

DEAR HEARTBREAK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Demetrios, Heather, editor.

Title: Dear heartbreak : YA authors on the dark side of love / edited by  
Heather Demetrios.

Description: First edition. | New York : Henry Holt and Company, 2018. |  
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018003710

Subjects: LCSH: Love. | Rejection (Psychology) | Emotions.

Classification: LCC BF575.L8 D386 2018 | DDC 155.5/192—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018003710>

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First edition, 2018 / Designed by Liz Dresner

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dear Heartbreak,

Ever since I was a little girl I dreamed about true love—sounds ridiculous, right? Well, the thing is, I was always inspired about it because of movies and books my dad used to read to me. So one day I saw him. He was everything I dreamed of (or so I thought). His caramel eyes were full of mischief, like he was calling out for trouble, and don't even mention the hair and the smile—a total dream boat! I was so in love that I thought he was in love with me, but how could he be when he barely knew me?

I thought that because he did things like telling me I was special, different from all of the other girls—flirting with me (he pulled my hair to annoy me and he always used an excuse to touch me)—I created an illusion around him (big mistake). So one day I decided to confess my feelings. I was so full of confidence that he liked me back, but when I got to him he was with another girl and I felt a flinch of jealousy. But I brushed it off. I was determined to confess my feelings—until I saw something that completely shattered my heart. He was kissing her and smiling at her and he had this twinkle in his eye and he was touching her gently, like touching her too hard might make her fall apart. I didn't know where to run or hide. I felt completely heartbroken.

The thing is, he still found out that I liked him: A dear friend

of mine shattered my trust and told him because she also liked him! Great friend, huh? So the next day I went to school heart-broken about seeing him (I forgot to mention we went to the same school), and there I go to talk to him like always, but something was very different. He looked at me like I was a bag of poop and ignored me. I was so confused and hurt. So the bell rings and we all go to the classroom (we also have the same class) and I was talking to a friend, but I was trying to catch the eye of the boy that I liked. When I finally got it, I waved at him and he looked me up and down in disgust and came to me. I gulped. I knew he knew, but the words that followed still hurt like a bitch: “You disgust me. Listen to me, I would never like someone like you—you are ugly and I hate you. I don’t want you near me ever again, do you understand?”

God, those words almost made me cry (key word: almost). I gave him my best smile, even though I didn’t mean it, and told him: “I understand; I hope you have a nice day and life.” Then I went to my seat. When I glanced at him, he looked so confused. I hated myself because of him. To this day, I still think that no one will ever love me. All my dreams were shattered—and you know what’s the worst part of it all? He still hates me and I don’t even know why! I wish I’d never see him again, but the thing is, as time goes by I still don’t hate him. He broke me, but I still don’t hate him.

Love,  
Unrequited Love, 16

## YOU ARE SO FAR FROM BROKEN

Dear Unrequited Love,

I'll hate him for you.

I mean, wow. This guy's an actual shitstain. But you? You're beautiful. And you're brave. Look at what you did: You loved someone fearlessly. You got your heart broken. You went to school the next day anyway and got your heart broken again. You responded by showing him exactly what grace looks like. And here you are, picking yourself up and dusting yourself off every single day.

I was a lot like you when I was younger. I went to school. I had friends. But I had this entire inner romantic landscape, shaped by books and movies and fairy tales and hormones. I don't think I'll ever find the words to explain the sheer force of my longing for the romantic leads in particular nineties teen rom-coms. Devon Sawa, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, and Ethan Embry, with their shy smiles and twinkly eyes, tripping over themselves to make grand romantic gestures to the beautiful skinny girls they were in love with.

And then there was me: on the couch, eating Goldfish crackers, smeared in zit medication, wondering what it would feel like to be worthy of cinematic grand gestures. I thought I wasn't worthy, but I wanted it badly. That is, I wanted love. Also, I wanted to be worthy. And in my middle-school heart, these two concepts—love and worthiness—were dangerously intertwined.

Of course, it wasn't just movies. At school dances, at bar mitzvahs, everywhere I went, it seemed like everyone around me had somehow cracked the code. I'd barely mastered eye contact, and my friends were slow-dancing and holding hands and sometimes even kissing—which was a thing I thought about *constantly*. I practiced kissing my own arm—I actually did that—but it wasn't exactly to improve my skills for the real deal. It was an attempt to approximate what kissing felt like. I wasn't sure I'd ever get to try it out on someone else's lips.

Because I wasn't like the girls who slow-danced and held hands and kissed. I was quiet and earnest and pudgy. The other kids wore Abercrombie. I wore oversized nature-themed T-shirts and gym shorts in the summer, and turtleneck tunics all winter. My hair wouldn't stay in its ponytail, and I was always pushing up my glasses. Once a boy sat behind me in class and murmured *l-l-l-l-liposuction*. I saw a slam book once that voted me the “plainest” girl in seventh grade. I don't know if any of this sounds familiar to you, UL—I hope not—but I'm guessing you understand the feeling. Sir Shitstain made you understand the feeling. *Disgusting. Unworthy.*

High school was better, sort of. I never had one of those teen-movie-style transformations, but I was a bit more comfortable in my skin. For the first time in my life, I had friends who were boys. Sometimes I had crushes on them—achingly physical, intensely real, absolutely top secret. I'd joke around with them during the school day, and there was so much casual touching at play rehearsal . . . Romance didn't feel attainable, but sometimes it felt close. Sometimes I loved how it felt to want someone. I used to cry in my car when certain songs came on the radio. Every unrequited love song was about me. I felt very alive. I was constantly in love, but I could never say it out loud. I guess I didn't want to burden anyone by loving them. I guess I still felt unworthy.

