

# Jennifer Egan, *Love in the Time of No Time*

Jennifer Egan is a writer whose work has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Slate*, *Harpers*, and *GQ*. Her novels include *Look at Me* (2001), *The Invisible Circus* (1994), and a collection of short stories titled *Emerald City* (1996). In the following essay, which originally appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2003, Egan investigates how the quest for love has changed as modern American life has become increasingly fast paced and technologically advanced. She argues that traditional community-based contexts for dating or finding romance are being replaced by the Internet, and that online dating is changing the way we look for romance or companionship.



## Mapping Your Reading

What interests Egan about online dating sites is *not* the question of whether or not online dating is “good” or “bad.” Instead, she says, “Better questions might be, How do [dating websites] work and how is the way they work changing the nature of courtship?” How has online dating changed the way people look for love or companionship? How has it affected how people identify and portray themselves? As you read, use the margins to note passages where Egan addresses these questions.

**T**he city is full of people we can't reach. We pass them on sidewalks, sit across from them in the subway and in restaurants; we glimpse their lighted windows from our own lighted windows late at night. That's in New York. In most of America, people float alongside one another on freeways as they drive between the city and the places where they live. To lock eyes with a stranger is to feel the gulf between proximity and familiarity and to wish—at least sometimes, briefly, most of us—that we could jump the hedges of our own narrow lives and find those people again when they drift out of sight.

In a sense, the explosion of online personals speaks to the fervency of that wish. In the first half of 2003, Americans spent \$214.3 million on personals and dating sites—almost triple what they spent in all of 2001. Online dating is the most lucrative form of legal paid online content. According to comScore Networks, which monitors consumer behavior on the Internet, 40 million Americans visited at least one online dating site in August—27 percent of all Internet users for that month. The sites they visited range from behemoths like

Yahoo! Personals and Match.com, which boasts 12 million users worldwide, to smaller niche sites catering to ethnic and religious groups and to devotees of such things as pets, horoscopes, and fitness. In between are midsize companies like Spring Street Networks, which pools the personals ads for some 200 publications nationwide, including Salon.com, the *Onion*, and *Boston Magazine*, and sites like Emode and eHarmony, which specialize in personality tests and algorithms for matching people. One entrant, Friendster, conceived of as a site for dating and meeting new people through mutual friends, has become a raging fad among the younger set and now claims more than three million members.

The societal reasons for this fury of activity are so profound that it's almost surprising that online dating didn't take off sooner: Americans are marrying later and so are less likely to meet their spouses in high school or college. They spend much of their lives at work, but the rise in sexual harassment suits has made workplace relationships tricky at best. Among a more secular and mobile population, social institutions like churches and clubs have faded in importance. That often leaves little more than the "bar scene" as a source of potential mates. (Many single people I spoke to saw this as their only option, aside from online dating.)

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Improved technology—namely, the proliferation of broadband and the abrupt ubiquity of digital cameras—partly explains online dating's surge in popularity. More critical still is the fact that the first generation of kids to come of age on the Internet are now young adults, still mostly single, and for them, using the Web to find what they need is as natural as using a lung to suck in air. They get jobs and apartments and plane tickets online—why not dates?

Still, a fair number of people continue to feel a stigma about dating online, ranging from the waning belief that it's a dangerous refuge for the desperate and unsavory to the milder but still unappealing notion that it's a public bazaar for the sort of people who thrive on selling themselves. The shopping metaphor is apt; online dating involves browsing and choosing among a seemingly infinite array of possible mates. But those who see a transactional approach to coupling as something new and unseemly would do well to pick up a novel by Jane Austen, where characters are introduced alongside their incomes. There is nothing new about the idea of marriage as a business transaction. Serendipitous love is what's new, love borne of chance, love like what engulfed my grandparents after my grandfather, then a resident physician at a Chicago hospital emergency room, happened to remove my grandmother's appendix. Serendipitous love as a romantic ideal is a paean to cities and their dislocations, the unlikely collisions that result from thousands of strangers with discrete histories overlapping briefly in time and space. And online dating is not the opposite of this approach to love, but its radical extension; if cities erase people's histories and cram them together in space, online dating sites erase both cities and space, gathering people instead under the virtual rubric of a brand.

