

Prologue

I always said that after my next breakup I would either run a marathon or do an ironman. When, at 25, my first relationship ended (5 years, on-again-off-again), I got into running and did my first 10k. After my second breakup aged 30 (almost 5 years together; five hugely formative years), I did my first half-marathon. At 32, after one year of me denying this was a 'relationship', my fuck-buddy-come-quasi-'boyfriend' found someone he actually really liked to spend some time with, and I took part in my first triathlon. The trajectory was clear: with each breakup I get physically stronger and more awesome, and one more relationship disaster and I can tick off another life goal. Yeah, that didn't happen.

As it turned out, I didn't run a marathon, or do an ironman. I had a complete nervous breakdown and spent three months on a German psychiatric ward. Bang goes my theory!

Throughout my life I have treated my mental health like a poorly maintained car, doing just the bare minimum to keep it on the road. Over the years, qualified brain mechanics have popped their heads under the bonnet and sucked the air through their teeth with a 'zchhhhhh' sound.

"Well, this needs looking at. This could go anytime. And this part here is hanging on by a thread."

"But can I still drive it?"

"Well, we can patch it up enough to get you through your MOT. But if I were you...well, I mean...zchhhh, if you keep waiting, you're going to be looking at a really big repair job in the long term."

"But can I still drive it?"

"Yes, but..."

I didn't heed their professional advice. I stuck electric tape over the rusty parts. I used cable ties to hold loose bits together. I did just enough therapy and counselling to keep me on the road until the next time the rattles got too loud, and a 'service' was unavoidable.

Unsurprisingly, whilst cruising down the motorway of life at high speed, my poor, neglected car couldn't cope anymore, and the engine fell out. This is the story of what happened next.

Chapter 1. The Break Up

Whilst I may have often said that my next breakup coping-mechanism would be to run a marathon, it had, in truth, been a long time since I'd espoused that theory, because this relationship? It was the one. This Hot Italian Man (HIM) I was with had me looking no further. I didn't plan on having any more breakups. Instead, I was trying to decide whether it would be 'impossible', 'difficult but possible', 'not impossible just different', or 'totally possible' to train for a marathon with kids. I was trying to imagine myself pushing a buggy as I jogged through the park. For the first time in my life I wasn't daydreaming about my next solo adventure. I wasn't looking for a way out. I wasn't keeping one eye out for a better prospect. Of course he wasn't perfect and nor was the relationship. But for the first time in my life, after an argument, I never thought, 'I can't take this anymore'. Unfortunately, he didn't feel the same way.

Our relationship was the usual story: girl quits job and buys a van. Girl converts van into camper and plans to spend the foreseeable future travelling and living in said van. Girl meets Italian boy in the first destination of the long-planned-for trip. Girl and boy fall in love. Girl and boy do ten months of long distance whilst girl sticks to her guns and sees through 'van plan' anyway. Girl spends summer working in England before moving to Munich permanently to live with boy in his apartment.

We had our ups and downs like any relationship; particularly a relationship between two adults - one 34 and one 43 - who have lived alone for a very long time and must now cohabit and get used to being a 'we' and not just an 'I'. And there were the communication problems of two people who spoke different languages, sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally. Living with a man, in his apartment, in Germany, in Winter, my life was now on a very different path to the van-life in sunny climes with non-stop climbing I had planned. But it was OK, because I wanted to be with HIM more. And after an 'adjustment period' (see also 'depressive episode') things were getting easier for me, so much so that when my parents visited in the Spring I was happy to be able to show them some of the highlights in this city I now appreciated, and the home which we had plans to make 'ours' and not just 'his'.

In July I returned to England for one last gig; one last seven-week contract of teaching, to recoup some of the money I had spent after nearly nine months of unemployment in Germany, and to pay for a course on my return to Munich which would allow me to achieve my dream job of becoming a pilates teacher. A psychologist I had seen for a few months

during the aforementioned ‘adjustment period’ had supported the idea of my summer of work in England, knowing how important it was for me to have some money and financial independence, and how that would help the relationship. It would also give HIM a chance to miss me. So off I went, in my campervan, that I was planning to sell in England during the summer, because the plan was to buy a new one and convert it together.

