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How Do You Mend a Broken Heart?

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### Author

Service, Shannon

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Shannon Service  
UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism  
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How Do You Mend a Broken Heart?

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It was seven hours into our flight to Croatia that I starting worrying about the jugglers balls in the luggage hold below. The balls were a gift from my ex-girlfriend, who made them out of socks stuffed with rice. They were exactly the right size for my small hands and landed with a dense, satisfying plunk. More importantly, they reminded me of the day I taught her to juggle on the lawn outside my apartment.

I'd gotten her to the point where she could cycle through a few rounds, a feat accomplished through gritted teeth and wildly flailing limbs. I went inside while she practiced, catching her profile through the window: Hair spiked up, her body at a 45-degree angle, chasing her tosses across the window before disappearing. I laughed, but when she came back for another pass, I began to cry--overwhelmed by the knowledge that I was absolutely, incontrovertibly in love with this crazy person, balls aloft, in full physical comedy, running through my yard. Nine months of elation dissolved into nine months of hell, until we broke our engagement, over differing opinions on fidelity. From there it was five years of putting myself back together until finally, there I was, 40,000 feet above Greenland, about to hand the juggling balls over to a couple I'd never met who ran a museum I half-suspected was a brilliantly conceived gimmick.

I began to dream, and the balls expanded in my mind. They grew and grew until I had the thought--grotesque, uninvited-- of the juggling balls bursting out of the cargo hold and dangling beneath the plane like a pair of testicles, rocking back and forth with such force the passengers began to panic, worried the plane would tip right over. Pandemonium ensued. Cries and shrieks. Then, just as quickly, the

thought passed, and I was left, once again, in Row 61, aisle seat, the lone passenger awake in a sea of angled heads.

Breakups are tough on the psyche. *Really* tough. They run the full emotional gamut, varying in wide and interesting ways, and some can be substantial. Some splits are big and public, while others go out in stifling silence. Paul Simon sang of *50 Ways to Leave Your Lover*, but it turns out there are far, far more. There are at least 400, in fact, as collected and assembled in Croatia's newly opened Museum of Broken Relationships.

Which is exactly where I was headed.

The Museum of Broken Relationships, a collection of breakup items from around the world, was thought up late one night at a kitchen table in Zagreb. Late, because Olinka Vistica worked long hours coordinating Croatia's biggest film festival; and late because Drazen Grubisic, her recently-exed boyfriend, never put words together effectively until noon. They sat across from each other in the half-house that seemed cleaved already down the middle, divvying up the physical remains of their four years together. Some objects were easily sorted by economic value--she gets the TV, he gets the computer. But then there were the incalculables, the objects with little monetary worth but pounds of emotional weight. Objects like the Little Wind-Up Bunny.

The bunny is scruffy, white and about 5 inches tall. Sometimes, when Olinka came home at night, she'd open the door and find him marching in circles in the entryway. If one of them left on a trip, the bunny went along in the suitcase and the partner at home got photos. There's a picture of the bunny in Iran, for example, and another of him on a podium addressing a crowd. The bunny didn't belong to either of them as much as it belonged to the relationship itself, that

mysterious whole that had emerged from the sum of their parts. But the whole had collapsed-- which is why, there, late at night with everything around them, they hit on the question that would snowball into a museum and send them both around the world: *What about the Little Wind-Up Bunny?*

Grubisic and Vistica are both artists, and after some time passed, they did what artists often do: they put their hearts on display. Cobbling together all their most memorable possessions, they created “The Museum of Broken Relationships,” a traveling exhibit showcasing the collected relics of extinguished love.

To the ex-couple’s surprise, the collection was a smash hit. Next thing they knew, they were putting up installations in Berlin, San Francisco and Istanbul. Everywhere they went, from Bloomington to Belgrade, people packed the halls and delivered their own memoria: the Silver Watch with the pin pulled out at the moment he first said “I love you.” The wood-handled Ex-Axe that a woman used to chop her cheating lover’s furniture into tiny bits. The Garden Gnome whose flight into a windshield signaled the end of a marriage. Vistica and Grubisic were suddenly the world’s investigators into the plane wreck of love, bagging and tagging evidence as they traveled around the globe. They couldn’t book their exhibit fast enough.

