

**HAND  
BOOK**  
*for the*  
**HEART  
BROKEN**

*A Woman's Path* from  
*Devastation to Rebirth*

**SARA AVANT STOVER**

 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

# Contents

**Heartbreak Story: Breakup & Betrayal** 1

**Introduction: Reframing Heartbreak** 7

Practice: Preparing for Our Journey 20

## PART I: DEVASTATION

**Heartbreak Story: Abortion** 27

**Chapter 1: Navigating Shock** 39

Practice: Ways to Navigate the Early Weeks of Heartbreak 47

**Chapter 2: Bowing to Grief** 53

Practice: Create a Container to Grieve Well 63

**Chapter 3: Validating Yourself** 67

Practice: Invite All of Your Parts to the Banquet Table\* 77

**Chapter 4: Asking for Help** 83

Practice: Get to Know a Protective Part\* 96

## PART II: TRANSFORMATION

**Heartbreak Story: Fertility Journey** 103

**Chapter 5: Allowing Anger** 113

Practice: Give Your Anger Somewhere to Go 118

**Chapter 6: Living with Loneliness** 123

Practice: Tonglen\* 129

Practice: Resource Lonely Parts with Self Energy\* 134

**Chapter 7: Processing Pain** 139

Practice: A Practice to Feel Your Pain\* 144

Practice: Contacting an Exiled Part\* 151

**Chapter 8: Creating Ritual** 157

Practice: Create Your Own Ritual 161

Practice: Microrituals to Hold Us Through Transitions 167

**PART III: REBIRTH**

**Heartbreak Story: Career & Finances** 173

**Chapter 9: Finding Forgiveness** 181

Practice: The Practice of Forgiveness 189

**Chapter 10: Restoring Trust** 193

Practice: Cultivate a Prayer Practice 200

Practice: Map Your Mistrusting Parts\* 203

**Chapter 11: Coming Alive** 207

Practice: Opening, Softening & Allowing Meditation\* 215

**Chapter 12: Supporting Others** 221

Practice: Ideas for Supporting Others 228

**Conclusion: Preparing for Our Ultimate Heartbreak** 235

Practice: Closing Ritual 239

**Acknowledgments** 241

**Recommended Resources** 243

**Notes** 247

**Index** 249

**About the Author** 259

\*Audio versions of these meditations are available at  
[saraavantstover.com/heartbreakdownloads](http://saraavantstover.com/heartbreakdownloads)

## Heartbreak Story: Breakup & Betrayal

**K***atabas*. It's a Greek word that means "a blow that sets your life spinning in an entirely new direction." In February 2016, my *katabas* struck.

The earthy scent of olive oil filled the kitchen as I tossed thin, quartered slices of sweet potato until they glistened. Spreading the potatoes evenly across a baking tray covered in parchment paper, I dusted them with a fine layer of sea salt. The evening was dark and quiet, punctuated by the dimmed overhead lights and heat sporadically gushing out of the vents. It was an ordinary Thursday. I'd just come out of the bath and, anticipating a much-needed early bedtime, put on my pajamas before starting dinner.

The bath helped cue me to wind down in advance of taking a long weekend for myself. I needed the extra encouragement: I was finally taking my foot off the gas pedal after several months of overexertion. I had been cranking to finish my second book—which was much more challenging and took me longer to write than expected—before the extended deadline. Then I was introducing my book to the world, followed by launching a yearlong online program that welcomed one hundred women. Then I was hustling to get a business loan to help bridge the gap between finishing my book and bringing in money again, plus navigating a relationship that was becoming more and more fraught with fights and sleepless nights. Eggplant-colored half-moons framed the undersides of my eyes, which, as my mom used to say when I got overly tired as a child, were "at half-mast." I was making dinner out of

duty. Going through the motions to throw something together quickly as I knew that, more than anything, my body simply needed to rest.

I longed for all the years and months when my life felt bright and shiny—when my relationship with my fiancé, Matt, wasn't so fraught with challenge. One of my friends set us up on a blind date in November of 2010. We sipped herbal tea at a high-top table in a coffee shop, and as we spoke, I was pretty sure I'd never met anyone quite like him. Despite our many shared interests, he didn't seem like my type at all, and I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. While I was in Thailand over the next couple of months, we exchanged long, witty emails, and by the time I returned home in January, I had officially fallen for him.

During the first year and a half of our relationship, I felt like I was flying. I was pretty sure that I had, at long last, found my soul mate. We quickly became the “it” couple and were looked up to by many in our community. We seemed to have it all—we were both public figures, and now we were in a great relationship. Together, we went out dancing, enjoyed dinners out over glasses of cabernet and deep conversations, and held the shared intention to use our relationship as a path to our spiritual awakening. We moved in together in August of 2012. After that, things started to change.