He was busy with his very demanding and stressful job and had friends in town, so although we exchanged whatsapp messages and pictures we didn’t actually talk for more than five days after I had arrived in England, until my first day of teaching. We had arranged a video call for as soon as my lunch hour started, and I sat there in the foyer of the university building, talking to HIM, sitting in our living room in Munich, laughing as we chatted away about all the usual bullshit. Then after forty-five minutes it was almost time for me to go. I started to say goodbye. But he had ‘a look’ in his eyes. An expression had flickered across that face that I knew so well, and lodged itself in the furrow of his eyebrows.

“Are you OK? You look sad?” I said.

“Listen. We need to talk.”

My stomach lurched, because it wasn’t the first time he’d said this. But things had been so much better lately? The stressful adjustment period of what we had jokingly referred to as our ‘amalgamation’ was over. The depression I had first felt when I arrived in Munich was gone. And I was looking forward to coming back, I just needed to earn some money first. I had a plan. *I had a plan.*

“No, don’t do this now,” I said, standing up and walking out onto the street. But as I went outside, to sit on the pavement of an unremarkable street in England, to talk to a man sitting on a sofa in the home we shared in Germany, he broke up with me.

“I have to go now, I have to go to work,” I said.

“Do you want to talk later?” he asked, or something like that.

“There’s nothing to talk about. You’ve said your feelings, I’ve said mine,” which had basically consisted of, ‘Please don’t do this, please don’t do this.’

“I’ve got to go,” I said, or something like that.

I went back in to the building, past the porter who had listened to me laughing on the phone just minutes before. Now I had tears streaming down my face. I walked straight into the ladies’ bathroom and collapsed onto the floor, holding onto the thick old radiator to try and find something solid to hold onto whilst my whole world tumbled around me. I couldn’t breath. Not in a figurative ‘I can’t breath’ way, in an actual ‘I cannot get any air into my

lungs' way. My cries were like ones I'd never heard coming from myself before; like those huge cries of grief when someone you love has died.

And then I stood up, wiped my eyes, walked into the staffroom and picked up my books.

"Are you OK?" asked my line manager?

"Yes. I mean, my boyfriend just broke up with me. Over the phone. But yes."

"Were you together a long time?"

"Almost two years," I answered. And then I walked out of the staffroom and into my classroom to teach a class of students I had met for the first time only a few hours before.

"Right, I hope you all had a nice lunch," I said, to the eager smiling faces. "So let's get down to business. Academic reading skills! Exciting stuff..."

I spent the next six weeks walking around a mere husk of a human being. I got up, I went to work. My students knew nothing; my colleagues in the staffroom knew everything, as they watched me sit in silence, tears falling down my face if I didn't make it to the privacy of the ladies' in time, and sometimes falling asleep in the staffroom in my lunch hour from the exhaustion of my insomnia. The second I came home from work, I shut the door of my bedroom in the university-owned student house I was sharing with eight other women, all summer teachers, and stayed alone. My internet search history became a list of entries like 'How to get over a broken heart', 'How to move on and let go of the love of your life', 'How to get back your ex', googled late into the night as my body's inability to stay asleep kept me awake until 2am, and woke me with nightmares at 4am. I could no longer listen to music as too many songs reminded me of him; but unable to bear the silence, I spent hours and hours with a background of Netflix - anything as long as there was no whiff of romance, love or kissing. My knowledge of British castles and Tudor dynasties benefitted if nothing else. I ate as little as possible and the weight fell away. Food made me sick and choosing anything at the supermarket was too difficult.

