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# Virtually Romance

## *A Discourse on Love in the Information Age*

Wendy Rawlings

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*In the Atharvaveda time is regarded as the generator of all things, including Brahman, and will be the source of their destruction.*

—Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion

*The key points of Netiquette serve a useful purpose: they keep the information flow efficient, civil, and comprehensible.*

—Navigating the Internet with your Macintosh

*Women take a haptic, holistic view of men.*

—John Updike

**I**n a computer store, out-of-season greeting cards tilting in their rickety racks, in a depressed Utah town east of Salt Lake City, I observe my companion, a writer visiting the university here for a week. I know him about as well as I know this depressed town. And yet already to look at him is as unbearable as it is to look away. The hands jammed in jeans pockets. Quizzical tilt of the head, this almost constant, the way dogs' heads cock when receiving sounds far out of human range. Listening, lips pressed together, a smile barely suppressed. Not "good features." Not "handsome." Only gesture, a premonition of touch.

It's no longer bearable. I look up at the ceiling. I can still hear him gently barraging the man behind the counter: "What's the economy like in this place?" "How do Anglos and Native Americans get along?" "What do people around here do for work?"

The ceiling. Quite unexpectedly in a shop so rundown that generations of black flies are living and dying in the front window, the ceiling is magnificent, ornate as an antebellum ballroom's. There should be a chandelier hanging from it. "Look," I tell him. Up his head tilts.

At Marion's Five and Dime Luncheonette we both order grilled cheese on white as everything else on the menu starts with Spam. Spam and beans. Spam and mashed potatoes. Spam on toast. It is at once understood that neither of us trusts meat byproduct shaped like the can it's packaged in, though as a child of a dual-career couple Spam and Mary Kitchen Hash were my dual-career dinner, a marriage made in aluminum. Looking elsewhere so as to observe something other than my companion sitting across the Formica-topped table from me, my eyes catch Elvis clocks, hips swinging with each tick: spam-spam-spam.

At the Protestant church on the Indian Reservation more generations of black flies live by stained glass and die on the carpet. "This time of day is the worst, with the sun," says the pastor, a man with denim shorts and braids to his waist. Cheapie pictures on the walls depict Jesus lugging the cross all over the place.

My companion, head cocked, is pointing out the window. "What's with that little model of the church?"

Out behind the church is a child-size facsimile of a church, ramshackle and littered with trash. The pastor shrugs. "We built that a few years ago for the kids. I keep meaning to repair it." Later, in the Indian burying ground, my companion tells me, "That's how they are about time." I find an unexpired state identification card on the ground. He shows me relics left at the gravestones: a Budweiser can, dirty one-eared porcelain bunnies, a tiny pile of fading green M&M's, a hank of hair tied to a stick.

"You looked up. That's great. I never look up," he says.

I've knocked him a little sideways. I too am out of my groove. Bad had been brewing between my live-in boyfriend and me, but now I've upped the ante. We are driving back from the Reservation to the city and I'm two hours later than I told my boyfriend I would be.

"When you're forty I'll be sixty. When you're fifty I'll be seventy. When you're seventy-five I'll be ninety-five." All this math and we haven't even touched each other yet. He of the gloomy algebra and moss growing on his antlers thinks he knows the kind of woman I am. The kind of woman he thinks I am: observant. Indeed I am observant; in fact, I am a deeply distracted and by the standards of late-twentieth-century capitalism shamefully unproductive woman. I have no husband or children to take care of, no yard to weed; I'm a dismal cook whose culinary forays are restricted to boiling freeze-dried Indian meals. By my own shaky algebra I spend sixty-five to seventy percent of an average day observing. And yet I looked up not because I was particularly curious about the ceiling but because I was

worried he might catch me in an act of naked observation: staring. At what? At him.

He loves my hair, he confesses. My hair? He has been looking at me all day. I punctuate our kisses with little sighs out of range of human hearing. When I take off my glasses I don't hear as acutely. "I'm glad you can't see without your glasses," he says. He feels he's fat. Oh, Jesus. Vanity the cross we all lug. He might be fat but what would I care? I only care if I'm fat. This is the way women's lust works. On the counter in his hotel room sit two bags, up close I see without my glasses are Doritos and Twizzlers. "When you're seventy I'll be in an urn," he says. I think of Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt, Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, Anthony Hopkins and any number of starlets. "I don't even think about your age," I say. The sort of thing young women are supposed to tell men worried about moss and math.

He's in town a week, and then he has to go back where he came from.