The defining fact of online dating is that it begins outside any context—historical, temporal, physical. To compensate, dating sites offer the old-fashioned

comfort of facts: income, life goals, tastes in music, attitudes toward having children—the sorts of things you might wonder about a stranger you locked eyes with. To ask whether this lack of real-world context is “good” or “bad” is to oversimplify; online personals are a natural outcropping of our historical and technological landscape—one more proof of the fact that time and space are ceding their primacy as organizers of our experience. Better questions might be, How do they work and how is the way they work changing the nature of courtship?

## First Impressions

Online dating profiles may begin as jokes or time wasters at work or good deeds on behalf of single, lonely friends whose digital picture you happen to have in your hard drive. But for the serious online dater, the personal profile—the page allotted to each client on dating Web sites—quickly assumes a pivotal importance. Whether visible or hidden (meaning people can see it only if you contact them first), profiles are as intrinsic to online dating as cards are to poker. The profile does the legwork of materializing before potential love interests and braving with a smile their contemplation, dismissal, exegesis, mockery, or the whiplash of being zapped among friends as an e-mail attachment whose subject heading reads, “Check this one out.” The profile never sleeps. It keeps vigil day and night, dutifully holding your place in the queue of romantic prospects drummed up by the thousands of searches all over the world whose criteria you happen to meet. What this means is that tens of millions of Americans, a great many of whom have never gone near a virtual-reality game, find themselves employing “avatars,” or digital embodiments of themselves, to make a first impression in their absence.

**The profile never sleeps.**

Dating profiles are works in progress, continually edited and tweaked, fortified with newer, more flattering pictures. If they were physical documents, they would have the velvety, dogeared texture of beloved children’s books or nineteenth-century family Bibles. Often they’re made collaboratively, with friends, or at least vetted by someone of the same sex as their target audience. Many online daters have more than one profile, sometimes on the same dating site. (Before Spring Street Networks limited the number of profiles a single person could post, lone individuals were known to have a few dozen.)

Greg, a 23-year-old secretary and aspiring rock singer who lives in Brooklyn, has two profiles on Nerve.com. Recently, his profile answered the question “Why you should get to know me” with a short paragraph ending: “Because I have condoms in my back pocket but don’t hit on anyone. I’m quiet, complacent, pretty, and utterly diabolical.” Greg acknowledged in an e-mail message to me that his approach was “pretty risky”: “The ad will attract fewer women, most definitely, but the ones who respond will be very likely candidates for a good date. . . . If I was bored and looking to go on a lot of dates, I’d have a different picture and a funnier, more verbose ad.” His earlier profile was indeed more expansive and earnest—the headline reads, “Make sure she gets home safe.” And as any online dater will tell you, the picture is the most crucial profile component. (Among the

several cottage industries that have sprung up around online dating is that of personal profile photography.) “I’m no photographer,” Greg writes (my weeks of conversation with Greg have occurred entirely by e-mail; we have never spoken or met), “but I’ve spent a lot of time trying to take sexy pictures of myself for these ads, and the good ones have produced lots of responses.” Greg estimates that he has gone out with between 30 and 50 women he met online since he first posted a profile nearly three years ago. His second meeting, through amihot.com—one of several dating sites where members can rate one another’s pictures—led to a relationship that lasted a year and a half.

Greg is 6-foot-4 and, judging by his pictures, possessed of a tousled rock ‘n’ roller handsomeness. Like a lot of online daters I corresponded with, he doesn’t have Internet access at home; his online activity occurs almost exclusively at work (he minimizes the screen when his boss walks by) or at Internet cafes on weekends. “It is impossible to draw the line between my online social life and my real-world social life,” Greg says. “Without online personals, there is no telling where I would be living, who I’d be hanging out with, what clothes I’d be wearing, or how busy my nightlife and sex life would be (believe me, they are busy).”

**“It is impossible to draw the line between my online social life and my real-world social life.”**

Notice that Greg refers to his profile as an “ad.” This is common parlance and helps to explain why a lot of people—especially those older and less Web-inclined than Greg—are squirmy about posting one. Lorraine, a 39-year-old mortgage officer in Cherry Hill, N.J., and the divorced mother of three teenagers, had no photo posted on her original profile with Match.com, and her descriptions of herself were vague. A tepid response spurred her on. She uploaded a photo and wrote a lengthy profile, whose “about me” section includes: “My ideal man is someone who respects a truly good woman and knows how to make her feel special, important, and loved. . . . A man who would give of himself before he gives to himself. (Ouch! I bet that hurt).”