In one of my favourite albums - *Graceland* by Paul Simon - he sings that 'losing love is like a window in your heart / Everybody sees you're blown apart.' How true it is. Anyone who saw me must've seen my pain, and they so kindly offered me hugs, biscuits, even taking on some of my huge workload. Looking back, I should've quit. I should've been straight on a plane to demand an explanation/knee HIM in the balls. But the truth is, that's just not me. I do not feel that kind of violent rage and need for revenge. And as for flying back to our still-shared home for crisis talks? I knew that man; what good would it do to fly over there,

knock on his door and ask HIM to reconsider? When he makes up his mind, he doesn't change it, even if he'd like to, so committed is he to keeping his word. So I did nothing. No contact whatsoever. I couldn't even join in with the cries of "What a bastard" and "Fuck him" my woeful tale evoked. Even when, in a horrifying echo of a famous *Sex and the City* storyline where Carrie gets dumped by a Post-It, he sent some mail to my temporary accomodation with a tiny corporate-logo notelet saying only, 'I'm so sorry baby. A hug. Ciao.'

"Send nothing or send a proper letter!" said a housemate. "Don't send this. What the fuck is this?"

"Do you think he's met someone else?" people would ask. A word of advice; don't ever say that to a girl who's been dumped from afar. So great was my love and trust for this man that I hadn't even considered this as an option, but I was *so* grateful for the mental images that came with that line of enquiry, thank you very much.

The worst things were the questions. This was a fixed-term contract for only seven weeks. It came with a room. My permanent home had been in *his* apartment in Munich, where all my possessions still were. Possessions that at some point I would have to go and collect. From the moment of that phone call at 12:52pm on July 25th, there was a countdown ticking in my head: 'no home, no job, no home, no job,' it said, and always reminding me of the exact number of days left.

"What are you going to do after this?" was like a refrain, asked by family, friends and co-workers, both in the know and not.

Little did they realise that I thought, and thought, and thought of nothing else. I had had a plan for September, but it relied on having a place to live in Munich and the support of a loving partner who was OK with supporting me financially. That plan was now completely unachievable, along with any long-term dreams of marriage and families and houses in a small town on the German-Austrian border.

"Why don't you stay in England?" suggested everyone. But having left those green and pleasant lands almost nine years before, or a third of my life ago, this place didn't feel like home anymore. The 'friends' that everyone assumed I had here didn't exist beyond Facebook. Their lives had changed in the interim with marriages, houses and babies. We would be able to sustain a pleasant conversation if we bumped into each other, but in no way were they friends who I could call to crash on their sofa and feed me ice-cream. An adult lifetime of expatery had left my closest acquaintances scattered across time zones, necessitating carefully coordinated Skype appointments when heart-to-hearts were called for.

“You could live in your van,” some helpfully suggested. And it was true: this breakup presented an opportunity to re-do the van life, the climbing bum dream, and do it properly; not ‘tied down’ by a long-distance partner. But the truth was I had absolutely no desire to do that anymore. However hard I had found parking up my van and hanging up my climbing shoes on a balcony instead of on the rear-view mirror of my camper, I had eventually found my place in Munich and settled down. My name was on the doorbell. During the course of this relationship I found that my dreams and goals were evolving. There was still that drive to travel and adventure, but my feet were no longer so itchy.

And so I spent hours and hours churning options over in my head, ignoring those who said, “Why rush to make a decision?”

But for me, I *had* to make a decision. It would be an act of taking back control; the control that had been pulled from under my feet so dramatically, unexpectedly and totally during that phone-call. If I had to start a new life I was going to do it as quickly as possible.

I decided to go back to Munich: The social opportunities, the culture, the good looking men, the proximity to the mountains and all the adventure opportunities they allow, not to mention the huge amount of time I had invested learning German... Sure he was there. But I also knew where he lived and knew his schedule. It would be perfectly possible to live there and never see HIM again, I reasoned; he could be avoided.

Of course, there was a small part of me that thought, ‘If I *don’t* go back to Munich there is absolutely zero chance of us ever getting back together,’ but I told that part to shut up, you dummy, reminding it again and again that this is a man who never changes his mind.

I began researching flats, re-started my job hunting, sending out applications. Eventually I got a job looking after two kids for four hours a day, subject to the kids actually liking me.

“And what will you do the rest of the time?” asked my (in hindsight) rightly concerned father, when I told him I was going back to Munich.

“Look for a place to live, and look for another job. I can do that in the mornings in a cafe or something.”

I wouldn’t be persuaded, my mind was made up. So on the 19th September, I packed my van, drove to Hull and took the ferry to the continent.

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