Here's how the next part of the story should go: I go to college. I get confident. Either I kiss a million boys, or I stop caring about kissing. I'm brave and self-possessed and my goals are bigger and I'm better.

Here's how it actually goes: I go to college, and I've still never had a boyfriend, still never been kissed, still want it desperately. But sophomore year, I met a cute boy with glasses. We were at a party in my friend's dorm room. I remember sitting beside him on my friend's bed, talking like we were the only two people in the room. And I thought: *Maybe this is finally happening.* Maybe I've unlocked the secret.

I saw him around campus a few times in the following weeks. I learned his last name. I learned he was an English major and a writer. There was no Facebook back then, but I found him in

the campus directory. I knew his email address, even though I was nowhere near brave enough to use it. But I was getting braver in other ways. I never used to confess my crushes, but I told my friends about this one. I said hi to him and smiled when I passed him between classes.

And I wrote an essay about him in a creative nonfiction writing class. It wasn't only about him. I didn't mention his name. But it was about that party and that feeling of connection and my hopefulness, even weeks later, and how I'd take the long way to class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, because I knew I'd run into him. It was about how I never knew the right thing to say or what to do with my hands, and it was about how those tiny moments could make or break my day. It was painfully honest, more so than I'd ever been. I didn't try to publish it or put it on the Internet—I would rather have died. But even submitting it to my professor was like handing over my heart.

The semester went on. I worked up the nerve to invite this boy to a party, and I'd obsessively rehearsed the whole encounter. I was still maneuvering to bump into him between classes, so that's when I planned to make my move. I'd mention the party casually, like I just happened to remember it. I'd ask for his email address—because I'd never let him know I'd already memorized it. Then, I'd forward him the info for the party, and when he showed up, I'd miraculously look like a nineties rom-com love interest. He'd ignore everyone else, and we'd talk for hours, just like the night we met. And then we'd kiss and have lingering eye contact, and he'd be my boyfriend. I'd have a



*boyfriend*. And since *me with a boyfriend* was incomprehensible, there would obviously be some kind of transformation montage. I'd become the kind of girl who inspired grand romantic gestures. This was finally about to happen.

Anyway, I found him after class and asked him. Super casual, no big deal. *There's going to be a party. You should totally stop by.*

He was nice. I remember that. He smiled and told me the party sounded cool. He asked me to keep him in the loop about it.

And then he gave me the wrong email address.

It was a strange mistake for him to make. I knew people sometimes gave the wrong phone numbers on purpose to reject overly persistent suitors. But I didn't think I was overly persistent. For all my pining, I'd barely talked to this boy. And I'd structured the entire interaction so it wouldn't look like I was asking him out. *Of course* I wasn't asking him out. Not asking him out was my only move, really. I was the best at never putting myself out there, and I was the best at never getting rejected.

I didn't *think* I was being rejected.

It had to be a mistake. A rom-com moment. And wasn't it so like me to fall for a beautiful English major in glasses who couldn't remember his own email address?

I emailed him about the party. I used the correct email address, of course—the one he must have thought he'd given me. I even had a story ready to go, about how I got a Mailer Daemon

from the email address he gave me—HILARIOUS, RIGHT—and only *then* did I look Mr. Mailer Daemon up in the campus directory. Of course. It's not like I'd ever think to look him up otherwise.

Anyway, he never wrote back. He also never showed up to the party.

A few days later, I ran into him outside my creative nonfiction classroom.

A few days after that, I learned he was my writing professor's teaching assistant, which means he'd read all my essays.

He'd read *that* essay.

To his credit, this boy never called me ugly. He never said I disgusted him. He was kinder than Sir Shitstain—but holy shit, did I feel ugly and disgusting. I finally got it. This boy didn't have any difficulty remembering his own email address. He was passively, politely rejecting me. I hated the thought of him pitying me—but even worse, I hated being something he had to *deal* with. My love was a burden, like I'd always suspected.

I was unworthy, like I'd always suspected.

You're a more generous person than me, UL, because you don't hate Sir Shitstain. I definitely hated Mr. Mailer Daemon. My best friend and I stopped speaking his name. We literally called him "The One We Hate." And, fifteen years later, I still cringe when I think of him. I especially cringe picturing him reading this letter. "*Jesus,*" he'll say. "This girl is writing about me again?"

Or maybe (probably, hopefully) he doesn't remember me at all.

My dearest UL: I'm so sorry to say you'll probably always remember Sir Shitstain. You may forget his face or even his name, but you'll remember how he made you feel. And I hate that. This kind of moment sears you. I wish it didn't. I also wish I could say this pain will make you stronger or braver, but I don't think that's true. There's nothing good or redemptive about what he did to you. And if there's a lesson there, he's the one who has to learn it. Not you.

But here's the good news: This experience doesn't need to be a lesson. It doesn't need to make you strong and brave. You're already strong and brave. So was I. We just can't always see it.

I'm thirty-four years old as I write this. I'm in love, and I'm married to the person I'm in love with. I have two children and a career I adore. I've held copies of my books in languages I can't read. I've visited the set of my book's movie adaptation. Do I feel unworthy sometimes? Absolutely yes. Am I confident and self-possessed? Not always. Not even usually. But I'm proud of what I've done and how the years have transformed me.

