Carmen starts to think maybe the breakup wasn’t so mutual. Someone always has to break a heart. Someone has to be heartbroken. That’s the principle of a breakup. She sits alone in her apartment, running through boxes of tissues, staring at old photos on her phone, happy, smiling, kissing faces, and craves the man she’s broken up with.

Carmen’s friends come to collect her on Friday night. “We’re going out!” They call to her, putting a shirt over her head and taking it off, then trying another shirt, and another, until they settle on the fourth option. They sit her on a stool and apply makeup on her face, setting glasses of vodka lemonade in front of her, telling her about the guys they’re heading out to meet. Carmen looks longingly at her bed and the box of tissues next to it. They seem more inviting than her friends.

“I was fine,” she tells her friends. “I was really fine two weeks ago. I just need time to think.” She feels that hard knot in the back of her throat that appears before she cries. Carmen stares blankly at the metal straw in her glass, lifts the glass to her face, and winces as the cold liquid hits the back of her teeth. She sucks down a big gulp, imagining her emotions going down her esophagus along with her drink.

Carmen starts to feel the seams of her heart splitting. She starts to feel hot, watery tears gathering in the corner of her eyes as her friends put bronzer on her cheeks.

“Oh Carmen…” one of her friends says. “I promise it’ll get better! For now, just drink more and go dancing!”
Carmen nods solemnly. She finishes her drink through that cold metal straw. She uses alcohol and nightclubs to stitch her heart up.

She wonders where and when she broke down.

Carmen googles “self-care for broken hearts.” She spends hours watching reality TV dating shows. She swore if they ever broke up, she would apply to be on one, just to see what it would be like, but she doesn’t want to be rejected again. She spends hours listening to music. She alternates between breakup albums and female empowerment songs. She cries a lot in the shower, because she can stick her face under the faucet, and if she cries hard enough, she can’t tell if it’s the shower water or her own tears slipping down the drain like the relationship she lost.

“Find freedom and happiness in yourself!” Google tells her.

Carmen goes to the beach by herself and stares at birds for two hours. She likes the tiny sandpipers, the way their feet move quickly and leave no marks on the sand. She takes herself out to lunch and buys herself lots of clothing. She lights candles. Cleans her entire apartment. Buys herself flowers. Takes care of herself the way she wishes she could have taken care of him, if he had let her. He was too independent and insisted he didn’t need anyone at all. She lets the food in her apartment grow moldy. She throws it out. Lets the trash bag fill. She takes out the trash when she can’t stand the sight of herself in the mirror. She sits naked on her balcony on the thirteenth floor, stares over the city, and lets the wind absorb her tears with stinging ferocity.

A crappy article on Cosmopolitan tells her: “Trying to heal from a break up is like putting band-aids on a stab wound in your heart. The only thing that can fix it is the person themselves.”

Carmen thinks back to the happier days.

But she thinks back to the unhappier days, too.
Now, Carmen writes for help on the women’s bathroom stalls in the first floor of her classroom building. “Advice?” it says in purple pen. “Inspiration? I broke up with my ex but I think it was a mistake? Should I text him?” She checks back every other day to see if there’s a response.

She still has his house key on her key chain. “As long as I have this key, there is still a chance he will reach out to me again,” she tells herself. His work schedule is still on her phone. Her friends tell her to delete it, delete all the pictures, throw out his t-shirts.

“Out of sight, out of mind!” they say.

“You can’t just delete a person like that, all of the memories, you can’t delete an entire relationship. It’s still there. It happened,” she replies. What she doesn’t tell them is that it’s still happening for her. This is part of it, all of it. There is a bigger picture out there. She won’t close that door. Someone could set the building on fire and she would burn with it. She won’t even think about the fire escape. She will just sit by that open door and burn.

She checks the bathroom stalls again. No one replies. Someone draws a picture of a pile of poop. Another person writes “GRAFFITI IS ILLEGAL” in permanent marker.

Carmen stays in for the first Friday in four weeks. She turns off her phone, grabs her step ladder, opens it in the kitchen, climbs up it, puts the phone behind the oats on the top shelf, climbs down the step ladder, closes it, and then stuffs it back in the closet. She goes out to her small balcony, sits on a chair all by herself, and breathes in. She closes her eyes and listens to the tires of cars rolling over the pavement thirteen floors beneath her. “This is it,” she says out loud to no one, “this is the part where I stop crying and I move on and I get stronger. This is the time
when I become okay with being alone.” Letting out a deep breath, Carmen brings her knees up to her chest and folds her head behind them, tucking her neck in. “I don’t want to feel that much. I just want to be okay,” she mumbles into her knees.

Carmen could be right. She’s not completely convinced of her observation of her mental state. Hours ago, she was convinced she made a mistake. Days ago, she was unsure of so much. And weeks ago, she thought she was doing the right thing. The only thing she’s positive about is that she’s tired of wavering between emotional states, between sure and unsure, and she breathes deep yoga breaths between her knees, in and out, in and out, thinking that if she can even her breath, she can even her thoughts. Carmen is out of answers, but so full of questions, of why and how and what if. Carmen has the kind of questions that Google can’t answer, that a circle of close friends don’t know, that a box of Krispy Kreme donuts can’t fix.