

Story of a Secret Heart.

'A broken heart hurts, but it can also be fun'

By Cassi Ellen

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Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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Prologue

Someone once told me: 'You can't find yourself until you are lost.' Throughout my twenties, I never really understood what that meant. I had always been that slightly chubby, slightly pretty, slightly clever girl who had always just had a slightly normal life, with a normal family, from a very small town in the UK, and everything was just always very slightly ordinary. That was, until I turned thirty, and I started to understand what that particular person had meant ten years earlier. Losing myself, and ultimately rediscovering myself, was one of the best things that ever happened to me. The pain and heartbreak that we go through can often lead to some of the best times of our lives if we just let it.

My first boyfriend

When I was seventeen, I fell head over heels in love with a boy I went to high school with. He wasn't the most popular boy in school, or the smartest, or the most athletic, or even the wealthiest. But he was the funniest. He used to make me laugh so much my whole body would ache, and I would have to beg him to stop. Even as I write this, fifteen years later, I still have fond memories of that boy, and I am smiling right now thinking about him and the way he used to make me laugh. Of course, at that age, my parents didn't agree with anything I did, and hanging around with this boy was no exception.

I remember the first time my dad dropped me off at his house. Of course, my dad was very reluctant to let me even go to a young boy's house alone, but I was seventeen and there wasn't much he could do about it—apart from giving me one hundred lectures on the dangers of adolescent boys.

As we drove up to the boy's house on a council estate in the UK, my father eyed the area with caution and asked me, 'What in the hell do you see in this boy anyway?'

I answered very honestly with, 'He makes me laugh, Dad.'

My dad responded instantaneously with, 'Yes, well, so does a f**king clown.'

One year later, after a horrible breakup and what I thought was the end of the world, I had sex with the boy's brother, and that was the end of that. After that experience, I decided my dad was right: my next boyfriend should not resemble a clown.

'Never look back. If Cinderella had stopped to pick up her shoe she may have not become a princess.' — Unknown.

The beginning

Thirteen years later, I was happily dating and living with a very lovely Australian man named Guy in Sydney. He wasn't the funniest man I had ever met, and he definitely did not resemble a clown, but he was intelligent, caring, and loving. It wasn't heart stopping, crazy love at first sight at all, but he was very stable, very reliable—maybe a little emotionless but liked by everyone—and I hoped one day he would make a good father. I guess most women would say he was a 'good catch.'

Until, that is, a horrific breakup, and I found myself alone, single and emotionally unstable, ten thousand miles away from my home in the UK. It all started to unravel when I returned to Sydney one January, after spending Christmas with my family and friends in the UK. When I had left for the UK, I really did have my life sorted. I knew where I was going and what I wanted, however boring that may sound now, looking back. Obviously, I lived ten thousand miles away from home, and I missed my friends and family more than words could ever say, but I was focused on getting married and having a family, just like all my friends around me were, and I knew both Guy and Sydney were a huge part of that plan. Nevertheless, when I returned to Sydney that New Year, my life turned upside down. How I got to that point I had truly no idea, and in no way did I see it coming in the slightest.

'It's like a blind turn on a highway: You can't see what's coming, so how can you prepare?' — Piper Perabo.

Heartbreak

On my return from the UK, my normally stable, reliable, boyfriend was acting more distant than usual. Now, this did worry me a little, but as we had just moved house, to a very lovely, up-market, high-rise apartment, I put it down to stress. He was normally a very friendly, easy-to-get-on-with kind of man, but in those first few days he was very argumentative, which was unlike him. He had never been particularly emotional throughout our relationship, but I think it's fair to say I was emotional enough for the both of us. However, for some reason, I had a very uneasy feeling deep down inside—which of course, at the time, I chose to ignore.

My first real clue—the first one that I chose to listen to anyway—was one night when I had stayed out late and I decided to lie to him. I didn't often lie to my boyfriend; for the most part, I was a good girl—always doing what I was told and always doing the 'right thing'—but in this instance, I think any priest would forgive me. I had only been back in the country a few days and was out at an event raising money for childhood cancer with some friends from work. My boyfriend texted me about 6pm to let me know he had fed Coco, our cat, and would be working from home all night. Lovingly, he asked what time I would be back. He worried about me, I thought to myself. I replied with 'about 10pm' as I was still jet lagged and didn't want a late night. At 8.30pm, I felt a sudden urge to go home and see him. After all, I had been away for a month and had really missed him, despite his distantness. Like I said, I had always been the emotional one in the relationship.

