep with a tear stained face at around four am each morning. I was devastated. What was happening? He was just like a different person.

When I woke up a few hours later I would frantically check my phone. Still nothing. Some days he wouldn't reply until midday. "Oh sorry, I forgot my charger." Always the same excuse – or another one. I knew he was doing it on purpose. And the job seemed to be making things worse. He pocket dialled me once and I could hear him chatting on the phone, trying to persuade someone to buy Thin Lizzie, one of the products he was selling. I was surprised for two reasons. He was very good and definitely had the gift of the gab, *and* I hated how good he was. I could never have done a job like that – persuading people to buy things that they don't really need. It would kill me. But yet, the guy I loved was brilliant at it. That was a red flag to my brain, but obviously, my heart disagreed.

I didn't like what I thought the job was doing to him. He seemed stressed out

all the time and was constantly in a bad mood, snapping at me if I said the slightest thing wrong.

One Tuesday I had had enough. We were sitting on the beach, just before he began work. I knew he didn't have much time, but I had wanted to tell him that something was on my mind and had been bothering me for days. A neighbour had alerted my mother to the fact that Ben's mother had been gossiping about me to other neighbours, telling them that the fights we had been having were my fault and that I treated Ben badly. I was angry upon hearing this and told Ben. He replied: "I don't believe you, my mother would never do that."

Prior to this, I had nothing against his mother. My only concern was that she was a bit too over protective and controlling with her 23-year-old son - but Ben and I were on the same page with that, so I had no negative feelings towards her. However, it seemed that whenever I told him anything bad about her that I knew was true, he took her side. I had never had any issues with Jake's parents. To this day I still think they're lovely. But Ben's mother seemed to have some level of control over him, rendering him unable to consider the possibility that perhaps she could have done something wrong.

It hurt when I found out what she had said, but not nearly as much as the fact that my boyfriend didn't even believe me. To me, there's nothing worse than that. Ben was feeding seagulls liquorice. "Look at me." I had said. But his obvious refusal to talk about this topic was evident. He didn't even try to say something nice. He just told me to drop it and that he didn't believe it.

I had had enough. Tears were welling in my eyes. But the drops didn't fall. I was furious. He wanted to drop me off at my car, but I wanted to finish our conversation, so we drove to his work.

"I'm going to be late Whit!" He was getting really stressed.

"This is more important," I said. "You are being *so* unfair and unkind to me. I can't take it anymore." Then the swearing began. He parked his car on the side of the street near his work and started shouting.

"Get out! I have to go to work."

“No!” I said, holding my ground. He screamed at me again. “No!” I said, crying.

“Well, then I’m leaving,” he sneered. I held onto his work shoes which he hadn’t put on yet. I didn’t want him to go in such a state. I had never seen him so mad. His face was turning pink and I could see a blue vein throbbing in his forehead.

“I swear if you don’t give me my shoes and let me go I’ll break this windshield.”

“Calm down!” I shouted. What he said after that was a blur, but what happened next was something I’ll never forget. In his frustrated state of mind, he slammed his fist into the windshield. Blood shot out from his hand. “Oh my g*d are you okay?” I was so scared.

I had never been so scared in my life. Adrenalin must have been kicking in or something, because I didn’t get out of the car and leave, something any normal person would have done. Instead, I held his injured hand and stayed. He grabbed his stuff, got out of the car and started walking down the street in a huff.

“You can’t go to work like this!”

“Just leave me alone Whit. It’s over.” I walked next to him. He pushed me away on my shoulders. “Ben, stop it. You can’t go into work like this. You’ll get fired.” He slammed his iPhone into the ground. “What the hell are you doing Ben?” I screamed.

He went back to the car, which I stupidly jumped into. He started driving. “I’m going home.” As he drove, I reminded him that he had to have a reason for not showing up for work. We were on the way back home and the next second, he did the craziest wheelie I had ever seen and spun the entire car around in the opposite direction so that he could go back to work. Smoke came out from the burning tyres as I ducked down in my seat from embarrassment. The other drivers in the traffic must have thought he was insane.

We drove back in tense silence and I turned up to his work, lying that his mother had been in a minor car crash. Looking back I couldn’t believe I lied about something like that, or was even able to. I’m a terrible and inexperienced liar - but I felt responsible for starting the fight and wanted to ensure Ben still had a job.

By the time he drove me back to my car, he had calmed down. "Are you ok?" he said.

"Um, yeah..." I replied quietly. My head was still spinning. I was in shock. He could see that. He gave me a hug and we sat there for a while, taking everything in.

"We can go chat maybe?" he said, solemnly.

"Okay, sure," I said, hopeful.

"Meet me at our usual place."

We drove off in separate cars. He led the way. But as we got onto the motorway, I noticed the distance between our cars increasing. He was getting further and further in front of me, passing car after car and weaving in-between the lanes. I struggled to keep up. Eventually, I couldn't see him anymore. 'Oh well,' I thought, he probably was there already. I drove to our spot and realised immediately what had happened. He had tricked me. He wasn't there. I sped home as fast as I could, and, to my horror, I saw his car parked outside my house. I walked inside, only to find my boyfriend crying. He was talking to my mom. He had told her that he wanted to break up with me because he was not good for me. I realised that he was freaking out, but what I don't think he understood was that letting my mother know we were having problems was an awful idea. Because I knew that although she wanted to help, unfortunately, she would not forget those things.

* * * *

A few days later when I arrived home after university, I found two soaps on my stairs. I could not believe it. A few days before I had given Ben's mother the soap as a gift.

"What is this?" I asked my parents."

"Oh, Ben's mother came around and left them for you."

"Um, no she didn't – she returned them! I gave them as a gift to her!" My parents were shocked. Even they thought that was cold. We had just broken up. Why would she go out of her way to do that? It was as though she was trying to send me a

message. I thought it was so cruel. Who does that? I knew Ben would have had no idea.

Furious, I almost went to return the soap in my immature anger. But I calmed down and instead vented to Nicky on the phone, who also couldn't believe the cruelty.

"What a b*tch!" She shouted down the line. Nicky, my now outspoken friend, voiced her evil plan. "You know what we should do? We should save up a few old soaps – like I dunno, the ones with hair stuck onto them, and throw it onto their lawn to send a message."

"Yeah!" I laughed, "That will teach her." I loved chatting to Nicky because she always made me laugh. Her ideas were crazy but she made me feel a little better.

A few days later Nicky and I were driving to my house, blasting our music as usual. We were in a particularly crazy mood and as we neared Ben's house Nicky said: "Hey, drive a little slower." At first, I didn't know what she was talking about – and then I remembered our conversation on the phone. I watched in horror as Nicky pulled out a disgusting, old, used soap from her handbag. As I realised what was about to happen, I grabbed Nicky's wrist. But it was too late. In a matter of seconds, she had opened the window, and just as I had grabbed her wrist she had flung the soap into Ben's front yard for anyone to see. I felt sick. As I was driving I couldn't do much.

"What on earth did you do that for?" I said with widened eyes.

"I thought we discussed this." She said calmly.

I laughed. How couldn't I. But after a good laugh, I thought back to reality.

"Nicky, she's gonna hate me! Go get it – NOW!"

We drove around the block once and then I made Nicky jump out as I circled the perimeter. When I came to pick her up she had a stunned expression on her face.

"It's gone!" She shouted.

“What?” I paused. “Just get in.” She jumped in the car and we drove to my house, giggling like crazy. I shuddered to think what had happened to the soap in such a short amount of time. My guess was that Ben’s mother had seen the whole thing unfold from the kitchen window which we had been in plain sight of.

My 21st birthday... without him

After our fight, Ben and I didn’t contact each other for some time. We were both in shock about what had happened. But as usual, when the dust had settled we somehow ended up together again. A few months before the fight, my birthday party guest list had come up in conversation. I had mentioned to Ben that Jake was on my list of invites, and he had seemed to have no problem with it. The invites had been sent and Jake had accepted.

I had been planning my 21st birthday party for a long time, and everything seemed like it was going smoothly, until about a month before the party. I thought back to the guest list.

“By the way, thanks again for letting me invite Jake. It’s just he was an important part of my life for 2 years. This is the last time I’ll invite him to something, it’s just it is important to me.” Ben looked at me incredulously. ‘What now?’ I thought. As usual, Ben had changed his mind.

“That’s fine, but you know girly, I can’t be there if he is. It’s just awkward.” I froze inside. ‘Please, don’t make a big deal - not this time,’ I thought, not on my 21st.

“It will be fine!” I said a little too desperately. “It’s been a long time and I need you there. You are my boyfriend - there’s no way you can miss my 21st!”

But that was that. He had his mind made up. I was upset. If he had told me that he wouldn’t come if I invited Jake too, I wouldn’t have invited Jake in the first place. Ben was putting me in a very difficult situation. He didn’t seem to care. A few weeks later I asked again, but he said he had to work that night anyway.

* * * *

When the night of my 21st birthday party arrived balloons were scattered all over the house. I felt like a queen getting ready, with all the ladies-in-waiting flocking around me, helping me decide on the right shoes and accessories. My friend Davi was curling my hair, while Nicky and Megan sat on the bed chatting excitedly. I could hear cars pulling up near and parking near our house.

For a while, I had a fear that everyone was going to forget my birthday, or that only half the guests would show up, and that I would be embarrassed – but tonight, somehow, that didn't matter. Only one person did. I received a call and shrieked as I saw Ben's number flash on my phone. I took the call outside. I was excited because I really believed he would surprise me. I mean, who misses their girlfriend's 21st? But he had only called to say, "I hope you have a great time, I'm sure you will. I'm sorry I can't be there. I love you."

I thanked him and hung up. I took a deep breath. My hands were shaking and I felt sick. I stood in silence for a few moments and really thought about the situation. I had two options. I could either let him ruin my night and destroy another good memory - like he had done quite a few times already with petty fights - Or, I could choose to enjoy my 21st birthday, with many friends and my family around me. As all these thoughts were circling around my head Vince arrived, handing me a present.

