



# YOUR WORST REVENGE

If rage and anger are a fundamental part of the healing process, is revenge morally off the cards? Reckoning with the revenge fantasy when heartbreak gets the best of us. This is the story you'll tell the kids we never had.

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We've all known the feeling. You're walking down the street, heartbreak still fresh in your chest. It's not so fresh that it oozes grief anymore, but enough so that the scar tissue arduously healing the wound is fuelled by anger instead of the sadness that stung your throat even weeks ago. Now, it sits in your stomach. Curdling, waiting, building. Betrayal burns your oesophagus like the bile you heaved after nights spent drinking cheap wine together while they whispered one thing into your ear and another thing into the woman at the bar's. You pass the falafel restaurant you used to eat at on Sundays, and *that* spot. You know the one. Your chest tightens at the thought they might be there, blood in your head, palms suddenly damp and grippless. You're not ready yet, you haven't anticipated the first run in. The one where, hot behind the eyes, you can choose to enact revenge. Laugh in their face, throw a drink in it or worse, dream up a volatile way to get your own.

They aren't there, though. But how sweet it would be if they were, and you looked how you wanted to look, perhaps with someone new on your arm, someone charming and charismatic who could run laps around their intellect. We've all known the feeling. We've all stretched the elaborate revenge fantasy out, expanded it into its own world, belted SZA's lyrics "what I would do to make you feel just

like this" into the void – that person on the mind – because it was shitty of them to make us feel just like this. While most of us know better than to give over to impulses, such impulses live on in our stomachs with our anger when we pass the falafel restaurant, when heartbreak gets the best of us. The saying "An eye for an eye" is a commandment found in Exodus 21:23–27, one that has transcended time, law, and religion. If only they understood how painful it is to look your betrayer in the eyes in the first place.

Love (and heartbreak), in the worst of circumstances, can drive us to be the worst version of ourselves. In unlikely incidences (but not unlikely enough that we don't hear about them), it can drive us to unfathomable, violent lengths. This love, the kind of love that invokes bone-aching heartbreak, rips our feelings from our throats, stings our cheeks with hot, liquid anger that seeps through our pores, makes us yearn for revenge, is not the right love for us. We know this. Because as it stands, the greater the harm and transgression caused, the greater the desire for revenge.

We normalised it in films and in pop culture, in *The First Wives Club* and with Lady Diana's famed "revenge dress"; in chick-flicks like *John Tucker Must Die* and *The Other Woman*, all dramatised examples of the way women turn rage into a particular brand of empowerment

and end up making the men who betrayed them feel like fools. More violently, *Kill Bill*, *Hamlet*, and *Crime and Punishment*, offer iconic revenge plots that see a more sinister idea of revenge come to life. And while we know that we are not to relate to the revenge-fuelled killing sprees in fictional plots, there is a fraction of us in there, somewhere, that feels the guttural rage that crashes over us when we learn of our own violation, and wants to match it.

I remember the feeling well, sometimes still, it creeps into my consciousness. The persuasively pernicious idea of revenge luring the mostly rehabilitated part of myself back into the ragged ache of heartbreak and betrayal, leaving me wondering if that part will ever really go away. When those feelings are mostly said and done, heartbreak healed, pebbles of anger still sitting in our stomachs waiting to be passed like kidney stones, does the feeling ever really leave us? Where does the anger go?

"Anger is always a really interesting emotion," Aleks Trkulja, a sex therapist and mental health counsellor tells me over the phone. "There's a lot of research that shows that anger fires up the same parts of the brain as desire and impulsivity. It can kind of get addictive to hate." She encourages the idea that anger is often an umbrella emotion that can serve as a kind of protection over feeling other emotions



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like vulnerability, shame, loneliness and rejection – all feelings that most of us would likely rather not face, if we can get fired up instead.

While experiencing feelings like rage and anger is a fundamental part of many breakup processes, even if we promise things ended amicably and vow to stay friends, it poses the question: how long is too long to hold onto these feelings, and more importantly, how can we move through them in non-destructive ways when revenge is morally off the table?

“I see revenge as a kind of resistance to acceptance over a circumstance or situation,” Trkulja says. “We have a bit of a formula in therapy, which is pain x resistance = suffering. If you’re in pain, that is one thing. If you resist the reality of the pain, it escalates into suffering.” She offers up the idea that when we are unable to accept our relationship has failed, or that we have been betrayed, hurt or manipulated (sometimes all of the above), seeking revenge instead is an interpretation of someone’s behaviour that leaves us questioning our self-worth.

