

How to Survive Your First Breakup (Anxiety)

by Nicholas J. D'Errico

Don't cry when Margret dumps you. Don't look her in the eye, either. And don't you dare start panicking. Just sit there silently, letting the truth that you're alone sear the back of your neck until it starts to feel cold. When you do finally look over, breaking your staring match with the seam on her comforter, you'll see that she can't look you in the eye either. She'll be curled up by her pillow—back against the wall—hugging her knees like she used to hug you. Take this to mean pity. She knows what she's doing to you, Sam. She understands you, and perhaps that's the one thing she won't deal with.

Start to shake. Replay the tape of what just happened; put it on loop. Dub the voices with a new dialogue. Once, imagine an apology. Twice, imagine anger. Thrice, imagine her reneging on the breakup. No replay is the same. You briefly forget which one is real. Hear a voice over the soundtrack, increasing in its concern. “Are you okay?” it'll ask. Will yourself to open your eyes and smash the video screen in your head. Don't show her how vulnerable you are. You don't want her pity.

She's staring at you now with two dry eyes—eyes that speak of moral duty rather than genuine concern. They'll disappear when you answer back, “Yeah, I'll be fine.” Take two of your hockey jerseys from under her bed, but leave her with the third—the one with her name on it. Say you don't want it (because you don't), but imagine it to be a reminder that she gave up something great. Let her drop your apartment keys into your hand. Then kiss her. Once. Cautiously. Like dipping your feet into a neighbor's pool, unsure of the temperature. You shouldn't have done it, but it's too late. Say you love her, and she'll say she's sorry. Then leave.

You'll remember the acid sting in your eyes. The tears will try to wash it out, but all they'll do is make it harder to see your phone. Hit

the first contact you see on your “favorites” list and pray it's not her.

You won't remember the conversation. Nor will you remember the trip over to Allston, Alex picking you up from the train station, and the cold walk back to her house. One moment you'll blink, and the next you'll be sitting on the edge of her roommate's bed, watching as she dials your mother from your phone. That night, you'll sleep on Alex's couch. It's a heavy sleep; no dreams—just blink, and your mom is picking you up from the curb, worry etching lines deep into her brow and cheeks. Alex will apologize for alarming her, then wave from her porch as you leave for home. Spend the weekend, and believe that you've begun recuperating.

These aren't the first blackouts, and they won't be the last. The first happened while you and Margret were still dating. You could feel them coming; you spent less and less time together, and she talked more and more about going away to London in the fall. Study abroad—an opportunity for her to find new experiences and adventures. To find friends and connections that would last a lifetime. To find some cute, scrawny British boy with an intoxicating accent and an inert intellect that you couldn't find in the States. You were replaceable—expendable—despite all the time and care you gave her, and thinking about this harsh truth sent an electric current down your spine. Blame yourself. Perhaps you weren't good enough for her.

When she first told you it was over come the summer, it happened. The shakes came first. The rest came all at once: senses dulled, mind wandered, and all outside control was lost. Inside, you remember flashbacks. You remember the first date at the art museum, where it didn't actually feel like a first date. By the second exhibit, you had your hand wrapped tight around her waist, sharing intimate secrets most of your friends didn't know. You bought her lunch and kissed her outside her dorm before leaving for home, like it was a matter of routine rather than a new experience. You remember the night she took your virginity; the moment you entered your apartment, she took her shirt off and you just stared like a retriever at a tennis ball, unsure of what to do but knowing that you

wanted it. You remember taking her to meet your friends and family. She seemed to charm them all just by talking about her accomplishments, and you sat there smiling proudly, thinking that after all these years of suffering alone, you had the confidence to catch something so great and wonderful. You remember hearing her voice over all this, repeating, "You're going to be okay. Go to that neutral place. Breathe." You don't remember curling in a ball on your bed, mumbling fragments, crying, and then falling asleep. That's what Margret told you.

Believe that being home will help you. You'll need this last fiber of optimism. First, your mom will tell you that she saw this coming; she didn't trust Margret from the moment she met her. Your friends will join in the self-righteousness, claiming that they couldn't have told you because you wouldn't have believed them. They'll guide you into feeling used. They'll evidence every meal you bought her—every stuffed animal or box of chocolates or pretty dress; you gave yourself away from the beginning. They'll tell you that you need to be angry to heal. Agree. This is when the nightmares start. The first iterations are simple. You're in her dorm room. She's curled up at the corner of her bed, just like the night she dumped you. Only now she's crying. But you're not sitting next to her; no, it's only her, and you're there watching, blank and emotionless. You feel flat; thin; almost transparent; insignificant. You can't do a damn thing.

From here on out, you'll wake up every morning feeling defeated. Believe it'll pass. Don't tell anyone.

