

Sometimes I see a young woman standing on a Manhattan street corner on a Friday afternoon, suitcase slung over her shoulder, a look of anticipation on her face, and I remember, quite well, how it was.

Being in love meant making a weekend pilgrimage. Sometimes he flew down to see me. More often—especially during the warm months—I left the steaming streets of New York City and headed for the cool brick sidewalks of Portland, Maine. After a year of flying back and forth, and a few thousand dollars spent between us on phone calls and plane fare, he decided to do what he'd been fantasizing about for ten years—and what I'd been hoping he'd do—take on the big city. From the start of our relationship, we'd always talked about living in the same city. We assumed that such proximity would solve all our problems, that everything that disturbed us about our relationship could be attributed to distance. That there were problems not related to our three-hour commute didn't cross our minds.

He was a bank attorney in Portland, and hoped to find a similar position in New York. We assumed it would be a long hunt, but within a month, he had a job, at nearly double his previous salary. He was ecstatic. He was positively cocky.

We celebrated in a Japanese restaurant in my Upper West Side neighborhood. We sat at one of those low tables, our legs folded under us. We toasted. To a



THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG- DISTANCE LOVER

by
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new life. To a life together. To the end of the commute. To the end of hour-long phone calls that cost \$30. To the end—and about this we were a little sad—of ten-page missives written in the still of the night. On the way home he told me he loved me very much and appreciated my help in moving to the city.

Ten months later, after a terrible struggle, we went our separate ways.

That we met at all surprises me. My buddy Cheryl, from Portland, wanted to visit me in New York during the last week of November. I was swamped with work and knew I wouldn't be able to act as tour guide. I welcomed her, but suggested that she harness a friend. She said she'd bring her downstairs neighbor, a real swell guy and a good pal.

When I opened the door Friday, at midnight, I was surprised. "Swell" wasn't an adequate description. Cheryl stood next to a tall, chisel-jawed, green-eyed, mustached man with an unruly head of brown hair. His face was tanned and ruddy; he made the men I knew in New York look like raw potato pancakes.

I started feeling warm, flushed and somewhat weak in the knees, a sensation I hadn't had in so long, I'd forgotten

The plane rides and the phone bills didn't faze us. It was sharing the same zip code that turned out to be hard

what it meant. I gave them sheets and towels and rolled out the futon and the sofa bed. Then I went to bed with a smile on my face.

For the first two days I raced through meetings and interviews while they ran through SoHo and every bar in Greenwich Village. When we gathered for dinner, I found myself ignoring the date I'd brought along in favor of deep conversation with my handsome visitor. We dumped the date early and pub-crawled some more. I seemed to need no sleep.

On their third, and last, night I presented a slide show of a trip I'd taken to China. He unrolled the futon to stretch out, and I used his ankles as a pillow for my head, very much aware that my neck and his knees were touching.

Cheryl stayed awake through the show; right after it, she passed out. It was 2 A.M.—but he and I kept talking. He told me about the town where he'd

grown up, six hours north of Portland, in a part of Maine I'd never even noticed on the map. He told me about the two-room school he'd attended through grade school and junior high, and something about his family. They were Adventists and lived a very simple life. The closest town of any size was 30 miles away. There was no drinking, no dancing, no swearing. There was church, school and hard work.

He and his twin brother had grown up plotting an escape from that life on the farm. While their mother shopped in Presque Isle for the few things she didn't sew or grow herself, they raided the store that sold used paperbacks. They read Karl Marx and Jack Kerouac. They read Allen Ginsberg's poetry. They waited and planned for the time they could get on the road.

It was 4 A.M. and time to sleep, but his stories fascinated me. I was obsessed with the deep crinkles that formed around his eyes when he smiled. He said he was going to wash up. I crawled into my room and lay down on the bed, my face in the pillows. All I knew was that I wanted him to lie down next to me. I tried to pass the information by mental telepathy, but it didn't work. He was a houseguest, not a suitor. He would never make the first move. And I didn't know how to extend the invitation.

After they left the next day, a weird melancholia settled over me, but there was nothing to be done. If he were polite, he'd write me a thank-you note, but I kind of hoped he wouldn't because the men I knew who wrote thank-you notes had their mothers' apron strings securely wrapped around their private parts. It was possible that I would not hear from him again. I started to scheme. I could visit Cheryl. I could drop him a note.