Usually, I did not enjoy myself when Ben was not around, but, for some reason that night I had an absolute blast. It was one of the best nights of my life. Seven of my friends gave lovely speeches and I took many photos and chatted to everyone. At the end of the night, I opened all my presents with a few of my closest friends who had decided to sleep over. I laughed when I opened the present Vince had given me. It was a DVD of "Anger Management." I smiled to myself – guessing that he was giving me a hint about Ben. It really had been the best birthday ever.

That night, as I went to bed, I thought about how Ben must have felt by me inviting Jake. I felt sorry about it and regretted inviting him because it hurt Ben – but I slept soundly, because I knew that I had done the right thing by not retracting his invitation. Wanting to invite my ex to my birthday was insensitive to Ben, but that didn't excuse the fact that he should have said something before I invited Jake. He should have voiced his opinion months ago and told me if he didn't like what was going on. He should have been honest. But what irritated me the most was that this pattern had occurred many times before. To be honest, it was starting to feel like Groundhog day. Ben would break up with me, disappearing from my life and living

his. Then, just when I began living mine again, he would reappear, expecting me to drop everything. I went to bed, strangely happy, but concerned that the one person who I thought would always have my back – didn't.

Nightmare in South Africa

It was a few days after my 21st. I was going to leave for South Africa the next day to visit the extended family. We had a small gathering to say goodbye to a few people. I greeted my friends and then I saw Jake. I hardly ever saw Jake anymore, but he had wanted to say goodbye and I had agreed. I texted Ben to let him know what was happening and left with my ex.

Jake took me to a forest path and as I was wearing a long dress he offered to give me a piggyback to the place he wanted to show me. As I knew Jake so well, I accepted the offer in order not to rip my dress on the plants covering the track. We arrived at a waterfall. It was beautiful. We sat and chatted on a little bench nearby. After a while we found ourselves sitting in silence, taking in the surroundings. Jake looked at me for a while before speaking.

“You know I still love you Whit.”

I was uncomfortable. “Jake...” I said slowly. I still hadn't found the time to tell him I had a boyfriend, and this was why. I knew he was still not ready to hear it yet. He wanted to kiss me, but I wouldn't let him. I started crying because I could see the hurt in his eyes. He didn't understand. And I wasn't going to give him the real reason. So I just said something about it being too difficult for me. He understood and kissed me on the cheek. I didn't know what to say. I still cared about him a lot, but I was so in love with Ben, and the guilt from me having found someone while Jake still had those feelings for me was tearing me up inside. I decided to walk on the way back to the car. I went home and said goodbye to Jake.

Later Ben came to fetch me. I was very excited to see him. We chatted for a while about my 21st, which still really hurt. As the conversation progressed, he wanted to know about seeing Jake - so I was crystal clear with my description. I told him about the drive, the waterfall and the piggyback. As I said it aloud it sounded wrong to me. I realised that I had definitely handled the situation badly.

Ben was livid. He was angry at the fact I hadn't just said goodbye at my house, and that I had gone to a romantic location with my ex-boyfriend. He was even angrier that he had kissed me on the cheek and told me about his feelings. But mostly he was furious about the fact that I had accepted a piggy back from someone I used to date. To him it was unacceptable.

Immediately I understood. I just needed to put the shoe on the other foot to realise I had done something wrong. I explained to him how it was difficult in those situations because Jake didn't know I was going out with someone else. I said that if he did there was no way he would do that. Although Ben cared about Jake's feelings at the start, I noticed how as the months went on Ben cared more about his own feelings – which was understandable because they were seriously getting hurt. Ben told me he couldn't handle it anymore. I apologised, crying because I could see his hurt. He wanted to drive away but I asked him not to because it was our last day together before I left. He didn't leave. I was surprised that he stopped fighting with me. I could see he was not happy at all but was holding himself together for once. I knew I had acted inappropriately. He accepted the apology and we hugged goodbye. I was sad that we would be spending a month apart.

* * * *

Christmas arrived a few days later, when I was in South Africa, surrounded by my family and friends. It was supposed to be another happy time, but instead, I was stressing. I hadn't heard from Ben since I'd left. I constantly checked all the portholes a message could have come from – but nothing. I was getting worried.

Then, a few days after Christmas, I got a one-liner email. “Whit, I haven't been replying to your messages because I don't want to make it more difficult than it has to be – but it's over. I can't do this anymore.” I felt sick to my stomach. The stress of receiving a message like that when so far from my boyfriend was crazy. I didn't know what had happened. I replied immediately, only to receive another one-liner the next day. Ben had had enough. It seemed that he was so hurt by the Jake incident that he couldn't get past it. I was confused because I thought we had moved past it after I had apologised in New Zealand. I told him that I would do anything for him and that if he needed me to completely cut Jake out of my life, I would. I felt annoyed at myself for not realising before how upset he was. I felt like the world's worst girlfriend. But I knew it was not the time for self-pity - I had to fight for him. And I did. I promised to never do something to hurt him like that again.

My anxiety would wake me up before 5 am, which was when Ben would usually send emails. Sometimes when the internet was intermittent - which is not uncommon in South Africa, I would grab the laptop and tiptoe downstairs to the tiny bathroom where I got more signal. I kept refreshing my emails. I was determined to reply to Ben as soon as possible.

Every morning I would wake up to a horrible message that said, "I don't love you anymore. The feeling is gone." I panicked. I had nightmares. I felt sick. I was tired from waking up so early every morning. Sometimes Ben didn't even reply, in which case I would send about 5 emails begging for forgiveness. It was really terrible. I was frustrated that I couldn't be near him to fix the problem and give him a big hug.

I became withdrawn from everyone. On a trip to the beach, I started crying because I saw some penguins, which was the bird that my boyfriend had told me reminded him of us because it had one mate for life, and he told me he thought of me that way. I was devastated. No one could help me. I was spiralling out of control. I was depressed and not fun to be around.

Vince was visiting his family in South Africa at the time and decided to come see me for a few days. I had warned him before his arrival that the family members we were visiting, especially my aunt Lilla, were not shy about expressing themselves through the use of 'bad language.' Since my immediate family doesn't like to swear if they can help it, it is always funny hearing what words come out of our relatives' mouths when we visit them. They swear so much that even their African Grey parrot took up the family tradition. The first day he arrived, we sat and chatted at the kitchen table with my friend Megan, who was also visiting. He had met a few family members, but not my aunt. Lilla is a warm, kind and caring soul. She is my mother's oldest sibling, and she is sort of like the nestly mother hen of the family. But Lilla has become a little bit of a battle axe, and the apparently once quiet, soft spoken girl, now swears like a sailor. After chatting for about 5 minutes, Lilla came into view, appearing in the middle of the hallway.

"Where is Tyler's ***** beach towel?" She shouted in Afrikaans at one of her sons. I looked in horror at Vince, who was trying not to laugh.

Sharp as a tack, he commented: "Oh hi there, you must be Lilla."

Megan and I burst into laughter. It felt good to find some happiness in-between all the sadness.

* * * *

One day when Vince and I went shopping at the waterfront, he noticed I was in a bad mood. He advised me to forget about Ben because he was being a jerk. He told me that if he wasn't accepting my apologies I was better off without him. I defended Ben and told Vince that no matter what I was in the wrong and Ben was just hurting. Vince told me that was no excuse and that I should move on. He said it was becoming difficult to be friends with me seeing how upset I was all the time.

I looked him in the eyes and told him something I will remember saying forever. I remember saying this because I don't think I had ever meant anything more in my life. I believed what I said with an absolute passion.

“No one, absolutely no one, could ever love another human being as much as I love him...” I said to him... All I knew is that on that day, at that time, I meant what I said with every bone in my body. I loved Ben, and I was going to get him back...

My plan to save my relationship

I was stuck in South Africa, thousands of miles away from my boyfriend (who I didn't want to be my ex)... This fight was the worst one yet. Not only did he want to break up, but he seemed pretty set on it being final. I had continued to apologise, but unfortunately, nothing was working. Eventually, I decided to take drastic measures. I needed to see him and tell him that I was sorry in person. He had stopped replying to my emails and I was not handling it well. I told my parents I wanted to leave South Africa early. They thought I was not going out with Ben anymore so they weren't aware it had anything to do with him.

My mother changed the tickets so I could fly home a few days early. 17 hours split between two different planes and I was home. I had been planning my speech the entire journey. The second I arrived home I started unpacking my suitcase, which was only half filled with clothes - the other half was filled with stuffed toys, candy and other gifts for Ben. One of the last emails I had received said that when I got home he

wouldn't be there, because he was going on a trip for a while to take some time away. I knew he wanted the space but I desperately needed to see him. I didn't tell him that I was flying home for him a few days early.

I had a bath, washed my hair and tried to look as pretty as possible. I knew he would still be working at his killer job at the telesales company. He would probably only arrive home at around 3 am. At 3 I went to his house, and he must have already been home because the light was on and his car was parked outside. I waited outside in the fresh January air, my arms filled with stuffed toys. Just before I was about to text him, he came into view. I could see him in the lit up hallway of his house. He paused and stared at me. I stared back at him. A minute later he disappeared from view, going downstairs to open the door. He hugged me. I started sobbing.

“It will be okay,” he said.

“Please give us one week. Just one week.” I cried.

He did. My family was away for another week. And I planned the next 7 days for Ben and me to make sure we would be okay. I planned romantic dinners and trips to the beach and city. I was fighting harder than I had ever fought before. I wasn't going to let him go. He was worth it.