Lorraine was honest, she says, in her choice of picture and report of her physical dimensions, but this isn’t always the case; most online daters have at least one cranky tale of meeting a date who was shorter or fatter or balder or generally less comely than advertised. Small lies may even be advisable; by dropping a year or two off her age, a 40-year-old woman will appear in many more men’s searches, and the same is true for a man shorter than 5-foot-11 who inflates his height even slightly. But for all the fibbing and fudging that go on, outright lying about who you are is generally regarded as uncool and self-defeating. Think about it: If all goes well, the person will ultimately agree to meet you, at which point they’ll discover you’re not a race-car driver from Monaco who speaks five languages and owns an island in the Caribbean. Evan Marc Katz, a screenwriter and veteran online dater, has started a business called E-Cyrano.com that will actually write someone’s personal profile in his or her own voice after a lengthy interview. Katz, 31, favors another popular metaphor for online dating: job hunting. “It is really a résumé,” he says of the profile. “You’re taking the available facts, and you’re cleaning them up.”

But for all the metaphorical aptness of shopping and job hunting to describe online personals generally, they neglect the most basic truth of the profile itself: regardless of its tone—hipster irony in Greg’s case, gushy sincerity in Lorraine’s—making and posting a profile is an act of faith. Like throwing coins into a well, there is an earnestness about doing it at all. Which is why even people with a cynical view of personals tend to speak about their own profiles with disconcerting pride. Yasmeen, a 26-year-old recent law-school graduate, went on only one date in three years in Columbus, Ohio, where she says her ethnicity (she is half Indian, half Filipino) made her “invisible.” She posted a profile through *Jane Magazine*, but chose not to meet any of her respondents for a year and a half. Still, she said: “When I’m lonely, it helps to know there is someone out there who is looking for me. . . . And while my ad may not be ‘the real me,’ at least there is potential for me to be that best version of myself. Even for just a small part of a day.”

## Flirting

Here is part of the expansive introductory e-mail message Greg wrote to Sam, a 23-year-old graphic designer, in response to her profile:

“Subject: Hi.

“It’s weird. I’m in the middle of noting to myself how you misused ‘perceptively’ (shoulda been perceptibly) when I get to a word I’ve never seen before: ‘ideationally.’ Everyone always tells me I shouldn’t be so harsh when grading the grammar, spelling, etc. in people’s ads and responses, but I can’t help it. . . . If you like to go out to dirty rock shows and drink at bars from time to time, or if you think you’d like to let my roommate cook for you while we all act like retards, you and I could get along. Please respond.”

Sam did, in an e-mail that began: “And here I was congratulating myself on my 170 I.Q. Dammit. . . . I am all about dirty rock shows and bars.” Referring to Greg’s remark in his profile that he carries condoms in his back pocket, Sam concluded: “P.S. You know, you have to use the condoms, or discard and replace. . . . Just F.Y.I., so you can start hitting on bar skanks before it’s too late.”

There is no shortage of ways to flirt online. The most obvious are codified right into the dating sites as nonverbal signals people can click at each other: “winks,” “smiles,” “breaking the ice,” depending on the site. While women are generally more comfortable approaching men online than in bars, men still tend to make the first moves, and since women with attractive pictures (Sam is 5-foot-11 with long blond hair) are usually besieged with responses—she’s had several hundred since posting her first ad last spring—it behooves a man to think hard about his opening salvo. Greg’s style has evolved over time: “It used to be: ‘I like your ad. Check out mine. Hope to hear from you.’ . . . But I’ve found that long-winded and entertaining messages get responses more than half the time, while boring, mass-mailed messages can’t beat a 1-to-5 response/message ratio.”

# FOUND

from 1-true-love.com

## PERSONAL-AD SHORTHAND

Don't know what all the abbreviations in personal ads mean? Here's a list. Remember, you can say a lot with abbreviations in your ad. Instead of saying "Non Smoking Non Drinking Single White Male In Search of Non Smoking Non Drinking Single White Female" you could just put this in: NSNDSWMISONNSNDSWF. You could use the above as part of your ad title. Just say, "Fun Loving NSNDSWMISONNSNDSWF25-30YO" as your ad title.