The years really have transformed me. I think the same thing will happen to you.

But here's the part that surprised me: Finding love wasn't the transformation. My first kiss didn't transform me. Neither did my first relationship, my first breakup, or my big summer wedding. The transformation wasn't even about me beginning to feel worthy—or, more importantly, understanding the

difference between finding love and being worthy. I'm worthy now. I was worthy then. And I see that now, but that's not the thing I'm most proud of.

I'm proud that now, in my thirties, I'm finally talking about this. All of it: these feelings, these experiences, my insecurities, my shame, and the fierceness of my longing. Now when I write, I take my armor off first. Sometimes I write about people I love, and sometimes those people read what I write. It's never easy. It's terrifying. But I'm more proud of the honesty in my books than anything else about them. I'm proud of my honesty in my personal and professional relationships. I'm proud of my honesty on social media, and I'm proud of my honesty with myself. This is how I put my heart on the line. This is the way I know how to be brave.

And this is what you did in the letter you sent me. I'm in awe. You're sixteen years old. I know you think Sir Shitstain broke you, but you are so far from broken. You wrote to me, holding the door of your heart wide open. You amaze me. You inspire me.

You're so brave, and I love you.

—Becky

There's nothing stupid about wanting to be loved.  
Believe me.

—*Everything Leads to You*, Nina LaCour



Dear Heartbreak,

I'm scared. I'm scared that something's wrong with me, or that people don't find me attractive or don't like me or something like that. I'm a senior in high school, and I've been in two relationships, one in ninth grade that was with a friend—we never actually ended up going on a date. The other was last year, and lasted a whopping three days. Besides that, no one's ever come up to me and asked me out, or told me that they like me, or even asked if I'd want to sit with them at lunch or something. A lot of my friends have had relationships before, even freshmen that I know are more experienced or lucky than me. I think I'm pretty, but I just don't know what is wrong with me that no one would want me. My mom tells me that things will be different in college, that I'll find someone there, but I'm so scared that it will be just like high school all over again. Last year for junior prom this other girl asked me to go with her, and asked me if I wanted to date her, too, and I said yes. She got a different girlfriend around a week later. I just want to know what's wrong with me, because I'm trying to do everything right, but nothing is working. I know that high school relationships usually don't work, but I at least wanted to try. I'm graduating in a couple weeks, and I've only ever been on one date. I know that things are supposed to get better, but I'm scared

that nothing is going to change. I'm scared that I'm not good enough.

Love,  
Scared, 17



## GROW WILDLY

Dear Scared,

You are good enough.

I'll say it again, because I know that this statement is a tricky one to believe sometimes. So much around us and inside of us says, in so many overt and covert ways, that we are not. But believe me: You are good enough.

The summer after my senior year of high school, I worked in a bookstore. On weekend mornings, we would pick up giant thermoses of coffee from the café a few doors down so that our customers could sip while they browsed. It became my job to pick up the coffee, and when I walked into the café on my first morning shift, a cute boy just a little older than me was working there alone. He wore worn corduroy pants and hemp bracelets. He had a deep laugh and a slender body. He listened to music I'd never heard of. I remember wondering if he found me attractive. I remember thinking, *Will he choose me?* When he asked me out to dinner a few weeks later, I said yes. I rode in his car through the tunnel and over the bridge and into San

Francisco, lit up and brilliant on a Saturday night, and we sat across from each other at a Chinatown restaurant and made flirtatious, tentative conversation. And so we began.

It sounds familiar, right? A little like the plot of a predictable movie? It's what we picture for ourselves because we've been shown a million versions of it. We are tricked into thinking that this story is true for everyone, and then when it isn't true for us, we wonder why. You wanted this in high school—a person who would find you attractive, who would ask you out. I can feel the sadness in your letter—*your* sadness—and I want you to know that it's okay to grieve that high school relationship you didn't get to have. In all fairness, you *did* have a little bit—the thing with your friend in ninth grade, the three-day fling, an invitation to junior prom. These are more than what a lot of teenagers have by the time they finish high school. But still. You wanted something more than that. I'm sorry that you didn't get it.

Why don't you imagine it now, what it could have been like? Picture the person who would have asked you out. Maybe you two would have gone out on a proper date, to the movies or for ice cream in a park while you watched the sunset. Maybe you would have stayed out until your curfew, telling each other about yourselves. Maybe your first kiss would have been awkward at first and then passionate, and maybe you would have found ways to be at your houses when your parents were gone so that you could do more than kiss. You would have shown up at parties together, arms around each other. You would have slow-danced

and made out in a corner. You would have taken up entire pages in each other's yearbooks. Or maybe you would have done none of these things—you're the only one who knows exactly what you wanted. Close your eyes and imagine it. Let it all play out.

It could have been really great.

Now, when you're ready, go ahead and let it go.

Scared, I want to tell you a secret. I've spent so much of my life trying to make myself a blank slate for other people. Nodding and smiling and saying yes. Waiting to be chosen. Wanting to be liked. Trying not to take up space, to never inconvenience, to read the mood of another person and alter my own to match them. I've spent so much of my life saying, "Me too," "It's up to you," "I really have no preference." The people who've grown to know me have done so *in spite* of this, not because of it. They've had to work harder. I know now that it's okay to be messy and difficult and angry and sad. It's okay to want things and to go after them. It's okay to end friendships or relationships that aren't working. It's okay to be inconvenient, to need something from someone and to ask for it. But it took me thirty-four years of living and a good therapist to get here. I still doubt myself far too often. I still marvel at how simple and true and freeing it is to say, "I disagree."

