



breaking up has
never been easier

the
Breakup
artist

shannen crane camp

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Discussion Questions

About the Author

one

The paper in my hand read:

Name—James

Age—16

POI—'80s dancing, girl pants, terrariums

Deadline—Two weeks before prom

As I read this boy's fact sheet, I was already mentally pulling together an outfit from my closet. I pictured my gray shirt with brightly colored cassette tape stamps all over it, black skinny jeans, and a hot pink and black zebra-print scarf. I could just slap on some neon eye shadow and I'd be good to go. Judging by the brief history given to me by James's soon-to-be former girlfriend, this job would only take a few hours, which worked out well since Nat wanted some other boy to ask her to the prom. There wasn't a question in my mind that "Nat" was the short, cool version of some otherwise outdated name. I didn't doubt that I'd be breaking the new couple up the day after prom, but that wasn't any of my business. My business was destroying the currently living relationship. I stuffed the paper into my black backpack and nodded to the retro-punk girl in front of me.

"It's going to be fifty," I said simply, checking my black cell phone for the time. If this transaction made me late for biology, I'd be doubling my price.

"Fifty!" she said incredulously. "Tori Jacobs told me you did it for her for only thirty!" I had expected this reaction, and I was prepared.

“Listen, Nat. It's three weeks until the prom. It's my busiest season of the school year, so I don't have time to haggle with you. If I take on any more clients I might be raising it to seventy, so fifty's a pretty good deal, wouldn't you say?” She nodded sullenly at me and began digging through her backpack for the money.

It has always amazed me what people will pay to avoid an awkward situation. That's where I come in. All the girls in the high school knew me and what I did to earn money, but the boys, amazingly enough, hadn't caught on yet. This was good for me because the second boys learned that my presence meant their inevitable heartbreak, my job would become that much more complicated. Of course, then I could just charge more.

Nat handed over two twenty-dollar bills and a ten grudgingly. The paper was crinkled and warm from her backpack, but money was money.

“Lovely doing business with you,” I said professionally, pocketing the cash. I began walking away when Nat grabbed my arm, cutting off my escape route through the quickly-emptying hallway. I really needed to get myself some sort of office to keep my business transactions more private. Nat spun me around to face her and I gave her a look that said she was overstepping the boundaries by using physical contact.

“You sure this will work?” she asked me, her voice straddling the border between anger and desperation.

“Positive. I deliver the news, cushion the blow, and gracefully bow out. He won't even blame you when I'm through with him.” This answer seemed to satisfy her, and she released my arm so that I could make my way, unencumbered, to biology. I could feel the wad of money in my pocket, and I smiled to myself, keeping my eyes straight ahead on the door just down the hallway. I'm sure that deep down somewhere I should feel bad about taking money from people for doing something they'd be better off doing themselves, but isn't that what business is all about? We'd be better off doing our own taxes but we pay people to do them for us, and I don't see mobs surrounding any CPAs' offices come April 15. Okay, so that may be a bad analogy, but I stick by what I said—everybody pays other people to do something for them that they could easily do on their own.

Biology with Mrs. Mathers was the same as it always was: terribly interesting, yet presenting me an absolute guarantee that I'd fail the test. It is

always unfortunate to love something you're bad at, which is why I embrace my profession so fully. I mean, God graced me with good looks and absolutely no friends, so I made that into a business. Besides, it's hard to be friends with someone when you're taking their boyfriend on a date. Things always get way too weird when I try to combine my business and my social life, hence why it's easier to just remain friendless.

I discovered my gift in elementary school with my first, last, and only friend, Becky Brasher. She and Tommy White had been “going out” (which in elementary school means that they held hands once every few lunch periods) for a week when Becky asked me to tell him it was over. Being ten, I naturally thought this would help our friendship so I told Tommy they were not dating anymore, giving him my business motto, “It's not you, it's me,” only to realize that this line was usually delivered by the actual girlfriend. Ever since then it's been apparent that my calling in life was to be the scapegoat, albeit a scapegoat that cushioned the blow by giving the quiet assurance that the boy's looks or personality have nothing to do with the breakup. But there I was, a scapegoat nonetheless.

I did my job with pride though, and after junior high, where I honed my skill into perfection, I had become a wellknown practitioner of the art of the breakup. Girls had even started coming to me from different high schools, seeking my expertise in the social crunches. Sometimes to my detriment, I will admit that I can be quite difficult to track down. My mother (who I love dearly but can readily admit is a bit of a flake) seems to switch job locations steadily enough to land me in a different high school every semester or so. While this proves to be good for business, it also presents a bit of a hindrance to my clients. Though boys aren't given the opportunity to become too familiar with my presence and realize what my appearance on the scene inevitably means for their relationships, my clients (their soon-to-be ex-girl-friends) have trouble tracking me down from time to time. Thank goodness for online profiles. If the school switching gets too confusing, I can always be Googled. Anyone in high school without some sort of online tribute to themselves and their never-ending attempt to shamelessly update people on the current status of their riveting affairs (“Just got back from the mall now I think I'll check my mail, txt me if you get bored!”) may as well not exist at all.

