

Exit Wounds: a post-mortem of a med school relationship

By Ben Teasdale

My first years of medical school, I was in a relationship with a Scottish astrophysicist I met at grad school in Cambridge. Her name was Annabel. We dated for just over two years: one year in England and another long distance after I moved to California. I loved her, but as we spent more time with each other's friends and families, and as seeing each other became less frequent and more expensive, it became clear to me that our lives just didn't fit together. The problem was, for months, I just couldn't get myself to end it.

When I finally got the courage, a month later, I sent her the Facebook message: "We need to talk." She replied by posting a meme with the text "We need to ta..." hovering over two pictures of the same woman. On the left, the letters "lk" hovered over a grimace. On the right, the letters "co" hovered over an expression of hesitant intrigue. I didn't follow through.

It was quiet in the weeks after she left. One night, lying in bed, I started to hear creaks in the ceiling. I didn't give it much thought at first, convincing myself that Stanford must have bought some new water system to curb the long Californian drought.

I got a text from her: "How's second year med school life starting?"

I didn't tell her, but I was lonely. I was lonely without her, and I was lonely feeling like I wasn't cut out for a career I had built up in my head for so many years. Once, the instructor in my ultrasound class told me my parietal pleura was shimmering, and even though this had no bearing on my competency, even though I knew he was primarily referring to my lack of pneumothorax, it was nice to hear some positive feedback. I rode that compliment for two days. But I didn't tell her that either. I never felt comfortable opening up to her.

Instead, I texted: "Good so far. Last night I watched *Inside Out*."

"That movie slaps," she said. I laughed.

That she could still make me happy with little phrases caught me off guard. *Inside Out* *does* slap, I thought, curled up in bed, smiling with a reluctant giddiness.

I typed and deleted "I love you" three times before falling asleep. I decided this was something I should practice not sharing with her. Still, it felt true.

A few weeks later, surfacing after my first round of finals of the quarter, I finally gave myself time to reflect. I leaned against the wall at the head of my bed, scrolling through my phone, counting how many of our exchanges were missed calls and messages either unanswered or misread: “sorry can’t talk in the hospital”/“oh no what happened?”/“nothing just a med student still”; “sorry I missed your call on my first ed shift”/“who’s ed?”/“emergency department.” Around that time, I noticed the noises coming from the ceiling above my bedroom had become more frequent, the floorboards beating guiltily like some perverse rewrite of “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

Before attempting another breakup call, I drew a flowchart covering objections she might raise. I had prepared responses to such claims as “This is unfair,” “There are ebbs and flows in relationships,” “I don’t want to give up this easy,” I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror and fogged it up repeating public speaking mantras. “Unique New York. Unique New York.” Breathe. I watched Muhammed Ali highlights on x2 speed. “You’re mean, Ben.” “Mean.” “You can do this.”

I remember wanting desperately to have some concrete reason to offer. “It bothers you too much that I organize my iPhone apps by color,” “I think I need a woman who listens to more upbeat songs than you.” “The books you recommend on your Instagram stories aren’t even very challenging.” I wanted some simple, petty transgression to blame.

But whenever I would call her, I would tell myself it wasn’t the right time. Really, I just lost my nerve. Once, she picked up the phone and announced that the heart-patterned, his-and-hers, matching underwear I had sent half-a-year ago had finally arrived. We thought they had been lost in customs. She was wearing them as a hat. My flowchart had not planned for this.

Med school, I worried, had turned me into an empathy robot. Once a week, I would get together with actors pretending to be patients and I would practice things like taking a chief complaint and establishing rapport. Sometimes, I just wanted to see how deep their backstory went. To one patient-actor I asked: “What do you do for work?” “Oh? What type of quilts?” “And how is the market for gothic quilts in the Central Valley?” I knew if I said, “I am so sorry. That must be a source of stress,” I would get positive feedback about my bedside manner.

When they would admit to fake loved ones dying, I would follow a clinical skills study guide a third year had shared. I would lean forward, furrow my eyebrows and nod along with their responses, still filling pauses with “greats” and “perfects” but only in my head now. I would say: “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

When did I start needing acronyms and study guides to express myself? Exactly how long after an underwear gift can one reasonably break up? It was her birthday in two weeks. How long before a birthday?

I couldn’t decide. And so I kept pretending everything was fine. I kept lying. To her. To myself.

I ordered her a gramophone-style speaker and a pack of golden and silver balloons for the twenties-themed party she was throwing and Skyped her in the top half of a black tuxedo. I emailed her a birthday card I made on my iPad. I told her I liked the swing covers of Life on Mars and Hotline Bling she added to the party's playlist and agreed not to add remixes of the Star Wars Cantina Band song.

To do these things for her, I felt a vestigial love, some useless appendix of emotion evolved in another time for a forgotten purpose. I also felt a burning, visceral and radiating shame for being dishonest with someone I cared so much about. I kept having nightmares of white-coated men—a disappointed Atul Gawande shaking his head next to a white-haired Hippocrates saying, “Does my Oath mean nothing to you? How could you ever be a doctor if you cannot have difficult conversations?” I always woke up thinking the same thing: I am not a doctor. I am an asshole.

Soon, the noises above my bedroom intensified. The vibrations in the wall, the occasional sound wave. It dawned on me that this was not the sound of water pipes—It was my upstairs neighbor beginning a love affair.