You may be wondering why I'm telling you all of this when you wrote with a straightforward problem of wanting someone to date. I'm sort of wondering the same thing. But at this point in my letter I need to confess that I did not face your particular struggle when I was younger, and I don't face it now, either. It

wasn't the problem of not having someone to date that drew me to your letter, that made me think about you on my neighborhood walks and late at night while washing dishes and know that I needed to write you back. When I read your letter, one line stood out to me more than any of the others: "I'm trying to do everything right, but nothing is working." I read it, and I read it again, and I worried over how much of *you* you must be erasing, how much of *you* you must be holding back, in your effort to do everything right. What do you love, Scared? What ideas fill you with wonder? Do you like to paint, or collect things, or play video games, or try out YouTube tutorials? Do you read novels, or go on hikes, or speak another language? When you and your friend fooled around in ninth grade, how did you like to be kissed? I am the kind of person who, when I want something badly, finds it difficult to pay attention to anything else. I get the feeling that you might be like that, too. That you might be postponing your happiness while you wait for someone to choose you.

Since I was thirteen years old, I have been in a relationship. I don't think I went more than six months without one. And I know that to you, who craves romantic connection, this might sound lucky. But it means that all the growing up I did, all the learning about myself, and the figuring out who I wanted to be, was done in relation to another person. That comes with its comforts and it comes with its challenges. It often means that when you're struggling with yourself, you jab an elbow into the eye of the person who loves you. It means that when you're navigating

the storms of your own heart, you break someone else's in the process.

Which brings me back to that boy from the café. We had our first date in the city and I tried to act like the kind of girl he'd want to be on a date with, but since I didn't know him yet I didn't know what that kind of girl she would be. I feared that I was boring. I worried over whether he'd kiss me and I didn't know if I wanted him to or not. He didn't on that first date but he did on the next one. It turns out that we had both been worried and nervous in our own ways. He was sweet and smart and I was lonely. We dated for longer than we should have—well into my second year of college. He had a crush on another girl.

I did, too.

I don't want to tell you the story of *how* I met her. I want to tell the story of how it *felt*. Like the crowded room we were in became silent but for her. Like she moved in slow motion. Like every time she exhaled, I breathed a little of her in. I learned her name from a roll sheet our professor sent up and down the aisles. I learned what her voice sounded like from the smart things she said in class. I learned what it felt like to want a specific person so badly—to be so drawn to someone—that once the semester was over I never walked anywhere on campus without searching for her. I had memorized her face from countless stolen glances and one fortuitous group work session when we ended up together and I fought through my shyness to talk to her. Even after months had passed since our class had ended, I knew her face well enough to draw it. I sketched her in pencil,

and then I carried the drawing of her in my journal as though it were a photograph she'd given to me. The drawing was a wish. And when, a full year later, we had a weekly class together in her very last semester of college, that wish was granted.

I ended things with the boy because all I could think of was the girl. I was still too shy to make a move, so I enlisted the help of my friends and slowly, she gravitated to our section of the classroom. Every day that wasn't Thursday I spent counting down to it. Every Thursday morning before class began I tried on all my clothes, or went to the mall next to campus to find something that would make her choose me. I casually mentioned a show I was going to and asked if she wanted to come, my heart pounding. She couldn't, but she smiled every time she looked at me. Finally we started hanging out outside of class, zipping through the city in her little red car. We went to parks and restaurants and bookstores and record stores and I kept waiting for her to choose me. I hadn't figured out how to tell her. Meanwhile, more than one of her ex-girlfriends wanted her back. They called and cried to her on the phone. The boy she was best friends with was in love with her. He showed up at a restaurant where we were having lunch one day, desperation in his every gesture. I had been waiting and waiting for her to choose me but I was afraid I was going to wait for so long that I'd miss my chance. So I gathered every bit of courage I had and I told her how I felt in clumsy words that were the best that I could do. They were clumsy, yes, but they got the message across, and I remember the light of understanding flick on in

her eyes. She smiled and said, “*Oh,*” her voice soft and surprised. A few days later, when she picked me up, there was no ambiguity: We were on a date.

Scared, it’s impossible to do everything right. Be kind to yourself—stop trying. Even at our best, we are messy and complicated beings. We are stupid and petty and mean and boring and gross. What you *should* try is to be fully yourself. Maybe in the past you would have gone out with anyone who asked you. Maybe all you needed was *someone*, and anyone could have been that person—the more-than-friend who never took you out, the fickle girl who asked but didn’t follow through—but here’s the thing: You get to choose who you want to be with. You get to do the asking, too. There is no guarantee that they will say yes, but the simple, brave act of putting yourself out there will transform you.

For every gross part of us, there is a beautiful part. I understand how badly you want to share that with someone. And I understand how, when you don’t have anyone to share yourself with, you worry that something is wrong, when really, most likely, it just isn’t the right place or the right time.