I remember, one year, after he dropped me at the airport to leave for the UK, I texted him once I was through security to say I missed him. To which he phoned me and very coldly said, 'Well, you only saw me ten minutes ago, so I don't know how you could miss me. What's wrong with you?'

Although that sort of lack of emotion was common for him, for some reason I couldn't help but think of it as I left the fundraiser.

I arrived home that night at 9pm, very excited to surprise him and tell him how much I had missed him, but all the lights were out and Coco was the only one home. I recall thinking that was strange, but maybe he had popped out to buy me some chocolates, or flowers, or something very expensive. A girl can hope! In retrospect, maybe I had had too much wine. Naturally, I decided to call him and he picked up nearly immediately. What happened next changed my life forever.

'Hi,' I said. 'Where are you?'

He waited only a few seconds to answer, but I knew him well enough to know something was wrong when he answered, very distracted, with the same question I had asked him:

'Where are you?' he said.

At that moment, something deep inside me, and I had no idea what it was, told me to lie, and so I answered with 'still at the fundraiser, but I'm leaving now.' Of course that was a lie, which I

immediately regretted, as I was obviously standing in our open plan kitchen. Despite my guilt, I quickly followed up my lie with a repeated, 'Where are you?'

His next sentence broke my heart into a million teeny tiny little pieces, and I would never forget it. 'I'm at home,' he said.

Feeling sick to my stomach, but being the tolerant person—most of the time—I am, I desperately gave him another chance and responded with, 'Whereabouts?'

That time, he sounded even more distracted but responded with, 'At my desk. Why?'

I ignored his question and continued my own line of questioning, trying to work out exactly what was going on because, of course, from the kitchen where I was standing, I could see into all rooms in the apartment, including his office where his desk was. 'Is Coco ok? Can you see her?' I asked, hoping the mistake was mine and maybe we had gotten our wires crossed and in fact he meant he was really in his city office or at his friend's desk.

When he responded with, 'Yes, she's fine and she is right here with me,' I nearly threw up.

My head started pounding, and I couldn't quite understand what was happening. At that moment, I did something I never ever do; I remained calm, I remained emotionless, just like him. Of course, I could, in fact see Coco, and unless my lying scumbag of a boyfriend had gained the power of invisibly, I had just wasted the last five years of my life waiting to have a family with that man. Holding back the tears, I continued to play along with whatever game he was playing. 'Ok, I'll be home in ten mins,' I said, emotionless, hoping to freak him out. Then I waited.

I don't really remember waiting or how long I waited. Of course, I was tempted to leave, there and then, but I couldn't. I was completely unable to move my legs. Part of me wanted to just pretend I wasn't home and walk around the block and come in like nothing had happened. That way, everything would be ok, and I would still be able to follow my plans for a family and a normal life like everyone else. However, my body had gone into complete shock, and although I was angry, I was frozen to the spot.

When he arrived home and saw me standing there, he went as white a sheet. Without saying a word, he eyed me very suspiciously, like I was some sort of unpredictable animal that could attack him at any moment. But as my emotions got the better of me, like they quite often did, and I began to cry, he knew he had been caught out. At first, he tried to tell me he had just popped down to the garage and we must have missed each other. Liar. Then he tried to blame me for lying; saying he had known I was lying all along and was just playing along. After five years, he obviously thought I was stupid! I asked him where he had been over and over again, but to be completely honest, I didn't even listen to the answers and excuses he came up with. I was too heartbroken.

After a lot of screaming, shouting and tears from me, he packed up some things and was gone. I honestly don't remember how or why he left; whether I asked him to go, or forced him to go, or

whether he left on his own accord. All I know was that it was past 11pm by that point, and the first two hours of my new life had just flown by in the blink of a very sad, blurry, teary eye. Of course, 99% of me didn't actually want him to leave, but looking back, I am so glad he did. In that moment in time, all I wanted him to do was tell me the truth and beg for my forgiveness. I didn't want to lose him. I still wanted my perfect little family, like all my friends had. But looking back, I am so grateful he left. If he hadn't, my life would be very different right now, and I very much doubt I would have anything interesting to write!

