

From Face to Screen: Plugging into an Ocean-Sized Romance

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"I love you," he whispered over the monotonic rhythm of shuffling feet and squeaky luggage that filled the dank stairwell of the Dublin airport. Over the last two months I'd never seen him so openly vulnerable, his Irish charm so easily faltered. He stood before me for the last time, speaking those three little words for the first time. Pressed against his lips and clutching his shirt I had to push all thoughts from my mind to stop the stone in my stomach from holding me down forever. Inhaling his sweet cologne, I took a breath and pulled away. "See you later," I said, my wishful words catching between sobs. Playfully, he tapped my butt as I turned around and ran.

So began the start to a post-study-abroad-long-distance relationship, where a picture perfect romance goes from face to screen. There is no denying it; I am a hopeless romantic. Viewing the world through this lens is exciting and fun, but also painful.

During an incredible summer TV production internship in Dublin, I met a guy. This guy introduced me to his 7-year-old sister. He took me to a quaint Sunday market in his brother's hometown. He rolled around in the shamrock sand with me and laughed with me when it was still coming out of our clothes two weeks later. Honestly, the odds weren't in our favor. Most people would say all good things must come to an end – I am not one of those people.

"Human beings are equipped in romantic situations to produce brain chemicals, principally phenylethylamines (PEA), along with other brain chemicals," said Larry Bloom, a psychology professor at Colorado State University. "In romance, particularly in the beginning levels of romance, the whistle factory blows in the brain and these chemicals go into the blood stream. And they're chemical cousins of the amphetamines, so they light a person up."

Whether in the United States, Europe, Afghanistan or Timbuktu, romance is romance, and for me, no amount of Guinness could stop it.

For two months my life was a movie, a romantic comedy that just kept getting better. Then I left, and it turned into a scene from the tear-provoking drama, where the girl moves away heartbroken, the whole time thinking that the guy never wrote her. And now? It's like that sucky in-between period where the movie shows a 30 second depressing montage before everyone lives happily ever after. The audience, of course, never realizes how long and miserably bipolar that montage truly is (they couldn't show it the way I'm living it or they'd lose all their viewers). And being my hopeless romantic self, I, of course, dragged it out even more slowly and miserably, refusing to let it end.

Sure, I knew the rules, but I'd also heard so much about the exception. In August 1993, Jean Marie Poynton had just graduated from Colorado University and was travelling in Ireland when she met Paul Roberts, the bartender at a pub in Dublin.

"It was love at first sight!" Roberts said. "It was like I had met my other, better half. Luckily, I realized that this was a real connection."

After developing a magnetic relationship, Poynton went back home for graduate school, but neither her nor Roberts could let one another go. Though separated by an ocean, they knew they had to try and make it work.

"This was just before email became the way to communicate, so we stayed in touch using phone, letter, and cassette tapes," Roberts said. "The tapes were great because we could talk about our dreams, frustrations, and be comforted by the sound of each other's voices and be supportive when we did not necessarily have a lot of people supporting our plans."

After three years of handwritten letters and voice recordings, Roberts immigrated in March 1996 to be with Poynton. They have been together for 21 years now.

"We had to negotiate my arriving in New York and how it would be seeing each other day-to-day," Roberts said. "It was not hard, although face-to-face means that those areas of difference become more tangible and the person who you corresponded with may not edit themselves as much – the reality of each of our flaws are day-to-day."

The transition of a relationship from paper to face can be just as challenging as that from face to screen. It wasn't instantaneous, but for Roberts and Poynton it was extremely rewarding.

"Negotiating through to a present tense relationship took time, as well as naturally changing the dynamic between us in a more solid, and real sense," Roberts said.

All I want is that solidity Roberts and Poynton found – I want their reality. Instead, I'm lost in a virtual world that is anything but real. My emotions roll up and down as my screen flickers on and off, the only difference being when my phone dies I can plug it back in and "ping," it's good to go. I've got phone chargers everywhere, but where is my life charger? I seem to have misplaced it.

"I don't think digital life can be easily compared to real life because a screen can never fully replicate all that a broad world can offer," said Michael Humphrey, a digital-age writer for *Forbes Magazine*. "The ability to hold hands, to see the textures on a great painting, to smell the pine trees – all of that triggers the brain in ways a virtual experience can't . . . at least yet. But that's not to say that what you are feeling when you have a connection digitally isn't real or less important."

It was 5 a.m. when my phone buzzed, lighting up my eyes and my insides; I didn't have to guess who it was.

"Knock-knock," he said. His knock-knock jokes were always so terrible.
"Who's there?" I said.

“Olive.”

“Olive who?”

“Olive you,” he said. Accompanying his joke was a photo of olive oil.

“Wow, that wasn’t so terrible,” I said. Even through text no one could make me laugh the way he could.

“Ah, fuck off,” he said. The Irish use “fuck” in the way Americans use “like.” They throw it in between breaths to patchwork their gaps in thought. They know it’s bad, but it’s immersed in their culture, like I was immersed in him. For a while, we were making it work.

“In many ways this is the great gift of a long distance relationship,” Humphrey said. “Two whole people who come together will always make a better couple – your love is more sure and your independence naturally gives the other person room to be themselves too. Use the connectivity as a way to learn about each other . . . and don’t expect constant connection – just because you can doesn’t mean you should.”

This lesson I learned the hard way.

It had been four months since I’d left Ireland. Staring intently at the screen, I willed it to ring. Two hours had passed and I had not moved from my perch. “Come on, just call me,” I said. No sound. Defeated, I heaved a sigh, peeled my butt off the chair, closed my laptop and walked away. Why did it always end with me walking away?