As for myself, my affairs are much less documented and much more focused on keeping my true identity secret. I have no easily identifiable profile picture, in case one of my client's ex-boyfriends should happen to stumble across my page. Just a way to contact me and arrange a business agreement to make their lives simpler. And what do I get out of all of this? Money—plain and simple. I know money isn't everything and it can't buy happiness or love, but it can buy some pretty cool stuff, including a nice, reasonably-priced college dorm and a mode of transportation, both of which are important when you're as determined as I am to go to a good school. And, as ironic as it may seem, I'm planning to go to college to learn the careful craft of marriage counseling. That's right; I'll go from trying to end relationships to trying to keep them together.

Like I said, you play what you're dealt, and the result of my pretty face and poor social status is a closet full of every different style imaginable. Let's face it. High school boys in general are not that hard to understand. And although my extensive clothing arsenal could outfit a small army, it always seems to come down to basic clothing chemistry: Math geek = plaid button-up shirt and glasses. Football quarterback = short skirt and high heels.

My mother says that in her day it was always the “surfers” versus the “low-riders.” These days styles and cliques might be a bit more diverse and outside the box, but it still comes down to giving people what they want. Or at least the illusion of what it is they think they want. “Dress to impress” as the experts say. So as I left biology, I mentally prepared myself to be transformed into a cute, punky girl for the next week.

two

I was fortunate that all of my CFs (short for Cold Feets) this prom season were relatively the same. This gave my hair some time to recover from the constant color changes. Along with my good looks, I was blessed with very resilient hair, so the constant dye jobs didn't leave me bald. Length was always a tricky one to judge, though, and so I kept my hair at a neutral shoulder length, giving me the chance to make it seem short and sassy or long and wavy—whichever style the job called for. Today my hair was black, a deep black that shone blue in the sun. The constant change of my hair color and wardrobe made me almost impossible to find at school, for which I was grateful. Even with my mom continually moving me from school to school every time we switch houses, I can still have difficulty flying under the radar for the one semester I'm in a certain place. The only way people can really track me down for a job is by searching online the one thing that remains constant—my name. And even then, Amelia Marie Bedford was often changed to Amy or Lia or Arie. Like I said, everything about me changes to fit the job.

So, as luck would have it, I was quite thrilled when my four clients for the next three weeks all turned out to be the type of girls who wear bright colored plastic bows in their black hair, lots of eyeliner, and flat shoes with patterns dominating the canvas.

Before I had become the “high school heartbreaker,” as my clients so lovingly call me, I was a jeans and T-shirt kind of girl, hair back in a ponytail and no makeup. Of course, this style only lasted until junior high,

so no one really knew what I looked like ... at least, what I would look like if I dressed how I would naturally. I didn't even know what that would look like, to be quite honest. I was so completely used to being whatever other people needed me to be that I hadn't really had an original fashion thought for years—not even so much as an “oh that's cute” when I looked at a magazine. I never lost any sleep over this little detail in my life though; my job was simple and straightforward, so why complain about it?

I walked into the kitchen and pulled a carton of orange juice from the fridge, pouring some into a glass. My mom looked up at me, surveyed my appearance over the top of her newspaper, and went back to reading. At first my mom didn't understand how someone as normal and socially inept as her daughter could change so completely from week to week, but eventually she just began to accept my odd profession and left me to my world.

Blasting an '80s sounding band that Nat had given me to listen to, I headed off to school. They weren't really my type, but seeing as how today I was Mari and not Amelia, I actually liked them. The band suited my hot pink scarf that hung loosely down the front of my T-shirt. My fingernails had a fresh coat of bright yellow, and I had snapped on my hot pink phone cover. It's always the little details that really make my disguises believable.

I pulled into the teeming Thousand Oaks High School parking lot and quickly found my spot. I always parked as far away from the school as possible because no one wanted to walk, so spots were always free. Stepping out of the car and beginning the trudge to school, I replayed my mission in my head, along with the little tidbits Nat had supplied for me. She would be faking sick today to ensure that James couldn't use her as an excuse to not talk to me. In fact, I should be running into him pretty soon. I pulled out the picture Nat had attached to James's file. It was a photo of the two of them, with James holding the camera out in front to snap the picture. Both were making very unattractive faces but the features were clear enough that I'd be able to recognize him. The fact that James had shaggy black hair with a bright orange stripe running through it would also obviously help.

Sure enough, as I approached the hallway leading to the classrooms, I saw James with a handful of friends. I quickly surveyed the group to make

sure none of them were any of my other targets for that week, and found, much to my advantage, that they weren't. As I approached them, heads began to turn. One boy stopped talking. Then, to see what had caused this sudden lull in conversation, the other friends (including James) turned to look at me. I pulled my confidence out of thin air as I always did and let my bright pink lips form an alluring smile. His friends stood and stared open-mouthed at me as I approached the stripy-haired boy.

“You're James, right?” I asked innocently, looking up at him through my eyelashes. He nodded dumbly but didn't say a word. “Hey do you think I can talk to you at lunch? I'm a friend of Nat's and she's not really feeling well today so I don't have a lunch buddy.” I bit my lip in a nervous way, just to add to the idea that I was a lost little puppy that needed protecting. James seemed to be brought back to reality by the mention of his girlfriend's name, and he rapidly blinked sense back into his brain. I was so used to this reaction that it was almost laughable when it actually continued to happen like this. The reactions were practically straight out of some boy handling user's guide.

“Yeah, sure, that's ... that's fine. We just sit here usually ... on the bench.” He scratched his head as if he were trying to remember if that's where they really sat. I giggled at his confusion in a sweet way, scrunching my nose up playfully.

“Sounds perfect. I'll see you at lunch,” I said, turning to go with a wave over my shoulder. My free hand worked frantically to dislodge the CD I'd been listening to so that it fell out of my pink messenger bag (bought the night before as an added touch to the outfit). It hit the ground with a clatter and I turned to look over my shoulder at it. James retrieved it for me like a good boy and handed it over, glancing absentmindedly at it. His eyes suddenly grew wide.

“No way!” he exclaimed. “This is my favorite CD!” I found it amusing that this seemed like such an impossibility to him, but I kept my amusement well hidden.

“Oh, is it?” was all I said. “I just found it in some music store and thought I'd try it. They're not bad.” (Word to the wise, having everything in common with a boy you like—or one you're pretending to like—is never good. Play hard to get.)

“Not bad?” he repeated, disbelief lining his words. “They're amazing!”

“I guess I just haven't gotten to that part yet,” I said with a smirk. “You'll have to show me what's so good about them at lunch.” And with that, I snatched the CD and walked to my first class of the day: psychology.

three

In high school, everything is carefully monitored. Or at least, it is when you have teachers who care. I was a good student (having no social life will do that to you) so my teachers usually paid attention to me. At the beginning of every new school year, I'd get one of those overly concerned teachers who would talk to the counseling office and set up an appointment for me. They always seemed to think that my constantly changing style and hair colors were signs of instability. They thought I had some tragic past that wasn't showing up in my school files, and they got worried. Though I loved that my teachers cared enough to worry, I still wished they'd just put a note in my file saying, "Amelia Marie Bedford. Age 16. Prone to change everything on a weekly basis."

Today, however, my psychology teacher Miss Tess just said, "New hair color again, Amelia?" as I walked into the room. I nodded with a thin-lipped smile and took my seat near the door. This class was arranged in a circle, rather than rows, so that everyone was equal or something to that effect. Psychology was another one of those subjects that fascinated me even if I wasn't amazing at it. Just because I get good grades doesn't mean I'm just naturally amazing at any subject. I actually have to work really hard to understand things, but I always ended up putting in enough effort to get A's.

Class went by slowly until Miss Tess (she insisted that we call her by her first name because "last names make people seem old") popped in a video about a child raised in the wild by animals. I took this opportunity to

formulate my plan of attack for my other three clients, since James seemed to be pretty much in the bag. After my performance this morning, he should be wondering how he could feel attracted to another girl if he was so in love with Nat. Then he would start to wonder if he and Nat should really be together. After that I'd just work some magic and break the news to him that Nat wanted out (in much nicer terms of course) and he'd feel, suddenly, like that was probably for the best. Then came the tricky part: I'd have to agree to go on a date with him so that he could really feel like he was making a good move forward in his life. This was only difficult because right after that date, I'd disappear from the boy's radar. The disappearing wasn't so hard—the hard part was the fact that I was the one breaking their hearts rather than their deadbeat girlfriends, who were really the source of their pain. But I have accepted my lot as a scapegoat, and by the next week I would look so different that he wouldn't recognize me even if I passed him in the hallway.