After he left, I curled up in a ball on the floor and cried...and cried...and cried. I didn't think I had ever felt so alone. I was so far away from home and from everyone I loved and everyone who loved me. I truly hated Guy at that point; I was alone and he was no doubt with his friends and family. It just seemed so unfair. It had all come as such a shock to me. Up until that point in my life, I had been a relatively good girl. All I truly wanted to do was settle down and have a family, but things were about to change.

'Sometimes good things fall apart so better things can fall together.' — Marilyn Monroe.

Heartache

After Guy walked out, I didn't see him for four weeks. Now that seems like a long time, but at the time, it flew by. Living alone in the apartment was actually sort of fun. Of course, that was between the hysterical crying, forty phone calls a day to the lying cheating scumbag and watching Prison Break (don't ask me why Prison Break—most probably just because it was there). I got to eat chocolate for breakfast, drink wine for dinner and did not lift one finger toward cleaning anything. For the past four years of my life, I had literally been his slave, always doing what I was told, and despite the heartbreak, it was such a relief not to have to do anything for anyone else. During that time, I barely ate, rarely went to work and seldom spoke to anyone, apart my family and friends in the UK via Skype. I did, however, desperately call Guy up to forty times a day, begging him to come around. I was so lonely and heartbroken. All I wanted to do was see him. Nonetheless, he remained strong, no doubt with the help of all of his friends, family and the blond slut I had since learnt, through Facebook, he had been sleeping with. He did not contact or see me for four weeks.

I truly hated him at that point. Looking back, I wish I could say I was this strong independent woman who took the breakup in her stride—even that I played hard to get and just cut all contact with him, but that is not true at all. In all truth, I was a mess, which at the time I was ashamed of, but now, with retrospect on my side, I believe this was just the beginning for me.

After four weeks of living alone in a relentless, never ending cycle of tears, sobbing and wine, our rent was due and so Guy came over one Sunday afternoon to discuss the options. His name was the one on the rental lease, so I guess it was his head on the chopping block if we did not pay our rent. At the time, obviously, I hadn't really put much thought into the rent. I never assumed he would just pay it. On the other hand, I didn't bother to pay my part of the rent either. I knew if I didn't, he would have to contact me, and at the time that was exactly what I wanted. Although heartbroken, I was also smart enough to know it would take the rental company a long time to evict me, and I knew it was very unlikely there would be any lasting damage to me, as ultimately I wanted to return to the UK to live. Guy, therefore, had a lot more to lose than I did, and that made me feel happy and a little less like my life was spiralling out of control.

I didn't know he was coming over that day, as he never bothered to call or text first, and I got the shock of my life when I answered the door. It was 5pm, I was extremely hung-over from the endless wine I had been drinking and I had been sent home from work, by a very understanding boss, three days out of the previous five. I was still in my PJs, and there was vomit on the bedroom floor, which I had not bothered to clean up, from my drinking binge the night before. I truly was a mess. The apartment, needless to say, was in a far worse state than I was, as I had refused, in protest, to clean or tidy anything for the previous four weeks. But to be perfectly honest, at the time, I just didn't care. As soon as I saw Guy, I gave him a huge hug. I had been so lonely and had missed him so much, but he did not return the hug in the slightest. I invited him in, hoping he wanted to talk, maybe to try and rekindle our relationship. Maybe even to apologise. But as he sat down and scanned the room in

complete disgust, I realised he was not there to check how I was or to beg for my forgiveness . As we sat there in silence, I started to cry uncontrollably, but he remained calm. I would love to say that was the minute I got over him, when I saw him for the heartless man he truly was, and when I became a new strong liberated woman, but that was not the case at all. I literally just sat and sobbed for the entire time.