A = Asian

B = Black

BI = Bisexual

C = Christian

D = Divorced

DDF = Drug/Disease Free

FTA = Fun Travel Adventure

G = Gay

GSOH = Good Sense of Humor

H = Hispanic

HWP = Height Weight Proportional

ISO = In Search Of

J = Jewish

LD = Light Drinker

LDS = Latter Day Saint

LS = Light Smoker

LTR = Long Term Relationship

MM = Marriage Minded

NA = Native American

NBM = Never Been Married

ND = Non Drinker

NS = Non Smoker

P = Professional

S = Single

SD = Social Drinker

SI = Similar Interests

SOH = Sense of Humor

W = White

W/ = With

WI = Widowed

W/O = With Out

YO = Years Old

Online daters are constantly innovating ways to shanghai the technology into flirtatious use: A 34-year-old opera singer and actor created a new profile of himself, "Brooklynboy," that was entirely a response to a particular woman's profile, "Brooklyngirl," that had smitten him. But if flirting in the real world consists of no-strings banter between two people who feel a mutual attraction, online flirtation is its inverse—it happens in the presence of everything but physical attraction. Two people who have read each other's profiles may know each other's hobbies, income, turn-ons, religious affiliations, political views, and whether or not they want children, but they have no idea whether the frisson these avatars of themselves manage to whip up in the void will translate into life. When Brooklynboy met Brooklyngirl after a week of strenuous flirtation, there was so little mutual attraction that they never made it to a second date. Online flirting happens, then, in the conditional voice, and there's a general sense that it shouldn't go on for too long.

The exact progression from first contact to in-the-flesh-meeting varies among daters and age groups. For younger people, who grew up with instant-messaging programs, e-mail will often lead to an instant-message exchange (or several), followed by a meeting; those over 30 tend to prefer the phone. David Ezell, 39, who is gay and runs a rare-book business online, refuses to exchange more than two or three e-mail messages before moving to the telephone. "There's a lot of men who are on the fence about their sexuality. . . . this is their sexual outlet: writing personals ads," he says. "They're never going to meet anybody, and they don't want to. . . . That's the first step in intimacy, swapping phone numbers." Ezell had a serious long-term relationship with a physician he met online, and when that relationship failed a year and a half ago, he returned to the personals.

Making a timely segue from virtual to real-world flirtation is hardest when two people are talking across a physical distance. Angel, a 42-year-old divorced father who lives in Boston, made contact with Carmen, a 39-year-old divorced woman who had just moved from Puerto Rico to Connecticut, on LatinSingles.com, where his profile is posted in Spanish. Angel was skittish about relationships; after separating from his wife of 18 years, he spent several months homeless, sleeping in city shelters and in his car because his job at a printing company didn't pay enough for him to afford an apartment of his own. He and Carmen communicated by e-mail and then moved to the phone. "I did not go by the looks of her, because she had no photo posted on her profile," Angel said. "I was basically just going with what the heart said." After a month of e-mail messages and phone calls, they made a plan for Carmen to drive to Boston so they could meet.

"We met at South Bay shopping center in the parking lot, right in front of Toys 'R' Us," Angel said. When he first saw her, he recalled, "I said: 'Wow. Damn, I'm good.' Because she is a very attractive lady. I was definitely speechless. We were both shy, but slowly we started to loosen up and get to the same type of conversation we were having over the phone. We got a bite to eat, and then we went to get a drink, and she stayed over that night." They slept in separate rooms, and Carmen went back to Connecticut the next day. She now visits every weekend and plans to move to Boston in December.

## Chemistry

Angel and Carmen had it; Brooklynboy and Brooklyngirl didn't. "Chemistry" is a word you hear a lot among online daters: sine qua non of the enterprise and the object of a fair bit of fetishization. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a dating log kept by Regan, a 37-year-old technical writer in Atlanta, since she posted an ad a year and a half ago on Salon.com. "M: Sang in the car; zero chemistry; started writing me poems and stories. A: Too young, too tiny, had roommate problems and bored me. C: Zero chemistry; I was sure he was gay. K: Great chemistry, but too straight for me. Lives in my building, of all things. R: Had had a recent bankruptcy and actually skipped out on his bar tab, appalling me. M.P: Came from California to meet me. A waste of a few days—there was zero attraction."