“Revenge is resisting the facts and personalising things. It becomes about having a score to settle, and that is a form of fixation, for instance, that even if you achieve revenge, you’re still not potentially affecting the circumstances of the situation. Is it really going to be that satisfying?”

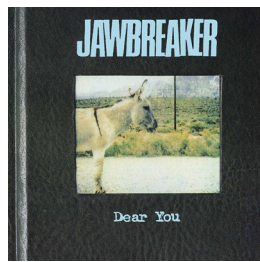
If you have successfully tried to seek revenge on an ex before, you may remember the range of emotions that come with the territory. The anticipation, the feeling of cloaked empowerment at getting your own, a rush of adrenaline, a triumphant success. But when justice has been served, has the anger left you? Has the wound in your heart healed over leaving a more fortified version of itself? Have you passed the trauma, grief, and betrayal back to them like a baton in a relay race, freed of it at last after an exhausting sprint?

“Processing emotion is never linear,” Trkulja explains. “It’s impossible to do it perfectly and I think we’re always learning about how to do it. There is no right way to go through a breakup – they fucking suck – and when the breakup is surrounded by feelings of rage, anger or shame, it’s hard to want to lean into an emotional experience that is quite unbearable.”

In Victor Frankel’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he writes that a lot of us create



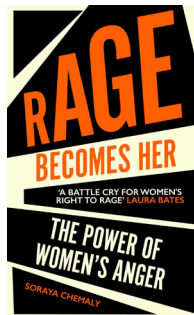
SUSANNE KAUFMANN  
Alkali Salt Deacidifying



Sluttering (May 4th), Jawbreaker



VERDE+REMEDY  
Clarity Face Oil+



Soraya Chemaly  
Rage Becomes Her  
(SIMON AND SCHUSTER)

meaning from our suffering, which, in hindsight, feels like an apt sentiment when we consider healing post-breakup. While rehabilitation is ultimately the goal, there is more to it than that. Growing from our experiences is a fundamental part of life, but nothing props the mirror up better than a broken heart. And when rehabilitation does come? We can only hope that we can look back at those experiences and know we are changed for the better.

Though, for rehabilitation to truly come, leaning into the emotional experience is almost always key. But when women are so rarely encouraged to explore rage and anger without such feelings tightly bound to shame, where does this leave us in the healing process?

We can all understand the stereotypes whereby femininity is hinged on the suppression of rage, while masculinity calls for it with ample reward. Soraya Chemaly writes in her book, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger* that women “don’t need books, studies, theories, or specialists” to prove how intolerable our anger is in society. While men are lapping up praise steeped in toxic masculinity for their “formidable” rage, women are pinned as hysterical, demented, violent harpies, and the adjectives only become more elaborate when intersections like race, sexuality, and identity are considered. From the lens of healing heartbreak, to consider moving through anger with empowerment and abandon, we must also consider the ask when we encourage women to experience, and express, their full range of emotions while existing in a patriarchal structure that has only ever told us to do the opposite.

We have all experienced it on various spectrums throughout life, and breakups are a fundamental part of life. We, alongside those around us, constantly tell ourselves to placate our rage, tuck it away out of sight, overcome and ignore it, in favour of being the bigger person. It’s not appearing affected, dodging stereotypes of hysteria and “craziness,” mostly all to the effect of not making our ex-partners feel uncomfortable with our feelings over expressing them in healthy ways.

“What’s happened with patriarchal values, influence, and power, is by subjugating women or female-identifying people, you can control a population,” Trkulja says. She references a study by a zoologist, who observed through following



PHOTOGRAPHY Mia Rankin  
FASHION Charlotte Agnew  
TALENT Gemma @ Chic Management wears  
BOTTEGA VENETA dress  
HAIR Koh @ Vivien's Creative  
MAKEUP Joel Babicci @ Assembly Agency  
PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT Dion Agius  
STYLIST'S ASSISTANT Charlotte Jennings



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a troop of gorillas, that if you wanted to control a population, you would subjugate the population’s females. “Expressing anger and rage through the feminine component of our identities is societally restricted. We don’t want to see the feminine represented as “raw” and “gross” and “out of control,” we want to see the feminine as poised and gracious, and through a lens that is very much influenced by patriarchal values of how the feminine should be represented in society.”