After losing his temper with my constant crying and realising he didn't have the patience or empathy for that kind of interaction, he coldly asked me to move out of the apartment or pay the entire rent, which he knew would not be possible on my wages. He then got up, and without even saying goodbye, walked out the door. He was so cold and heartless that if I had had a knife handy, I honestly would have killed him. I felt so alone, and I truly hated him for dragging me all the way to the other side of the world, away from all of my friends and family. Little did I know that only a few months later I'd have everything to thank him for.

'Heartbreak changes people.' — Unknown.

Freedom

After that, I obviously could have broken down. I very much wanted to lash out, and on more occasions than I should have, I cried myself to sleep. In the end, I think my only saving grace was that my heart had been broken before. I had been through all of this before—maybe not in quite the same way—but I had had the experience of living with the bereavement of a broken heart. However, this time I was ten years older and so much more prepared for the overwhelming feelings that came with a broken heart.

In the back of my mind, I repeated two things to myself, over and over again. Number one was that 'time is the best healer in the world,' and number two was that 'a breakup is a bit like ripping off a very painful plaster / Band-Aid; it's best to just rip it straight off.' With those two pieces of information in the forefront of my mind, I vowed to try and enjoy that initial breakup period and throw myself into whatever life had in store for me, rather than focusing on lashing out and moping around. I never intended to live in Sydney forever and really didn't want to leave on such a bad note. I knew I was the only person that could change the path my life was about to take.

I didn't have many friends in Sydney at the time. Being a slave for Guy had been a full time job, so there hadn't really been much time for making friends. Luckily, I did have one very good friend with whom I had worked. She was single, had a spare room and already had two cats; it was a match made in heaven! As soon as she heard about the breakup, she came over, sat with me for hours, listened to my heartache, offered me her spare room and truly was an amazing friend to me. She had actually broken up with her boyfriend of ten years six months earlier, so she knew exactly what I was going through. Once she had offered me her spare room, the decision to move out was a lot easier. I had somewhere for both Coco and I to go, and all of a sudden, I didn't feel so alone. Moving out was easy. Guy wasn't around, so I took the important things, like his entire alcohol cupboard, his flat screen TV and our bed. My new flatmate, Elly, and I very much enjoyed toasting our single life with the vintage Moët Guy's sisters had bought him for his thirtieth birthday.

If anyone out there is going through a break up or a hard time, I think friendship truly is the magic ingredient for a quick recovery. Don't take it for granted.

The weekend before I moved out of the apartment, Elly and the only two other friends I had in Sydney at the time, decided to take me out for drinks in the city to cheer me up. It obviously wasn't going to fix things, but after four weeks of moping around, hysterically crying and constantly phoning Guy, it was worth a try. Plus, my friends, like all good friends, weren't going to take no for an answer.

I really had no idea what happened that night. One-minute I was drinking shots of whatever expensive alcohol we could find in Guy's cupboard; the next minute I was in a bar in the city; and the next minute I was being carried up the stairs in my apartment block by a very tall, dark, handsome stranger. I woke up on the bedroom floor in a pool of my own vomit. This is what my friends and the very handsome stranger told me happened.

The last thing I remember is being happy. I was sitting on the balcony in my apartment with three of the kindest people I've ever meet. Now, you wouldn't have put us four together as friends if you had just met us, but somehow, in the huge city of Sydney, we were thrown together, and it just worked. So, after way too many drinks on the balcony and lots and lots of laughs, we headed into the city. Apparently, after being rude to a number of men, we were swiftly removed from bar one by a security guard. That was nothing new to me; I was definitely a girl's girl and most of the time men just annoyed the shit out of me. Bar two was a lot more successful, so my friends decided to try and set me up with a few random men in an attempt to help me get over Guy.

That is all very well and good when you can string a sentence together, but not a good idea when you can't even stand up. By bar three, I was crying uncontrollably, begging my friends to let me go home so I could phone Guy (we have all been there, but it is so not a good look), and we were denied entry. Some may say that was a disaster of a night out, but to be honest, that was what both my friends and myself were kind of expecting from that night. After a short taxi ride to 'the Cross' in Sydney, I was also denied entry to bars four, five and six. For anyone who knows 'the Cross' in Sydney, that is quite an achievement, as they tend to let anyone in. At that point, my friends realised I was a drunken, emotional mess and began to think I did actually need to go home. They decided to put me in a taxi and carry on with their night (I do not blame them one bit and looking back now, I am so very grateful). The next two hours of my life are a complete blackout, but this is what I gather happened, based on looking at phone records and talking to the handsome stranger.