The unlikely success of the collection seemed to underscore what we intuitively know about both heartbreak and humanity’s lust for shared misery.

Rural and urban, men and women, young and old shook their heads at the cheating wife or smiled slyly at the secret affair between the sixty year old woman and the lover in his thirties. But beyond voyeurism, the growing collection started hitting certain themes. Some, like the havoc caused by deceit, were more prosaic. But others came as a surprise. Even though both Vistica and Grubisic survived the Yugoslav wars that cleaved Croatia off from the only country they’d known, they were surprised at the number of heartbreak items linked with war. A

surprising theme emerged: Even as powerful machinations of war and history grind around us, life is lived and love is lost in tinier, more human doses. It's not the lockstep of occupying soldiers, the stories said, that lodges permanently in the heart. It's the final image of the teenage lover, rifle slung across his back, who walked out one morning to join the fight. The exhibit was beginning to speak about things larger than cheating boyfriends or busted marriages. Grubisic and Vistica had tapped into the zeitgeist. While they toured the world, a new scientific field took its first major steps towards unlocking the neurological and physical secrets of splitting up. A field that, so far, is showing us that a broken heart is every bit as powerful as the most twangy, howl-filled country song ever claimed it to be.

Research into why breaking up sucks is a relatively recent phenomenon. Researchers have long agreed that love isn't an emotion since it lingers, while emotions are defined by their fleetingness. Emotions like happiness or sadness are inherently ephemeral---they rise and fall in seconds. Take the driver of a car, for example. In the span of a minute, the driver can be happy his favorite song is on the radio, angry that someone cut him off, then nervous he's going to be late for work. Emotions come and go, but love is different. Love is stable. Once it sinks in, love is there day in and day out whether or not you even want it to be.

So if love isn't an emotion, what exactly is it? One theory gaining popularity is that it's a form of persistent craving. In fact, a couple of years ago Dr. Stanton Peele, a social psychologist with over 40 years of addiction study, listed for [\*Psychology Today\*](#) the top seven addictions he thinks are hardest to quit. They are:

7. Cocaine
6. Alcohol
5. Valium
4. Heroin

3. Cigarettes

2. Fatty Food

And, in the top slot: Love.

The last few years have also seen growing public recognition of “love addicts”, people who chase the highs of new love in self-destructive ways. And while many still roll their eyes at the idea—*isn't everything* an addiction these days?-- rehab centers across the country have retooled to deal with the rising tide of people checking themselves in. And, rolling eyes or not, the wreckage of heartache is well-documented. Cross-culturally, heartbreak, jealousy and possession rank among leading causes of both suicide and homicide.

While Grubisic and Vistica meticulously catalogued the hows of breaking up, researchers quietly chipped away at why it hits us so incredibly hard.

The ex-couple's exhibit swelled until they needed a permanent place to put it all. They found an old dive bar inside an Austrian palace in Zagreb's oldest quarter and spent four months refurbishing. This would become their ongoing, permanent museum: A one thousand-square-foot space devoted entirely to love's failures.

I arrived a few days before this actual, physical Museum of Broken Relationships opened their doors and met Olinka at the hotel/apartment building she lives in about a mile from the museum. A former dancer, Olinka moves with a disarming mixture of grace and awkwardness, like a teenage girl who grew too fast. She'd swept the front of her long brown hair up into a barrette and wore a white coat, a stylish scarf and black and white polka-dotted glasses. She greeted me warmly and offered to take me to the museum. Olinka walked quickly along the main,

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shop-lined boulevard and I struggled to keep up, slinging my bag across my shoulder before tripping on a crack.

Zagreb is a modern European city with moments of unexpected whimsy. Cars rush past on the central boulevard, while old women in head scarves preside over flower stands in long plazas. We turned and began climbing a series of wide, stone stairs before emerging onto a cobblestoned square. We'd arrived. Outdoor signs weren't up yet, but through large doors I could see the museum's interior metal sign, each letter crafted individually and lit from behind. We entered the clean, white space. Polished concrete floors glistened beneath tarps, buckets and ladders. A large table in the reception area was littered with paint rolls and towels. Exhibit items lay on the floor bagged in clear plastic with post-it notes signalling object and nationality. A hot pink vibrator read simply: "Toy. Ireland."

