



# Goodbye, Hello!

When the love of his life left him stranded, was it the end of all his happiness—or a chance to strip away some emotional clutter and let the future come to him? **MARK MATOUSEK** discovers the incredible lightness of losing.

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MY LIFE FELL APART THREE YEARS ago. One cold afternoon, a week before Christmas, my longtime companion dropped a bombshell that ended our ten-year relationship, exploding the shelter—domestic, emotional—I had planned to inhabit the rest of my life.

It was nightmarish, horrible, filled with betrayals, sacred promises smashed in

the gutter. I've lived through many serious losses—a dad's disappearance, a sister's suicide—as well as an illness that should have killed me, but the drowning sadness of this was different, not only because the details were so heinous but because I'd lost a cherished ideal—love's fortification through better or worse—as well as the outcome I'd planned for my future. ♦



I felt marooned, like a castaway. A chilling question—what's left?—circled my island, baring its teeth. When you're young, the future seems limitless, packed with infinite prospects and choices, B-plans and C-plans in every direction. It was not so scary to lose back then. Recklessness is a form of virtue when you're first inventing your life. You stand the chance—if you go for broke—of unearthing an authentic existence. Loss is an afterthought, like death, when you're young: heartbreaking but distant and not yet your problem, as you career through decades of unwrinkled plenty.

Then one day you wake up and see you've been dreaming. Some tragedy shatters your shell of blind faith and allows paler, more grown-up truths to seep in, the unavoidable costs of living. The trance of forever comes to an end. There's not always more where *that* (fill in your own blank) came from. We begin to perceive, in a gimlet-eyed way, that often there's a great deal less. Facing our limits, the coarse truth of endings, what remains becomes

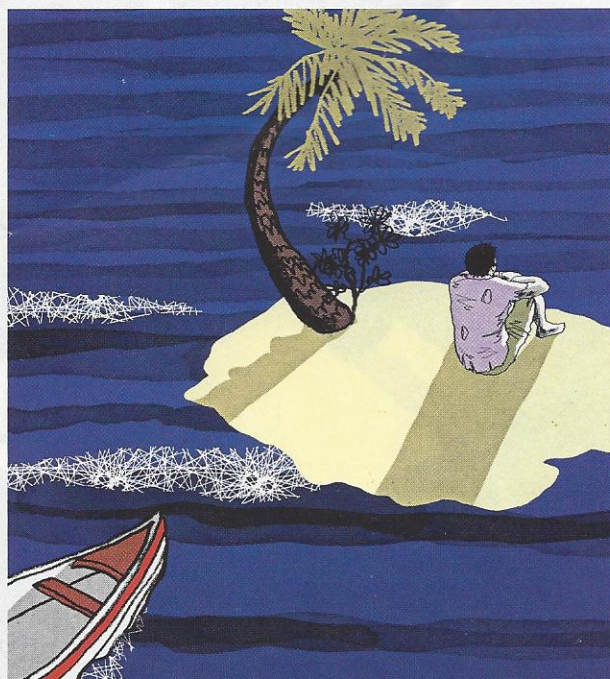
its power. This was my life, just this, just now; what was left lay well within my sights. And yet once the shock passed, this knowledge did not leave me wholly disheartened. Disoriented, certainly; crazed, insecure, but lifted by another force, too, a mystifying buoyancy.

While so much had fallen away, I saw clearly, something remarkable had been

get the Buddhist joke of it all: We are not the people we thought we were, death-locked to those things we feared leaving behind, but the soul that's left when the rest has been lost, the self that's watching and can't be erased, the one who is always asking the questions. Losing what we believe cannot be lost compels remembrance of who we are. "With the walls of

my house burnt down / I have a better view of the moon," wrote another poet, Basho. Each time we consciously mourn a great loss, it's as if we've lost ballast, been bounced and made lighter. The world returns more luminous.

In the aftermath of my relationship, I knew less for certain than ever before. I also felt more free as the heartache subsided and I moved on. Then something uncanny happened. I met the person who has turned out to be the greatest love of my life. My ex and I should never have been a couple (we were far better friends than mates), but this new partnership was a different animal. There were no agendas or power plays. I never imagined this person was mine and never



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more precious to us, the families and lovers, possessions and passions we call our own. Subtraction is no longer taken so lightly. Beginning, of course, with the loss of time.

In the wake of my domestic disaster, I found myself in a strange new zone where the future, once safe on the distant horizon, loomed suddenly, eerily close and distinct. I'd spent my life waiting for great things to happen—and many had; I'm a lucky man—but now the waiting game seemed to be over. My life's consummation—its *raison d'être*—no longer required some future event. No biographical climax was coming (at 50) to radically alter my existence; magical thinking lost

revealed. The essence of me, the seeing part, the soul that could love and recover and learn, emerged not merely unharmed—intact—but more awake than ever before. A mask, a weight, had been removed from the person I defined as myself. This reminded me of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art," whose meaning escaped me when I was in college but now seemed perfectly obvious. "The art of losing isn't hard to master," wrote Bishop, tongue firmly planted in her cheek. "So many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster." Negotiating the world, we step through one loss after another, gaze down to find our feet still on the ground, and

adored with so much abandon. Gratitude took the place of clinging. I made fewer assumptions, criticized less harshly, demanded far less, lost my conjugal soapbox. For the first time in my romantic life, fear wasn't playing the Wizard of Oz, inflating my ego behind a curtain. I hardly recognized myself.

Did hollowing out make the room for this fullness? I won't pretend to know the answer. The art of losing is hard to master. Losing yourself, though—your joy in being—is the only disaster. ●

Mark Matousek's new book, *The Art of Survival* (Bloomsbury), grew out of an article in *O* and will be published in the spring.