I came home one afternoon about a week later and opened my mailbox. Inside, almost buried in junk mail, was an antique postcard from Portland, ME. Within an hour, I'd written back. That was the beginning of a correspondence so voluminous and ardent that my postman, who got used to my hanging around while he sorted the mail, started calling me "Portland."

We pretended to be pen pals, nothing more, but writing to each other became a special occasion, as anticipated as a night on the town. I regaled him with tales of my latest escapades in New York—but I carefully left out any mention of the men who accompanied me. He wrote about work and what he was reading, about what Cheryl was doing, about his family. We were dating by mail. We communicated only by post; he didn't call, and neither did I.

After a month of letters, he asked, rather obliquely, if I hadn't mentioned some intention of heading north for cross-coun-

try skiing. I had, but I clutched. If we turned this Victorian dalliance into a full-blown love affair, it might fade. Still, I couldn't resist. I felt like I'd gotten to know him pretty well through the mail. He seemed so gentle and thoughtful and romantic. I made my plane reservations. I let my fantasies, which I'd held sternly in check, finally run wild. Surely the gods had smiled on me this time: This had to be THE ONE. My expectations were outrageously high. I packed the requisite long underwear and sweaters, the seven-pound typewriter I always travel with and an oval, blue plastic box that indicated, at least to me, that I had no intention of keeping this relationship platonic.

On the night I arrived, the three of us went out to dinner, to the best restaurant in Portland. I pitied poor Cheryl. She found herself in the middle of a mutual seduction. I have no idea what we ate; just that we were in a frantic hurry to find a way to be alone. There was a complication: My suitcase was in Cheryl's apartment, where, determined to be subtle, I had deposited it. We returned, sat down at her kitchen table and looked at each other. We tried some small talk. Cheryl rolled her eyes and excused herself. I offered to show him my seven-pound typewriter. I put it through its paces. Then, since I was so used to communicating with him on paper, I typed a message: "I'm sleepy. Would you be interested in retiring?"

He got the picture. He picked up my suitcase and headed for Cheryl's front door, with me right behind him.

I didn't get back to New York for a week, and when I did, I walked around with a silly grin on my face. After a long hiatus, I was actually in love. He'd never felt any need to come to New York on business before, but suddenly he began to have Friday-morning meetings in the city. For a month we were rarely apart. By the time the fourth weekend was over, we were a couple. Nobody said anything, but we knew we weren't just dating. We didn't know each other very well, but this relationship was going to be serious and exclusive, or it wasn't going to exist at all. Neither of us needed to travel three hours to get a date.

People Express made our love affair possible. The Newark-to-Portland route opened just after we met. We could make the trip for \$23, off-peak, which was cheaper than dinner for two in a decent restaurant. We joked that if we got married, Donald Burr, the airline's president and CEO at the time, would receive the first wedding invitation. As it was, he was getting a nice chunk of our disposable income.

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long-distance love was deceptively easy. There was an extended honeymoon. Most couples get through this phase in a couple of weeks, but we stuck with it all spring. We'd never had more fun. The commute seemed effortless; we couldn't be nice enough to each other. If he'd asked me to marry him, I would have. Fortunately, he had better sense.

After the honeymoon was over, a strange cloud settled over us. It was as if some important part were missing. I'd develop this sad feeling in the pit of my stomach after we'd part for the week, and it would stay with me. I missed him most when it stayed light until 9 P.M.; the sidewalks were buzzing with people in love, and I was alone. I couldn't understand it: I had a boyfriend I was crazy about, and yet I was more alone than I'd been in years. The sadness would go, I thought, if we lived in the same place.

The letters kept coming, now sweetened with "my darling" and "my dearest," but letters weren't immediate enough. So we turned to the phone—that instrument of the devil. Sometimes I'd try to call him and get no answer for hours; I'd be overcome with a sick, weak feeling. I'd envision terrible things: First, he was out with somebody else. Then, as it got later, he was dead in a ditch. It took me months to learn—and remember—that if he'd had a rotten day, he would unplug his phone. Sometimes, after a night of not being able to reach him, I'd call him at his office. Then I'd be put off by his formality, although I knew that if his office door was open, dozens of people could hear every word he said. We'd generally close with a discussion of plans for our next reunion. And then I had to hear him say he'd talk to me in a couple of days. I needed to know when, precisely. I was afraid he'd disappear into thin air.