“Keep in mind when you come from two different cultures, things that are second nature to you – i.e. instincts, points of reference – are not to the other person,” Roberts said. “This requires negotiation and developing respect, patience and understanding for these differences. It can take a long time to become familiar with these aspects and here is where misunderstandings can become more frequent.”

I had run out of patience and there was nothing left but misunderstanding. Just like the other two dozen times, he messaged me later that night. “Sorry,” he said. “Something came up.” There was no explanation, no attempt at mending, just those four words, time and time again.

Why is it that the one who cares less always wins? I felt as though I’d long past fallen off my horse, my foot was stuck in the stirrup and I’d been dragging along behind, too afraid to pull free. This time, my body could take no more. Unable to Skype him, I poured all my anger into the Facebook message that sat in front of me. Pounding on the keys, words rushed out like a waterfall, pulling down any detail that got caught in its wake. Send.

Nasty word after nasty word were exchanged. Then, he stopped. “This long distance thing is tearing us apart,” he said. Though I agreed, I couldn’t help but feel that it wasn’t the distance, but him that was tearing us apart – his lack of effort. Just like that, with a few pixelated words and the click of a button, it was over. I sobbed uncontrollably, heaving the last of my strength into the overheated metal that delivered my anguish. It turns out my picture perfect romance didn’t look so great on screen.

The anger inside confused me.

For four months my computer and my phone were my closest friends, surrounding me night and day. Now, they suffocated me; they choked me. I felt betrayed. I had waited by a monitor, fixated on the small connection I had left to the world I was forced to leave behind, sucked into cyberspace and lost in a realm of social media that I was never fond of to begin with. I had been living through my screen, and he just wanted to live.

“If you’re trying to hang on to something that is very difficult to hang on to and maybe will not work for you, you just forestall the inevitable,” Bloom said. “If you come back and you say, ‘You know, that was a great experience, I loved it, I got to see sides of myself I never knew existed, but I have to leave that now, I have to acculturate myself back into my culture and take the lessons of that experience with me,’ that’s a pretty healthy attitude I think.”

I’m going back to Europe this summer, another four months from now. It will have been a year and the possibility is there. To see or not to see, that is the question. After the fallout were three months of cold, dead silence, finally broken by a mild buzz and the familiar comfort of a small, lit screen. We talk occasionally, and sometimes it lights me up, but sometimes it just runs me down and soaks up all my battery. Ultimately, I believe we could have made it work if we had wanted to, and the fact of the matter is, he didn’t.

“We do know that in spite of the challenges, that you are able to – and he is able to – get beyond any hurt, any pain that you might have,” Bloom said. “On the other hand, if you were my daughter I would say if you’re not comfortable with opening up these feelings again, which they very well may open up if you get involved romantically, why would you be reckless? I don’t want you to be reckless with yourself – life’s hard enough.”

I’ve never been one to do things the easy way. Plus, who knows, maybe 20 years from now we’ll meet again and life will work in our favor (that’s my hopeless romantic creeping in). Maybe I’ll run into his rain-kissed arms once more this summer, a scene I’ve envisioned and recreated more times than I’ve spent sleeping, and then once again say goodbye as he taps me on the butt. Or maybe, I’ll choose to pass him up this summer and we’ll never speak again. How depressing does that sound?

The image of Poynton and Roberts runs in my head – the perfect exception. However, when I get past fairytale land blocking the forefront of my mind and think more deeply, I know they had their trials too. Roberts’ family had a hard time understanding why he left, and they hardly communicate. Not to mention, there are significant cultural differences.

“Americans tend to tackle a problem head on, speak literally, and don’t tell stories when a short-to-point answer will suffice,” Roberts said. “What was quaint and endearing in Ireland became a barrier to being taken seriously.”

Unaccustomed to fast-paced American life, Roberts had to adjust his speech and behavior after moving to New York. He speaks slowly and over enunciates, to avoid his accent becoming more of a hindrance than a charm. The personal changes were not easy for Roberts, but his relationship with Poynton underwent far more than a simple flip of the tongue.

“Our relationship has endured some very tough times – job losses, living in New York during 9/11, working two jobs while being a full-time student, the crash of 2008, not to mention the normal ups and downs of any worthwhile relationship.”

Through good and bad, in the end, their struggle was worthwhile. Will my fortune be the same?

I’m not an expert fortuneteller, nor do I own a time machine. All that I know right now is that I lived a dream. Nothing and nobody can take that away from me. I fell in love with a foreign lad in the Emerald Isle and, like the unmistakable smell of morning dew drenching the pavement, the love will linger and the memory of that magical summer will never be replaced.

“Eventually, the losses will heal, and you’ll move on,” Bloom said. “You’ll be OK.”

Accessories:

- Tips for Staying in Touch:
 - Funny Snapchats are nice, but nothing says I love you like a hand-written letter in the mail or a packaged box of mementos
 - It’s not always easy finding time to Skype seven hours apart when he works and you’re at school; set a time on the weekends beforehand; plan ahead
 - Utilize technology, but make it personal: DropBox him your favorite song, share a personal essay, record a fun video message; I miss you posts on Facebook get old fast
 - Keep in contact with his friends and family and don’t get jealous when he talks to yours; it’s always encouraging to know your significant other cares about more than themselves
 - Don’t expect instant replies and gratification, just appreciate them when they do come

- Photographs:





