

The film that ended my relationship.

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It's New Year's, 2021, and I'm in Byron Bay with one of my girlfriends (who will go by the pseudonym 'Sarah' for the duration of this story). We were both in relationships at the time, and both of our boyfriends were also in Byron Bay for New Year's, staying in separate houses with their own respective groups of friends. Sarah and I had been late ring-ins.

Sarah's relationship was going well (they are engaged now). Mine, on the other hand, was not. My boyfriend had made a concerted effort to let me know that he would not be available to hang out very much, despite us both being in the same small town, because he'd be busy with his friends. Fair enough, I thought. No one likes to feel like they've invited themselves to something, and I *was* a late ring-in, so I decided to give him plenty of space to enjoy his trip with his friends.

Meanwhile, Sarah and her boyfriend were meeting up every other night for drinks on the beach and whatever else 21-year-olds do in Byron Bay over New Year's. I was feeling somewhat dejected, but was trying to let it go and enjoy the festivities. After all, if my boyfriend was capable of having so much fun without me, shouldn't I be too?

Things were going smoothly until Sarah called me about 3 days into our trip to tell me that she, her boyfriend, and a few of the other guys staying at her boyfriend's accommodation had started developing COVID symptoms. In 2021, COVID was still very much a 'new' virus. Neither of us had had it, and didn't know how sick we'd get. It was also mandatory for people that had tested positive or were experiencing symptoms of the virus to self-isolate. A few hours later, they all drove down to the drive-thru testing centre and lo and behold, they were all positive. This meant that Sarah, her boyfriend, and the other guys wouldn't be able to leave their accommodation or go out to any of the local celebrations we'd planned.

Spoiler: Most people ended up going out anyway, and there was a huge outbreak of the virus in Byron Bay that was widely covered by Australian news broadcasters.

As a consolation prize, we decided that the logical thing to do would be to let Sarah and her boyfriend stay at our one-bedroom Airbnb. The other guys would self-isolate in their holiday house, and I would go and stay with my boyfriend. That way, I could still go out, and Sarah and her boyfriend could take care of each other. I could have kept the Airbnb to myself (Sarah had offered) but then I'd be spending New Year's alone at 21, which is depressing enough as it is, let alone in the middle of a party town.

I thought our plan was a good way of making lemonade out of lemons until I called my boyfriend and told him what had happened. I can't remember the conversation verbatim, as it was years ago now and I've mostly blocked it out due to sheer humiliation, but he couldn't have been less enthusiastic if he tried. Despite feeling as though I was coercing him, I packed my things and moved into the holiday house he had booked with about five friends of his.

When I don't feel welcome somewhere, like most people, it makes me act a bit strange and inauthentic. I'm not one of those people who can "cop in on the chin" and carry on as my usual self. Quite the contrary. I overcompensate massively by laughing too loud at people's jokes, or shut down so aggressively that people would consider me seriously antisocial. Consequently, people perceive me as strange, inauthentic, or perhaps boring, and don't want to befriend me, which reinforces the belief that I'm not wanted. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For the 4 days I spent in that house, my boyfriend was irritable and distant. I was feeling vulnerable and desperate. I tried not to take it personally, but it was.

Now, I know what you might be thinking: Paris, you crashed his trip. He doesn't owe you anything. To that I say, you and I probably wouldn't make a great couple either.

One evening, my boyfriend and I decided to go and see a film. We walked to Palace Cinemas on the main strip in Byron Bay and got tickets to Joachim Trier's romantic dramedy *The Worst Person in the World* (2021). It had come out the week or so prior, and I was dying to see it. A film is a great way for people to spend time together without actually having to spend time together.

Without spoiling the film too much (sorry, but in my defence it came out 4 years ago), the film follows a couple, Julie (played by Renate Reinsve) and Aksel (played by Anders Danielsen Lie), and the breakdown of their relationship. Julie is in crisis, craving autonomy, and self-reinvention. This is evident in one sequence, where Julie abruptly leaves one of Aksel's work events, wanders into a party, and has a rendezvous with the tall and handsome Eivind (played by Herbert Nordrum). By contrast, Aksel is very much rooted in himself and the relationship, and loves Julie deeply. There is some almost-cheating-behaviour (depending who you ask), arguments about whether or not to have children, lots of sex, drugs, and a cancer diagnosis. Despite how the remainder of this story plays out for me, *The Worst Person in the World* is still one of my all-time favourite films and one of the most believable depictions of a relationship I have ever seen on-screen. These two have the chemistry of two souls destined to find each other in every lifetime. Part of the film's brilliance lies in the fact that there is no one to blame in the end. Everyone knows breakups are easier to come to terms with when there's someone to be mad at.

My boyfriend and I exited the cinema and walked across the road to an Italian restaurant for a few wines and something to eat after the film. One of my favourite things to do after watching a good film is sit down and talk about it; the sound track, the authenticity of the costuming, what scenes were most salient and why. To my dismay, the energy between us was still off (as it had been for most of the previous 72 hrs). Perhaps I was finally perceiving what my boyfriend had felt between us for a while. After a moment's silence, I asked him, "So, which character did you relate to more?". Admittedly, I was baiting him. After the past few days we'd had, I wanted nothing more than for him to say "Oh, Aksel, of course". This would confirm his love for me and reassure me that this had just been a blip and we were all good. He took a deep breath in, raised his eyebrows and said, "Probably Julie, to be honest". My heart sank. The waiter came over to drop off our drinks, and I feigned a smile. I could have vomited all over the table. I didn't know whether to scoff, burst into tears, or run. I could have engaged in some self-preservation and said, "Oh, yeah, me too", but that is not me. I sheepishly said something to the effect of "Oh, right, well, I think I definitely feel like Aksel".

I don't really remember the rest of that dinner or the rest of the trip, but about 6 months later, my boyfriend broke up with me. In the middle of his break-up spiel, trying not to slide off the edge of his bed, in his suffocating bedroom that smelt of dusty carpet, a friend of his knocked at the door to drop something off. My boyfriend got up, and went downstairs to open the door, leaving me in my puddle of tears (a familiar psychological state for me at this point in the relationship) clutching a pillow to my waist. I overheard my boyfriend say, "I'm sort of dealing with something upstairs". As if I were a rogue pigeon that'd just flown through the window and knocked over a pot plant. As I left his house that night, replaying the relationship and looking for the evidence of its demise that I'd missed (or chosen to ignore), I thought back to that night in Byron Bay.

You can come to your own conclusions as to why I chose to share this story. Perhaps to make my ex-boyfriend look like a bad person (he's not), or for you to feel sorry for me (you shouldn't). Perhaps it speaks to the way that films like *The Worst Person In The World* quietly seep into our lives, informing our decisions in ways barely perceptible until months later. I often wonder if that post-film debrief was as significant to my boyfriend as it was to me.

My ex tried to reach out about a year later via social media. Who knows what his intentions were. Rekindling? An apology? An attempt at friendship? We will never know. I was dating someone else at the time, so I decline the request. We proceeded to bump into each other at bars, airports, parks, and festivals every few months or so for about a year afterwards due to our many overlapping hobbies. Alas, I believe that if someone is once a Julie, they are always a Julie.

Many years later, I went on a date with someone else, and we got to talking about films. I mentioned *The Worst Person In The World* and to my disbelief, my date had almost exactly the same story to tell in reverse. The rocky relationship. The post-film debrief. The revelation that you and your other half are effectively doomed. We are good friends now. Us Aksel's must stick together.