The first moments we spent together after a week apart were always difficult. Just getting there was nerve-racking. Inevitably, the plane was late or canceled. When I'd finally arrive, some time on Friday evening, I would meet him, not in his bachelor's digs, but in a local bar, where we could both decompress. We found that this cooling-out phase was essential. After a week apart, we found instant intimacy tough to handle.

We'd stand there in the after-work din, growing accustomed again to each other's faces. Slowly, the fantasy people we'd created during the week would start to dissipate. This was painful. Long distance gives you the opportunity to fantasize on a heroic scale. When you finally see him, you are shocked. He's not a

white knight who's going to whisk you away from your troubles; he's actually a little cranky and rattling on about his boss, the bastard. He looks at you and wonders where his dreamgirl is—the really sexy one he had all those bedtime reveries about. Your hair has gone stick-straight, you smell of jet fuel and you're demanding the love and reassurance you were missing all week.

For the rest of the weekend you wait expectantly for some of the fantasy qualities to appear. And, indeed, some of them do. You applaud your good judgment. As you head to the airport for the return trip, a new crop of fantasies starts to sprout in your head.

We packed a lot of life into that summer. We went hiking and camping and bicycling. I loved his strength and his energy. One Sunday night we misread a ferry schedule and pedaled frantically for the dock. I went faster than I'd ever gone in my life, and he beat me by three minutes. I joked that I knew what had happened to his old girlfriends—they'd died from overexertion.

Every weekend had to be letter-perfect. We had to be happy and in love every minute. We set aside the nagging chores of real life. Nobody asked for time out to do the laundry. If we saw ourselves heading into dangerous water, we'd quickly back-paddle; no time for arguments. And consequently, no time to come to a deeper understanding of what made us tick. We pretended we understood each other, but there was always a space between us. We romanticized each other's lives. He thought the words flew effortlessly from my fingers when I sat down at the typewriter; he didn't know how I struggled and stomped around and complained. I thought he was an intellectual who just happened to be a banker; I didn't know how much of his life he had spent dreaming—and not doing. And I didn't know how deep his insecurities ran.

I remember walking one day on the Western Promenade with him in Portland, looking at the stately brick houses and the sea. The summer was over and we were talking about the future. We agreed that we needed to live in the same city. I offered to move to Portland, at least for a while. I had visions of writing fiction in front of a fireplace somewhere. He thought it was a bad idea. He was tired of Portland, he said. He was ready to move on. He had seen a lot of New York on his visits with me, and he liked what he saw. Two months later, after a long Sunday afternoon tour of congested upper Broadway, he told me he

was ready to move to the city. We held hands all the way home.

We were both startled that he found work so fast. It took him less than a month. He took a Monday off and came to New York for a job interview. The company was kind of straight, kind of uptight, but the money was amazingly good, and they'd pay for his move. He would start in three weeks. I screamed with joy. I hugged him and jumped up and down. We had our Japanese food and celebrated.

He didn't sleep much that night. By morning, reality had set in. He said, as gently as he could, that he thought it was best if we didn't live together at first. I was a little disappointed, but I agreed. Then he started to say things that made me nervous. He didn't want to spend every night with me. He wanted to be able to go off on weekends by himself. And, most important, he wasn't thinking of marrying anytime soon. He was about to give up everything he knew, and he was trying to create some structure. I wasn't calm. I'd always believed that if we lived in the same city, things would be perfect. Now I felt like I was watching the whole dream explode in my face.

Things were never really right after he came to New York. I thought he resented me for who I was. I knew the ropes; I could get anywhere and find anything—and if he needed so much as a tailor, he had to ask my advice. Differences I'd previously refused to see stood up in front of me and hollered. I was an extrovert, delighted to meet new people. He was a loner, and I knew he'd have trouble making friends in New York. All of his life he'd been the star: the best student, the popular bachelor, the successful bank lawyer. Now he was a very small fish in a pond full of piranhas.

I tried to help, but in retrospect, I probably did more harm than good. I introduced him to some of my friends, hoping that all he needed was a drinking buddy and a night out. He liked them all right, but they were, he said, my friends. I tried to get him to make some plans: pick out a place to eat, find an exhibit to see. He'd done that with enthusiasm when he was a visitor. But he couldn't do it anymore. He was afraid he'd make a mistake. The restaurant would be terrible. The exhibit would be closed. I watched him wither, and I tried to figure out what I could do.

