

Break.up

Joanna Walsh



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Break up

1) *To cease to exist as a unified whole*

2) *To end a romance*

Webster's Dictionary

1 London/Leaving



All love stories begin with the letter I.

So where am I? I'm here in the bathroom at Eurostar Departures, St Pancras Station, London. I'm looking into the long bank of mirrors above the basins, making myself up. Not that I usually wear makeup, that's not me. I made myself up each time we met, it's true, though I was never quite sure whether it was to make me look better or to make sure you knew I wanted to look better for you. But I'll do it again today, just a little: mascara, lipstick, though I'm not going to see you, or anyone else I know.

Today makeup strings together a face that what? – mourning? – what should I call it? (there's no word for feeling the end of love) – has pulled in such different directions that to see myself in the mirror

– still – is a surprise. The light in the bathroom is grey-ish and orange-ish, and I look OK. A glance to the side: even compared to the other women I look OK, their faces always older under the fluorescent strips, disappointed, disappointing, no longer the heroines of their own stories, or of anyone else's. And I'm one of them. It's a miracle it's not written on our foreheads in black felt tip. Mirror? Window? I'm transparent with love (or is it grief?). No need to spell it out: surely everyone can see right through me.

But the women come and go without a second glance. That's to be expected: people are ruthless in their non-arrival, you can't rely on them. You, for instance, are not here now, and you-not-being-here accompanies me wherever I go. You are not here when I get out of bed, when I drink my coffee. You are not here when I clean my teeth. You are not here when I am here, now, standing in front of the mirrors in the Eurostar bathrooms. You *are* here when I read my email and, although even there you have been not-here for some time, when I scroll down, here you are again, each time I look. I can open your emails, I can shut them again, as if I just got them. Their envelopes never become ragged with re-reading. I could move them – into Trash, for instance – if I liked. And if I did, I could take them out again, not even dirty. But I don't. I like to see their outsides, here and now. They move me. Still.

I look OK in the mirror, although there's something wrong with the glass that I can't work out. I know it's there, but when I turn to the mirror there's no hole, no gap, however hard I look. In my jacket, with my handsome travel bag, I look almost together. And I am here, clearly, because there's a here for me to be in. Because I'm standing looking in the mirror in the Eurostar bathroom – a place where I usually am not – there must be a me to be here. I occupy some space, so here is where I am. Here.

But soon I'll be leaving.

How did I get here?

Before dawn I took a bus to the Eurostar terminal.

London began like rain, 'Harrow Fencing' at its borders. I leant against a cold window to photograph an empty sky through a triple screen: eye, camera, pane. At my photo's baseline, a few unlit street-lights to show perspective, orientation, to give a clue to where I am. I thought I might send it to you. Even if I'm leaving, I want you to know I'm here, still. I look down at the picture my phone has saved for me. Between the two lamp posts, a smudge of red: a light: one star awake. I didn't see that when I took the picture. It's good to notice something I didn't the first time, something going on nevertheless. It is hope. It means I will take more pictures. It is a beginning.

I don't know why I'm beginning here, when it's all over – or am I still in the middle? It's difficult to tell, but I will write down what happened because it's barely a story yet. And I am not a storyteller. But if I put it into words, it might begin to become one. I met you first for five minutes, in a bar, a friend of a – not even a friend – an acquaintance. I noticed – what? – a buzz, something in the air: attraction, aggression? A week later you wrote to me. I wrote back. In a few months we exchanged over a thousand emails, which turned into days spent on g-chat, 3am texts I still wake for, though they don't come any more. How close can you get?

We never slept together.

We were together In Real Life for hardly more days than a working week, and never the same place twice. I spent time in between places: on trains, on buses, in hotel rooms, on international flights. We

met in city centres, nowhere else to go. We always met alone. We never met each other's friends. Where did it all happen? In airports, in stations, in anonymous coffee shops – not really 'in' anywhere. Outside then: on park benches, on street corners. Most of all online, which can be something you're 'in' like a net or a web, or something you're 'out in', virtually limitless, a (Cyber) space. We met wherever there was WiFi, which is almost everywhere nowadays so that, when you left, there was never a space from which you could be erased, tidied over. There was never a place where you weren't, a place from which you could properly be missed.