A lonely Valentine's day

Things went well for a while, but after a few weeks, we had broken our no-fight streak. Although we were still going out, our relationship status had taken a step back. We were ‘Unofficial’ – a term I still to this day never understood. Because Ben was still very hurt from everything that had happened with Jake, he had insisted we take a 6-month "break". I understood this to a point because I tried putting myself in Ben's shoes and realised I couldn't have gone through what he had. He truly had been very strong in supporting my decisions with Jake and with trying to get over things. I also thought it must have been even more difficult for him because I was his first girlfriend. I knew that because of his emotions like jealousy and hurt were accentuated, which must have made things even tougher for him. But even though I tried to sympathise, when I heard him say he wanted time apart, my heart sank.

His absence left a gaping hole in my life. I missed having dinner with him, walking our dogs, watching tv or just chatting. I was so lonely and heart sore - constantly. I hated wondering where he was too, because unlike me, he never seemed to be home. I cried every day and worried about what the future would hold. The cards were not in my hands and I was scared.

When February arrived, so did the date of our one year anniversary. I hoped Ben would see me. As the day turned into the evening, the drop in temperature seemed symbolic of the cold, harsh reality – I would not be celebrating with Ben. I couldn't believe I wouldn't be wearing the beautiful satin blue dress I had bought months before, especially for the occasion. Although Ben had ignored the fact that we had missed a milestone in our relationship, somehow I always gave him the benefit of the doubt and thought that there was no way, even with the distance between us, that he would not show some speck of love towards me on Valentine's day. It was a big deal to both of us and we liked celebrating these occasions. But, as the hours in the day passed I sadly realised that maybe it was just me. Maybe he really didn't care anymore.

I drove home from buying him a rose and to my surprise saw him driving the opposite way in his car. By chance, we both stopped at the front of the line of cars at opposite ends of the stop lights by the intersection. He looked at me and I melted... We looked at each other for a long time, until his light turned green. He waved at me as he drove away. I thought that the wave was a good sign and awaited a text when I arrived home. He had to send me one after that. What were the chances we would coincidentally run into each other on this day? But the day turned quickly into night and I realised that no text was about to arrive.

Later that evening I took a slow drive into the city and went to the museum where it all started. It was one of our special places that I know will be engraved into my heart forever – because it's where I fell so deeply in love with him. Early on in the relationship, he had taken me there on one of our first dates. From then on we had picnics on the grass and spent many hours on summers evenings looking up at the stars. The museum was always lit up and looked magical. Very soon it became our spot. I always felt at peace whenever I visited. And in tougher times I would always go there to clear my head.

No one was around, so I walked solemnly to the pillars near the entrance and sat down at the top of the steps, leaning against one. I listened to my music on my iPhone

and played 'our' songs. I looked into the distance at the beautiful surroundings and city lights and then the waterworks began. I cried and cried until I couldn't anymore. It hurt so much that the person I loved so much wouldn't even send me a kind message on Valentine's day. I had taken a permanent marker with and started writing something on the concrete ground.

"I will always love you <8>" I left the rose on the ground next to the writing and started to walk back to my car when suddenly a couple my age appeared. I saw them walking towards me, clearly in love and amazingly happy. They were both dressed up and talking to each other. I tried to turn away in an attempt to hide my tears, but the girl noticed.

"Hey, are you okay?" She asked me.

I don't know how it took a complete stranger to ask me this, but I started pouring out my feelings. I told the couple about my rose and that my boyfriend wanted a break and that I understood it but I just wanted some confirmation that he still cared. The girl looked at me with kind eyes.

"It's going to be okay," she said softly. "If you ask me he's being an idiot."

The guy chimed in and said some calming words. "He's lucky to have you, so don't worry, he probably just doesn't know how lucky yet."

They said goodbye and I wished them a happy Valentine's Day. I wiped my tears and suddenly felt much better. I was starting to get messages on my phone as no one knew where I was, so I headed home again. Weeks later I found out that Ben had also gone to the museum that night, and he had found the rose and the message I had left there. He took a photo of it... Things like this made being with Ben so confusing. I was hurting and it was the worst Valentine's Day I had ever had.

The Final Break Up

We had been on a break for four months and it was killing me. We spent time together once a month. Every time we saw each other we had a great time, but he never put my heart at ease. He told me he loved me but didn't say much more. It was so difficult because he refused to let me know where I stood. When you have been with someone for a while and have heard them tell you many times that they want to marry you, it is difficult to take a huge step back and hear that they are unsure of you. I was raised to know my self-worth, and somehow Ben was not making me feel great about myself. I felt like an option. I knew that I deserved to be someone's first and only choice.

Then, one day he texted me, saying that if I was free we could hang out that night. I was beside myself with excitement. It wasn't even time for our monthly meet up yet. This was what I had been waiting for – a sign that he still loved me. This was the first in a long time HE had texted me to hang out, as these days I felt like I was the one making all the effort, asking, begging in fact, for more time with my boyfriend. Naturally, I said yes.

I spent hours getting ready, put on a dress that I knew he loved and spent a long time on my makeup. I looked great. I was ready.

We hung out and had the best time. I had been socialising with a few friends during the tough time. One was a good friend I had known for years – Mikaela, and another was a fairly new friend called Vince. Vince was a lovely guy who worked as an accountant at a big accountancy firm. He did some work for my mother and she had introduced us. He was great to talk. Because I had made plans with him the night after, naturally I let Ben know. He thanked me for telling him and we continued to enjoy the night. For the first time in months, things seemed to be looking up. Things weren't tense or stressed, and Ben seemed quite normal. I remember the night as being romantic and special.

The next day I was still on cloud nine as I got a text from Ben that said "Hey I'm pretty busy today, but I'll text you a bit later. I love you." I thought nothing of it and replied happily. My head was in the clouds and my heart felt light for the first time in ages. I was optimistic. I practically skipped around all day, daydreaming about my favourite person. As the day went on, though, there was still no message from Ben. I began to worry. We had left things on such a high the day before, so I really

didn't know why he was acting distant. I put thoughts of worry out of my mind – He was probably just crazy busy with university.

The day turned into night and still no message. I sent him another one but still received no reply. Now I knew something was up. It frustrated me so much that we could be so happy and everything seemed fine, and then out of nowhere he would be up to his old tricks again, playing mind games, being vague or not texting me back. Before I went to bed that night, I prayed. I prayed that he would change and that things would go back to how they used to be. I prayed for us, and I prayed that I would be happy again.

The next morning I woke early, grabbing my phone as soon as I could open my eyes. Still nothing. I sat up, clutching my duvet cover. I don't know what it was, but I felt different that morning. I was still hurt, upset, broken-hearted, but something had changed. All right Whit, give him twenty-four hours. I had sent my second last text at 12 pm the day before. I'd give him until 12 pm again.

Because I woke up early, the hours dragged by painfully. I checked my phone every two minutes. I don't know what I was expecting. I was hoping that he was going to reply, and some part of me truly believed it. It was that same part of me that believed in our love more than anything. If there was one thing I believed in, it was that he was the one for me. I didn't want to give up. But I had been treated so badly for so long that I honestly was at the end of my rope. I think I actually reached the end of my rope a long time ago, but my love for him made me tie a knot at the bottom and hang on. He was my guy. And he was worth the fight.

Then the clock struck 12, and I knew what I had to do. I stared at my phone the entire minute. As the time changed to 12.01, I shivered. It was time. I had already drafted the message. I had drafted a breakup message to the love of my life! In the message, I explained how I was feeling (for the hundredth time). I expressed my feelings towards Ben and told him how amazing I thought he was. I told him how much he meant to me, how much I loved him and how in love I was. But then I told him it was over. I explained that I could not take the bad treatment anymore. I could not take the stress, the hurt, the second guessing, disrespect. And most of all, I could not fight anymore. I had fought so hard for him, I had fought more than I had ever fought for anything in my entire life. I had given him the benefit of the doubt that he would change back to who he used to be. I had ignored everyone telling me to break

up with him. I had put him first in my life and I had loved him with every part of my soul – and it still didn't work.

So I pressed send. I broke up with him. And I didn't just say it for effect. I meant it. We were done.

When I sent the message I felt a bit sick almost. But I don't think it really hit me for a while. I know that when I sent it I felt a sort of lightness, easiness. There was definitely a weight off my shoulders. I had made the decision for a few reasons. Firstly, I was fighting so hard to keep him in my life, but he wasn't fighting to keep me in his. Secondly, he was treating me badly, and being mean to me. Also, he was messing with my self-esteem and hurting me intentionally by telling me he loved me but didn't know if I was the one for him anymore. And lastly, I felt like although he thought of me as his number one, he didn't treat me like it. He didn't make me feel like I was his number one. He made me feel like an option when he should've made me feel like a first and only choice. That made me feel replaceable. And NO guy should make his girl feel that way.

And finally, to make matters more interesting, he didn't reply to my text. At all. Surely someone who loves you would reply to a breakup text? They would fight to keep you? Ben? No ways. That was the final straw. The fact that he did not even fight for me once I had broken up with him, showed me I had made the right decision to leave. I deserved better than that. I think he probably thought I was just making empty threats – or that I didn't mean what I said and was just hurt. Maybe he thought that because of all those times he had threatened to break up with me. I questioned the extent of his love for me. And by him not replying, I got my answer. We were done, and I was finally free.

The Last goodbye

After I sent him the message saying that I wanted to break up, I realised that I was actually okay. I realised I had been feeling so lonely when we were together, that when we weren't it was only a small step down the ladder. I was only a bit lonelier. It had been about 7 weeks since the breakup, and Ben had only texted me once, when he saw me driving to a party and got jealous I was driving in the direction of Vince's house. (I was actually en route to one of my good friend's twenty firsts – stopping nearby Vince's house to collect him along with another (gay) friend to take with. So

naturally I didn't reply to Ben's text as it was mean and hurtful and because I was still mad he hadn't replied to my original breakup. In this time I had really been relying on my good friends' support. Mikaela and Vince were really helping me through the tough time. Mikaela was the sweetest. When I broke up with Ben she was the first person who showed up at my door with my favourite ice chocolate frappes and a box of chocolates. On Valentine's Day she surprised with chocolates and other days she left notes on my car after coaching to cheer me up. We had movie nights and she really was there for me when I needed her for anything, whether it was to talk or just hang out with to distract myself from missing my ex.