On the bad days I felt like he was living off me. It was always *my* friends, *my* parties, *my* enthusiasm, the restaurants I knew and the plans I made. He wasn't contributing. When I made arrangements, he resented them. I'd leave the planning to him and we'd find ourselves in front of the TV on a Friday night.

By the time he'd been in New York for six months, I knew we wouldn't make it through the year. I could hardly remember the vital, sweet man I'd known in Portland. We rarely touched. When he put his arms around me, I felt like he was embracing a sack of potatoes. And he was hostile. He didn't like my friends or my life. I didn't think he liked me; I yearned to get out, if just for a few late nights. I dreamed of wild evenings on the town—with a couple of suave Europeans as escorts.

I also had a little problem with guilt. He said he'd moved to New York because he was ready for the big time. But I knew the truth. If it hadn't been for me, he would have never uprooted himself. That he was miserable was my fault.

We split up as winter was ending. One snowy Saturday morning, well-provoked and not without warning, he snatched his cross-country skis out of my closet and said he'd had it. We'd been through this before; previously, I'd raced to the elevator to bring him back. But this time when he stalked out, leaving his pipe, his tobacco and his book on my kitchen counter, I let him go. Before the weekend was over, I returned the items he'd left behind. I didn't cry very much. There is no point in crying when there is nothing you can change. He needed to be free of me. He needed to make his own friends and stake out his own turf—to make New York his own. I couldn't do it for him.

To my irritation, my friends were not surprised when we split. Long-distance relationships never worked, they pointed out. I corrected them: The long-distance part was fine. It was proximity that killed us. But I thought about what they said. We had somehow failed to get to know each other during the first year. I didn't know that he was so hung up about having been born into a farm family in northern Maine that he could barely tell my friends where he was from. And I didn't know that the traits that had attracted him to me in the first place—my ease with strangers, my high level of organization and my motivation—were qualities that he thought he lacked and desperately wanted.

I called him a few times, feigning business, but really wanting to know how he was. My friends asked me if he planned to return to Maine. I didn't know. He was cold and distant on the phone; there was nothing left of his warm, kind voice.

I dated my Europeans. I ran all over town. I grew my nails long, painted them red and wore obvious makeup—things he hated. As the months went by, I thought of him sometimes and smiled. Yet I was pleased that I had not, upon his departure, turned him into an obsession.

Autumn, and another anniversary of our meeting, came and went without notice. I left town for a week in December to avoid celebrating my birthday. When I got back, there was a message from him on my machine. The warm, kind voice had returned. Would I call him back as soon as I could? I burst into tears. Then I played the message five times.

I took a shower, pulled a flannel nightgown over my head, climbed into bed and dialed his number, which I had not forgotten. We stayed on the phone for two hours. There were no awkward silences. We had a million things to say. We said we wanted to see each other. We said we were scared. He had a new job. He had some friends. He felt much better. He knew I'd never believe him, but he actually liked New York.

We couldn't seem to hang up. It looked like we were going to talk all night. I was the one who asked if we could meet. He wasn't going home to Maine for Christmas, since it fell in the middle of the week. For him, it was going to be a grim holiday. I could hardly invite him to my parents' house under the circumstances. But I asked him to meet me for a drink on Christmas night. We agreed that if either of us developed cold feet, we were perfectly free to change our minds.

He was sitting in the window of our neighborhood bar. I saw him before I crossed the street. I ran in and hugged him. I knew that the guy I'd fallen in love with in Portland was once again inhabiting his body. It was palpable: His eyes were clear, his grin was real. And when he held me, there was an emotional connection I had forgotten existed.

He said he wanted me back. He thought we had a decent shot at having something really great. I wasn't sure. The memory of the last months together had stayed with me. I agreed to see him sometimes; I wasn't sure how often. I wasn't going to give up my social life entirely. He liked the challenge. And I enjoyed being the subject of ardent pursuit.

We're not home free. There are still plenty of problems. But we're doing a good job of working them out. We're getting to know each other, the way we should have in the beginning.

This month we're getting a good dose of it. He's moved in with me while he waits for a new apartment to be readied. When he departed this morning for work, he left his coffee cup on the floor and assorted dirty socks in a small pile next to it. I put the coffee cup in the sink. I haven't decided what to do about the socks. □

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