After two hours of psychology we had a ten-minute break, which I usually used to get to my next class. But, as previously stated, today I was Mari, not Amelia, and so I returned to the staircase. James sat there expectantly, constantly glancing over his shoulder until he spotted me. I put on the alluring smile once more and made my way over to him. His friends whispered something to him, and they all broke out into grins. Boys could be so predictable sometimes. When I sat down, James asked me an obvious question, one that I was actually surprised he had missed upon our first meeting.

“So, um, what's your name?”

“I'm Mari,” I answered with a smile.

“And you're friends with Nat?” I kept the smile in place, sensing that we were treading on delicate ground now that we were discussing reality.

“Yeah, Nat and I have been friends for a while. Hasn't she mentioned me?” He shook his head, and I instantly relaxed. We were back to nonverbal responses, which meant that my carefully practiced inflections of charming innocence had worked. I pulled out my cell phone with perfect grace and checked the time. We still had five minutes until we had to be in class but I was quickly growing bored with the conversation and showing

that would mean certain death for my carefully laid out plan. So I opted for the easy way out.

“Well, I'm gonna grab something from the vending machine and head to class. I'll see you at lunch, James.” I walked away, feeling that I had fulfilled my break time duty. Besides, using his name made the short conversation feel much more intimate and substantial. I rewarded myself for a job well done by grabbing a fruit snack out of the machine before retreating to English.

In English we were analyzing a book I'd already read three times. It was all about anarchy brought about by a terrible disaster, leaving children stranded on an island. There wasn't much for me to contribute to the conversation, so I pulled out my other three fact sheets and studied my upcoming projects. If I could get James out of the way without a date, I could start work on the others by tomorrow. This wasn't the ideal situation obviously since the actual date really solidified the end of the relationship, but I'd just have to work around that. The first paper read:

Name—Corey

Age—16

POI—Music, parties, fashion

Deadline—Two weeks before prom

I wasn't quite sure what it was about these girls, but apparently prom was something that reminded you just how much you wanted a date—not a boyfriend. I checked this boy's POI (points of interest) once more and sighed deeply. I always required at least three subjects in that category. The ones this girl had provided were so general that this Corey could have been any boy in the school. I glanced at the attached picture, hoping to glean some information from there, but was sorely disappointed. I'd have to call and force some more information out of this girl or I'd have to give a refund, which I've never done.

Shaking my head I pulled up the next file.

Name—David

Age—17

POI—Books, Photography, Culture
Deadline—Two weeks before prom

Culture? One of his interests was culture? What did that even mean? He liked having culture, or learning about culture, or experiencing other cultures? I considered calling this one also but figured that the other two interests were a strong enough foundation.

Finally I pulled out the third paper, which read:

Name—Taylor
Age—18
POI—Skateboarding, Shoes, Art
Deadline—One week before prom

My clients were obviously getting lazy. Shoes are not an interest. Shoes are things you put on your feet or spend too much money on. People aren't really interested in shoes. I shook my head at the challenge that faced me and put my fact sheets carefully back into my manila folder marked "work."

By lunch I was in full Mari mind-set, ready to work my magic quickly, carefully, and efficiently. I sat down on the now familiar bench and talked about music with James. Halfway through the forty-minute lunch period I decided to drop the bomb, hoping I could get out of this one without an actual date.

"So James, I have to tell you something kind of important." I bit my lip yet again, in the way that said I was worried about something, while still being cute enough to distract him from exactly what my words meant. He smiled and nodded at me, obviously allowing his mind to rest on a completely different track. "Nat and I have been hanging out a lot lately and, um ... she's been telling me she's not sure she wants to be in a serious relationship with anyone right now..." I let my words trail off naturally to make it seem like I was scared to go on. He cocked his head at me, obviously not expecting what I had just said.

"Here's the bad part," I went on with a pout. "I think it's all my fault. I mean, she and I have just been having so much fun having girl time, and I think it made her realize she doesn't really want to be tied down." I let my brows come together in a line, fake worry crossing my features. "I don't see

why else she'd ever break up with someone as amazing as you.” I placed my hand over his with these last words and looked up at him under my eyelashes once more. He simply looked at me for a moment, and I was beginning to wonder if he was smarter than he looked. Maybe he hadn't bought my story and was about to reveal me for what I was. But, as always, the boy simply nodded, looked appropriately sad for a moment, and then lapsed back into our old conversation, claiming he wanted to take his mind off of it.

I had done it once again. I knew from experience he wasn't really sad. Instead, he was just relieved that he wouldn't have to break up with Nat because he'd discovered that she had a hot friend. He'd inevitably try to catch up with me after school to ask me out on a date, but with my tight schedule I couldn't afford the time to let him down gently, so I gave him the cushion for the blow during lunch: lots of flirt-filled conversation and a quick, promising peck on the cheek as I scurried off to my last class of the day.

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