On Sunday, Mom will drop you off back in the city. Try to get ready for school and go about your routine as usual. Somewhere between doing laundry, cleaning dishes, and writing a story, you'll feel lonely. This is when you call Margret—or you would've called her, had you not remembered. Imagine how it should've been: a quick text and she'd be at your door twenty minutes later, excited to sit next to you and keep you company while you completed your mundane chores. Then imagine how it really was: a quick text and a begrudging response. "I've got work to do," she'd say, "and I can never get it done when I'm around you."

You would've answered, "Why don't you come over after, then?" to which she'd reply, "I'd just rather stay here."

Realize you're alone now. The shakes start again and you try to fight them, but the struggle only makes you feel lightheaded. Sit down, breathe, and close your eyes.

She's crying again, and you seem to be watching from a distance. But this time, everything seems to be more real—more material. You have a time and place in this relative dimension. She picks up her head and you can clearly see damp, swollen redness around her eyes. Then she reaches toward you, and you realize that you're where her desk would be. You're small—hand-sized—and she clenches you gently with soft, moist fingers that carry you toward her face. She dabs, and your body soaks in her tears like you're made of a fibrous material. You feel saturated, absorbing her sadness like it's your own, filling the void in your emotions. Her fist clenches, then releases. You find yourself falling, downward, accelerating faster. You wake before you hit the bottom of the wastebasket.

Go to school on Monday morning. Or at least try to. You know you need the routine to pull you out of this. But that morning you just lie there, watching the clock tick later and later. You feel like you're choking—like you don't even have the will to keep breathing. Remember your optimism from the weekend; it'll help you stay alive for now. Commute, get to class, and sit there, taking shelter in your head while dull sounds echo on the outside of your skull. The room and everyone in it will distort as if you're watching them through glasses with the wrong prescription. You won't notice the teacher's talking at you until your neighbor prods you in the arm. Shudder, apologize, and pretend to listen, but retreat back inside. Be alone with your thoughts.

One of Margret's roommates will stop you outside of class. Listen to her. Tune into the pity in her voice; let the soft, smooth melancholy brew a lukewarm calm. She'll be outright. Margret cheated. On you. He was just some classmate who showed an interest. They're dating now. Margret didn't want to tell you. Her

roommate had to—out of pity. She thought you treated Margret wonderfully. Margret says she just got bored.

Take this wonderful news and feel angry, but only for a second. Then blame yourself. You weren't good enough. You made this happen. Anger should make you feel better—should be justified—but it does nothing.

Leave the building, cross the street, and enter the outbound station toward home. You never thought about it before, but you're damn sure about it now. Shakes start, and the trolley speeds down the track toward the platform. It's just one step down. A small step before the blackout hits.

This time, she's not at the corner of the bed. She's on her hands and knees in the middle, hovering over the naked figure of a man lying face-up. You're on the desk. The stuffed panda you bought her when she had the flu blocks the figure's face, but you're sure it's male. You can tell by the deep moans and how Margret's mouth glides over his shaft. She goes faster; the click-and-suck noise gets louder and more frequent. There's a rumble from his throat and a reply from hers, a whimper that sounds more desperate in its passion. You try to scream, but you have no mouth. At the same time, you realize you have no ears, and the intensifying moans fall silent. And lastly, you realize you have no eyes. The room goes dark. A few more seconds pass and a hand gropes for you along the desk. You crumple, then feel something soft and wet press into every fiber of your being. There's a shudder, and then a spray, and you absorb something more than just the wetness of tears. The moisture eats away at your stomach like acid burning an ulcer, and you begin to disintegrate. Parts of you fall away, just as the whole of you falls piecemeal toward the bottom of the wastebasket.

You'd never step, though, would you? You blink once and you're on the train to Alex's. You blink twice and you're in her living room while she hugs you. It's the tightest you've ever been squeezed. You blink thrice and you're at home, holding a bottle of pills while Mom pats your shoulder and says, "Remember, these are to help you."

Take a week off from school and go see your friends. Call a few of the long-distance ones. They'll tell you they love you over and over, and you'll believe them. Tell your story to most of them. Tell everything to a few of them. Perhaps this repetition is exactly what you need. Work through the events. Contemplate whether or not you regret dating Margret—if you wish you'd even met her in the first place. Realize that you don't. Get incompletes in two classes and extend essays into the summer.

You saw the warning signs, Sam, but repressed them in favor of all the good times. It just wasn't meant to be. Margret cared—at least at some points. But then there was the narcissism, the indifference, and the lack of effort. While these might've made the relationship seem unhealthy, it wasn't. At least not for you. At the time, it seemed like the end—like she was the one. But you have to understand that it was just a fleeting college relationship. It was your first. Maybe not now, but someday you'll realize that there's no singular method for dealing with heartbreak. It's just one thing you have to experience for yourself.