What I’m trying to tell you is this: When that slow-motion moment comes, and you feel the air being sucked out of the room, and you can’t take your eyes off someone—take a risk and talk to them. Or even if it isn’t that dramatic—if there’s someone smart or cute or interesting, if there’s someone you feel like kissing—ask that person out. And in the absence of those feelings, don’t sit still, waiting to be chosen. Don’t feel like your life

is on hold or missing a piece because you aren't dating anyone. These are the times you can grow wildly and with abandon, knowing you won't jab anyone in the eye or break anyone's heart. These are the times to perfect your French accent, or watch every Greta Garbo film, or learn to play the ukulele. These are the times to figure out what you want to major in, to immerse yourself in ideas, to go on adventures with friends or strangers, to find out who you are by discovering what you thrive on.

The girl I fell for in college? We're married now. We have a daughter and a little green house and tomatoes growing in our garden. I catch myself often in moments of wonder that I could have the kind of love that I do. It's as magnificent as you hope it will be. When it comes to you, it will be worth all the disappointment that came before it.

But, Scared, let me tell you this: The best love story is the one where you love yourself.

Wishing you many kinds of love,  
and wild growth and courage,  
and all the lessons I've learned much sooner,

—Nina



Well, right now it's feeling worse because the same thoughts are repeating themselves, bouncing around in there. You're like a teakettle begging to let out steam. You need to let someone pull you off the stove and pour you into a cup.

—*Let's Get Lost*, Adi Alsaid



Dear Heartbreak,

I am afraid that someone will love me (or think they will) only to find out once they get to know me that I am truly not a person they could love. I feel like I must keep people at a distance to protect not only myself, but them as well. It is so lonely and so heartbreaking because I do not know how to fix it. I wish I could because I truly do love others, but now I am so isolated I don't even know where I could go to even meet people. I still have hope, though, that someday things can change for the better.

—Motionless, 19



## DO YOU CARE TO RESIDE WITHIN?

Dear Motionless,

How much do you know about truffles? I knew some of the basics before writing to you—rare fungi, found in the dirt, used in cooking—but I wanted to do a little research before answering you. Here's what I learned:

- It's believed that they evolved underground to protect themselves from forest fires, frost, and other environmental threats.
- Truffles form part of a symbiotic relationship with a host tree; each provides the other with crucial nutrients.
- It's not just pigs that find them; trained dogs and goats do, too.
- A truffle once sold for over \$37,000.
- In 2016, France harvested approximately 55 tons of truffles.

I think you may know where I'm going here, but it'll do you no good for me to be vague. Motionless, you are a truffle. You have sent yourself underground for protection, to hide from the harm of heartbreak and the soul-crushing frost of being unloved. This, in a very real and natural sense, is a perfectly reasonable approach to life. Seek safety from harm.

But it sounds to me that you know that's not how you want to live your life. You have this self-awareness, and you have hope. These are good starts. Now ask yourself this: Is protection from pain worth living underground? Will the benefits of exposure to the outside world outweigh the potential harms that will come your way?

Truffles hide in the dirt, but attract a host of animals. Mainly humans, who've found that even a fungus hidden in the ground is worth searching for. For any of what I say next to work, though, you have to think of yourself as a truffle. You have to know that you are inherently valuable. If no one is saying that to you, you have to say it to yourself.

You have to be kind to yourself. The assumption that someone could get to know you and then find you completely unlovable, well, it's a typically human assumption. It's a damn rude way to act toward ourselves, but most of us do it at some point or another. You're not alone in the fear. Like everyone else, though, you're wrong, and you have to move past it.

I used to be a shy kid, stuck within a proverbial shell. I fostered dreams of showing my true, goofy self to the world, but kept it hidden from most people. My sister jokes that until I

came back from a trip to Israel when I was eighteen, she'd never heard me speak a word.

I'm not sure why I felt the need to hide. Maybe, like you, it was a fear that people would not appreciate the person I would reveal myself to be. I searched through my old LiveJournal account (a sort of early 2000s Tumblr) and found a bevy of angsty posts, sparked through with moments of joy on days when I did feel comfortably myself. I wrote love letters to girls in high school and then fled before they could respond, thinking the move was inherently pathetic. If I recall correctly, I once even referred to myself as pathetic within the letter, casting myself as unworthy of love.

My brother puts it this way: "You couldn't decide if you cared or not. Then you decided you didn't."

He said this when we shared an apartment in college, when I was doing things like taking spontaneous road trips to Baker, California, just to have lunch, or founding a student organization at UNLV called Students for the Advancement of Silliness. I brought my first girlfriend to the top floor of a library and rained down thirty notecards with book quotations on them. I wrote editorials in the school newspaper about choosing to be happier. I broke out of my proverbial shell, deciding, as my brother pointed out, that I no longer cared to reside within it.

It's a damn hard step to implement, I know. Insecurities and worry and maybe experiences with others have wired your brain in a way that has turned you mean toward yourself. Try to catch instances of this happening. I was guilty of this plenty

of times on that museum of myself I found on the Internet. Any time you start thinking that there's nothing lovable about you, argue with yourself. Stick up for yourself to that shitty inclination we all have inside. Remind yourself of how much love you have for others. How you are selfless, a good cook, patient, smart, kind, charitable, a champion cuddler—fill in the blanks, whatever they may be. And if you are right now thinking that you can't fill in the blanks, that's the mean part of your brain and I want it to shut up. Take a long, *kind* look at yourself. Assess yourself with only positive words. Say these words out loud until you believe them.