God knows exactly how, but I somehow paid the taxi driver and entered my building, where there was only one lift and it had a huge sign stuck on it saying 'broken.' Of course, we did have a fire door key for situations like that, but Guy had taken it with him. I phoned him to ask him to drop the fire door key over as I was locked out (although I don't remember, I was no doubt absolutely ecstatic to have an actual real reason to call him). In truth, I called thirty-five times. He ignored me. He even cut me off a few times. Bastard. I left messages and sent him texts, explaining about the lift and fire door key (some of which made sense and some of which did not). The only other people I knew in the whole of the southern hemisphere were currently drunk in the Cross. Guy knew that and still texted me back with 'stop calling me'. Bastard.

I obviously started to get extremely upset. I have no idea how long I waited or didn't wait, but I began to hammer in desperation on what I thought was the fire door. As the door opened, I was standing, in complete shock that the door had actually opened, hysterically crying, shoes in hand, dress around my waist (I have no idea why) and mascara all down my face.

The man who answered the door was obviously also shocked by what he was seeing at 2am on a Sunday morning and bewilderedly asked, 'What are you doing?'

I'd never seen him before, and I thought he thought I was some sort of intruder in this very posh block of apartments. At the time, in my drunken state, I imagined myself hoping he would phone the police.

Then I could at least sleep in a cell overnight; maybe the police would even phone Guy and make him come and get me. 'Trying to go home,' I answered, through my hysterical tears.

Half suspicious, half concerned, he asked, 'Ok, where do you live?'

I answered through sobbing tears, and for some reason I apparently blurted out, 'England.'

Now, obviously, as much as I love Sydney, the UK will always be my home, and I guess in my drunken emotional state I got a little confused between the two.

Again he eyed me suspiciously but began to soften. After God knows how long, he worked out that although my home was England, I lived upstairs (level 10 to be exact) and he had a fire key. Great! Later, the stranger told me he had never seen anyone so drunk in his life. After I tried to kiss him (of course I don't remember any of that, so I may have tried to do a lot worse and he is too much of a gentleman to say so), he half carried me, half dragged me up ten flights of concrete stairs. After opening the door and walking into my apartment, I apparently turned around, extremely surprised, like I had never seen him before and asked, 'Who are you, and what do you think you are doing here?'

I will be forever thankful to my friends for dragging me out for drinks that night (and getting me so drunk I could not function) and to the handsome stranger who was my hero that night and who has become my best friend since. But I am mostly thankful to my lying scumbag ex-boyfriend for cheating on me.

'Life doesn't always work out the way you think it will, but it always does work out.' — Unknown

The stranger

Over the next four days, before I moved out of the apartment, I had a number of flashbacks about my drunken night with my friends; mainly about the stranger carrying me up some concrete stairs. I told my nan the story later (obviously minus the alcohol intake), and she thought it was very romantic. If only she knew the truth! The day before I was due to move out of the apartment, I had walked home from work, like I did most nights, and got in the newly repaired lift. There, a very tall, handsome man was staring at me with huge dark brown eyes. It made me extremely uneasy; the guy was huge, not in a fat way but in a tall muscular way, looking like a cross between a terrorist and a gangster. He had a short, dark ponytail, dark olive skin and a big gold chain around his neck and one around his huge wrist that made him look like a member of the mafia. After a very uncomfortable minute, I finally gained the courage to look at him, he was smiling at me, and the flashbacks started again.

I truly believe fate was on my side that day. If I had left work earlier or later, or if I had stopped at the shop that day, I would never have seen this man again. And that would have been a real shame.