The early stages of an online acquaintance happen on spec, with the mutual understanding that chemistry will be required in order for things to proceed. This puts a fair amount of pressure on that first meeting—both parties tend to arrive with chemistry sensors keyed to a quivering state of alertness. When chemistry is absent, on both sides or (more painfully) just one, a cut-your-losses mentality prevails. "Sorry but it just wasn't there for me" e-mail messages are the polite response to a chemically inert date; just as often, the disappointed party will simply fade away, a conventional rudeness that is especially jarring to newcomers.

Being on the receiving end of these rejections can be bruising, because the rejection comes not from a total stranger but from a person you've e-mailed and talked to and possibly become fond of. In September, Lorraine, the New Jersey divorcée, had tea on a Sunday afternoon with an attorney she had spoken with at some length on the phone. She said that on first seeing him, "My initial reaction was: shorter than I like, he's not great looking but he's O.K. looking. I would have given him a chance and gone out again." But the attorney sent her an e-mail message that began, "I think you're a wonderful woman, but. . ." A week later, Lorraine was still trying to figure it out. "You think, what is wrong with me?" she said. "I'm 90 percent sure it's physical, that I'm just not the perfect body. I try. I wear a small size, but I'm probably not what he's looking for." Or was the problem that, as a way of making conversation, she had mentioned a conflict she was having with a neighbor—did the lawyer think she was grubbing for free legal advice? Or could it have been her personality? "On a first date I laugh, I smile, but I don't crack jokes," she reflected. "So I was thinking, Maybe he wanted someone who was fun immediately." Lorraine's failed marriage began with love-at-first-sight, so she is wary of instant chemistry. "A lot of times that spark is just lust anyway," she said. She's looking for something that will evolve and endure, but fears that in the chemistry-fixed world of online dating, that sort of bond would never have time to flourish.

And there are those who say that the culture of online dating is itself inimical to the chemistry its practitioners crave. Someone actively dating online may have as many as five or six dates in a week ("serial dating" is the term for this), which can make for some fuzzy-headed folks beholding one another across

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tables. Just organizing that much dating activity is a challenge; at one point, David Ezell had his dates and prospective dates arranged on an Excel spreadsheet. Leslie Hill, 34, who works in human resources in Silicon Valley, estimates that she went on 100 online dates before meeting her second husband on Match.com. She kept track of the multitude in a dating binder, printing out the profiles of every man who contacted her and filing them under different headings: "Under Consideration," "Chatting Online," "Chatting and Going to Meet," "Met and Would Like to See Again" and, for men she didn't want to see again, "NMF," or "Not Moving Forward," a category borrowed from human resources. During phone conversations with prospective dates, Hill would scribble notes about their lives: "I would write it down: 'has two sisters and a brother,' 'worked there and there,' and if I went out, I would go through my binder and refresh myself: 'O.K., this is Bob. He went to Chico.' I hoped that when I got to meet the person, I was real and genuine."

For Greg, who isn't looking for a serious relationship, the chemistry issue is less acute. In late July, he had a first date with a woman he met online. "I just don't spend much time trying to figure out where the date will go," he said that afternoon, when I asked about his expectations. "I think she'll be attractive. I think she'll be just a bit heavier than she looks in her pictures, since she did not list her weight anywhere. I think we will get along very quickly. It would be out of line to assume that we're going to have sex, but I think it's a definite possibility. . . . She's told me that my e-mails make her laugh, which might be good or bad, as it is difficult for me to be funny in person before the conversation has gained momentum, and I've actually had dates comment that I'm much quieter than they expected. . . . The key is fun. Intense mutual attraction is optional. Playful lust will do."

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## Sex

The next day, Greg sent me this account of his date: "Well, she was a little on the heavy side, as I expected, but wearing it well. She was well dressed and drank quickly at first. I wouldn't say there was an immediate comfort level; she seemed maybe just a little nervous at first." They hit a couple of bars on Manhattan's Lower East Side, played pool and ate grilled-cheese sandwiches. The evening ended like this: "We took the cab to my place and made out during the entire ride, except when I needed to direct the driver. My place is a wreck. My bed is in the living room. It's a good thing that my roommate was already asleep, because I have absolutely no privacy when he decides to walk through the apartment. . . . We got naked, I left the light on, we had some really good sex for around 40 minutes and passed out by about 1:30." He concluded: "I'd say she'd see me again. It will probably happen at some point."