Vince was great too because he was also always there for me. We didn't talk so much about Ben, but he distracted me from my misery. He taught me how to parallel park, he brought me episodes from Suits to watch when I was recovering from my Wisdom teeth operation, and he was great to just have a chat with over coffee lunch or dinner. We had definitely become closer during the time I had broken up with Ben. He was there for me when Ben wasn't. I had never liked him as anything more than a friend when I was with Ben, but suddenly I was seeing that the way he treated me was much better than how Ben, my ex, had been treating me. I knew Vince liked me but I had told him before that I was not interested. But somehow things were changing. Eventually, one night Vince kissed me. I was in two minds about it. I liked Vince a lot, but I knew I was still very much in love with Ben. In hindsight, I probably should have kept my distance from Vince for a little longer after my breakup, because I was perhaps leaning on him a little too much. But, things just worked out and we started going out.

A week later, I ran into Ben. It was unfortunate circumstances as I had come back from training and a dog had chased a cat out into the road. I had run over it and it had died. It was one of the worst things ever. I felt terrible. The poor animal! Then seconds later my ex appeared. He stopped, surprisingly, in his sporty little silver car, and jumped out to help me. I held the cat and he drove to the vet, where they told us the cat had already passed away. It was awful. But despite the circumstances, Ben cheered me up a little. At first, I barely looked at him or spoke to him – I was so upset about the situation with the cat and about us. But eventually I warmed up a bit and we began to chat.

Finally, for the first time, he gave me a proper apology. With not buts. "Whit, I am so sorry. This time apart has been so good for me. In the last month I've realised how bad I have been to you. I was awful. I treated you so badly and I am so sorry. I

love you so much and I want us to work. I know you probably need some time, but I just want you to know that if you want to get back together, I am here.”

I took it all in in silence. After he had spoken, I smiled. I couldn't help it. I had been waiting for those words for so, so long, and finally he seemed like himself again. Then a pang of sadness hit me. I noticed how he was holding my hand, and holding my shoulder, cuddling me with all that love and warmth that he had withheld for so long. It was everything I had ever wanted... but he was too late. I didn't say anything at the time because I didn't know what to say or do. I loved him so much and wanted to be with him, but just the week before I had kissed someone else. Why had Ben waited so long anyways? Why hadn't he replied?

I waited a few days to meet up with Ben again. Finally, I plucked up the courage to meet him. I had to be honest. I told him that during the past 2 months of hell I had grown much closer to Vince and he had just kissed me. Ben was shocked. He looked at me with sad eyes.

“What?” he said, bewildered.

“I thought you didn't like him like that.”

“I didn't” I replied slowly...” But I guess I just started seeing the way he treated me and spoke to me and realised that that was what my own boyfriend wasn't doing. I still love you, but I am going to give him a chance, because he deserves it.”

Ben was distraught. He was so heartbroken, and honestly, so was I. He was everything I had ever wanted. My guy was standing in front of me, asking for forgiveness and a second chance – but the truth was he had had his chances, first, second, third and tenth. And he was simply too late.

In the months to come, we still spoke quite often. I went on a Contiki to Europe to clear my head, but we pretty much texted throughout most of that. Suddenly the old Ben was back The Ben that expressed his feelings, his love for me, his belief in our love. Where had that Ben been? Had it taken losing me to sort himself out? Whatever the reason, he was back.

In one of our conversations, I found out he had actually, during the time we had broken up, bought me an engagement ring. I was stunned. “What?” I messaged.

It was obvious it had sort of slipped out. He hadn't meant to tell me. I asked him why he had waited to tell me. And I asked him why he had done that. And most importantly, I asked him why, if he could buy an engagement ring, could he not reply to my breakup text. I told him it had made me feel as though he no longer loved me. Him not replying confirmed my biggest fear – which was that he wasn't too fussed about losing me. He told me he was just being immature. He had still been angry and upset. I was devastated. I was so madly in love with Ben, but I knew that it was not fair on Vince. I knew that I had done everything for Ben, put my heart and soul on the line, waited for many months and fought so desperately for us to stay together, and he had done nothing. He had not cared when I was in tears on his doorstep, he had not hugged me when I was sad, he had not been there in big important moments in my life, and he had not reassured me that things would be okay when I really needed him to.

If he had asked me a month ago to marry him the answer would have been yes immediately! But now, I had gone through so much pain and so much heartbreak, I just didn't know if I had faith in us anymore. I had lost some of that. In all that time fighting for us I guess I had been focussed on keeping us together, not realising that just below the surface I was almost at breaking point. Ben was too late, and I had finally made up my mind. We were over.

* * * *

After a while, Ben and I decided that we would try to be friends. Whenever I run into him, I remember all the good things. I have forgotten so much of the bad, but I have not forgotten how he made me feel at times. That's why I knew I made the right decision. Because I was in love with him, very much. But, he wasn't treating me well and towards the end of our relationship, I was extremely sad and unhappy. Whenever we see each other, we give each other a hug. I am so glad I went out with him. I am so glad I got to know such a cool and interesting and lovely person. I will always have such an incredibly special place in my heart for Ben... but I made the right decision for me. It was by far the most difficult decision I have ever had to make – I mean, breakups are difficult normally, so imagine how difficult it was to break up with my favourite person, the guy I thought was the love of my life, the guy I thought I was going to marry.

I'm glad we are still friends, even though we keep our distance. I'm proud to know Ben, and every time I see him I am reminded of what a special and amazing individual he is. I can understand why I used to be so crazy about him - but also, I know I made the right decision for me. It's just, I still was so sad sometimes...

My relationship with Ben could best be described as a circle, because sometimes when we fought I felt as though it would never end, or never get resolved fully. We just kept going around in circles. But we hung in there because, despite all the fighting, things were amazing too.

Vince



Vince worked as a business advisor for an international accounting corporation. Vince had moved to New Zealand from South Africa four years ago, in search of greener pastures and better work opportunities. He had left his family behind and embraced the new adventure that lay ahead before him. He was independent and smart, and everybody seemed to like him. Better yet, they respected him. He was ambitious, a hard worker, and very fair. Vince was also an avid golfer – and he was good. He had gone to the States on a golf scholarship but had to return home after six months as the college he had attended in Texas ran out of funding. He was eight years older than me, even though he didn't look it. Vince took pride in his appearance, and always looked clean and fresh. Vince had a slim and strong build and was taller than me. He had short brown hair, beautiful glowing skin, and a warm smile. His eyes stood out to me the most, though. They were blue, like mine, only slightly smaller, with creases around the sides. Smile lines. To me, this showed exactly what kind of person Vince was. He had a good core – you could tell. He always wore a suit and seemed to have a distinct preference for checker shirts, mostly in shades of blue. He was the quiet type – the first of my boyfriends to be. He never spoke if he didn't have anything to say, and he never said a bad word about anyone. Vince was mature, wise, and reserved - a very attractive combination. But, in saying so, he was quite difficult to get to know. It took a long time for Vince to open up to me, and with me being very talkative, my first impression of him was that he was not very deep. He seemed so serious... but soon I found out that although he was not a man of many words – he was a man of action. The best kind. All my friends liked Vince, and everyone said that I had met the one for me. My mother introduced me to Vince.

Meeting her...

My heart was racing. I was so nervous. It had taken me ages just to pick out a tie for the occasion. Should I have even worn one? What if she realised that I didn't need to wear one. We have to wear suits to work, but ties are only for when we go to meet important clients. Maybe I was overdoing it. She had a boyfriend anyways. Tonight I was sitting with her parents in a restaurant called Zavito. Her mother was one of the firm's clients and she had asked me out to dinner. She said she would bring her daughter as well. The woman had talked about her daughter a little in our business meetings, and from what she had said Whitney seemed like my perfect girl. From hearing good things about her, I was curious so decided to look her up. When I found a photo of her on Facebook I grinned. She was beautiful, but I hadn't met her yet. And my secret stalking had made me nervous. I already knew where she worked and what her hobbies were. We were all at the restaurant looking over the menu. Whitney hadn't arrived yet as she had coaching or tennis training and was going to be a little later. Then her mother said, "Oh, there she is now. "I tried to act casual and turned my head to get a glance at her. I turned just in time to see her walking across the street, wearing a purply pink tracksuit. The jacket arms were rolled up in a sporty fashion and the zip was half undone. Her hair was in a messy ponytail and she wasn't wearing much makeup. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. Somehow I just knew – This was the girl I was going to marry...

How we met

I don't remember this night as clearly as he does, because at the time it did not mean as much to me. I was going out with Ben, and madly in love. So, if at that stage you told me I would be meeting my future boyfriend, I would have laughed at you. Ben was my life, and I only had eyes for him. So maybe it is best to describe the facts.

My family invited me to dinner at a nice restaurant with their accountant. I arrived at the restaurant after coaching and waved at my mother who was sitting near the window. I was a little nervous, because I'm naturally quite shy around people I haven't met before. I walked to the table and got my first glimpse of Vince. He was a nice looking, clean cut guy with blue eyes and mousey brown hair. Actually, I don't know the colour of his hair – maybe something between a blonde and brown. I shook his hand and introduced myself, then sat down next to him.

As the evening continued I spoke a bit to Vince. We got along well, but the conversation was quite superficial. He was twenty-eight years old and I was twenty. That's about all the details I remember from that night. And the fact that I ordered my favourite New Delhi pizza. Oh, and that Vince was wearing a suit.

Getting my wisdom teeth out

After that dinner, months went by and I forgot about Vince, until one day I noticed a message request on Facebook. He asked if he could add me. At that stage, I was still going out with Ben, but we were on and off. A few weeks later Vince wanted to meet up for coffee. He had seemed like a lovely guy when we met and Ben hadn't seemed to mind. Vince and I had coffee at a café by the mall near my house. We chatted for an hour or two. I was quite relaxed as Vince knew I had a boyfriend.