I happen to think that, eventually, a pig or dog or goat or human who finds value in you will find you anyway. Truffles are delicious; that's why we seek them out. I don't think you *want* to wait around for that to happen, but it's something I've found to be true in life. It takes time. In high school and in college, I found groups of friends that were merely company, and I found people who saw me for who I am and loved me for it. Patience isn't my recommended strategy, but it's good to keep in mind. The people who value you come around. It doesn't always feel that way, but they're out there, searching for you, just like you should be searching for them.

Will some of them get close to you and then later find that you are not what they were searching for? Absolutely. Motionless, it's going to happen. Just not every time. We meet people in life with whom we are incompatible. No matter how great truffles are on French fries, shaved onto pasta and risotto, there are



people who dislike them. Our differences are sometimes obvious right away, and sometimes they only come to light after a while, leading to heartbreak and pain and the desire to burrow in the dirt. This doesn't mean we are universally unlovable. If someone gets to know who you are and decides not to be in your life, it is not an admonishment of who you are; it does not diminish your inherent value. Quite frankly, screw those people. You don't want them in your life anyway. Wait for the truffle lovers.

Now let's talk about that second bullet point, the host tree that depends on you. You're feeling overwhelmed by loneliness, so it probably doesn't feel like you have one right now. But I promise you there's a larger community that you need and that needs you. I recommend you look for it a tiny root at a time.

Maybe you've hidden yourself away from the roots that are already there, or maybe you've yet to find them. A coworker who counts on your interaction every day. A classmate who admires the things you say in class and aspires to be as thoughtful as you. Your cat, who counts on you for food and for the love you provide it even though it never seems to return the favor. You belong in the world, Motionless, even if you've buried yourself in the ground, even if you feel apart from it. Look for the small ways this is already true, and treat them like ropes cast down to save you and slowly pull yourself up to the surface.

Let's set aside the poetics and the pep talk, and dispense with some practical advice on where to meet people: [couchsurfing.com](http://couchsurfing.com). Even if you don't travel, the people that use

the site are by and large lovely, good-hearted people, social in a way that embraces those who aren't normally social. When I moved to Monterey, California, to start writing, I didn't know a single person in the area. I posted on Couchsurfing once, and within a day I was meeting up with a guy for coffee. He introduced me to a whole social group who would be my closest friends during my time there, as well as hooked me up with a volunteer job at an elementary school so that my visa could remain current. There were potlucks where I spent a whole night eating, talking travel, feeling like people who were previously strangers could easily whittle away my loneliness. Look for meet-ups in your town. There are subgroups for people who share your interests. Try [meetup.com](http://meetup.com), too, where you can find everything from language-exchange buddies and book clubs to people looking to climb a mountain or develop an app.

Volunteer somewhere relevant to your interests. An urban garden, maybe. Something to do with kids, if you're interested in spending time with innocent, maddening, amusing, filterless little human beings. A library, to surround yourself with books and the people who love them.

Two years after returning to Mexico, I was living at home with my parents and had not much in the way of a social circle. Writing is a wonderful job, but it can be a lonely, isolating affair, and I was desperate to find a way to have people in my life again. I thought about jobs that I could get that would allow me to still write, but that were within my interest level, so I applied to be a flight attendant, and then a basketball coach.

I was hired for the latter, and the changes were almost immediate. It took a while for me to really find my people within the school where I was coaching, because, again, that's sometimes just how life is. But eventually I found them. They found me. Working at that school led to my meeting some of the closest friends I've ever had, including my soon-to-be wife.

These acts of reaching out will probably be a little bit outside of your comfort zone. Do them anyway. Your comfort zone is malleable. Just like it's shrunk in around you, you can make it grow. Don't go thinking you've buried yourself in the dirt forever. The more you push back against your comfort zone, the more you put yourself in an opportunity to dig yourself out and find the people who will appreciate you for exactly who you are.

When I started Students for the Advancement of Silliness, I had to be outgoing, show my weird self to a much wider world than my close group of friends. I had to file paperwork with the university, had to organize events, though I'm the kind of person that practically flees from plans. It was uncomfortable, and at times it didn't feel like there was a point to it. But again, that move brought people close to me, the exact kind of people who would appreciate who I am.

When you've met new people this way, I think it's helpful to remember that France harvested 55 tons of truffles in 2016. You are not the only truffle out there. Some may not be part of your host tree, and some may come to harm you, but many know exactly what it's like to feel what you're feeling now. We're all

truffles, hidden in some sort of dirt, waiting to nourish and be nourished.

Remember that there are pigs out there who know how valuable you are. Remember that the benefits of an exposed life outweigh the harms. Remember to be kind to yourself, Motionless.

—Adi

Cara takes my hand in hers and holds it on top of her stomach. Our heads are near, on the same large pillow, and every once in a while, when we breathe in at the same time, our shoulders touch. I almost cry a little, because I never think anyone wants to be this close to me.

—37 *Things I Love*, Kekla Magoon



Dear Heartbreak,

I think I'm alone. I'm surrounded by people, but I'm alone. I try to fit in, but I just . . . can't. I'm a thirteenth wheel. I still have my family, but they're drifting apart, slowly but surely. At the same time, I can call people and they almost always answer, but I feel like a pest. Just for once, I would like to BE called. If you have any advice, I would appreciate it.

Thanks,

N





## IF YOU CALL, I WILL ANSWER

Dear N,

Alone.

That word on the page looks exactly how it feels—like standing all by yourself in a very white room. Nothing on the walls. No furniture, no windows.

Sometimes that room is your own mind.

Is it an endless room? One you can walk and walk through? Or is it a tight little box, in which you can barely stretch your arms to their full length?