I remarked to Greg that by virtually any standard, it sounded like a successful date and asked for his evaluation. "This was a run-of-the-mill date, or maybe a

notch better than that," he said. "I liked her, but not enough to merit fireworks. Given the seemingly endless selection, I get to be a little less forgiving."

Until the late 1960's, marriage was the best guarantor of regular sex. Thereafter, it was being in a steady relationship. But online dating may be on its way to eliminating that particular incentive for commitment. Sites like men4men4sex.com and adultfriendfinder.com or the "Casual Encounters" area of Craig's List exist purely to coordinate sex dates among interested parties with complementary tastes, often on very short notice. But even at the more main-

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stream sites, one-night stands are commonplace and easy to arrange. L., a 31-year-old information-technology specialist, had several one-night stands during the three years he lived in New York. (He moved to Paris last August.) He let me log into one of his accounts and scour the old e-mail exchanges, a typical one of which (to "sexyangelina") reads: "Let me know if you're interested. . . . I think we could have fun." The woman's response: "Where yah goin'?" He: "Moving to Paris." She: "Whoa! Why is that? You're such a cutie! Good luck to you, though." This time, "sexyangelina" included a private e-mail address, so the communication could bypass the dating site. "It starts with a few e-mails," L. said, "and goes to I.M. More pictures are exchanged, then it goes to a phone call, and that's when the deal is usually closed. Typically, it doesn't take very long if both people are interested in the same thing. . . . On two occasions the women have come to my place, had sex with me, and we haven't had one paragraph of conversation."

The ability to prospect anonymously for lovers who have no overlap with your actual life is something of a Valhalla for married people inclined toward extramarital sex, and by all accounts, the dating sites are teeming with them. Many are disguised as singles, while some operate quite openly, usually—though not always—without a picture. (Friendster and Spring Street Networks allow "open marriage" and "discreet," respectively, in their choices of "relationship status.")

Greg may not be looking for a serious relationship, but he's not after no-strings sex, either. An ideal date for Greg is a woman he can see casually, sleep with for as long as possible, and stay friends with when the sex ends. The lack of context around women he meets online doesn't trouble him. "We had enough in common, I guess," he said of the woman he slept with on the first date the previous night. "I tend to focus more on the fun at hand—I'm not preoccupied with matching up with a person's life goals or hobbies or anything." By the end of that week, he had gone on four dates with women he'd met online (one indirectly; she was the friend of another online date) and had slept with three of them—a busy week, Greg said, though not extraordinary. He practices safe sex. "It's more or less understood with everyone that condoms are mandatory," he explained. "I even have a brand. There is also a brand I hate. Also, it's extremely rare for the girl not to have condoms. The one time I forgot mine because of a last-minute pants change, my date had a whole box in her purse."

Those disillusioned with online dating will tell you that its promise of a no-muss relationship attracts people with intimacy and commitment problems. This is probably true. A 50-year-old American magazine editor who lives in Paris says that he has used online personals over the past 10 years to orchestrate “adventures”—rendezvous in foreign locales with women from various European countries. “There are periods when a frenzy comes upon you,” he said. “You really feel yourself in the grip of something that’s kind of like a ‘high.’ The problem comes when you try to make that happen again and the feeling gets progressively more tepid and less exciting each time around. And before you know it, you’re looking for somebody new.” This man calls his present relationship, of one year, “a record for me.” Yet he recently posted profiles on two French dating sites. “This is kind of made for people like me, who prefer fantasy to reality,” he said of online dating. For this man, though, the promise of a no-strings attachment has often proved illusory. “Whatever people say, they tend to get involved,” he told me. “People tend to lose their hearts.”

**“Whatever people say, they tend to lose their hearts.”**

## Rejection

Relationships begun online have a tendency to end there too. This generally happens one of two ways: by e-mail or by no e-mail—i.e., someone disappears. Regan, the Atlanta technical writer whose dating log I excerpted above, fell in love last spring with a man she met online: a journalist living in Atlanta. “We e-mailed and talked on the phone for about a year before we met,” she told me. “We set up a meeting two times. He stood me up both times.” The reason was guilt: He had a live-in girlfriend. In April, Regan happened to pass this man on the street, and they recognized each other from the many digital photos they’d exchanged. “We circled each other, in slow motion, in disbelief,” she remembered. “Everything in me relaxed, calmed, stilled. . . . It was IT. The thunderbolt. And he was going through exactly the same thing.” They began a relationship that flourished despite the fact that the journalist kept postponing the promised breakup with his girlfriend. On Regan’s birthday, he sent a gift and a love letter from Europe and left her three messages. “His heart is completely open, visible at all times, this one,” she said.