Drazen, 40 and lanky with a delta of laugh lines, shook my hand and offered a tour. The rooms, Drazen said, were ordered by theme, like "Whims of Desire" or "Rage and Fury". Each room featured a dozen or more items arranged in various ways. Some, like the Ex Axe, were nailed to the wall. Wedding dresses hung on mannequins. Most items were displayed on plastic shelves a few feet off the floor. There was a mountain bike used to ride out of a relationship and the side-view mirror a wife ripped off her husband's car when she discovered it parked outside "the wrong house".

Beside each was a laminated story in both English and Croatian:

***An unopened Candy G-String (2004-2008) Winterthur, Switzerland. This is what he thought was romantic: a thong made of candy. I laughed, but never took it out of the package. He never bought me flowers because flowers, he said, were for boring people. Instead I got sausages or new parts for my bicycle. After four years he turned out to be as cheap and shabby as his presents. He cheated***

*on me with a colleague and dumped me via email.*

When it comes to breakups, we're all in the eighth grade. Breaking up, after all, is a daily, common occurrence. But when it happens to *us*, it takes on monumental proportions. Walking past the collections of stuffed animals, the shaving kit he used to keep at the house, the fuzzy handcuffs that never got used, it's clear that the exhibit items are once quirky and completely commonplace. Each breakup was both very specific in its shattering effect and part of a large, very normal phenomenon. Like the banality of evil. So, if it's as universal as it is crushing, does that mean humans are somehow wired for heartbreak? Just what happens, physically and neurologically, when we split from someone we love is something researchers are only recently getting a better handle on.

When a heart breaks, the body releases a flood of stress chemicals that can cause coronary seizures in otherwise healthy people. It's called "Broken Heart Syndrome." Seriously, that's its actual name. It was discovered in 2005, and is currently treated at all the nation's major hospitals and heart institutions. Johns Hopkins cardiologist Dr. Ian Wittstein was the lead author of the *New England Journal of Medicine* study announcing the syndrome. He says Broken Heart Syndrome is so similar to a standard heart attack that the patient will usually call 911 reporting a coronary arrest. EMTs will arrive on the scene, do an EKG and conclude it's a heart attack. "Even at the Emergency Room level they're going to treat you for a heart attack," Wittstein says. "It's not until you're checked into the hospital and they perform an echocardiogram that the difference becomes clear."

People with Broken Heart Syndrome have an enlarged left ventricle and a closing of the arteries due not to cholesterol, but to overwhelming emotion. The cause of emotion can differ—the death of a partner, a breakup, even the shock of a surprise party can all trigger it. The severity varies also. "But make no mistake," Wittstein says. "I've seen plenty of people who are very, very sick. You can

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easily end up in the Intensive Care Unit and, without care, you could die."

Recently, Dr. Arthur Aron, a Professor of Psychology at Stony Brook University, teamed up with Dr. Helen Fisher, a Rutgers Biological Anthropology Professor and the author of the books Anatomy of Love and Why We Love, to figure out what goes on in the brain of someone who has recently been dumped. To start, Aron and Fisher took 19 students who were still in love with their exes and placed them in the MRI scanner. They showed the subjects pictures of their respective dumpers and watched how their brains responded.

"We saw activation in the part of the brain associated with craving for drugs," Aron says. "It's usually seen in people who've been prevented from having drugs, but who want them. Not just drugs, but super-addictive drugs. "Drugs like nicotine," Aron says. "And, of course, drugs like cocaine."

The theory that Fisher and Aron are advancing describes love as a "goal state" closely linked with addictions. Unlike emotions which can rise and fall in a matter of seconds, a goal state is a term social psychologists use to describe a stable, long-term yearning for something crucial. This isn't a yearning for a roast beef sandwich. This is the deep, fundamental desire for warmth when you're cold, or a fix if you're an addict. It's a state that drives us continually towards something until we get it.

Aron says that during early, mutual, romantic love, we're "rewarded" with blissful feelings when we see or conjure our beloved. But, for most couples, this wears off. "What grows," he says, "is activation in another part of the brain that we've studied in monogamous mammals like prairie voles. It's a part that becomes active when there's an attachment to a particular individual."

Prairie voles have become the animal of choice for researchers studying love.

