

# The Talking Cure: Love and Sertraline

written by Guest Contributor | November 10, 2019



After feeling anxious for years, first in childhood stomach aches, then in the mid-twenties chest pains, both times with the dread, the worry, the terror, a doctor said to me: So, do you wanna go on sertraline?

And I said: Yeah.

The person Laura was fucking at the time, a quiet Irishman into watersports like Joyce, was on it and said it was a miracle for anxiety. I wanted to give it a try. The doctor asked me if I'd ever hurt myself and I said: Yeah, yeah I've hit myself, punched my face when I was drunk.

But she said that didn't count, so, fine. I also stayed on the propranolol, beta blockers which I had been prescribed a few months before and took if I ever felt anything too unpleasant ever.

My partner's sister was also prescribed SSRIs, coincidentally on the same day. It was late January and that was the sort of thing that happened. I went over to their house after the first tablet made me feel like I was not in the same body or world as before. Gemma cooked me and their sister a special dinner, one that had comforted the siblings in childhood. They were close, and sometimes I thought things about that, how they had been married as children, how they lived together still and how one time Gemma had said that living with their sister alone would be the same as living alone. I didn't know how I fit into that. Not that I wanted to be Gemma's only one, we were non-monogamous, but because sometimes I felt like I was taking things away from their sister, especially because we were both women (and wasn't my relationship with Gemma, although they weren't a woman, perhaps sisterly, perhaps female-friendship) and the same age although I felt younger and silly like a loud little girl who made ridiculous decisions.

So, now we were on SSRIs. After dinner, I lay with my head on Gemma's stomach listening to its rumblings, as I did with my mother as a child, and feeling slightly aroused by their breasts above me. (Later my counselor would call this encounter womb-like and mine and Gemma's relationship nourishing for me.) Their house, as well, was sustaining, with love and warmth and tidiness,

the smell of washing. I will probably always associate their house with the first time people saw me as being a queer person (I say first as if it is for certain that people will see me like that again), as well as my sense of being a phony. I knew the right words but not in practice, I didn't top or bottom. Being queer to me then was just being swaddled and not having to explain the pain.

(And, when I did touch their breasts I felt like a teenage boy, not a grown woman. I couldn't believe I was allowed, I was obsessed with pulling down the tight fabric covering the gap between the two. They laughed at me, said I was always horny like a dirty old man. They said: Oh, you only knew you were queer when you touched boobs.)

After about six weeks of the anxiety increasing, in particular in the mornings, I suddenly felt what a different doctor described as a lift. Around this time I noticed that Theo, so tall, so handsome, so young was sending me a lot of emails. Ones that said:

Catherine  
Catherine  
Catherine.

And ones that had poems attached about wanting people and hiding. There was also the time IRL that he closed the Evening Standard on the tube (like a father, like my father. Dead now. Long dead.) stood up to get off and said: I think the truth should stay just beneath the surface.

Making me think: Hang on, no, surely not.

Laura had got me the job at the cafe after her brother who had worked there for years was leaving. She said: You'll be best friends with Theo.

And I asked whether he was hot because Theo sounded like a hot name to me. She said yes, everyone said he was beautiful, but he was only twenty. I asked if she thought his youth would put me off fancying him, she said it wouldn't. She knows what I'm like. When I met him he seemed thin and his face overcrowded. I said: So, you go to Camberwell?

He said he did and asked me no questions. I told Laura that I wasn't going to be friends with Theo and that I didn't think he was hot either. Plus he'd mentioned a girlfriend who he'd been on holiday with, very wholesome.

Somewhere in between then and my lift he asked me some questions, we went to Sainsburys Local together after work and he saw me texting a boy I was sleeping with:

Harry

Harry

Harry

And said I was mad. Now I liked his face, I thought he was gorgeous and the way his big body filled the space behind the coffee machine impressive, not overbearing like I'd found with tall men in the past. He was so young. I dream that we'd had sex, and were just chatting nicely after it. I sent a video of him to my sister who called him devastating.