Then silence. Days and then weeks began to pass. Because there was no overlap in their work or social or daily lives, Regan had no idea whether the man was still in Europe or had returned to Atlanta, and they had no friends in common to ask. “I feel like I’ll never smile again, let alone laugh,” she told me. “Everything weighs eight million pounds. . . . I guess anyone can do anything to you at any time.”

The journalist resurfaced several weeks later with an unsatisfying explanation and hopes of resuming the relationship. Regan agreed to see him and continues to, but repairing the gouge left by his sudden absence has been difficult.

People in fledgling relationships begun online can vanish from one another’s lives with the same breathtaking efficiency as a line of text deleted

from a word processing document, leaving no hole, no gap in one another's daily lives to mark the fact that they were ever there. For some, an awareness of this exit strategy permeates the enterprise, allowing them to skimp on the niceties they would more or less have to extend toward a person they were likely to meet again. Newcomers to online dating either acclimate themselves to these occasional early evaporations or abandon the practice altogether. "I'm totally irritated at how disrespectful it is to just disappear," a 27-year-old TV producer fumed after the man she had been dating for three weeks failed to call and then stopped answering her e-mail messages. "I really don't have the energy or the self-esteem to continue to meet guys whose backgrounds I don't know." She was one of several people who renounced online dating in the course of my interviewing them for this article, although the paucity of alternatives soon drove her back and she has since become seriously involved with a man she met on Friendster.

Because online relationships begin in a state of mutual absence, "disappearance" may be the wrong word for a sudden lack of contact between two people who meet this way; more, these are failures to reappear from the digital murk that came first. And because the avatars who reside in that digital realm often hang about long after their makers have ceased to communicate, it is possible for people to keep distant, prolonged track of one another. Lynn Ross, a clothing merchandiser in her 40's, was involved for three months with a married man who deceived her into believing he was single. The relationship ended nine months ago, but she still checks his profile, noting recently that he continues to update it every week. And Marie, the designer, takes comfort from the fact that a man she loved and was rejected by is often logged into the dating site where they met. "Sometimes when I see him online late at night," she said, "I think: Good. Another night he's home alone."

### Getting Serious

Online dates that lead to love—and they are legion—are a little like Tolstoy's happy families: for all their quirky particularity, they end up sounding strangely alike. There's Kellie Smith, 33, from outside Boston, an occupational therapist who whimsically clicked "Love on AOL" during her lunch break and found herself on Match.com, where she dashed off e-mail messages to several men who interested her. Michael DuGally, 35, a partner in a Massachusetts furniture manufacturing company, was her first online date; they met for lunch and never really parted. Last summer, the couple asked Match.com for a logo banner so they could be photographed with it on their wedding day.

They aren't the only ones making such requests, according to Trish McDermott, vice president for romance at Match.com; the company has forked over baseball caps and matchbooks to give away at weddings, along with well wishes and toasts to be read aloud. One couple designed their wedding cake in the shape of a computer, with the top section decorated to look like the

Match.com welcome page. Michael and Kellie, whom I met for a drink in Manhattan just after their honeymoon in Greece, call themselves lucky, as if a fluke of chance had brought them together. There was no intersection at all between their worlds, yet the connection they feel, they say, is “spooky.” Neither wants children. Both practice Bikram yoga. They don’t like making plans, but are very neat. They love to shop. They even drink the same cocktail: Grey Goose orange vodka on the rocks, with two wedges of lime.

There are scads of stories like this from every walk of life, so that even the most jaundiced view of online personals must contend with the fact that people manage to find one another this way—again and again and again. So far in 2003, McDermott says, more than 140,000 Match.com members said they were leaving the site “because they found the person they were seeking there.”

