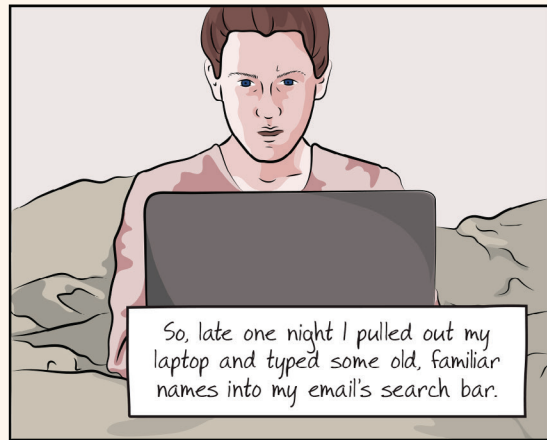


BEGINNING AT THE END

TO TRULY KNOW A PERSON, YOU MAY NEED TO BREAK UP. ILLUSTRATOR KRISTEN RADTKE, AUTHOR OF THE GRAPHIC MEMOIR *IMAGINE WANTING ONLY THIS*, SHARES HER ROUNDABOUT LOVE STORY

Three months before my wedding, I started thinking a lot about my ex-boyfriends. I wasn't reminiscing exactly, but I began running through a mental catalog of past relationships, replaying why things hadn't worked out.



So, late one night I pulled out my laptop and typed some old, familiar names into my email's search bar.

I was greeted by the demise of relationship after relationship in rows alone now. But I have of post-breakup correspondence, some from nearly a decade ago:

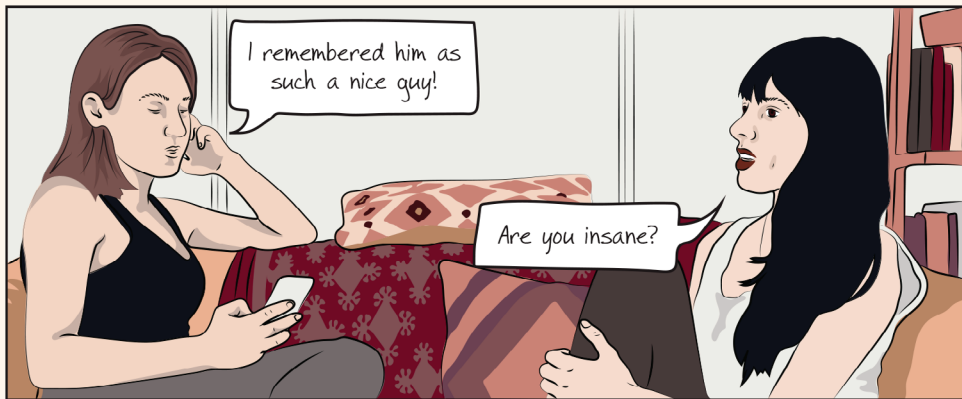
(no subject) - I know you're hurting but you really can't imagine what I'm going through.

You're such a liar. - What a big fucking hypocrite you are. I have so much resentment.

One Last Thing - You're disgusting. Just to reiterate, I'm mad but it's your life and your choice.

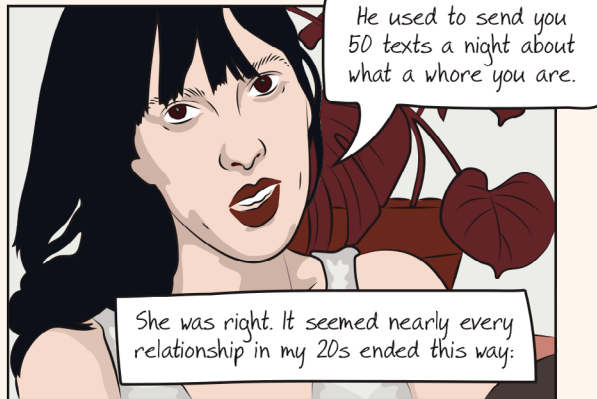
I'll leave you alone now - No one else is going to love you as much as I did, and it's your loss.

When I met most of these men, they were so polite. They called my mother "Mrs. Radtke." They took out the recycling every evening. They presented elaborate, homemade gifts for my birthdays. But my friends remembered them differently.