One evening around then, I got a call from my mom that my dad was in the emergency room. While using an electric saw, he'd cut four inches, through the bone, from the knuckle of his pinky to the back of his hand. The doctor said he likely would not be able to move his finger again and that they might need to amputate it. Later that night, I tried telling this to Annabel on the phone. “I don't understand why you're *this* upset,” she said. “At least it's just his pinky.”

She didn't get it. My dad worked construction for most of his life. When the housing market crashed in 2007, it sent him into a decade-long depression, worrying about his family and money and entering the job market with no degree. He gained 100 pounds, then lost 40. He was in and out of the psych wing with depression and delusions and once revealed to us in the most matter-of-fact way over breakfast that he had tried to kill himself the night before.

Now, at 65 years old, he's back in college trying to get his bachelor's in music. My first day of medical school was his first day of undergrad; he texted me: “Hello fellow student how do you like school?” He is learning to play piano. He is hosting a radio show with a 17 year old named Harry. Once, live on-air, he turned down an orgy invitation from some classmates of his. He said, “I can't go to an orgy, I have kids!” And, while my mom was upset she was not included in the list of reasons for my father not to have an orgy, I thought it was the funniest thing in the world. For the first time in years, he was doing strangely okay, and I was proud of him for this—for finally finding some happiness.

Then an accident comes along and threatens his ability to play music, to do something he loves. While I loved her, at the same time that I was loving her, I hated her for not knowing a part of my life I could never bring myself to share.

In the days before Annabel flew back home, when I had fallen in and out of love and wasn't ready to tell her, we would kiss before going to sleep. To go through those motions, to have my lips touch hers, to bring awareness to the muscles of our tongues, the mucus membranes and the sounds they make, to let her touch me, to give just enough so she did not ask me what was wrong. The mechanics of it all, the act without feeling, disgusted me.

When it dawned on me the noises above me were my neighbors having sex, that was all I could think about—it's empty mechanics. The sound of the floorboards. The sway of the light. Its power and force. I hated having it there above me: their emetic love.

The thing that surprised me most about all the acting we did in medical school was not how fake it was but how real it turned out to be. My first day on the neurology service, I followed our team to see a patient: a young woman in her fifties who could no longer move the left side of her body after a massive stroke. There were no therapies we could offer, and that tore me up. When the attending said, "I am so sorry this happened to you," I truly believed her, and I felt sorry too. But by the end of the day we had seen eight patients with strokes, I had heard the same line eight times: "I am so sorry," "I am so sorry," "I am so sorry...." I began to wonder if the words really meant anything.

About three weeks after I first decided I'd do it, I called Annabel at 1am on a Sunday morning in late October to break up. It had been months since we had seen each other, and we were supposed to be scheduling flights for winter break. With the time difference, she was just waking up. We spoke until 9am. I tried giving her my reasons; she tried addressing them. Eventually, I dropped my flowchart facade, started to cry and told her I loved her, but that this wasn't what I wanted. She seemed to understand. I think she just needed to see that this was hard for me too.

When we hung up the phone, her video disappeared, and I found myself staring at an array of apps. That was it. It was over.

I remember being disappointed that nothing in my life had tangibly changed. She lives across an ocean; most people wouldn't notice I was alone for weeks or months. I wanted to do something dramatic like throw her stuff out the window, but I lived on the ground floor.

In the end, I decided deleting 'hot valentine's day mix tape' from our shared Google Drive, a shot of whisky and a good cry was about all I could stomach. I scrolled to the blue section of my iPhone, opened up Venmo and sent a classmate \$6, adding in the "What's it for?" section: "I don't know how else to tell you, but Annabel and I just broke up. I am sad but okay and just want you to know."

Before I went to bed, I got a notification back from my classmate. He replied with my \$6 and a note that began: "I am so sorry. That must be really hard." And even though we both knew med school had ruined that phrase, it felt good to hear him say it.

For weeks after the breakup, the sounds above my room did not stop. Eventually, they stopped bothering me, and I decided to accept these noises as a routine part of single life. At night, when I would hear the beginnings of a regularly irregular beat, I would open up my flashcard app. It became a personal challenge to tap through cardiology cards as fast as the metronome they unknowingly set for me. When questions came up on gallops, murmurs or rubs, I would smile up at the ceiling and think, “You losers have no idea the mnemonic implications of what you’re doing.”

With more time, I began to enjoy it. All their rhythm and edginess. How easy it was to forget how clumsily we’re all piled up together in this world, stacked in these stucco’d rows and columns, living our lives so inappropriately close to one another: These intimate strangers right there above me, shaking the foundations of this shoeboxed life of mine without apology. I would lie in bed, listen to them, and think things like, “Maybe I *can* be the type of person that listens to Billie Eilish.”

On my birthday the last summer we were together, Annabel had given me a stack of cards labeled with different phrases that started with “Open when...” and ended with “You’re bored,” “You miss home,” “You’ve had a bad day,” “You miss me.” For months after we broke up, they had remained unopened on my bookshelf. I told myself that I didn’t deserve them, that those letters weren’t written for me anymore.

And then one day, in the late fall, the noises stopped. And the unopened letters began to hurt. And I would look up at the ceiling and think: *Where are you two? I need you.* I lay there wondering how long it would take for me to remove all the hairs Annabel left on my clothes, in my sheets, and in the bathtub drain. I thought about grabbing my stethoscope, pushing it up against the ceiling and checking if there was something going on, but I didn’t. An occasional footstep, a shuffling of furniture, a fire alarm and a panicked cook. But mostly, it was silence.

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