



People Are Awful

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If I'd known what was going to happen that day, I probably would have broken up with him by phone. It's not even my problem. It's Ben's problem. He was late. He's always late. Not so much now, but anyway. He was late, and he knew I'd be angry. But I wasn't angry because I knew that all I was going to say to him was:

It's over, we're finished, I'm ending it, I never want to see you again, we're breaking up, you disgust me, I'm leaving, don't call me.

So it didn't bother me whether he was five minutes or ten minutes late, or an hour late, just so long as he turned up. I wouldn't be angry because I knew for sure, for *certain*, it was going to be the last time.

(It makes me sick thinking about it. Just sick. It's not fair. I was so close.)

So, anyway, I'm sitting outside the café because the sun was out. I remember it so clearly, I remember everything about that afternoon. The sun was out, it felt like it was burning my cheek. There was a lady at the next table wearing this huge big hat with this yappy little dog by her feet. God, the dog. I can still hear it barking. Whenever I hear a dog bark, I hear *that* dog bark, and I'm right back at that table in the sun outside the café, feeling fantastic about what I was about to do. But then I didn't get to do anything.

So this is what happened: I take the last sip of my coffee and put the empty cup back down. The waitress walks past me and sort of stumbles, and spills a drink all over the lady's snakeskin bag. The lady jumps up and starts yelling, her dog jumps too and makes twice the noise she does. So I'm watching this, then I see Ben making his way over to me from across the street. He's wearing this awful jumper he's owned since university, he found it at a house party or something, and it's just the ugliest thing. He never, ever took it off. So I'm thinking he's overslept, and I can smell him from here. He's doing this little hop-skip-run thing that's really not getting him here any quicker, and I'm just going over in my head what I'm going to tell him, thinking this is it, this is the end. Then he notices me, and waves at me with this dopey-looking smile, and for a second I

don't do anything. I'm just trying to breathe in the moment. I start thinking about how much I don't like him. Like, I really didn't like him. Not hate, I wouldn't say I hated him. I just...I needed to get away. So he's looking at me strangely and I think, well, I'd better do something, so I kind of wave back, and he's crossing the road towards me then suddenly bang.

The next bit, I don't remember so well. I think I stood up. I remember how busy the street was, and looking round, and there being all these appalled faces, just frozen, staring. But maybe I've only imagined that and actually it didn't happen. Anyway, the dog was yapping like crazy, and I wonder if I stepped on it or something when I was moving, but I don't remember. Just that suddenly I was next to Ben and he was lying on the ground. The car hadn't actually driven over him, but whatever way he had landed and whatever way the car had stopped, he must have slid underneath it a little bit, because I thought he had been. And I was on my knees looking at him. It felt like forever, me on the ground and him on the ground, and people gathering around us. Someone must have called the ambulance and someone must have gone looking for a doctor in the crowd, but it wasn't me. I was just looking at him. I thought he was dead. His face was grey, as grey as that jumper, except the jumper wasn't really grey anymore, it had dirt all over it from the road. There was blood on his face but I couldn't tell where he was bleeding from. I don't even remember touching him. I don't know what I was thinking.

If it happened today, I would have just got up, walked away, pretended not to know him and get on with my life. But instead I was telling people how I was his girlfriend and he was meant to be meeting me and stuff. I wasn't freaking out or anything, I was just...spaced out. I just didn't understand.

And the guy driving was behind me yelling at me, saying it wasn't his fault and Ben had just walked out in front of him and things, but I wasn't paying any attention. So I could hear him screaming, and that little dog still howling away, then the sirens were coming too. And there was this woman beside me trying to wake Ben up, turns out she was a paramedic on her day off. She must have been so annoyed, you know? Trying to get her groceries then having to do the same life-or-death stuff she always has to. I would have been so angry. I would have told them, *no, it's my day off, they don't pay me for it*, but I guess for some people it's a calling.

At some point during all this, someone stole my bag from the café, which isn't really relevant but I think it says a lot about how terrible people are.

The rest is hardly worth talking about. In fact, none of it's worth talking about, but it's all I think about most days. The things that could have gone differently. If only.

So I end up in the hospital with Ben. First they take him in and examine him, and say all his injuries are superficial, then they operate or something, I've forgotten the order it happened. At some point I had to ring his mum. It was horrible. She was bawling down the phone and I wasn't really saying anything. Then she gets to the hospital, and she's flapping her arms and yelling at the nurses because they can't tell her anything, I suppose that must have been when they were operating on Ben. Phil was there too, he's this idiot she goes about with. He was no help, just sitting there reading a car magazine instead of trying to calm her down. So I'm stuck in the waiting room with her hanging off me, squeezing me so tight I think I might explode, and she's saying *I'm so glad you're here, I don't know what I'd do without you, you've always been a good girl, it means so much that you're here for him.*

And I think back to that sentence I was going to say to Ben and think, Jesus, I could have just sent him an e-mail or something.

Then some time after that, we were standing around Ben's bed, and he was awake. I think maybe it was the first time I'd seen him. I hadn't wanted to go in but his mum made me. He was lying in the bed with all these tubes going in and out of him, and he saw me and his eyes lit up. I couldn't even smile at him, I was so angry. So we're all in there, and the doctor said something like, *Ben's been very lucky, he could have been killed or in a coma and stuff, he didn't hurt his brain so that's good, but, like, he still got hurt pretty badly, so basically we don't know if he's going to walk again, 'cause he's paralysed at the moment, so that's what's going on.*

I didn't really feel anything. I mean, I felt bad for him, but in my head I was already single. But the floodgates open, and his mum's beating her breast and shaking her fist at the heavens, and Ben's crying too, just saying no over and over, and Phil's shaking his head going *chin up, son, we'll get through this.* And I'm just standing there, thinking it's ironic because Ben was always going on about how he'd like to have a go in a wheelchair, only as a joke though. But I didn't say anything. I just almost burst out laughing. The doctor was doing this thing that really set me off. He was standing nodding his head with this really serene look on his face, like he'd seen it a thousand times, but he was kind of smiling too. He looked like one of those nodding dogs you see in the back of cars. It's one of those situations when everything's so serious that it's ridiculous, but it would be the worst thing in the world if you laughed. And I didn't. I thought I was for a

second because there were tears running down my cheeks. I hadn't realised I was crying too. Ben grabbed my hand, and he says *we'll get through it together, pet, we'll get through it*, and I'm thinking, well, how am I going to break up with you now?

That seems ages ago now. Everything's changed. His mum got the council to upgrade her house, make it wheelchair friendly and stuff. Lower all the cupboard handles and widen the doorways. Ben's at home now, and he does physio every week but he's still paralysed. I'm just waiting for the right moment to tell him it's over. I couldn't at the time, he was going for operations and stuff, and they kept saying it was only hope that was getting him through it all. If he died on the table, it was not going to be my fault, you know? So I'm just waiting for some big breakthrough, then he can carry himself through. Waiting for him to wiggle his toes. I'm not too worried. You hear about these things all the time, people spilling tea on themselves and feeling their legs again. We're meant to be getting married in the spring, but nothing's planned. I keep saying I'm too busy to decide anything. He seemed so happy about it that I couldn't turn him down, but it's not going to happen. I haven't told anyone because it doesn't matter. I almost broke up with him a couple of nights ago, but he had talked himself into a dark mood so I didn't. In case he killed himself. But he'll take it okay when it happens. You never know how you're going to react to things, and he's strong, so it'll be okay. I'm only wearing the ring because he'd wonder why if I didn't. But I definitely will not be his wife, no way, no how. No.