Vince slowly became a good friend. He was always game to hang out when I was going through tough times with Ben. It was nice to socialise with a mature guy. Vince was a very private person and never spoke about himself. If I didn't ask him about his life, I wouldn't know much about him. The more I got to know him, the stronger our friendship became.

One day I went to get my wisdom teeth out. Ben and I had another argument the day before, and it had turned into another 'breakup' fight. I wasn't as concerned and

frantic as usual because I was sure he would come to support me. When it was time, though, I had still heard nothing from him. How could he miss my operation? Surgery is a big deal, and he didn't even send me a text. I went in for the operation, and the dentist struggled. He had to take out all four.

That afternoon, as I lay in bed in a daze, there was a knock on my bedroom door. I looked up groggily. In walked Vince. I had expected it to be Ben, who lived around the corner. Instead, it was Vince was holding a bunch of flowers. I was so surprised that he was visiting my house. We had been friends for a while, but I didn't think good enough friends for him to visit my home.

"Here you go," he smiled and handed me a memory stick. "I've put a few seasons of Suits on here. It is my favourite show." I thanked him and we chatted for a while and I laughed a lot – probably from the medication, or from the way I had to speak because of the cotton in my mouth. Eventually he jumped up from my couch. He had to dash back to work, as he had gone over time on his lunch break to visit me.

When I was alone again, I cried. My mouth hurt and I had still not heard from Ben. Suddenly the pain was really bad. I looked in the mirror and gasped. My face had swelled up to an unbelievable size. Luckily I was so loopy from the pain meds that I fell asleep.

* * * *

For seven days I had not heard a peep from Ben. When I felt better I walked to his house and gave him a piece of my mind. It was me again who had gone over to make sure things were okay again. He made some excuse about feeling bad about our fight the previous week and thought it was best to stay away. Love is a strange thing. I forgave him easily.

When he told me he liked me

Vince and I had been friends for a few months. We got along well and he was a great friend to hang out with and chat over coffee. A few months after we had become friends, he appeared at tennis one morning. I was finishing coaching, when he arrived at the courts. Surprised, I greeted him.

“Hey! What’s up? What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I thought we could hang out, just go for a drive,” he replied.

I laughed. “Sure, I’m thirsty. Let’s get something to drink on the way.”

We went for a drive and chatted... but something was different. Vince was more reserved than usual. After the drive we went back to tennis, where I greeted him and drove off. And then I got a message.

About half an hour later I looked at my phone, only to find a very long text message from Vince. The message began by apologizing for wasting my time. Then, as I read on I realised what it was about. Vince explained how for months he had been in love with me. And he said the reason he had shown up at tennis was to tell me that. I was shocked. I thought he understood my situation, in the sense that even though Ben and I were broken up half the time, I definitely still felt like I had a boyfriend. Ben was still constantly on my mind, my main priority, my entire life.

I spent a long time trying to get the wording right, but finally sent a reply to Vince, saying that I really liked him as a person and saw him as a great friend, but that I did not share the same feelings and was going out with someone else. I sent the message. I never liked to hurt anyone, but I had to be honest. I asked if he would be okay with us just being friends. He replied a while later. He seemed disappointed but understanding, and he said that he was okay with being friends.

Of course, I told Ben everything, but *I* never knew how he spent his time these days. Although our relationship was unstable, I still had hope for our future together.

Music is very important to me. This song became one of my favourite songs after I broke up with Ben. Our relationship was so turbulent that my hobbies, sport, academics and life goals all took a backseat to the relationship. I devoted all of my energy to fighting for the most important thing in my life – Ben. I was reprimanded a few times for arriving late to work, instead deciding to finish phone arguments with Ben. I was constantly distracted and it was evident in my grades. My essays were unfocussed and sloppy and I struggled to concentrate. I lost too many tennis matches, and my friends seemed to be fed up with my extreme highs and lows. My self-esteem took a huge knock. Ben had gone from being the wind beneath my wings at the start of our relationship, to the wind in my face, holding me back. The relationship took all my energy and effort and I had no more left for myself. I didn't realise at the time, but I was becoming pathetic.

Fortunately for me, my survival instinct took over. I was determined to focus on myself again and get my fight back. I decided to take action. I took on more jobs, arrived early for work, challenged myself to improve my grades, made an effort with my family and friends and trained harder so I could win more tennis matches.

Some of the lyrics of this song struck a chord with me because it was the perfect song for me at the time. I listened to it on my way to work, and it helped me grieve, heal, persevere, and move on.

***Some verses of
“Part of me” - by Katy Perry***

*Days like this I want to drive away
Pack my bags and watch your shadow fade
'Cause you chewed me up and spit me out
Like I was poison in your mouth
You took my light, you drained me down
But that was then and this is now
Now look at me*

*This is the part of me
That you're never gonna ever take away from me, no
This is the part of me
That you're never gonna ever take away from me, no
Throw your sticks and your stone,*

*Throw your bombs and your blows
But you're not gonna break my soul
This is the part of me
That you're never gonna ever take away from me, no*

*Now look at me I'm sparkling
A firework, a dancing flame
You won't ever put me out again
I'm glowin', oh, whoa
So you can keep the diamond ring
It don't mean nothing anyway
In fact you can keep everything, yeah, yeah,
Except for me*

Our first kiss

A few weeks after I had broken up with Ben, I was at the stage where I was thinking 'good riddance.' He hadn't talked to me, texted me, or made any attempt to contact me after I had sent him the message that I wanted to break up. I was hurt and unhappy, but to be honest, I had been hurt, lonely and upset for a long time already. I decided to cut him from my life and move on... Unfortunately, grief and pain have a funny way of coming back later on. You can prolong the symptoms, but you can't evade the effects entirely. Unfortunately for me, I didn't realise this yet.

Vince and I had been hanging out more regularly since my breakup. Vince was happy about it for two reasons. The first was that he liked me, so obviously it was good news to hear about me being single. The second reason was that apparently, I was more fun to be around. I was less stressed and a little calmer, and less defensive. I didn't believe it at first, but after a few weeks more and more people close to me had mentioned this. I didn't realise that Vince and I had started to get closer and closer. I started hugging him goodbye, touching him on the shoulder, and finding his jokes funnier. Our relationship was still platonic, though, because in the back of my head I still loved Ben.

The problem with the breakup was that I had no closure and no confirmation whether Ben did or did not love me anymore. I had no idea what he was thinking. All I knew was that every time I drove past his house, his car was nowhere to be seen.

But I had come to the conclusion that he clearly did not care about me anymore. It was a difficult decision to break up with him, but it was made easier by the fact that he made no attempt to fight for me or get me back. So I tried to shut off my feelings and socialised with those who made me feel better.

Enter Vince.

When you are going through a tough time, your mood changes every day. One day you might feel strong and independent, another you might feel clingy and vulnerable. If I have learnt anything it is that one should not make big decisions while in this state of mind. I was reckless in the sense that I wasn't thinking clearly – at all.

My friends Mikaela and Vince were there for me. Mikaela worked with me and we had coffee together, watched movies and did girl stuff. Vince and I went out for coffee or lunch. There was one on-going problem though - Vince liked me. And although I knew this, I needed his support and friendship too much to push him away. I had recently lost my best friend Nicky. Nicky had a front row seat to the chaos that was my life with Ben, and I guess she did not want to be a part of it anymore. This was another hard knock for me as I had always been there for her. As a result of her parents' bitter divorce, Nicky needed counselling and a friend to lean on. I was always that friend. Now I had a few good friends, but I missed my best friend.

A few months after Ben and I had broken up, I suddenly began to see Vince in a whole new light. He had many qualities I admired. He was kind, honest, mature, and very loyal, but I wasn't sure if I could like him like that.

I can't remember what I was thinking at the time. All I knew was that I was confused. I had been crazy about Ben. I knew it. Ben knew it. There was no love quite like it... so how could anything compare? But all the time I was becoming closer and closer to Vince, without really registering, or acknowledging it. I noticed little things though, like when he talked about other girls, or when he complimented me. It meant more than before. I got jealous. I blushed.

One night when I went to his house, he cooked me a lovely dinner - cottage pie. We chatted and watched tv. Recently we had started watching tv side-by-side. We would have sit half lie on his L-shaped couch, watching fun movies like Just Married or Fools Gold. He asked me if I liked him. I paused.

"Yes, I like you," I said slowly.

"I want to kiss you." He said.

A little while later, he did.

* * * *

The next day I had tennis coaching until quite late at night. I daydreamed about the last few times I had visited Vince. As the lesson ended and I left the court, suddenly I heard a familiar voice saying my name. I looked up to the top of the stairs. Vince, in his coat and suit, looked more handsome than ever. He never looked mismatched or out of place, not even at the tennis centre. It was not just his appearance. It was everything about him. He was different to anyone I had met before. When we were together girls turned their necks just to get a second glance, but Vince never seemed to notice. The way he spoke to people and the way they reacted to him showed me the first glimpses of a guy who commanded respect wherever he went. Everyone seemed to be drawn to Vince like a moth to a flame. Vince was always himself, but something about him intrigued me. He was quiet and reserved, with a wisdom brewing beneath the surface.

I grinned in surprise. I was so happy to see him. He smiled back at me. We stared into each other's eyes for a long while.

"What are you doing here? I asked.

"I just wanted to see you."

Vince believed in me from the start. He got to know me at my worst. He had become my friend in a time where I wasn't fun to be around. I was miserable, depressed, heartbroken and lonely. I was aggressive, defensive and angry. I was self-centered and ignorant. And to be honest, I lost a few friends in that time. SO the fact that Vince saw past the surface in that time of my life showed how much he cared. He knew I would return to the girl he had met at dinner years before. He had faith in me when I didn't have faith in myself... and this song reminds me of that...