Matt no longer gazed at me adoringly, calling me his “sun, moon, and stars,” and he often stayed out late without me while I opted to go to sleep early and catch up on rest. Things slowly began to devolve, bringing us to that Thursday evening in 2016 when our relationship was being held together by a thread. Despite all that, my love for Matt felt so deep, and the thought of letting go of my dream with him terrified me. I still held on to the hope that our challenges were all part of our spiritual path, that we could use them to help us get back to where we had been and, somehow, grow even closer.

Snapping me out of my reverie, our dog leapt to his feet from his bed. The rapid click-clack of his paws across the oak floorboards of the living room, then past me in the kitchen, signaled that Matt was home. The front door swung open, letting in a gush of cold air that smelled of the outdoors. Matt knocked the tips of his boots against the door ledge, shaking off the snow before stepping inside.

“Hi, Bug,” he greeted as he bent down to rub our dog’s floppy ears. I noticed he did this more firmly and quickly than usual, as though he was in a rush. Picking up on his energy, I hurried to the door, meeting him in the entryway.

“Hi, love, welcome home,” I greeted, sliding my arms around the cold exterior of his down jacket. Rather than waiting our usual few moments in a welcome-home hug to feel both of our bodies relax, he pulled away quickly, offering a forced smile and vacant eyes. I returned to the stove, opened it, and slid the tray of sweet potatoes inside.

Matt pulled off his coat, unwrapped the scarf from around his neck, looked at me, and grimaced. “I need to talk to you,” he said. “You might want to take that out of the oven.”

He walked past me toward the dining room table while I took the potatoes out of the oven and turned it off. Following behind Matt like a robot, I felt my neocortex shutting down as I sensed a bright red danger sign flashing above us.

We sat across the table from one another, a soft yellow light beaming from the luminaire above us. My stomach clenched, knowing something horrible was about to happen. The wise voice inside told me to breathe and brace myself, warning that my life on the other side of whatever Matt was about to tell me would never again be the same.

“I’ve been having an affair with Lindsey,” he admitted. His face remained stoic and matter-of-fact while his words shot into the quiet evening like darts. “It was sexual for a while. In recent months, it’s just been inappropriate texts. My men’s group found out about it and confronted me last night. I knew I needed to tell you today—before someone else did.”

An icy anesthetic flowed through me, numbing everything from toes to crown. My thoughts turned black and my tongue swelled, keeping me from forming words. Lindsey was part of our inner circle. I was frozen in my chair, my hands interlaced in front of me on the table.

“You’re kidding, right?” I asked, scanning his face for any sign that he was about to start laughing.

“No, I’m not kidding,” he replied.

“Then I need you to leave,” I responded automatically.

“I’ll go get my things,” he conceded. He stood up and headed briskly toward the stairs.

Hot lava started to bubble in my chest, temporarily unthawing me. It jolted me to my feet and sent tears down my cheeks. I had told him to leave, but of course that wasn’t what I really wanted. How could he even consider leaving me alone after sharing news like that? A part of me wanted him to wrap his arms around me, tell me what a terrible mistake he had made, and reassure me that he would never, ever leave me. Another part of me knew that life had just answered my fervent prayer for clarity. For months I’d been contemplating leaving our relationship to have a child on my own because Matt had decided he didn’t want to have children, and because our relationship was fundamentally not working for reasons I couldn’t quite grasp. As one of my spiritual teachers often said when clarity struck, “The fat lady had sung.”

Matt didn’t say or do any of the things the clinging parts of me wanted so badly. Meanwhile the wiser part of me knew I needed to let the Band-Aid be ripped off fully and completely. I rushed up the stairs after Matt until we both stood at the top. The wood floor started to undulate beneath me. He was still talking, but I couldn’t hear what he was saying. I leaned against the wall with my left shoulder, trying to find something, anything, to hold me up.

“Get out! Get the fuck out!” I screamed in a voice that didn’t sound like mine.

Matt fell to his knees at my feet. This man’s face, the one that I had known so intimately through all of his moods and moments, now showed something I’d never seen before. It twisted into creases of anguish as he pleaded, “I’m so, so sorry, Sara.”

I don’t remember all of what happened next. I do know that, at some point, Matt moved past me into the bedroom to pack a bag. Still holding onto the wall, my hand traced a path across it toward my office. Once inside, I slid my hand down until it met the floor, lowered myself, and crawled into a corner. There, I pulled my knees into my chest, tightly clutching the jersey of my pajama pants and squeezing my eyes shut



until I heard the soft thud of the front door close and the faint sound of his car engine starting and then fading into the distance. Inside, a ticker tape rushed through my mind with two questions on repeat: “Did he really just leave? Is this really happening?”

All around me, the house descended into silence.

