

Breaking your Heart – in Little Ways

By Gail Wanman Holstein

Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote for women.

With her genius for turning agony into poetry, she really nailed the phenomenon of falling in love. She published “The Spring and the Fall” in 1923.

When you fall in love your senses are on high alert. You see beauty everywhere; you notice everything your beloved does; your future stretches ahead like endless May. Here’s the first verse:

In the spring of the year, in the spring of the year,
I walked the road beside my dear.
The trees were black where the bark was wet.
I see them yet, in the spring of the year.
He broke me a bough of the blossoming peach
That was out of the way and hard to reach.

Then, with bitterness, Millay follows the couple down their primrose path. You may recognize the subtle change in her language. The world is still beautiful, but the relationship doesn’t look quite as peachy:

In the fall of the year, in the fall of the year,
I walked the road beside my dear.
The rooks went up with a raucous trill.
I hear them still, in the fall of the year.
He laughed at all I dared to praise,
And broke my heart, in little ways.

He broke her heart. And how? Did he find someone else? Did he go back on a promise? Did he leave her? No—apparently he just made fun of her.

Year be springing or year be falling,
The bark will drip and the birds be calling.
There’s much that’s fine to see and hear
In the spring of a year, in the fall of a year.
‘Tis not love’s going hurt my days,
But that it went in little ways.

By today's standards this is mild stuff. On daytime TV we can see real people—who were once, presumably, in love—flinging accusations, exposing their private battles to the nation, in the name of entertainment. The only thing Millay's cad did was embarrass her for caring.

Edna St. Vincent Millay died in 1950, but if she were giving poetry readings today, she would pack the house. Anyone can relate to the emotions she expressed with such delicacy. Her verse throbs with pain. Years pass; springs spring, falls fall, and we humans continue to have strong feelings about one another.

What are some “little ways” he can break your heart?

In my years of work with women, I've heard of plenty. Some are merely thoughtless, but others can be warning signs of abusiveness that can escalate:

- Criticizing you, putting you down
- Telling disparaging jokes and stories about people you care about
- Not taking your wishes seriously
- Embarrassing you in public
- Adopting interests that you disapprove of and telling you to “live with it”
- Reminding you frequently of his degree from a prestigious college—or the reverse, extolling his “common” roots and ridiculing yours
- Not listening, making you say everything twice
- Refusing to work on a behavior that bothers you
- Making his interests more important than yours
- Reminding you who earns more money, who puts food on the table
- Treating you—and others—as servants
- Forgetting your birthday, your anniversary, dates that are important to you
- Paying flattering attention to other women
- Demanding sex even if you don't feel like it
- Invading your space, treating it as his own; treating your time as if it's his
- Denigrating your feelings, teasing you when you're angry
- Keeping secrets from you
- Not showing empathy when you're in pain

These may be hallmarks of, in Millay's words, “love's going.” He may not love you anymore—or he may never have loved you. He may have a serious form of obnoxiousness known as narcissism, a mental disorder rooted in infancy that renders a person incapable of love. In either case, your future together does not look bright.

What can you do?

- My first advice is always to stop, look, listen. Are you missing anything?
- Do you have similar complaints about other people, or only him? Could you be over-reacting or overly sensitive? Don't rule anything out until you examine it.

- Look at your own part in this drama. When you disagree, do you perform in undignified ways, not living up to your own standards? Do you only react to his cues, rather than stating your own wishes and opinions? Are you always ready with a retort, and do you make “pre-emptive strikes” in anticipation of what he might say? Is your back always up? This kind of tension can put the kibosh on the best of relationships.
- Listen to his actual words. He might not be saying what you think. He might not be intending to sound harsh. Does he talk to everyone that way, or just to you?
- Talk about your feelings. Not with your mother or your best friend, even if they are licensed psychotherapists. Find a psychologist, social worker, or support group led by a professional. For the first few sessions you may want to vent, but remember: your purpose is to go forward, not to whine and spin your wheels.
- Once you’ve sorted out your feelings, initiate a talk with him at a time when you are both calm. You’ve already had plenty of arguments. Another one won’t change the pattern; it will only etch it deeper.
- Use the “I-message” technique. Tell, without blame, how his behavior makes you feel. See what kind of reaction you get. Apology? Great. Then ask him to consider your feelings before he does it the next time. Defensiveness? Don’t argue. Just state it and let it be. The next opportunity for a talk, do it again. Make several honest attempts before giving up.
- Try couples counseling. If he cares about your union, he’ll agree to it. Once in the room with a counselor, he may act as if he’s only there to prove you wrong. The counselor should call him on this. If he or she does not, get another counselor. Use this time—you’re paying for it, after all—to repair, not to keep tearing down.
- Watch for signs of progress. When he does something “right,” tell him (without making a big deal of it) that you appreciate it.
- Sad but eternally true, you can’t change someone else. He has to do it himself. Your decision, after you’ve done everything you’re willing to do, is whether to bail out or go down with the ship.

Don’t let your heart be broken, in big or little ways.

Though in a poem a broken heart sound romantic, in real life it just hurts and drags you down. You may decide that your poetic soul is too valuable to waste. If that’s the case and you’re sure of it, implement your exit strategy.

Parting is such sweet sorrow.

More poetry. I’m not trivializing the difficulties you’ll face if you do leave. They can be overwhelming, and you may question your decision for quite some time.

But you'll be better off, dear lady. I'm sure Ms. Millay would agree.

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