I'm not in a hurry but I jaywalk the lights to the tube station. That's how you do things in a city, set yourself to its pace. Different cities have different settings. London is fast and red. Bricks and mortar: it will always be harsh. London's a nineteenth-century city. It seems

*The form of the city changes
faster than the human heart.*
Charles Baudelaire, *The Swan*

older but mostly it's not. Its patterns look immemorial but already they're tired, already tiring, and the city's still having changes of heart, not new-built

but repurposed: flats become home offices; cafés are for working at; warehouses for living in. You would have thought there was enough money to have made the city over by now, but it's still making the same mistakes, autopsied building sites, the evidence of neglect, abuse, ill health, the wrong decisions, plain bad luck. Outside the tube where there was once white stucco, today a dirt-brown interior exposed like a bomb site, the inside turned out. One day London will shine from top to toe, its own theme park. It will not any more decay. I'll like the place then. As it is, one part falls as another part rises.

I am still inside. I am *in* love. I love you, still. But I'm out of place everywhere. No places feel like places any more. They all feel like somewhere I have to get out of.

I don't like places.

I don't like being in the world

I want a world of other people's places, places I haven't had a hand in.

I am leaving the places I know to find some new places.

It's not entirely true that I won't know these new places: does anyone know nothing of anything, now that nowhere is more than a click away? The plan of the metro, photographs of the mosque at dusk, the market at noon, even of the city's cats and dogs, its bar listings, reviews of its restaurants, the phone numbers of its karate clubs: you can know more about a city by googling than by being there.

I board the tube. This is one of the lines I travelled with you. This could even be the same carriage, a clone of all the carriages on all the other trains on this branch. But because the carriage won't stay in one place, it can't move me like the corner of the street where we last met. I've passed and passed that place. I might be passing under it right now, but I'm never quite sure which street. Does it matter that I tie love to place? Or is it neither here nor there?

The tube train unpicks the stops, one by one, some of them places we were together, a straight line with no branches. I stare at the route map but there are no complications between the dots, no diversions, no breaks in the line. The real distances are nothing like as regular as they're drawn, or so they say, and gaps between the stations are not so evenly distributed. We spent most of our time together when things were well on their way to over. I might have missed something along the line, but I still don't understand how we stopped before we got to the end.

Mind the gap.

Between each station there's a gap of time which is also a gap of space, and each stop moves me further away from the last time we travelled together, even if it was in this very carriage. How long is it since I saw you? How long is a piece of string? Even if this is the carriage, the months since we stood here must be looped around it, the spooling spew of an old cassette tape that needs winding back tight if it's to keep time with space. I thought place was my problem, but perhaps it's time, and this slack length of time – this spare time I don't know what to do with, hardly want to own up to – is what longing is. I'm always trying to shift the pain further down the line, for it to have happened already, or for it to be about to happen in the future, somewhere, somewhen else, please not now. If I travelled this route backwards would the train reverse, could time somehow rewind? If I rode all day, back and forth, could I wear out the magnetic tape, overwrite you, score out the line?

I have travelled this route a few times since it was over and I'm no longer sure this is possible. Longing doesn't fade like an old tape recording: it moves in patches, hitting hardest where time and place coincide.

*I'm unhappy only by moments,
by jerks and surges, sporadically,
even if such spasms are close
together.*

Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*

Let me explain.

Love is not a cassette tape.

Love's not analog, it's digital.

Love is movement. Though it may not be self-precipitated, it is precipitate.

Love is falling.

A certain length of time ago, I fell in love with you.

(In love: blank words. A fait accompli.)

Fell. In. From what height? To what depth? A logical question.

Length again.

Love, definition-less, is also measureless. That is as it should be.

There is no depth in digital.
So am I still falling? I can't tell.