When expressing rage and anger is considered inherently non-feminine in a society upholding the patriarchy and white supremacy above all else, we must find the room to move through it regardless. We must acknowledge that in order to do this, we must also approach it through a lens of understanding that just because *some* women are allowed to be angry, it is the majority who are not. And while emotions are not gendered, and processing emotion should not be gendered, there are myriad systems in place proving to us that as people who identify as women, our reality of being able to safely and freely move through rage looks a lot different to that of a cisgender male.

“Ways I think you can explore rage and anger freely and safely is to do some somatic exercise,” Trkulja continues. “Listening to your body is like the best “fuck you” to the patriarchy and Western societal structures – to listen to what your body needs, and actually give it that.”

Showing up for ourselves can take on many different forms when healing heartbreak. It may look like setting and holding boundaries, communicating clearly or taking space for ourselves. It may also look like giving over to breakup clichés that have become such for a reason: singing your lungs out to breakup anthems or sobbing into a pillow, breaking things and moving energy through the body. This kind of somatic release is something that both Trkulja, and wellness practitioner and energy healer, Alexis Hamer, advocate for in the recovery process.

“I would say one of the biggest things

when feeling your emotions is they say ‘you can’t heal what you don’t feel’,” Hamer says when we speak about moving negative energy through the body. “After a breakup, a lot of people will try to distract themselves rather than actually sit with their feelings and feel them. So, acknowledge, recognise and accept the feelings that are coming up, and notice where you feel them in your body,” she explains, while offering up physical movements to help process trauma and anger, like dance, exercise, and Trauma Release Exercise – a somatic body-based exercise whereby the body shakes with the goal of physical and emotional release.

When choosing to rehabilitate ourselves over seeking revenge on an ex-lover, growth feels imminent, especially when we are able to lean into our emotions. “With a heartbreak, the feelings don’t just float away and dissipate. We normally suppress them,” Hamer says. “Emotions are energy in motion, so when we suppress them, we push that energy down, and it can become stuck in our body. It gets trapped, kind of festers in our body, and can manifest as physical stuff.”

“For example, it can drain out energy, lead to burnout, emotional imbalances, and eventually, disease within the system. When we suppress emotions, we create a toxic environment for our body.” Hamer points out that emotions and stagnant energy from unprocessed experiences can be stored mostly in organs, glands, chakras, energy centres, muscles, and tissue. “It’s not always possible to in the moment, processing what we’re going through. Which is why in the moment, we will suppress things to keep equilibrium and not go into overwhelm state.”

Once we are able to process these emotions, however it may feel right to do so, we are often called to forgive those who have wronged us as a trade-off for revenge. As though, when the work is “done,” and the emotions have been run through with a comb, untangled, shiny and new, forgiveness represents the other side of heartbreak. We have climbed over the hill, and the medal we

are awarded at the top reads “over it,” so we wear it proudly around our necks as a token of our growth and healing. Except that, for myself and for many others, the idea of forgiving somebody who ruthlessly broke my heart and left me with a PTSD diagnosis, while never displaying a mere moment of remorse, doesn’t exactly hit the spot.

Call me spiritually underdeveloped if you will. While I am aware that forgiveness is supposed to come from within, and generally doesn’t need to have anything to do with the subject of forgiveness, if it’s not for them, is it really for us?

“It’s the influence of moralistic and biblical values on our society,” Trkulja points out. “We preach forgiveness as a form of humanity and community, but in reality, not all of us need to forgive.”

When bad things happen to us, relationships fail, hearts are broken, emotional and physical abuse is considered, is the act of forgiveness – or lack thereof of motivation to forgive – just another vehicle for shame?

“I think there’s a difference between forgiveness and acceptance,” Trkulja says. “The reason why I think that distinction is important is that there are things that people do to us that are unforgivable. I think acceptance is a lot more realistic than forgiveness because even in the word, you’re giving. And I think, to further give to someone that may have facilitated that hurt feels like a bit of an emotional violation.”

When we liberate ourselves from the arbitrary goal post of forgiveness and look towards acceptance, we do not receive a free pass for the revenge fantasy to return, despite Gauguin’s apt sentiment: “Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.” Rather, a holistic understanding that healing is not linear, and a momentary revenge fantasy does not undo our journey to acceptance and peace. Instead, it affirms that our experiences are uniquely circumstanced with heaping spoons of nuance, and to correctly navigate morally appropriate responses in a consistent way when dealing with a broken heart is seldom a realistic expectation. ❧