“Because you loved me” - by Celine Dion

*For all those times you stood by me
For all the truth that you made me see
For all the joy you brought to my life
For all the wrong that you made right
For every dream you made come true
For all the love I found in you
I'll be forever thankful baby
You're the one who held me up
Never let me fall
You're the one who saw me through it all*

*You were my strength when I was weak
You were my voice when I couldn't speak
You were my eyes when I couldn't see
You saw the best there was in me
Lifted me up when I couldn't reach
You gave me faith 'coz you believed
I'm everything I am
Because you loved me*

Trip to Europe - healing

Suddenly it was July. I had organised to go on a Contiki around Italy with my South African friends. I thought at the time it would be good for me to get out and travel. Little did I know I would be dating Vince at the time.

The time flew by and I found myself on a plane to Rome. Vince and I were on great terms, but I still had feelings for my ex. I hadn't been talking to Ben as much, but suddenly both he and I panicked and we texted non-stop.

Eventually I decided to stop contact with Ben, but he consumed my mind most of the time. Was I ready to move on? NO. I loved him. My feelings for Vince were also growing, but Ben was still MY GUY. Every time I wanted to give him another chance, I came to the same, depressing conclusion. I didn't trust him not to hurt me again. I loved him, but love wasn't enough. I didn't trust him not to make the same mistakes or break up with me over and over again. He had promised me he was back to how he used to be and that he had gotten over his jealousy of Jake. But, this time, as hard as I tried, I just could not forget the pain I went through, the weight I lost, the sleepless nights, the loss of self-esteem and the miserable person I'd become.

Never again. I decided. It was done. I'd made my decision... So why didn't the feelings evaporate? Why, even though I knew he was not good for me, did I still love him SO, so much. With every ounce of my being... It was a mystery. But I knew one thing was for sure – if I kept acting the way I was, I was going to lose a great guy who clearly loved me with every ounce of his.

Vince and I had different personalities, but we had similar character traits. We agreed on the big things. We never really fought about anything (except my ex). And when we did, it was more of a disagreement than anything else. At times I got a little angry, but Vince knew how to calm me down and make sure that I didn't get too mad. He had this saying 'KISS.' Which meant 'Keep it simple stupid.' Vince believed that nothing was too much of a big deal. And that nothing had to be too complicated. "Nothing is complicated." He would say calmly. "We complicate things." Very soon I was a calmer version of myself, adapting to this incredibly brilliant yet simple concept. If I really thought about it, nothing was ever that bad. No fight should ever get out of hand.

I realised that I loved Vince for many reasons. And one of the main reasons was because of how well he treated me. What was I doing? I had found someone who

thought I was the best thing ever, but I was too hung up on someone who treated me as though I was replaceable. For the first time, I realised I had to take a good look at myself in the mirror.

A copy of the letter Vince wrote me when he asked me out...

Dear Whit

I had the privilege of meeting you some 2 years ago, yet it feels like it was yesterday. I was all dressed up in my grey suit with a blue, grey and pink tie, purely to make a good first impression, as a first impression is a lasting one. I was so nervous, hands sweating, voice pitchy as I waited for your arrival to the restaurant. I looked up and there you were, all jumpy and smiling from ear to ear, an angel in disguise all dressed in her pink tennis tracksuit. As you got closer my eyes focussed and I was gazing upon the most beautiful thing my eyes had ever seen. And without a word my heart skipped and beat and I fell head over heels for you.

I recall I was so nervous I didn't know what to say to you. I didn't want to make a fool out of myself. The night was such a blur in the sense that all I can remember is sitting next to the most beautiful girl I'd seen. I couldn't hear a word you said that evening, all I said was yes and smiled, so I could have probably said yes to anything you said ☺ The next day I remember texting your mom that she can be proud of their daughter they raised as she's unlike any girl I knew or met, she's unlike any girl I will ever know.

From that night on I knew I had to find my way to your heart, make some sort of impression to you so that you could see me for me. For you had a boyfriend, a feeling that crushed all my hopes and dreams. I thought, hey I'm a guy like no other, so different, such a black sheep in the world surely she will see that and just maybe think wow, he is such a good guy, a guy I would like to make my life

For two years I would encourage dinners with your family, just to have my heart melt at your beauty and just to fall for you over and over again/ During these two years I got to see your heart, a heart so kind and soft, so caring and loving. A heart I wish she would give me to protect forever and ever. I remember how I would Facebook stalk you Sifting through your pics as I lay in bed dreaming of holding your hand and kissing the most kissable lips. I had to have more time with you so I Facebook

messaged you, my first message being on 25 April 13 was “Hey Whitney, would you mind if I added you as a friend? How was the last nights ‘lecture’. Have fun on your day off.” That was the start of something I could only dream of...

Growing up I was always different to the point I thought I would always be alone in this world. While getting to know you I realised that I wasn’t alone, for the first time ever I met someone who was just as ‘different’. Someone who never followed others, someone who knew what it meant to live a life with craziness, happiness and full of emotion, She lived the life she wanted to every single day.

This was a girl I wish I could date, spend my life with and live a life with. That day has come and I sit in front of you all nervous and excited at the same time. For today is the day I ask the girl of my dreams will she be my girlfriend?

An ex-girlfriend in a daze

I knew that Vince had been in a past relationship before, but when we were friends, it did not matter to me. It started to bother me when we went out. I didn’t even know why. It was not as though he’d done anything wrong. He hadn’t had a girlfriend for years, so why were my insides churning? I felt stupid because I couldn’t shoot him for having had a girlfriend in the past. It was a difficult feeling for me to describe, as I’d never gone out with anyone who had had a girlfriend before me. I was Jake’s and Ben’s first girlfriend. This was uncharted territory. I did not like it and didn’t know how to deal with it.

I really had nothing to worry about. I knew Vince was besotted with me and he had not given me any reason to doubt that. Every now and again, my overactive mind would take over and I would blurt out something immature and embarrassing – showing my feelings – such as ‘Did you go there with your ex?’ or ‘Am I prettier than your ex?’ I’m still not sure why I behaved this way. Maybe it was because I was still growing up, or maybe being unsure of myself was a direct consequence from my previous relationship.

Vince was patient. He would explain “It was five years ago. I broke up the relationship. I can’t undo the past.” More importantly for me, he said “You are my person.” His answers would always calm me down. I believed him when he told me

he had never felt this way before, but, somehow, something about him having an ex just annoyed me.

Finally, I reminded myself that I had an ex too - two in fact, and that's what HE had to deal with. It helped to put myself in his shoes. Eventually, I laughed at myself. It's funny how quickly my insides got hot and I wanted to explode in tiny fits of anger. Vince knew how to handle me and the love and attention he showered me with made me feel as though I was the only girl on earth, the only girl that was ever on his earth.

Our First trip away alone

We were at the airport, en route to Las Vegas. I made plans to go to Vegas with Vince when we were friends. Since we had booked the flights we had become a lot closer. I was excited to go on my first overseas trip alone with a boyfriend. Growing up, my mother had been so strict on me with my boyfriends, but as I was a little older, I was finally allowed to go on holiday with Vince, alone. My mother had taken a long while to warm up to Jake when we started dating, but by the end of that relationship I could see she really appreciated some of the qualities I saw in him. With Ben, she liked him from the start, but as the relationship hit extreme lows at times she believed that he did not deserve to go out with her little girl. It was tough for me to grow up with more restrictions than my friends. I was lucky that my ex boyfriends were understanding, but I wished I had a little more freedom, or at least a fair curfew. Ten thirty on a Saturday night? That's insane.

These thoughts circled my head as Vince put my bags on the carousel. We were going to Vegas!

* * * *

Vegas is my heaven on earth. I had been there before. I love it. I could dress up, eat out, watch shows, go out, see the Grand Canyon, tan by the amazing pools, and shop. Vegas was mesmerising to me. I was happy that I got to experience it with Vince. I was starting to fall in love. The first night we arrived, Vince said to me:

“Okay, get ready, I'm taking you out.”

I wore a pink dress with sparkles. We walked in the night time heat, craning our necks to get a look at all the bright city lights. Vince took me to a little restaurant at the Wynn Hotel and Casino. The food was excellent. We sat on the deck, with a view of the Linq wheel that resembles the London eye. The hot and dry air had a numbing effect on my senses, and I slipped into a semi-conscious daydream. Life was good again. Life was great. In the back of my mind, Ben was still part of my thoughts and I knew I had a special place in my heart for him, but now I knew something had changed. I was happy. For the first time in months I was not stressed about arguing with someone or breaking up, or worried about arguing my view or getting my point across. I was concerned with one thing, and he was sitting right across from me...

Vince was easy to get along with and even easier to live with. He packed his clothes away, his things never lay around in the bathroom, he dried the basin and left clean towels for me. He was clean and tidy, hygienic and considerate. He carried my shopping bags and pulled my chair out when we went to dinner. He let me choose which bed to sleep in and every morning we spent at the poolside he went to get us croissants and hot chocolate from Starbucks. He was a gem. My mother knew it, my friends knew it, and finally, after months, I knew it too. When we were tired and had late nights and early mornings, or had to travel and catch long flights, we still got along. We went to malls and bought fruity cocktails and walked with them down the strip. We went to the Beatles show and the Michael Jackson Cirque du Soleil. I raided Victoria Secret and we spent one morning taking a helicopter ride to the Grand Canyon. We only became closer. Life was good again.

At a work party...

We had been dating for about six months and Vince had a work party coming up. The theme was the 70s and so we decided to go as "Sandy and Danny" from Grease. Vince wore a white t-shirt and a leather jacket, although I questioned whether or not it was real leather.

"But the woman said it was," he insisted.

"Yes, baby. I'm sure she wouldn't lie considering you wouldn't have bought it if it wasn't." I had said teasingly. Vince was trusting and kind, qualities I loved about him. So, it was leather.