The minutes fall away, nothing I can do. On the up-escalator at St Pancras they're bowling down the opposite staircase. I could run back and try to catch them but I'd end up flat on my face, pratfallen. That's OK: inconclusion, ignorance – right now they suit me down to the ground. Besides, one part of my mind is always getting away from another. From the top of the stairs, a glimpse of the clock on the front of the newly restored station and, timewise, I seem to be doing OK. We're a nation that likes to keep time, when it can: the city's symbol's a clock, and its toll on the news at ten, the tell for the whole country. As for me, I'm always on time, which means I'm usually a little early. That's fine. I've never minded a wait, so long as it's not too long.

Time was so long. You said I took things too fast. It didn't seem fast to me. 'I am digital,' I said, 'not analog. On or off, zeroes and ones.' I'm not sure you understood. I'll try again. 'Between my word and my action falls no shadow.' Or hardly any. I meant to say, *there is no sweep of the second hand between what I say and what I do*. I meant to say, *I don't say things I don't mean*, though I admit I might sometimes have a problem with timing. You said, 'You are an odd mixture of something and recklessness.' I don't remember what that 'something' was, indecision maybe, but I'm not indecisive, once I've had time to think. I look before I leap, even before I decide I'm going to leap, and when I decide, I do it right away, or I'm already doing it. The moment seemed to be right. But then there was a gap. As I felt you draw away, I said, 'I like you: why waste that?'

You said to me, 'I wasted my time with you.'

I said to you, 'I didn't.'

I'm still trying to work out what you meant. Did you mean like the time between the stops, the time spent waiting at bus stations, in airports? As a child I was taught to count only the time spent at destinations, never weighing the moments in between: hours spent on motorways at dawn, queuing for ferries in a mist of petrol, on long tours of housing estates – backwaters of the domestic – searching for a new address. *Are we nearly there yet?* Although, at the time, it was impossible to say, I think I was happiest in these wastes of time; it was the wastes, not the destinations, that I remember.

How long is happiness anyway? I don't wear a watch. I use my phone (who doesn't now?). We had such a short time together, I thought we'd just started. I'd imagined our happiness would increase, only realising afterwards, that was it. Perhaps I should rephrase: how short is failure? Not that I had 'success' in mind. It's not like I'd wanted what we had to last forever, just a little longer than it did, then just a little longer than that: just long enough for it to merit a name. Why did I need so much to give it a name, *that* name?

We never named our connection to each other – it wasn't friendly, was barely even erotic – but nor was it denied. To deny something, it has to exist somewhere, even as an idea. Instead we made a nothing, a gap in something, no words to give it borders, endings. It was impossible to know what kind of thing it wasn't. Not that the name would have helped: love's a word for so much that it isn't really a name for anything. It's the word at the end of the line. You can't argue with it: no cleverness will unseat it. I say it's love. You say it's not. End of story.

But I've been daydreaming. If I want to be on time, I should get a move on. Here I am, already, at border control. I've passed the enormously ugly bronze couple that stands on the station – as large, as wordless, and as terrifyingly hideous as love can be. I've placed my

passport against a small glass square, which is enough to prove who I am. I've crossed a border, I've checked in.

• • •

I like stations. I like places designed to be left. Everything here is transparent: they've let you see its workings right down to the bones: the rails it runs you out on. The iron roof showcases its skeleton as decoration – there's no sleight of hand, you can see what holds it together – and, a long, long way below, a concourse of shops, the enclosed smell of alcohol and hot food at the wrong time of day.

I'm right on time, which means I have some time to spare. I walk to the stationer's, passing a man by the bar. Did I look at him? Did he look back? It's nothing I could put into words. Whatever's between us turns like a revolving door: plate glass. Is there anybody there, or is it just my reflection? To travel is constantly to begin a love story.

I dawdle along the stationer's shelves looking for a book that might help me, but I can't find any. So many love stories: pink covers for the ones that end in marriage, black for those that end in death. I don't have time to hang around to see either of them out.

A love story comes only after the end of love, whether it ends one way, or the other, and, until the story's told, love is a secret, not because it's illicit, but because it's so difficult to tell what it is. Having this nothing to tell becomes indistinguishable from the need to have someone to tell it to. Love stories are a confessional whispered to a third party, not the lover,

In all of this, there is a nagging question: Does virtual intimacy degrade our experience of the other kind and, indeed, of all encounters, of any kind?

