

SHELF LIFE, created and hosted by David Wayne Reed
ITEM: Engagement ring from ex-wife

So, my, uh, “Rock Show” item is this engagement ring from my ex-wife (*Audience member whoops, says, “Yeah!”*). Yes! Free love! Love it. Ok.

When I started dating Kara, I was six months out of a nearly ten-year relationship with a guy who isn't a bad person, but who wasn't a good match for me. At a young age, he and I had faced real, grown-up shit that nobody wants to face. Ever. Although I had managed to brush off some of the ashes from the fire we walked through more or less together, parts of my soul would remain permanently charred.

By that time, I had known Kara for a couple of years. She was a student at the university where I worked as an American Sign Language interpreter. She was an athletic Gold Star with quiet but solid swagger (*aside to the audience: That's a lesbian who's never had sex with a man, if you don't know what “gold star” means (audience laughs) Yes!*). She and I fell for each other hard and fast... well, she fell for me hard and fast, and I liked being loved, hard and fast. We basked in the shiny brand-newness of Us.

After The Guy and I had broken up, I rented an apartment. And one night, only a few months after we became a thing, Kara said that she hoped that when my lease was up, I would move in with her. She... (*audience member chuckles. aside to the audience: yeah...*) she owned a house near the university where I worked, and where we were

both students (aside to the audience: This is not news to lesbians. *Audience laughs.*). Although a klaxon sounded clarity in *my* gut, but my brain quickly overlooked the flaws in her plan, I thought, “Why not?” We’re already spending almost every night together, at one place or the other. It seemed silly to have two places. We’d save on bills. It just made sense. Maybe you recognize this refrain. Maybe *you* can sing it by heart.

Kara is a true Sagittarius: she loves to pursue, and I’m a full-blooded Scorpio: I love to be pursued. And according to Astrology dot com (aside to audience: which is where you should get all your dating advice. *Audience chuckles.*), “If a Scorpio and a Sagittarius want to make a love match, they should be warned to slow down, take their time getting to know one another on a deep, significant level or else they run the risk of getting way too far ahead of themselves.” Well, I didn’t keep up on my astrology, and six months later, when my lease expired, I did, *indeed*, move in with Kara. And she continued to love me brilliantly, and I continued to enjoy being loved by her.

This is the point in our regularly scheduled programming where I should fill you in on three salient details. Six years earlier, I had been pregnant. I had only known that I was pregnant for only ten days before that pregnancy ended naturally. That is how I found out I would struggle to have children. Those six years were filled with increasingly invasive medical interventions, with most of the intervening happening on my body.

Number two: I am hearing and Kara is big-D, capital-D Deaf, meaning that American Sign Language is her first and most-fluent language, and that she is most at ease in the

company of other people who are also Deaf. To those of you on The Outside, that might seem awkward. But I had grown up in my local Deaf community, and was very comfortable socializing with Deaf people. Plus, and this might be a surprise to you, but there are, like, so many more hearing people in this world than Deaf people, that Deaf people are pretty adept at navigating a world which is almost always created not for Deaf people, and created almost always created never with Deaf people in mind.

And, last, but certainly not least, my relationship with Kara was my first open relationship with a lesbian. I identify as pansexual, which, at a very basic level, means that I don't discriminate against my romantic partners based on their gender expression or their genitalia, although I do have a particular affinity for the Apparently Queer, and shiny gay boys—and that unrequited love is a heartbreaker, bee tee dubs (*Audience laughs*. Aside to the audience: Love shiny gay boys. Any age. Doesn't Matter.).

When Kara and I got together, many of my friends already had a kid or two, or more. A year later, the last hold-out told me she was pregnant, too. It was official: I was the only one in my group of friends who didn't have kids. And I wanted them, desperately. With no foreseeable change in that situation on the horizon, Kara and I did what anyone else in our shoes would do—we moved to a new town (*audience chuckles*). It was serendipity(!), actually: a job opening that was perfect for Kara came open at the same time that a client that I had for many years recruited me to a different university to work with them.