As I later learned, the man actually built and owned the building in which Guy and I had been living. After our chance meeting in the lift, he invited me in to his apartment so I could get a fire door key so the incident wouldn't happen again. At first, I was absolutely terrified. The man looked very dangerous, but something inside my newly single head told me to throw caution to the wind, as I could now officially do what the hell I wanted! I guess it was kind of a statement, a kind of 'up yours' to Guy, a 'you can't control me anymore. I can do whatever the hell I want.' I could even enter a complete stranger's apartment, where I might or might not be raped, murdered and chopped up into a thousand pieces, never to be seen again, but that was now my choice.

The stranger lived on the ground floor, and the apartment was absolutely amazing. Everything was white and so clean and tidy, there was nothing on the kitchen side, not even a kettle. Everything seemed to be put away in its rightful place and I couldn't help but feel a surge of guilt at the state of my own apartment upstairs, and I hoped the stranger hadn't seen it when he had carried me home. Although absolutely spotless however, I did notice how nothing was very homely, even the sofa looked uncomfortable, although I'm sure it was very expensive.

As we walked into the kitchen, he very coldly said he didn't want me disturbing other guests, so I needed to be more careful next time, but I could tell from his face that he had a soft spot for me. However, as soon as I entered the apartment, I was so embarrassed I completely forgot my newfound single woman's confidence I'd had literally seconds before. Instead, I didn't know what to say or where to look, and I actually forgot that I was moving out the next day, so what did I want with a fire door key!

He actually commented that 'For someone who works in a hospital (I was still wearing my hospital ID), you were dangerously drunk, you know. Anything could have happened to you.'

Gee, thanks 'Dad,' for your insight. I know that! After a five-minute conversation, where I apologised over and over and over again like some sort of little school girl for being so drunk, he handed me a shiny new fire door key. I suddenly remembered that I was moving out the next day and I was so embarrassed that I had forgotten such a huge detail that I handed it back to him without even an explanation. He thought I was absolutely insane, I'm sure. After all, why else would I have followed him into his apartment? He didn't know about the new crazy single girl who could get murdered if she damn well wanted to!

After an awkward silence, he said something that made me laugh (which he now tends to do a lot). I can't recall what exactly he said, but I touched his arm. Now I hadn't sat down with a man and 'flirted' in five years, and I had no idea why I touched him. He definitely was not my type. He did not look the stable type at all, but when I touched his arm, I definitely felt something. I'm not sure what it was (and I'm sure he felt nothing at all), but whatever it was, it was new and extremely exciting. I shyly smiled to myself for the first time in a long time, as I thought of my newfound freedom and, of course, of the fact that I hadn't been murdered just yet.

As I quite often do when talking to men, I soon began to freak out and look for an escape route, but I guess it couldn't have gone that badly as he gave me his number. That night, I texted him, apologising for the thousandth time for being so drunk and making a nuisance of myself, and also to make sure that he had my number. The next day, I moved out of the apartment and in with Elly. One hour after I had moved out, my phone rang. My heart nearly stopped and I prayed it was Guy begging me to come back. But it was Ben (the handsome stranger), checking that I was ok and asking if I needed any help. A lovely gesture, I thought to myself. That was one of the last times my phone rang and I hoped it was Guy.

Despite my new glimmer of hope, that first night in my new home was horrible. Elly went away for the weekend, and so I was alone, again. The only reasons I stayed in was because I had nowhere to go, no one to go and see, and because I wanted to settle Coco in. I had, of course, taken her with me when I left—one, because I wouldn't trust Guy with her and two, because I knew I couldn't live without her. However, she was not adjusting well, and she meant the whole world to me, so it broke my heart. In my desperation, I relapsed and phoned Guy a number of times that night but he didn't pick up. It broke my heart all over again to know that he really didn't give a shit. He actually texted me later that night, asking me to stop phoning him because he was out at dinner and I was pestering him. No doubt with his friends and / or family. Bastard.

The next day was Saturday, so I reluctantly left Coco and went out to the gym. After wasting a lot of time trying to stay busy, I finally sat down in hysterical tears by 4pm. Of course, I started drinking. Then, I decided it would be a good idea to make up some excuse and go up to the apartment building so I could hopefully bump into Guy and he could see the new me who was 'happy and content' without him. I really don't know why people do this when they are heartbroken, but it seems to be the norm and the thought came so naturally to me. So, I texted Ben, asking if he fancied a drink while I

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