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*

because once you agree it's love, something about it is over. It was different online where we were alone together. Ignoring invitations

to 'favourite', 'like', 'friend', our love letters were outtakes, asides to the fourth wall, because that's what instant message is: an echo chamber for thoughts not said out loud, performed to an audience of one, both lover and confidante. What could be more intimate, what could be closer? A line from you could keep me going for a whole week while I held it, secret, inside me.

They say love is blind, but so are words. A love letter must have a reader as well as a writer, and it must be the right reader: a love letter received unexpectedly reads as the ramblings of a crazy person. But a love letter can only be written when the reader isn't there. Writing is distance.

*How is it between you and me?
I love you, and you are away.*
Marcus Aurelius, *Letters*

reader as well as a writer, and it must be the right reader: a love letter received unexpectedly reads as the ramblings of a crazy person. But a love letter can only

A love letter turns words, the only proof of love, into something solid: a piece of paper, a number of bytes. Is this a love letter I'm writing now? I'm not sure. That depends who I think I'm writing to,

*My personal goal... is to express
myself as clearly and honestly as
I can – so in a sense love is just
like writing.*
Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*

and why. A love letter is designed to provoke love, but how? If I write about sex it's a sex act, provocative, but there is no pornography of love, no way to conjure a sound, an image that both represents and seeds the feeling: could it be

all in the words? Venn-diagrammed with sex, but not so bodied, love has to be 'like' something – like what? *A red red rose? A butterfly?* Metaphor rehydrates feeling, curls it open like Japanese paper flowers in water. What hovers in those words is alive and not-alive, like the terrible creature that unfurls itself in Chinese lotus-flower tea, but too much metaphor and the story flattens, slips sideways, disperses itself across the words that are its stand-ins until only the insect, the bouquet, remains. Every time I write love down it has a change of heart. Art and life are very different, yes. Writing makes love artful.

I'm not sure how to begin to make art out of love. That's why it's been hard, hard to write these first few paragraphs, so hard I've sometimes had to turn away from the page, so hard I've run words together, unable to type them so they mean something anyone else could read. Untrained in grammar, but it's more than that. Sometimes there are no sentences for what I need to say: sometimes the object must replace the subject. Sometimes participles dangle. Sometimes there are no nouns, sometimes I haven't been able to tell who's speaking. No virtuoso, I'm all non-sequiturs, tautologies... or it's not what to write, it's what to leave unwritten, how to narrow life to the width of the page. I could write, *I love you*. It's a good, straightforward sentence – subject, verb, object – but where's the good in that? There is no good in it. So let me not be virtuosic, as I am not virtuous. Let me make things difficult; let me make difficult things. Let me not succeed (if I did I'd get to the end too quickly and I'd have to stop thinking about you). Let me fail. I have failed the practice: now let me fail the theory. To talk about love let me use only the simplest words. Let me state the facts as they occurred: they will evoke the rest.

The simplest words become charged with an intensity that is almost intolerable.

Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*

Love letters begin with 'I', but they aspire to 'we'. Our story was slight enough, barely warranting the two-letter word, that double-you. But 'we' is seldom a storyteller, and any love story told is evidence of singularity, of separation, of love's failure – or success – at any rate proof that love has moved on elsewhere. To write about love is to feel my way to its ends, to trace its limits, to push against its borders. To write about love is to gather its pieces, to kick them from under chairs and pry them from between floorboards, to sweep them onto a duster or a piece of newspaper, to purse it closed. To write about love is to wrap it up, to put a layer between me and it so that I won't trip on it, stub my toe on it, cut myself on it. To write

about love is to be sick of the sight of it lying around, to clear it up, throw it out, to put the pieces out of harm's way. To write about love is to shrink it, to conclude it, to end it, to end up alone. All love stories end with the letter I.

But all travel books begin with 'I' too, a fugitive 'I' that flings itself from country to country. Could this 'I' write a love story that goes on, with no ending up, in which uncertainty is ceaselessly renewed?