Alone.

This feeling has nothing to do with the volume of people around you. It sounds like you have a group of friends, maybe as many as twelve of them. You're certainly not the first human being to feel less than satisfied, even in good company. We are, universally, made of more than the sum of our parts. Each one of us is an ocean, rich with unseen depths.

It hurts to feel unseen. To feel unappreciated. It hurts when

you don't fit in. Humans are social creatures. We crave company and contact, the warmth of other bodies, other hearts.

And yet, we are so often by ourselves.

Alone.

This word likes its capital A. The sharpness of it, the certainty. It says, fuck you, world, I'm the Eiffel Goddamn Tower—look at me against the sunset sky and kneel as you were always meant to.

Most of us don't want to kneel. Most of us don't want to live forever in the state of Alone. We want to reach out, we want to be reached. The saddest thing I can imagine is a person who lived an entire human life and never felt connected to anyone.

In the end, most of us don't end up living forever completely Alone. And chances are, N, you won't, either. The world is full of interesting people. Somehow, against all odds, we find each other. There may be deep loves, rich friendships, and a new, stronger meaning of family yet to come for you. Not immediately, but the best things in life are worth waiting for.

If you're rolling your eyes right now, I don't blame you. Promises and hopes for the future mean very little when you're in pain. The hard truth is—Alone is a feeling that may always be with you. Albeit to different degrees. In this life, we are inextricably bound to our own minds, our own skin. We barely have time to get to know ourselves deeply, let alone to have others know us. Parts of us may well be unknowable.

It doesn't mean we shouldn't try. And you are trying, N. The

best news in your letter comes in this line: “I can call people, and they almost always answer.”

Even though it doesn't feel like it, you are well on your way to feeling less alone. The first step to getting called is to KEEP ON CALLING. Be gentle and thoughtful in your reaching out, but try to be unafraid. One of the hardest things to do is to put yourself out there, to be vulnerable to the possible rejection you fear most. To call someone you like when you aren't sure they'll pick up or you're afraid they'll think you're a pest, takes great courage. It makes me smile to imagine you nervously picking up the phone. In my life I have rarely been brave like that.

I write this letter to you from a ditch on the side of a road in rural Pennsylvania. I've run my car off the road trying to avoid a deer, and I can't get it back out on my own. So I'm waiting. I'm a little shaken and a little scared, and I'm in the middle of nowhere so I don't know whether help will arrive before dark. I don't have anyone to call, apart from my insurance agent, and her cool, businesslike sympathy is not what I want in my ear. I want someone who loves me to wish me back home. Someone who would be willing to talk to me while I wait, or to offer to leap into a car and drive a hundred miles to come get me, however irrational that would be. But I don't have that person. I don't have anyone to call, and the tow truck is on its way, so I might as well do my writing. I'm uninjured and my laptop still works, and as I was driving I'd already been thinking about what to say to you, and how to explain the joys and sorrows of being—or feeling—Alone.

There is a great sadness to Alone. There is also strength. There is strength in being of yourself and doing for yourself. But you cannot give in to it, or resign yourself to it. You cannot become afraid to keep trying. You cannot become afraid to keep calling.

I sit here, cross-legged in the dirt in the middle of this one-lane road, thinking about all the ridiculous things I've done by myself because I was too embarrassed or too scared to ask for help. I dragged a sleeper sofa down a flight of stairs once. I've built countless Ikea furniture pieces that are supposed to require "team lifting." I've driven myself to the hospital with a broken foot. I've moved a 40-gallon fish tank multiple times. I've stayed in hotels because I was too shy to ask a friend to stay over, or I worried that they'd feel unnecessarily obligated to take me in even if they didn't want to. I've done this more than once, only to receive a sad message days later: "Why didn't you tell me you were in town?"

The answer, almost always, is "Because I was scared."

I don't want to live my life in fear. There is a certainty in Aloneness. No one can tell you what to do, what to watch, what to wear. You get to make all the choices. You never have to compromise. There is plenty of uncertainty in Alone, too. I would like someone to alert me when I have spinach in my teeth. I would like to be able to tell the joke that occurs to me when that particular Downy commercial comes on. I would like to tell my joke, and have someone there to laugh. Is it really so much to ask to not be all alone?

I sit here, slightly shell-shocked, and I find myself wanting to call someone. Today, I find my courage by thinking of you, N. I wonder if you feel it from afar, a burst of a feeling that is softer than Alone. Probably not, right? I don't have your number and so I can't call you. I can only tell you, long after the fact, that thinking about you gave me more courage than usual.

I called my friend Emily from the side of the road. I pushed down the knowledge that I was probably interrupting her dinner with her wife. I called anyway.

Guess what? She answered.

Guess what else? For those few minutes, I felt less Alone.

Okay, N. A few hours have passed and I'm safe and warm and fed and able to charge my laptop. (All the important things.) Having some distance from my moment of crisis helped me see that I was never as alone as I thought. I figured out who else to call, and kind friends came to the roadside to wait for the tow truck with me. They helped me ask the right questions and rescue my belongings. My friend Nicole, who lives a hundred miles away, offered to come get me, and I started to cry.

When you have a bad day, a bad week, a bad *moment*, however long it lasts, it is easy to lose perspective. I don't know if you've had a significant crisis in your life yet, but when you do, watch who shows up. Make note of who you most want to call and how they respond. We don't form our closest friendships in a vacuum. We forge them in the fires of adversity, as we walk hand in hand through the valley of despair.