And so we visited the prospective New Town one weekend, and toured TWELVE houses... *twelve* houses, in one day... all the houses that were in our price range and on the side of town that wouldn't leave us with a ridiculous commute. See, I knew that I had to buy a house, because I seriously doubted that any landlord would actually rent to us. Between the two of us, we had four dogs and three cats (*audience member remarks, indistinct*. Aside to audience: uh-huh), and I couldn't imagine those words (Aside to audience: four dogs and three cats) coming out of my mouth to the face of the owner of real property that I was asking to be allowed to live in. So, I bought a house.

And the thing is, Kara wanted kids with me as much as I wanted kids, and because it wasn't happening the old fashioned way, you know, with the alternating injections, first of hormones, and then machine washed sperm (*audience chuckles*), we decided to foster. We filled out alloftheforms (aside to audience: like, this many (uses gesture indicating a thick stack of forms)) and so did our friends... they don't just take your word for it. And then we took alloftheclasses.

Kara put this ring on my finger, and over the course of the three years that she and I lived in that two-car attached, three bedrooms, one-and-three-quarter baths, great room and galley kitchen, we filled that house with those four dogs, three cats, a total, over time, of eight foster kids, most of whom had parents who couldn't stop getting high on rocks of a different crystal composition.

Then between 2014 and 2015, TEN women in my office had babies in one calendar year (*audience reacts: mmm!* Aside to audience: Mmm! Mmm-hmm!). That fact alone elicits an array worthy of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (aside to the audience: it's for mental health needs) ... uh, in someone like me. And through my eyes, these women, who were at least my colleagues if not my friends, grew into walking social landmines for me.

So over the course of the Year of Pregnancies and then the Year of Births, it took all of my mental and emotional energy to just drag myself to and through work. Every night, some food was bought or reheated, and then I Netflixed or Hulu'd until I was ready to go to sleep. Lather; Rinse; Repeat.

And then, while it seemed to happen suddenly at the time, love doesn't really ever go away suddenly. It always ebbs slowly, in those details of daily life; seeps away in the moments when you're not paying attention.

Looking back later, I realized that things hadn't been going well for us for a while, but we had clung to our relationship in the same way one hesitates to remove a Band-Aid that's out-lived its purpose. Like, it wasn't doing either of us any good to stay put, but ripping it off all at once was going to hurt more than either of us was prepared to endure. So instead, we chose to peel it back slowly, each distancing ourselves from the other with every tug at the bandage. It took nearly two years for us to part completely.

It was my realization of the end of the love which was sudden. It hit me like a brick wall, or, I hit it. But either way, it hurt.

To paraphrase one of our contemporary musical geniuses, John Mayer (*audience chuckles*), I wasn't really in love with Kara; I was in love with the thought of her. And that wasn't fair to her.

I had to break up with her.

After talking over the course of a few days, I found out that she had already fallen for someone else. But *I* had to break up with *her*. And my hands hurled at her, (sign) HAPPEN YOU-MEET-ME, ME FINISH BROKEN (pause, then speak) "I was already broken when you met me!" Her fingers gracefully replied, (sign) ME KNOW, NOT-MATTER, ME-FALL-IN-LOVE-WITH-YOU (pause, then speak) "I knew that, but I fell in love with you, anyway."

"So that's it? It's just over? Why didn't you tell me?" She was quiet for a minute, and then replied, "I didn't want to be the one to break up with you because you were already so sad. So I just waited for you to realize that it was over... I thought it would be sooner."

By the time I sold that two-car attached, three bedrooms, one-and-three-quarter baths, great room and galley kitchen, I hadn't lived in it for nearly two years. And it's actually kind of ridiculous I held onto it that long. But how long does it take to let go, entirely, of a

life you're no longer living? What delineates Life as We Know It from some previous iteration?

The sediment of Us that remains is, at times, disturbed, and floats, agitated, among the pieces of my life's current iteration, and then it settles back to the bedrock, but almost always coating those pieces with its dust.

THANK YOU.

(Audience applauds and cheers)