*Does he love the girl or is she
just another thing that moves
him?*

Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

To move me, a story has to move towards some kind of conclusion. Still, it mustn't hurry, must never be too sure of the ending. There has to be a beginning – a middle, too – or there wouldn't

be a story at all. I always want everything to be over too soon: loving the story but wanting the end. Only when I've finished reading do I realise it was better to travel than to arrive. By the time it draws into the station, love is no more than a reported act: *the train arriving at platform four is the 06.32 from...* A story involves a leap of faith. It's not in the words, it takes place in the seconds of held breath between. I give my trust freely to the writer who, I hope, will bring me safe to the end. But there is no story without the possibility of a fall.

I buy a coffee and sit at the bar by a man in a grey-paunched business suit. He is reading a book: *Living in the Moment*. He thinks of the future, orders, 'Un Coca-Light'. Travel's a space for worry. Everyone here is looking for advice but no one dares to ask themselves, or the other people here. It's so hard to *be*, so hard, we have to search for solutions elsewhere. If not in a book, then a window-seat on a moving train: that's the best place to get some perspective. I flick through a magazine on the bar to the horoscopes page and read: *Having refused to disclose much about yourself, you'll soon need to be more open with certain people. Don't enter into territory that leaves you*

anxious. Some facets of your life are too complex to discuss openly. You've a right to privacy just like everyone else. I have no idea what this means, but a lover grasps at predictions, as a traveller at signs.

Something inside me still tells me to forget it, is trained to say, let it go, move on, as though living, loving, were somewhere else; as if nothing important could happen to me and nothing that happened to me could ever be important. Who do I think I am, anyway?

(And to love is to ask the same question, and also the question: *Who are you? What is it, about you, I find so loveable? And, if you ever loved me, what was it about me?*)

If my other half leaves, what is left of me? There are a few things. I have brought with me enough for a month. I have brought: one dress, one pair of jeans, three, T-shirts, a jacket, a scarf, a sweater. I am wearing some of these. I have brought: underwear, bikini, socks – perhaps four pairs – one washbag, one pair of boots, one pair of shoes, sandals, a very small umbrella. I have brought: one laptop, one pair of headphones, one smartphone, notebooks, pens, a few books – one copy of Alain Badiou's *In Praise of Love*, one copy of Søren Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, one copy of Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, a copy of *Mad Love* by André Breton, and also his *Nadja*, which begins with the words 'Who am I?' (do not think I have not noticed these are all books by men). One bag. No allowance, but I'm equipped for everything. I am proud of how little I need, how little I am.

The Sempervivum plant... tries at the cost of whatever revolting efforts to reconstruct itself according to the properties that it has.

André Breton, *Mad Love*

The boarding announcement: I cut back through the stationer's, a last search for something in a language I understand, that will tell me nothing I need to know. The *Girl's Guide to Europe* does not tell

her what Europe is like, but how a girl should be when she is there. In the self-help aisle, *Top Tips for Girls* says:

Don't call him

Write an email but don't send it.

Delete all his texts etc.

Do I intend to take any of this advice? No, I think, no. I am not an advice taker. When offered advice I think carefully, not about what will do me the most good but about what I want to do. If it's no good for me, so much the better. I won't do things because they are good for me, or because they will make me good. If I want to email you, I will. Why? Who knows? For the split second of autonomy, for the beautiful fall.

Is this going to be a self-help book, then? Self-help does seem to come in books, as though the self could be helped only by writing,

We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body – not too little, not too much, just right.

Turtle, ibid

being mostly, or even nothing more than, words. I've done it online, tweaking my profiles, refining sentences, but a book is a solid-state object: there it is, all at once, not a word can be altered, and nothing tells you the time quicker than a yellowed paperback. No, I'm not

sure this is a self-help book. If it were I wouldn't be thinking about myself: I'd be thinking about how – having already achieved some measure of self – I could help my reader, whereas, as things stand, I can hardly help myself. So, no, I think this will be a helpless book and, though I admit it's not entirely selfless, it will not, I hope, be selfish. *I think, therefore it is...* All right. OK, OK, call it a selfish book then: self-ish, like 'childish' – analogous to, concerned with, but not quite self, just as blue-ish is sort-of-but-not-quite blue.