For a long time, I believed I needed to be as perfect as possible in order to get people to like me. Good behavior had been drilled into me as a child, and I learned to equate such behavior with respect and affection. The version of myself that I performed in order to be seen as a responsible student, a good daughter, a polite young woman in the eyes of the adult world . . . that performative self only allowed a small part of me to be revealed. I believed that you had to behave a certain way to be good and to be liked, and this belief messed with my head. I hid the things about me that were weird, because I wanted to fit in. I tried so hard to be normal that I made myself bland. I missed out on a whole great nerdy and quirky subculture that would have resonated deeply with me. I was too afraid to let my freak flag fly, and, as a result, I probably missed some opportunities to befriend similar freaks. I didn't find the friends who really GET me until late in college and in my early twenties. As I get older, I continue to become better at being ME, and that is what helps draw the right kinds of people to me. Most amazingly, some of these people are actually people I knew and hung out with in high school, but we have all become more OURSELVES and grown closer. Some of us grew apart for the same reasons, but that's okay. I'm left with something better.

If you don't quite fit in with the people you know, think about why that might be the case. Why do you feel that way? Do you really like these friends? Do you have some things in common, but not everything? That's actually all right. Most of us need a lot of different kinds of friends to fill all the corners of our hearts.

I spent a long time assuming that the longer I knew people, the closer we would become. I believed that our friendships would deepen automatically. This is true to an extent. Another piece, though, is finding the right friends. People that you click with. It can take time to find those people. It can take a little bit of searching.

Think about the handful of people you genuinely like best and want to spend time with. Invite those friends to hang out. Think about what you have in common and what would be fun for both (or all) of you. There's nothing wrong with being the one who calls!

My problem is so often the opposite. I get too afraid to call people or to invite them over. I get so convinced that they don't really like me or wouldn't want to hear from me. I don't really even know why I feel this way. There are a lot of things I like about myself. I'm creative, I'm funny. I'm thoughtful, I'm caring, I'm smart. Other people should like these things about me, too. And many people do. I no longer expect EVERYONE to like me, and I no longer go out of my way to try to win anyone's affection. It's very freeing, to simply be myself and do my best and HOPE that the right people will notice me and respond. When I'm left by myself, which happens quite often, I find ways to celebrate myself and remind myself of my best qualities, because it's important to know.

Alone doesn't have to mean lonely. There are plenty of things to love and appreciate about yourself while you're waiting to build deeper connections with others. What are your best

attributes? How can you enjoy your own company? Your relationship with self is as important as relationships with friends and family. What do YOU like about YOU? What is your safe space? What is the best part about Alone? The part you can stand?

The thing is, we never fully know how other people feel about us. Self-doubt and insecurity are cruel little brain buddies. They can convince you that your best friend, who just invited you to a sleepover, doesn't *really* want to hang out with you. Sometimes you have to use logic to override the emotional fears and awkwardness. Remind yourself that people like you. Remind yourself what is most likable about yourself. Don't let yourself forget.

I understand your fear about being a pest when you reach out to your friends. I happen to be an introvert and very skittish. I fail at this test more often than I succeed, by resisting the impulse to call someone when I want to. I don't carry a lot of regrets about my life, but the main one is not telling people how I feel. Not telling them that I care. Not calling. To me, dear N, it sounds like you're well on your way to a happier place. You are braver than I have often been. You *call*.

It's entirely possible that some of your friends are more like me—too shy or nervous to reach out. Maybe YOU are the strong one; maybe YOU are the one helping other people feel less Alone.

I know how you feel, N. I want to be called. I want to feel chosen, and cared for. I don't want to chase anyone's affection. That's a good way to be; that takes strength. It means I'm not



diving into a bad situation simply because I'm desperate for someone, anyone, to like me. But relationships are a two-way street. The way to get called is to keep calling. The way to get called is to continue to forge bonds with other people, inch by inch. Let them see you vulnerable. Let them see what you need and who you are. They will begin to reveal themselves to you, too.

Sometimes the thing that makes you feel most alone is having someone that you want to reach out to, but your mind convinces you that they will not want to hear from you. That you're a "pest." The feeling of being alone in a crowd is so much worse than being alone on your own. Your mind can play tricks on you, try to convince you that you're not fun, or funny, or clever, or interesting. Why would anyone want to hang out with you, anyway?

Tell your mind to **STOP BEING SO NEGATIVE**. It sounds easy on paper, but it may not be that easy in real life. It takes time to develop confidence in social situations, and we all make mistakes. We say the wrong thing or we leave an awkward voice mail, or we text one too many times and slightly annoy someone. The good news is: A true friend who is worthy of your time and energy will understand and forgive that kind of mistake. Humans are flawed and relationships are messy. If we don't take any risks, we never get to the good part of relationships—which is being flawed and messy together, and finding joy in the things that are wrong with all of us.

I wish I could give you a miracle cure. I wish I could tell you

it gets a thousand times better. Alone is not the sort of thing that goes away.

Most of all, I wish I could tell you that you are not alone. Sometimes you are. Sometimes we all are.

What I can tell you is, the moments when I've been brave enough to make the call, the moments when I've been bold enough to kick over the Eiffel Tower—these have become some of my finest moments. In my weakness, I find strength. In my fear, I find courage. In the depths of Alone, when I stretch out my hand, I always find something to hold on to.

—Kekla