

Clean Break

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2026 1st Place Prize for Prose

I write breakup texts for a living.

Not like a side hustle. This is my actual job. I have a website. I have a rate card. I have a Calendly. Mondays and Thursdays I do consultations. Tuesdays and Fridays I deliver. Wednesdays are for the people who chicken out on Tuesday and need a pep talk before I press send on their behalf.

The business is called Clean Break. My mom thinks it's a cleaning service. I have not corrected her.

Here's how it works: you fill out an intake form. Length of relationship. Communication style of the recipient (I give you a dropdown: texter, caller, voice-noter, emoji-heavy, dry). Reason for breakup (also a dropdown, but with an open field because people are creative). Whether you want to leave the door open, close it gently, or weld it shut. I draft. You approve. I send from your phone, which you've handed to me across a coffee shop table while you go to the bathroom so you can have deniability with your own fingers.

I have a 94% client satisfaction rate. The 6% are people who got back together and blamed me for the text being too effective.

My best work was a four-sentence breakup of a three-year relationship. The client cried when she read it—not because it was sad, but because it was so precisely her voice that she couldn't tell where she ended and I began. She said it was like watching someone do your signature and getting it right. I charged her double.

My worst work was Kevin.

Kevin came in on a Tuesday in November wearing a Patagonia vest over a Patagonia fleece, which is a look that communicates a very specific relationship to emotional vulnerability: amenable but only in REI lighting. He wanted to break up with his girlfriend, Margaux—yes, with the x—who he'd been seeing for eleven months. He described her as "a lot." When I asked him to be more specific, he said she had strong opinions about sourdough.

I wrote the text. He approved it. I sent it. Margaux responded in fourteen seconds with a voice note that was six minutes long and included, by my count, three references to attachment theory, one to Esther Perel, and a forty-five-second stretch of what I can only describe as structured weeping.

Kevin looked at me across the table at the coffee shop. He was holding a cortado in both hands like a baby bird.

"What do I do?"

"That's not included in the service."

"Can I upgrade?"

I should have said no. I should have handed him his phone and wished him well and gone home to my apartment where my cat, Ender, was waiting to be fed exactly seven minutes late, which is the amount of lateness he tolerates before knocking the BRITA off the counter.

Instead, I said, "Okay." I drafted a response to the voice note. Then a response to her response. Then a response to her friend Chelsey's response, which arrived from a different number and opened with "I just think it's interesting that—"

By midnight I was sitting cross-legged on Kevin's couch, operating his entire phone like mission control, fielding texts from Margaux, Chelsey, Margaux's therapist's after-hours service (I did not

respond to this one), and a group chat called "Kev's Boys" where his friends were sending fire emojis and a GIF of someone throwing a chair off a balcony.

Kevin was asleep. He'd fallen asleep around 10:30, mouth open, one sock on, the Patagonia vest still zipped to his chin. I was managing the dissolution of his eleven-month relationship from his living room while he snored into a throw pillow that said LAKE LIFE.

And here is the thing I won't put on my website: I was good at it. Not good like competent. Good like lit up. Every text was a tiny negotiation, a calibrated detonation, and I was placing the charges with the care of someone who understands exactly where the load-bearing walls are in another person's love. I knew when to concede and when to hold. When to use her name and when to use "you." When a period was a weapon and when it was a door.

At 1 a.m. Margaux sent: *I just want to know if any of it was real.*

I held Kevin's phone. The cursor blinked. Ender was home, definitely furious, probably mid-BRITA. Kevin shifted in his sleep. The throw pillow had pressed a crease into his cheek that looked like it might be permanent.

I typed: *The parts that were real were real. The parts that weren't, I'm sorry.*

She wrote back: *Okay.*

And that was it. Eleven months, collapsed to a single okay. I set the phone on the coffee table. Kevin's mouth was still open. A small thread of drool connected his lip to LAKE LIFE.

I let myself out. I walked six blocks to my apartment. Ender had knocked the BRITA off the counter and was sitting in the puddle, looking at me with the specific contempt of someone who has been abandoned by the one person who was supposed to show up.

"I know," I said.

He didn't move.

I sat on the kitchen floor in the water and opened my own phone. Fourteen unread texts from my mother, which is not unusual. She texts in fragments, one thought per message, like a telegram operator who discovered emojis. The last one said: *are you eating enough protein* 🍷

I hadn't responded in four days.

I thought about drafting something. I'm a professional, after all. I could write the perfect daughter text. Warm but not needy. Engaged but not overwhelming. The exact right amount of exclamation points to communicate health and happiness without triggering a follow-up call.

Instead I typed: *Hi mom. I'm sitting on my kitchen floor in a puddle. My cat hates me. I had a weird night. Can you call me tomorrow?*

She called immediately.

I answered.