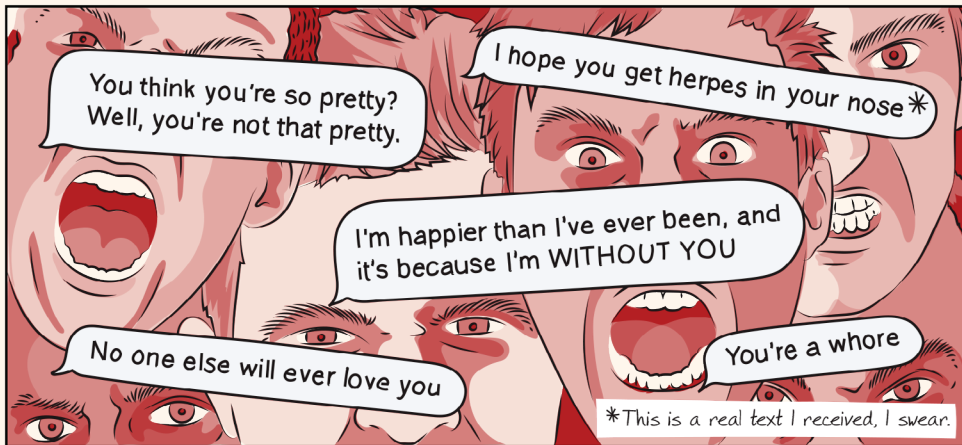
I remembered him as such a nice guy!

Are you insane?



He used to send you 50 texts a night about what a whore you are.

She was right. It seemed nearly every relationship in my 20s ended this way.



You think you're so pretty? Well, you're not that pretty.

I hope you get herpes in your nose*

I'm happier than I've ever been, and it's because I'm WITHOUT YOU

No one else will ever love you

You're a whore

*This is a real text I received, I swear.

I'm not proud of how I acted through all of these breakups either. But what I've found most troubling is how hurt for some men builds a desire to inflict more hurt outward. Men who had been previously kind turned unrecognizable, acting as if they were owed access to another person, and when that access was taken away, their newly battered egos grew big and red.



Jeff was different.

I met him when I was 25, and we spent five years dating on and off. Each time we broke up, I used all the tired lines, and I thought I meant them:



I'm just not ready for something serious right now.

I'm worried that we don't want the same things.

I'm too busy to give you what you need.

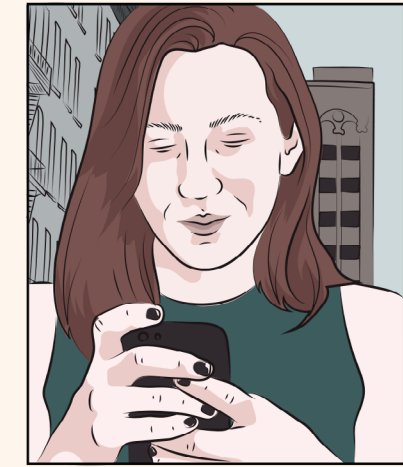


Whereas after other breakups I dreaded checking my phone, afraid of the latest slew of aggressive messages that might appear, as months passed without Jeff, I found myself hoping to hear from him, disappointed every time I clicked on my screen and didn't see his name pop up.



And when it finally did, his message to me was quite different:

Heard the news about your new job. Proud of you.



When we met for a drink after so many months apart, we seemed to know right away that we weren't going to break up anymore.

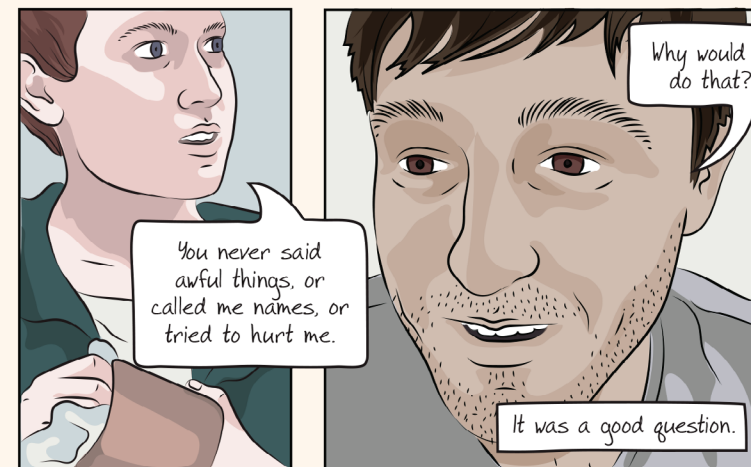
In a way, it was who he was when we weren't together—still kind, still respectful, even when he no longer needed to be—that made me realize how much I wanted to be with him.

We talked about it before our wedding:



When we broke up, you never treated me badly.

What do you mean?



Why would I do that?

You never said awful things, or called me names, or tried to hurt me.

It was a good question.

Perhaps you only see who your partner truly is when he's not your partner anymore. I've seen that person in him, and it's enough to make me never want to leave.