As of December, Angel and Carmen, the couple who met on LatinSingles.com, plan to be living together in Boston. But removing their profiles from the dating site—the watermark of commitment in a relationship begun online—is something neither wants to do. A community of sorts has sprung up among the single people posting on the message boards, Angel says. “My girlfriend and I, we did create a lot of friendships on this board. We have created a ganglike type of thing.” There are even plans for “gang” members, many of whom have never met, to convene in New York this winter. So rather than remove their profiles, Angel and Carmen hope to bend the genre and create a joint profile of some sort—as Angel puts it, “something that will reflect both of us.”

The circularity here is intriguing: an absence of real-world community fuels a schematic, inorganic online ritual that spawns a network of online friendships that ultimately pushes back out into the real world. No context becomes, in effect, a context all its own—an avatar, if you will, of the city itself. This is how the Internet was supposed to work, and it suggests that the deep impulse behind the success of online dating could reach well beyond dating itself. Friendster lets people search for one another using book titles, band names, and TV shows, among other things, as keywords, and its “interested in meeting people for” category offers not only “friends” and “dating” but also “activity partners” and “just here to help.” Greg used Nerve.com to research nightlife before a weekend trip to San Francisco; he arrived with two prearranged dates and a list of 19 bars he was interested in checking out. The chairman of Spring Street Networks, Rufus Griscom, sees the company as not even being in the business of online dating so much as “purchasing access to like-minded people.” The long-term vision, here, looks like something out of a Borges story: a virtual clearinghouse where potential lovers, friends, business associates, audience members, and devotees of all forms of culture—invisible to one another in the shadowy cracks of cities around the world—are registered, profiled, and findable. An alternate dimension where the randomness and confusion of urban life are at last sorted out.

**Relationships begun online have a tendency to end there too.**

## Analyzing the Text

1. Has dating in the traditional sense disappeared altogether? How have dating practices transformed into something completely new? From Egan's perspective, what does it mean to date someone today?
2. According to Egan, how is online dating like the following:
  - Job-hunting?
  - Shopping or marketing oneself?
  - Playing a game?

Find examples from the reading that explain how the principles behind these activities affect the expectations people bring to online dating.

3. According to Egan, how does the online profile, which she refers to as an avatar, impact modern dating? An avatar is a version of ourselves that we project into digital spaces like the Internet. An avatar represents a person in cyberspace. How has the use of avatars benefited the dating process? How have avatars created limitations or hurt the dating process?
4. Throughout the essay, Egan suggests that the online world, which includes virtual profiles, emailing, and instant messaging, frequently clashes with the "real world" when people use online dating services. According to this essay, how have online practices or attitudes begun to change "real-world" dating?
5. **Connecting to Another Reading.** David Sedaris's "The End of the Affair" (p. 272) begins this chapter because it provides a starting point for defining the classic themes of romantic love in American culture. Egan's essay takes the next step by asking, "How has courtship—or finding romance—changed today?" Having read her essay, how would you answer this question? How would you compare people's expectations about romance today to the classic views about romance that you identified for the Sedaris essay?

## Writing about Cultural Practices

6. Every online profile presents an argument for why readers should be interested in meeting its author. Choose one online dating or social networking site and analyze how the site structures the profiles appearing within it. One chief question is: How do the websites dictate how people can represent themselves? Begin by exploring several different sites, paying particular attention to the questions the site asks its members to respond to when creating a profile and the advice the site gives for writing a successful profile. As you draft your essay, consider these questions.
  - What kinds of facts, features, or qualities about a person are emphasized by the structure of the profiles? What about a person is deemed most important or attractive?
  - How much emphasis is placed on photographs?
  - What facts, features, or qualities about a person *cannot* be conveyed in a profile because of the structure imposed?
  - How does the site determine whether a profile is acceptable?

7. Egan's essay illustrates how important and sometimes complicated emails or instant messages can become between people looking for romance. Work with a partner or in a group to create a guide that explains the unspoken rules of using email versus instant messaging versus phone calls for communicating with a potential love interest.
- To begin, create a list of eight to ten reasons people use these methods to initiate communication. (For example, to introduce themselves? To flirt? To ask someone out? To turn someone down? To talk to someone the day after a date?)
  - In one section of your guide, explain which medium—email, IM-ing, or phone calling—is most appropriate for communicating each of these eight to ten messages effectively. Provide examples to illustrate your advice.
  - Next, include a second section in which you identify five common social blunders people make when using one of these methods to communicate. Be sure that you explain both the benefits and the drawbacks for using email versus IM-ing versus phone calls.