Like humans, prairie voles nest up on the first date, groom each other for hours, avoid other potential sexual partners, and become doting parents. The reason, researchers speculate, has to do with a cocktail of neurochemicals released during sex. The first of these, dopamine, is a pleasure-inducing chemical, linked to the reward section of the brain, so scientists theorize that prairie voles feel pleasure during sex and link it in a sex-equals-the-reward-of-bliss equation. Dopamine is common in monogamous and non-monogamous mammals alike---it's the basic "sex is fun" chemical that fuels the sex drive. Oxytocin and vasopressin, on the other hand, are monogamy-inducing chemicals only present in faithful mammals like humans and prairie voles. These monogamy chemicals are active in a section of the brain involved with recognition, and scientists believe the faithful vole links the pleasure of sex with the features of its partner. When researchers block the monogamy chemicals, the voles become promiscuous. But, when the chemicals are present, the cocktail proves a powerful combination- one that creates the chemical conditions, it might be argued, for love.

While it's unlikely that humans evolved to have a "cocaine" part of the brain, it could be, Aron argues, that our oxytocin-driven, monogamous brain evolved to crave love and that we, curious creatures that we are, found drugs to provoke similar responses. If true, it points to how deeply we're wired for the booms and busts of love.

Understanding the science behind heartache is leading us closer to finding its cure. Fisher, the scientific mentor of online dating, is already theorizing that a solid dose of serotonin might prevent a happily married wife from falling for her neighbor. A February *Time* article revealed that couples therapists are already experimenting with oxytocin as an intimacy enhancer; and C. Nathan DeWall, a social psychologist at the University of Kentucky-Lexington, recently released the results of a modest, but telling, test. He's tracking how people who have been

rejected respond to a simple, over-the-counter painkiller: Tylenol. “We made a straightforward prediction,” he says, “that if we numb people to the physical pain [of rejection], it will numb the emotional pain as well.”

Using fMRI to track brain activity, DeWall studied 25 people playing a computer game that involved rejection. He found that the 10 people who took Tylenol were less impacted by rejection than the 15 on the placebo. The small study, published in *Psychological Science*, isn’t enough to say definitively that Tylenol, or other painkillers, eases broken hearts. But it might help. Addicts have long testified that taking painkillers and antidepressants help “dull the pain” of recovery. Rebounding from a broken heart, then, may not so dissimilar from kicking any addiction. Painkillers for heartache? It might work. But is it a solution? That’s harder to say.

----- Section Break -----

My second day at the museum things were a little more in order. The opening was in a little more than twenty-four hours, and the floor was swept, all paint supplies gone. Olinka and Drazen stood side by side, debating the proper placement of a garter belt that hung limply from a single nail.

***Garterbelts*** (Spring-Autumn 2003). *Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. I never put them on. The relationship may have lasted longer if I had.*

Olinka pulled a leg loop wide, wondering if it might make more sense to spread the loops so the viewer could see the shape and size of the woman’s thigh. But doing so was weird, like spreading a pair of underwear. They decided to keep it hanging from the single nail. They debated whether it was up too high.

Olinka and Drazen were together for four years before their relationship ran out of fuel. When the museum idea thrust them into a working relationship for the next four years, they both accepted it. As artists, they found it was hard to turn down exhibit offers and the sold-out global tours.

Now, Olinka left to deal with the ever-ringing phone while Drazen moved on to the correct placement of a pair of papier-mâché breasts. For a moment, he just stared at the hand made, prosthetic boobs. One droopy breast was larger than the other. The whole bodice was painted bright peach. The nipples were bubblegum pink.

***Fake Breasts*** (3 years) Belgrade, Serbia. After 3 years together, my husband brought home fake, sculpted breasts which were, of course, larger than mine and that was the time of our biggest relationship crisis. He made me wear them during sex because they turned him on. I was disappointed and, because of those fake breasts, I left him for good.

Drazen had met the wife and said, “What’s amazing is that the woman, his wife, is like this,” he held up his pinky. “She’s tiny!” The fake breasts, on the other hand, were huge.

The museum doors opened at 10am the following day for a sneak-preview of the museum for the press. Olinka was mobbed by TV crews. Drazen took flocks of reporters on guided tours. I put a pastry down for a few seconds, and when I returned found a French woman happily eating the rest.