The lift is hard to describe, but it sort of felt like whatever happened everything would be ok, after years of feeling the opposite. I imagined myself with my little beret moving through London cheerfully, just getting on with it, bobbing. I walked to Theo's house in Waterloo like this. The city clanged around me with a monster's claws under dripping railway bridges but nobody apart from him knew where I was going and even he didn't know which exact route. It was February and the city was so big and involved in its own dark redness that I could do what I wanted. I told him that either in a message or in person and he said he knew exactly what I meant. Later, at work when he was steaming the latte milk he said it again: I knew exactly what you meant when you said that. That's why you're such a good writer.

And looked at my lips.

Maybe being on antidepressants was taking me further away from my childhood which some would argue had caused the anxiety with all its injustices, run-of-the-mill though they were. Being sedated was loosening my body's grip on the past like pulling skin away from the bone. I decided my feelings were valid.

I met Gemma in a cocktail bar. Because they were beautiful and grown up I felt that way too. But then protected when they walked over to me with Aperol spritzes, pink hair and dark eyes. I told them about my childhood, about the abandonment, the emotional abuse, the death and the feeling of not being wanted.

That sounds like a tough start. They said and: I want you.

My mum was sympathetic about the SSRIs. She's been on them herself and as a rule is kinder to me about things she's directly experienced. She told me how she hadn't felt anxious or depressed on them, but she hadn't felt anything else either and that didn't seem right.

They made me forgetful, but also I want to leave stuff out, things that I've done where I don't come across very nicely. Like when I told Gemma they had nothing to worry about but then broke up with them a few weeks later saying I didn't know why I'd changed my mind.

But that was after...after Theo left his girlfriend, not for me, not because we'd had a loving look at the river together, but because he apparently was going to do it anyway. Although maybe it was before I text him saying:

I feel like all the streets and pubs and shops around where you live are an extension of how I feel about you.

This was all part of the lift and maybe it's helpful to say that that is over now and what he once called love he now says was obsession and not something he feels anymore. At the time, though, the golden feeling which he added to the edge of my life was mutual. And I didn't hold back. I was honest when I described the time in the pub when I walked over from the bar to the piano where he was sitting in the 5 o'clock March light as transcendental. He was the most beautiful person I'd ever seen then. His hair so sandy, his legs so long that I could be enclosed by them. I said that we were like Terry and Julie and I ate cheese and onion crisps with my mouth open in his face. He kissed me and said I was sexy – but how could I have been?

Except it might have been my counselor who used the word transcendental. I don't think I was so succinct, or spiritual. I think I said words, like pure, nostalgic and bright – like a film. The pub helped with that, and the crisps and being in Waterloo.

One of the things my mum understands is men leaving you. She spoke to me in a nice voice on the phone and concluded: Well, sod him.

Theo and I went to my house and there was a fire in the garden. The landlord had started it, my housemate said, and then left. We went to look at it. Theo was quiet, I hugged him and he said he felt like he was going to have a heart attack. In my room I bit a 40g beta blocker in half so he could swallow it. He said he needed to be alone now after all. I was angry.

I wonder if I only started to love him because of 'the lift', like in the past when a person who happened to be sitting next to me when I came up off MDMA became my most interesting and precious friend. It's May now and I don't know if I miss him because I find that emotion hard to recognize, but when I think of him he's saying: Will you send me a picture of you out on the sea kayak?

With his face developing three triangles as he smiled, one at the side of each eye and one that was his whole mouth, and his laugh then which was childlike and giddy, I feel a loss.

And when I think of his still face, when he's not smiling, with his heavy brow, I feel a loss as well, that pools from my chest into my stomach.

We were together for seven weeks. I do my calculations. If I bung on an extra week at the start then that's eight weeks which halves to four. Because I'm being kind to myself I round that up to a calendar month. So on May 24th, I should feel better – but will this be a lift or a fall?

The second doctor, a man, said that six months after I feel settled on the sertraline I can come off it. Of course, I go along with this but wonder if I'll just go back to how I was before. How can my brain have changed? He says he doesn't want me to be on them my whole life and at least now I have a plan, some things to wait for for the rest of the year.



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