## Introduction: Reframing Heartbreak

The night my fiancé, Matt, left—February 4, 2016—my life split into two. Eight years later, I now see that moment as an impassable fault line demarcating who I was prior to that night and who I was to become afterward. That heartbreak, however, was not a one-and-done event. Far from it. Rather, it was the first of a series of several more blows that encompassed all areas of my life (health, finances, work, relationships, self-identity) that sent me spiraling down further and further into grief, depression, loneliness, confusion, and, at times, desperation.

That night, however, was not only the catalyst that unraveled me. It also planted a seed of the me who I was to become. It was, I now see, a nearly unsurvivable gift that helped me to heal, mature, and evolve. It helped me to come to deeply know the different stages and flavors of heartbreak, and, in turn, to be able to sit with and support others as they traverse the dark valleys of their own lives. In this book, I share the stories of the successive heartbreaks I've faced over the past several years, anecdotes from those my students and clients have endured, and the perspectives that helped us to make sense of the unfathomable, as well as the tools and practices I used to heal and endure the longest, most painful (and, ultimately, most fruitful) years of my life.

We live in a heartbreak-illiterate world that's obsessed with success, shackled with isolation, and ignorant of how valuable our suffering can be for our growth and evolution (not only as individuals but as a species).

It's no wonder we face a void of guidance when we experience our inevitable falls from grace. And that's not all: with the growing existential threats of climate change, the pandemic, political divisiveness, and the breakdown of long-standing societal structures and ideologies, psychic anguish of all sorts is cracking through more frequently and powerfully than any of us have experienced in our lifetimes. And we direly lack the support we need to face this.

This book offers a sacred container for your heartbreak experience. An intimate and supportive mentor, it will be with you when you struggle to survive your darkest hours. At times this book will also mother you with a gentle power, providing fiercely loving guidance to help you continue moving forward. Our initial caregivers and the media often teach us to fear challenging emotions like grief, sadness, depression, confusion, and rage. We are repeatedly told that our only option is to find happiness at all costs by getting married, having children, following our dreams, and living happily ever after. In actuality, heartbreak is an inevitable part of *everyone's* life journey (usually many times over). This book will show you that it's only through fully turning toward your heartbreak (with support, courage, and compassion) that you can heal. Not just that, but fully embracing these darker seasons of life is the only way to become a fully wise, mature, integrated human being.

Within the loving pages of this book, you'll have full permission to fall apart—and slowly, organically find your way back to greater wholeness. This book takes a holistic approach to not just surviving heartbreak but also transforming it into a life-affirming rite of passage. Yes, heartbreak is mandatory, but transformation is a choice.

## **Who Is This Book For?**

This book is for any woman who's currently experiencing any kind of heartbreak, at any stage of her heartbreak journey.

There are many ways our hearts can break. The following are some examples of heartbreak this book can help you with:

Death of a loved one	New empty nesters/ free birders
Death of a pet	
Natural disaster	Saying goodbye to your childbearing years
Significant health challenge, illness, disability, or injury (yours or another's)	Loss of community (one's family, religion, or spiritual community)
Dealing with a troubled teen/child	Failed fertility treatment(s)
Baby loss (miscarriage, abortion, stillbirth, infant death)	Loss of a friendship
Separation, divorce, or breakup	Loss of a job or a career
Betrayal	Abuse (sexual, emotional, psychological, physical)
Addiction	Loss of identity
Bankruptcy or a financial crisis	Violent social event (war, a shooting)
Major professional change	An accident (car, plane, or something else)

Also, this book is for you if you're grieving things you didn't get, like certain experiences in childhood or later in life. It's also for you if you're not experiencing heartbreak presently, but you know there are past hurts and grievances that you haven't fully healed. Even if you experienced a heartbreak ten, twenty, or more years ago, this book is for you, too. Perhaps you didn't have the time, perspective, courage, or resources you needed to heal at that time. Now you sense that, by not fully healing those past hurts, you're letting them unconsciously impact your life. In doing so, you're holding yourself back from experiencing the wholeness and forward momentum you most want.

Above all, when we don't successfully pass through our heartbreak journeys, we're limiting and hurting ourselves in a multitude of ways.

Keeping powerful emotions like grief, anger, and sadness unexpressed within us can shut down our emotional bodies, making it hard to experience positive emotions like joy and gratitude. This emotional stuckness can lead to depression and even physical illness. We also protect our hearts from future hurts, and this keeps us from moving forward with our lives and experiencing the connection and intimacy we most long for.