As the public opening hour approached, the staff and friends laid out bottles of champagne and filled a long table with a variety of food. Everyone donned museum t-shirts and turned on all the lights. A long purple and white banner reading “The Museum of Broken Relationships” was unfurled in front of the

building.

It was, all in all, like many gallery openings, it seemed to me, except that no one stood back, hand on chin, to hold forth on the piece's true meaning. The night felt more like the christening of a ship, buoyant, champagne-filled. Olinka relaxed and drank wine. Drazen beamed with pride.

Maybe, I later realized, the real appeal of the Museum was narcissistic. The hatchet used to chop a cheating lover's furniture, the lopsided boobs, the glass box filled with a German man's tears—all things fundamentally, reminded me of episodes of my own rage, all showed me my own rage, my own awkwardness and my own despair. By taking the painfully personal and putting it on display, the museum created the reflection that makes art so comforting. These hundreds of objects from total strangers showed me my infinite capacity for flailing in the face of love. Oddly enough, I felt a sense of relief. Faced with such overwhelming evidence of human insanity, I let go an elegant response to lost love. A broken heart is one of the things that makes us human. Sometimes being human is a ridiculous, painful, desperate thing.

A couple of months after returning from Zagreb, deep into the construction of this article, I broke up with my partner of a few years, Maggie. I joke that it's because I stopped saying "I love you" and started saying "I feel a stronger than usual pair-bond," but I think that was secondary.

I hadn't actually felt heartbreak in over six years, and the force of it was surprising. When you're in a relationship you don't realize how many times a day you think of your partner. "I can't wait to tell Maggie this." "I wonder what Maggie wants for dinner." But when the relationship ends, every one of those

thoughts is quickly followed with a solid pang to the heart; you start noticing. One day I counted: I thought of Maggie 73 times in 24 hours. If, as Dr. Fisher maintains, new love is like Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, then for me at least, breakup is traumatic head injury. I kept forgetting that we broke up, forgetting to say “I” instead of “we,” forgetting she wasn’t next to me when I woke up. I even felt the nausea and disorientation of concussion.

The physical pain in the chest was there too, and in the days following the break up, I took Tylenol to numb it. I have no idea if it worked, since I didn’t know how I would have felt without it, but I found that taking it made me feel psychologically better--even if it was, I quietly suspected, a placebo. It also made me uneasy.

On my last night in Zagreb, I remembered, I drank tea with Olinka in her apartment. The bustle of the opening had died away, and she was in a quieter, more reflective mood. She talked about why she and Drazen have curated the detritus of other people’s relationships for over four years.

“The Museum is like a shop window where you can come and see other people’s lives,” she said, “but in a way that makes you think about yourself. It makes you think about yourself, and say, ‘This is a passage we all have to go through.’ I’ve become a better person after a couple of break ups--especially this one with Drazen. So a break up doesn’t have to be a bad thing. The common perception is that you’re suffering and you have to stop suffering. But suffering is okay. If you’re just happy, watching TV and eating your pizza, then what? This makes you think about yourself, which is the most important thing.”

On a windy night in February, I took a necklace Maggie gave me, wrapped it in tissue, and dropped it in an envelope. Here’s what the note said:

Dear Olinka and Drazen,

I commend this necklace into your capable hands. In my drawer it's a reminder of a happier time, but in the context of the Museum, I hope it says something more. I hope it adds to the evidence that heartbreak is a fundamental part of being human, that the lows of love are as crucial as the highs and that courage can be found when we bring our broken hearts together.

After it was in the mail, I went to the stereo, turned up Paul Simon's *Graceland* and danced around the empty, Maggie-less living room.

*"...And I may be obliged to defend every love, every ending,  
Or maybe there's no obligations now.  
Maybe I've a reason to believe, we all will be received  
In Graceland."*

I danced and danced with the song on repeat until, finally, hours later, I collapsed on the couch. And I felt better. I felt better in a real, true, lyric-belting, limb-shaking, heart-pounding, old-fashioned, broken-hearted love song kind of a way. Miserable, sated and real, I did the best thing I could think of to honor the feeling: I lay on the couch and felt it.

Then, just to be safe, I threw the rest of the Tylenol away.