On the night of the party, I wore tight black pants, red heels, and a genuine black leather jacket and bright red lipstick. My blonde hair shone in the night light. Vince put a cigarette in his mouth and finished off his outfit with hair gel and sunglasses. We looked cool.

“You look so pretty, Whit.” He said. Pretty? I thought to myself. It took me two hours to look like this. I thought I deserved a beautiful at least. As we entered the venue, he turned to me. “I have never taken anyone to a work party before.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I never wanted to before I met you...”

I smiled as we sat down at a round table filled with unfamiliar faces. Colleagues greeted Vince and he introduced me to all of them. At some point his boss came over, and I was surprised to see how relaxed and comfortable Vince was with him. We danced, chatted to his colleagues, ate and then hogged the photo booth. Towards the end of the night, announcements for the best dressed girl and guy were made. A woman wearing short sparkly shorts and rollerblades was awarded the honour. It was a good choice!

“What do you think of that? DO you think she looks hot in those shorts? Bet you do,” a woman, who apparently was not very nice, commented to Vince. I felt my cheeks burning from embarrassment.

Coolly and classily, Vince answered her back. “Why would I think that? I’m with the prettiest girl here.” I was proud that I dated someone with such composure. I knew that no matter what, I never had to worry about Vince. He would always behave like a gentleman, but at the same time would protect me no matter what.

Dreaming about the... past?

It was approximately a year and a half after Ben and I had broken up. I had just gotten back from shopping at the mall. As I got out of the car, I heard the distinct sound of a basketball echoing off the concrete slab about a hundred meters away from my house. That could only mean that one of our neighbours, Ben’s friend Grant, was playing

basketball outside. I realised what else it could mean – he was not the only one there. I strained my ears.

Then, I heard it. That ever so charming, boyish laugh that I seemed to almost have forgotten. It pierced the crisp air and somehow, a piece of my heart too. It lifted my mood time and time again. A pang of sadness pierced my heart as I thought about how he was no longer laughing with me anymore. Quickly I grabbed my shopping and crouched around the corner, hiding from view. A part of me wanted him to come running and apologise for all the mean things he had said and done when we had gone out. I sunk to the ground and sighed – he would never do that – it is just not who he was. I hadn't run into him for the past four months – the longest time I hadn't seen him since we had met. Ben was still on my mind, and sometimes I would dream of him for a few nights in a row. Mostly we were together in the dreams, and I would feel a little sad and heartbroken all over again when I woke up realising we weren't. I didn't understand it at first, because I thought I was happy. I had moved on. I did love my new boyfriend. But, I couldn't deny it, I did still miss Ben a little bit sometimes.

I felt the cool of the ground on my butt, a relief from the hot spring day's fresh but warm air. I sat for a few moments, checking around the corner to catch a glimpse of him every now and then. However, all I could think about then, was that stubborn quality he had. I remembered fights where I would be in tears, heartbroken about something or the other, where he would just continue to attack me. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. He had a lovely personality, so happy and carefree. So exciting. But, he could never admit he was wrong or take responsibility for his actions. And that had hurt me a lot.

I truly believe Ben has all the components to be such a successful individual. I believed in him more than anyone for a time. Sitting on the ground I realised something – in all aspects of life - he would probably get there one day... but he just was not there yet.

I thought about all the things weighing on my mind. My mind then reset to the present, where my Vince and I reside. If we disagree, we disagree. But if one of us gets too upset, the other is there to be kind. If I start crying, my boyfriend will make sure I am okay and give me a big hug – as nothing is as important as my heart and feelings to him.

On this note, I got up, shook my head out mentally, and walked inside. I don't have time to think about nice ideas. So I reminded myself why I broke up with him in the first place.

Us...

As I had become used to a lot more drama in my life, at first I became a bit bored with the stability of my new relationship, but very soon I realised how lucky and fortunate we actually were. We could teach each other things and learn from each other. Even with the simple things – I learnt to make my bed properly (at 22 that's an embarrassing fact about me – I never really made had learnt to make my bed properly). He taught me how to write professional CVs and work emails when addressing my boss. He taught me to let things go and just from his calm and decent demeanour I learnt, for example, that if I had nothing nice to say, I shouldn't say anything at all.

I saw Vince most days and we spent a lot of time together. Our relationship was easy, so we both could focus on other things that were important to us – like tennis for me and golf for him. I finally had time and energy to be productive again. In my previous relationship I had the physical hours in the day to do what I wanted, but the fact that my mind was consumed with stress and thoughts of worry that the person I loved would hurt me or break up with me or not love me, prevented me from doing those things. With Vince, I never had to worry about that. We were on the same page.

Vince worked long hours at his accounting firm. He studied for his CA exams before work every morning, and after work every evening. For years, this way of life hadn't given Vince the opportunity to travel. He was eight years older than me, but somehow we had met at the right stage in our lives. We both wanted to travel. Him, after years of working, and me, after university.

Vince brought out a calmness in me that benefited my life in so many ways, and I brought out his fun side. I come from a family where work ethic and discipline is highly regarded, so naturally for me it is a way of life. My lifestyle consisted of a high workload at university and a demanding coaching job, which at times became stressful. I was not always great at handling the pressure. My workload often prevented me from being able to spend time with Vince, which only added to my stress. Fortunately, Vince was supportive. He made me a calmer, kinder, more relaxed

version of myself. He would often show up at my house with a chocolate milk or snack to keep me going. Sometimes he would only spend fifteen minutes with me, insisting that he did not mind seeing me less. Other times he would take out his own laptop and we would work side by side. We were good for each other. We both got promoted, and soon after I was offered a corporate role. We were doing well.

We worked hard and had a lot of fun. We would goof around, make jokes and sing to music in the car at the top of our lungs. And to my great amusement, I taught a very reluctant Vince to rollerblade.

All my friends loved Vince from the start. Before I had felt those feelings, my friends had all said to me – “Whit, this is the one.” I didn’t get it at first, but very soon I realised they were onto something. We were opposites in personalities – he was relaxed - a little too relaxed for my liking even, calm, and I was over active, over-analytical, crazy, fun and a little stressed. But somehow we worked. I realised later on it was because we had the same ideas on relationships and life. We had the same values and maturity and the same character.

I started praying again and thanking God for bringing Vince into my life. Life was good, really good, and it was just getting better all the time.

Looking at houses...

My hands were clammy. My expression was concerned.

“I dunno. I just, don’t like it,” I said to Vince. I walked away from him and into the next room. I felt a shortness of breath and felt like I needed fresh air. I stepped out of the house into the sunshine. It warmed my back and I felt instantly better.

"Well, I think it's perfect." He said.

I don’t know what it was, but every time we looked at houses I got anxious. Obviously it was only early stages, and we were just THINKING about buying a house together... but it made me physically ill. I felt dizzy. I felt nauseous. I don’t know why, but I did. It took me a while to actually understand these feelings. Finally, I realised what was happening.

This was the furthest point I had ever reached in a relationship. I was in uncharted territory. I had talked about marriage with boyfriends in the past. And I thought that I would marry Ben. Before I met Vince, marriage was a choice to be with someone forever. A choice to love one person, a choice to wear a pretty diamond ring and walk down the aisle to the man of your dreams... sounded perfect to me... But that was as far as I had gotten in thinking about it. I had no idea that there was so much more to marriage.

Now I realised marriage was so much more. Being eight years younger than Vince illuminated the whole picture. There were bills and mortgages to pay. There was grocery shopping to do, cars to wash, clothing to iron, dishes to do. There was not living with your parents anymore and not getting mom to get your lunch for you. There was doing everything yourself and sometimes forgoing the fun stuff to do the necessary stuff. There was the fear of the unknown... and oh yeah... marriage is forever. You are stuck with that person forever. Your entire life. You have chosen them. What if it's not the right person? What if you have kids? Will you be a good parent? What happens if you don't like your house? Will there still be romance in your life? What about money? What job will you do? I'm not giving up my dreams for a kid. Do you like your in-laws? Do you want these people as part of your family? Will you be happy forever? Or will you lose interest and get bored with your husband? Your married friends on Facebook, their photos look so damn boring. You won't be like that, though. It's going to be different... You are only twenty-three... Breathe...

My over analytical nature was taking over. I had never thought so far down the track before. I was stressed. I knew that we were only *looking* at houses, but unfortunately, I am not the kind of person to see it as just that. If I buy a house with him, that is my decision made. It was scary. It freaked me out. And it took a while for me to arrange those emotions in my head.

At first, I thought I was feeling that way because I was perhaps with the wrong guy. But then I realised that maybe the reason I was feeling that way was because it was new. I loved Vince... a lot... but I am not someone who loves change. It makes me feel unsettled. And for the first time I was confronted with a very real vision of what my future could be. Yes, it could be brilliant, but, one thing was for certain, it would be very, very different. Life would change. And that scared me.

The great thing was that after looking at other houses a few times, I changed my mindset. I still felt a bit nervous, but I was no longer anxious. My mindset was changing... and I was getting more and more ready to welcome the future and whatever it held with open arms...

My relationship with Vince could best be described as an arrow because it just got better and better...

Lessons learnt while Dating Vince

1. Don't make big decisions when you are emotional

I learnt to not make decisions when you are emotional. After I broke up with Ben I was emotional and I was not thinking straight. I think that decisions should be made when in a clear and neutral state of mind.

When I broke up with Ben, I was a bit more emotional, confused and irrational than I realised at the time. I made the right decision to break up with Ben because he wasn't treating me well at the time, but I made the wrong decision in letting Vince kiss me when in the back of my mind I was still in love with someone else. One day I was happy, the next I was sad, the next I felt strong and the next I felt vulnerable and weak. I had not even let the breakup sink in yet.

I shouldn't have gone out with anyone for a long time. In hindsight, I should have gathered my thoughts about Ben before I made any decisions involving dating other people.