Because emotional and psychological injuries are much less visible than physical ones, we can more easily get away with (at least initially) stunting their healing and hiding them from others. When I was healing from my heartbreaks, one of my friends reminded me that it was like I'd had an accident and had broken both of my legs. She encouraged me to treat myself accordingly by staying at home and resting, and, above all, not expecting myself to be functioning as if I had two healthy legs. Think about it: if you had broken both of your legs and didn't do the things required to heal them, like resting, using a wheelchair, taking pain meds, going to the doctor, and doing physical therapy, your legs wouldn't heal, or, at the very least, they wouldn't heal correctly. The same is true for us when we're heartbroken. Even though we (and others) can't see the depth of the injury, it's still there. Without proper rehabilitation, it won't heal, and you won't be a fully healthy, functioning person until it does.

Also, initial heartbreaks can lead to subsequent losses (which you'll see some examples of in this book). For instance, a divorce or separation can lead to the loss of a home, pet, and one's sense of security (inner and outer); the rearrangement of friendships and community; health challenges; and even financial distress. Keep this in mind as you go deeper into your own heartbreak journey, probing for the cascade of losses you're likely experiencing along the way, and how each of those impacts you in different ways.

I've included financial and career loss in this list (as well as in one of my own heartbreak stories in this book) because crises at these levels can rock our entire material foundation as well as our self-esteem and sense of self. Financial challenges can force us to lose our homes, limit our ability to get the support we most need, and riddle us with fear, panic, and anxiety. Job or career loss and transitions rattle us in similar ways, especially if

a lot of our time, focus, and identity has been linked to our work. Above all, I encourage you to expand your understanding of heartbreak and to see how it encompasses far more than just deaths and breakups. It can punctuate—and shatter—every corner and crevice of our lives.

## **Why I Wrote This Book**

Heartbreak and I have been lifelong companions. Starting from an early age, on the outside I looked perfect, and I liked that. Beneath the surface, though, I wasn't happy. Growing up in a family with addiction, I often felt lonely, afraid, and unable to express my true feelings. By the time I was in my late teens, this inner pain expressed itself through anorexia and bulimia. I grappled with depression and anxiety, which I tried to self-medicate through overachieving at school and running several miles a day. Upon receiving a frightening diagnosis of advanced cervical dysplasia in the spring of 1999, I finally hit a wall. I was about to graduate from Barnard, an Ivy League women's college in Manhattan. Despite all of my outer achievements, I realized I didn't know who I was or what I wanted. I didn't know what it meant to be a woman, much less how to be one. I felt completely lost.

Luckily, life intervened through an out-of-the-blue job offer to teach at an American-style international school in northern Thailand. I accepted the job, and a few months after my graduation from college, I flew to Chiang Mai for what I thought would be a one-year position. I ended up staying in Thailand for nine years, and it was there that I began to heal through immersing myself in a slower, saner, healthier approach to life.

Now a teacher of feminine spirituality and certified Internal Family Systems practitioner, over the past twenty years, I've supported thousands of women through their own spiritual openings disguised as healing crises. I have sat with women whose children were born still. I've met women whose lives changed course due to debilitating illness and injury. I have spoken with women who left abusive relationships, grappled with how to heal from sexual assault, and struggled with addiction. I have met women who lost their mothers, whom they saw as a best friend. These are all moments of heartbreak and devastation.

My capacity to meet women in their suffering has grown as I've learned to be with my own suffering in greater and greater ways, with the magnitude of my own heartbreaks (and subsequent healing) increasing over time. As I began healing myself in my early twenties through yoga, meditation, traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, and by living in harmony with nature, more and more women began asking me how they could do the same for themselves. So, starting in my midtwenties, in addition to providing one-on-one support, I began leading in-person retreats and trainings around the world. Starting in 2008, I was one of the very first people to stream yoga and meditation retreats online and became one of the first online entrepreneurs in the field of feminine spirituality.

I've also written two books about the cyclical nature of feminine healing and empowerment. The first, *The Way of the Happy Woman: Living the Best Year of Your Life*, grew out of my experience of getting sick in college and moving to Thailand. In it, I bring together everything I learned and then taught in my in-person and online women's events throughout my twenties.

My second book, *The Book of SHE: Your Heroine's Journey into the Heart of Feminine Power*, grew out of the challenges I experienced in my early-to-mid thirties while I was writing and publishing my first book and my eating disorders resurfaced. In it, I share the practices and perspectives I embraced during that stretch of my healing journey. It translates Joseph Campbell's story of the hero's journey into a modern-day version of this monomyth for women and instructs us that the crises we face in life aren't failures but rather portals into becoming more of who we truly are, deep down.

Throughout, my own life experiences have been my greatest teachers. Each book I write reflects my deepening understanding of a woman's journey—it's not lost on me that my first book was about becoming a happy woman and my current book is about heartbreak! At their core, all of these books work together and share a similar thread of supporting women to trust, honor, and align with the various seasons and cycles of our lives. Throughout all of this, I discovered that heartbreak is a crucial initiation for women to step into deeper maturity and wisdom, yet given