2. You have to let go of the past to give a new relationship a chance

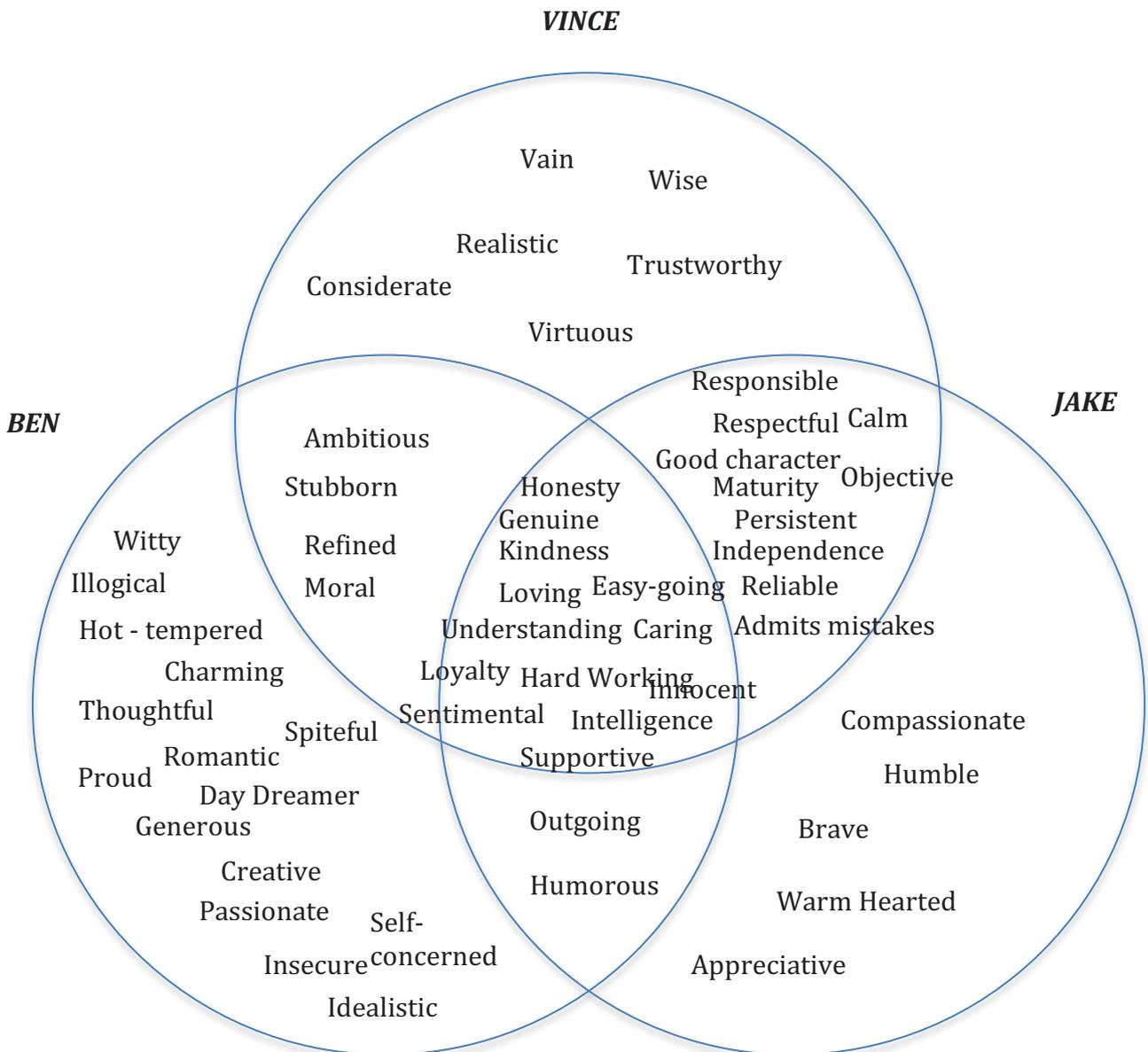
At first when I broke up with Ben, I still thought he'd always be a big part of my life. That of course, I realised, wouldn't be right. Not when I had a new boyfriend, with feelings and a heart of his own. I had chosen to give Vince a chance... but I had not yet truly given up on Ben. I knew we weren't right for each other... but I still hoped we were. So, I decided to truly choose Vince. I decided to cut Ben out of my life.

I realised I had been partly responsible for destroying a relationship with Ben when I refused to let go of Jake. I didn't want to make the same mistake again. So I told Ben we couldn't contact each other. I missed him dearly, but I realised that letting go didn't mean forgetting the wonderful memories or the good times, or even the love – but it did mean moving on, properly this time.

3. Figure out what you want

After having gone out with a few people, I developed a very clear idea of what I wanted in my life. I thought about the attractive qualities in each person I had dated. I realised that there were certain qualities I found important or attractive in my

significant other. Understanding which qualities are most important to me helped me discover more about myself too.



4. Sometimes similar personalities can be a bad thing

When I thought back to my past relationships, I noticed something very interesting. Jake and I had gotten along well, and despite out different personalities and interests, we never fought badly. It was the same with Vince and me.

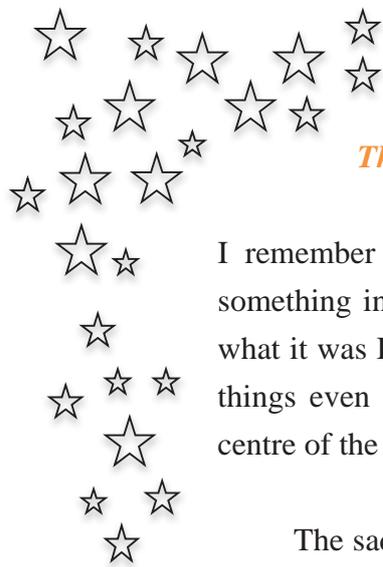
However, Ben and I fought like cat and dog. I found it strange because he and I had the most similar personalities. We had just clicked.

I spent a long time trying to figure out why two people who seemingly had everything in common and everything going for them as a couple could just not make it work.

Whilst dating Vince I realised the difference. Jake, Vince and I may have had different personality types, but our character was the same. Character is defined as “The mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual.”

Ben and I were so similar in many ways, and morally we were perfectly suited, however, emotionally, we probably weren't. The reason for this was because our character was different. We had different conflict resolution styles and reacted differently to things. Jake and Vince handled tough situations in a mature way. Ben did not. He was an eye-for-an-eye type of person and if I hurt him by accident, he would attempt to hurt me back on purpose. Not because he was mean, but because his character was not the same as mine I think. Our views on important things weren't always aligned.

I learnt to be more self-aware and understand what kind of person I am, and what type of person I was going out with. I developed a better understanding of the type of guy that would suit me, or that I could have a successful relationship with. I realised I needed someone calm, caring and mature. Unfortunately Ben and I were both hot heads, and so we didn't fight well. In the end, I realised that having similar personalities is not necessarily always a good thing, and what really matters is finding someone with the same character as you.



The story of the two birds...

I remember driving in my car a few months ago and on the way home I saw something in the middle of the road. I slowed down as I neared it. When I realised what it was I just burst out in tears. In front of me was a dead swallow. And to make things even more upsetting, its mate was tugging at its wing, pulling it out of the centre of the road.

The sadness of the situation was unbearable and it occurred to me that birds are similar to humans, they too, mourn the death of their loved ones. Not only this but the sadness in the remaining living bird, was so evident. It didn't leave its mate, it didn't desert it in the road, even after it had died. It stuck by her. This little swallow could not bear the thought of losing his love.

It reminded me of how I think about love. I believe that when you are truly in love with someone, the thought of losing them is utterly unbearable. The thought of not seeing them again, whether because of death or breaking up or whatever reason, is not an option. You can't imagine your existence without them. This is true. I believe in the loyalty I witnessed by that day. The strength that swallow had to stay there with his mate, even though there was no hope, he still stood by her. That is real love.

It made me so sad to think, not only did this amazing creature lose his favourite thing in the entire world, but that something that loves so purely could. It was so heart-breaking. We, as humans, have a huge capacity to love. It is much easier to love than to hate, yet, so many of us don't pursue this kind of love. Our love can be conditional, manipulative, unkind and selfish. Humans can be disloyal, unfaithful and honestly, pretty bad mates. So why, if a tiny swallow can get his priorities right, can't we?

I want to be with someone who loves me more than himself. I want to be with someone who will do anything for me and can't imagine their life without me. And if they can't, then they're not the right person for me. Because that's how I am. That's what I believe in. A love like that. It's unfair to think that some people end up with mates who just don't feel the same. It's unjust to think that people can hurt, manipulate, lie and cheat on their loved ones. It can happen.

However, in saying this, never stop striving to find the right person for you.

That doesn't mean you have to go looking. It doesn't mean you have to do anything for that matter, except know yourself. Be yourself and know yourself, because that way you will attract the right kind of people that suit you. You will attract a mate with the same beliefs and values as you. Not only this, but you will be happy. Of course, there is the chance that you lose this person in your lifetime, but I'd safely say it is definitely worth the risk. That swallow was devastated. But at least that means he was with the right mate. Everyone deserves someone like that swallow. No one should settle for anything less. So raise your standards, don't accept anything less and love like the swallow. Because that is the right kind of love.

Afterthought...

Throughout my life, I have been fortunate enough to have three amazing relationships with three amazing guys. Each relationship taught me so much about myself and helped me discover who I wanted to be. I learnt what qualities I wanted the man I wanted to marry to have. The main thing I learnt, though, was how much I have to be thankful for. These relationships were all part of my journey in finding the 'one.' And now I am so proud and happy to say that I have definitely found 'The One.'

I hope we have the brightest future ever. I hope I have a wonderful lasting marriage with the man of my dreams. I hope I continue to keep learning about myself and growing as a person. After all, I'm still young. I don't know what the future will hold, but based on the past, hopefully, something great is in store. After all, life is all about perspective...