### *Cyberspace*

From: Tully@aol.com  
 To: Wendy@aol.com  
 Subject: Re: Romance

*In a message dated XX/XX/XX 02:18:31 EST, you write:*

*<<I knew I never should have allowed you to take off my underwear . . . >>*

*Sweetie, I don't mean to be critical, but you DO seem to have a slightly irrational attachment to your underwear, and a slightly exaggerated sense of your underwear's magical ability to ward off evil (or me). We'll have to work on this, perhaps get you a therapist . . .*

### *Tempus Fugit*

Virtual romance is a freeze-dried package of Saag Paneer. It is Saag Paneer, yes: by American standards an adventurous meal. It is not, say, chicken-flavored ramen noodles. It is not a can of Spam. And yet, when you slit the silver package open and pour its contents on a bed of basmati rice, there is the infinitely disappointing trace odor of whatever chemicals are used to preserve this food in freeze-dried form. A food facsimile. You feel you are eating a meal poured out of a Mylar balloon. If you keep a jar of chutney in the refrigerator you have, nonetheless, in a hundred and twenty shifts of Elvis's hips, a virtual Indian meal.

*Cyberspace*

From: Tully@aol.com  
To: Wendy@aol.com  
Subject: Re: Romance

*It's amazing that we'll see each other so soon (given the distance) and it'll be nice to be together around Christmas. And then it won't be so long before it's your birthday. Shit—I really have to get off and get to work. But I wanted to tell you that everything's okay for December; that I am incredibly in love with you, that you will have to use a crowbar to get my arms off you when I see you (do you REALLY have to pee alone? do you really like being apart from me that much?).*

*Mostly Incommunicado, Tortola, British Virgin Islands*

“Tortola” is a word that feels like food. “Tor-tolla!” my father exhorts in a bad Italian accent. My father, he of the moss rapidly accumulating on at least one antler, is recovering from an earlier fiasco alfresco with a cocktail at the Moorings boat charter clubhouse. He and my sister compete to see who will be the first to tie a maraschino cherry stem with their tongues. At four-thirty that morning, he warned my sister and me about not forgetting things, then misplaced the plane tickets and made us miss the flight. The tickets were in the car trunk the whole time, so we can make jokes about senility. *You'll be in an urn.* We are chartering a sailboat for five days, a Christmas trip my father has talked about for years.

At the dock he examines the boat's steering mechanism and finds a penny going green as the Statue of Liberty. “The wire's snapped,” he says, spinning the steering wheel in futile circles. “They don't maintain these.” *A marriage made in aluminum.* He and my mother have been divorced just over a year, my mother in menopause too high maintenance. Maraschino cherries prick in me a bright nostalgia for before divorce, the four of us at restaurants for seafood, “Shirley Temples for the girls.”

My sister's popping Bonine to ward off even the idea of sickness. I keep thinking *home* instead of *sea*. It's my computer I miss out here. Black women have provisioned our boat, named *Karen Anne* as if it's a girlfriend you climb on. Over Triscuits and Cheez Wiz I feel guilty. I'm white and sailing, they're not and not. “Is there any Spam down there?” I call to my sister in the galley. No, she says, but nine cans of Coco Lopez. It takes three sips of a Painkiller before I taste it's rancid and spit.

At the topmost island, The Bitter End, as I am lovesick and hungerless, I can't abide the all-you-can-eat buffet (\$32.50 per person). Instead I order drinks, three Painkillers at \$6.25 each.

We return to our boat in the dinghy, me holding the hurricane lamp out in front. Up fish jump in the path the light casts. I shout for my father and sister to look.

Tully calls on our ship-to-shore phone from a blizzard in New York: Subzero. Ice storms. Power lines down. And me? Snorkeling. Rancid Coco Lopez. Too many Painkillers. My guide to Caribbean marine life says the brown fish I saw today, with prominent lips and what look like thick eyebrows, are called Jewfish. Racial slur? Trying to describe snorkeling to someone who has never snorkeled is like trying to describe making love to someone who has never loved.

Underneath the boat a barracuda spooks my sister, transfixed by swarms of white fish. "That's some sick rush hour," she says as she climbs up *Karen Anne's* ladder. For dinner the next night we have the special, trigger fish.

### *Synchronous, Manhattan*

Tully is vexed at the sight of my suntanned torso. At fifty, his flesh next to mine makes him think of death. At the hotel he unpacks not Doritos and Twizzlers but economy-sized bottles of Listerine and conditioner. Will we co-gargle? We'll only be here for two days, never mind that he of the mossy antlers might have more in the way of moss than hair. Why condition?

He gives me a Maxfield Parrish pop-up book, a naked nymphette bending on the cover. Can he imagine me at thirty an old Lolita? "You're not supposed to *read* it," he says. Chastened, I look and pull the pop-up tabs.

In bed he talks about the 1850s in England and the concept of the individual. As he speaks I'm already counting the hours until I'll have to be back on the plane to Utah: 32.5. *That's how they are about time.* I like the middle of the night because I can't guess the hour. "You're not supposed to *laugh* during sex," he says, chagrined beneath me. But always in the middle of it I think of a word like "spatula."

My sister works in pharmaceuticals. For Monday lunch we take a subway to meet her. I show Tully my T-shirt decaled *The Zoloff Smile*. "You have to get me one of those," he says. A shirt or a smile? It is the late twentieth century; it is America. Maybe even a smile can be purchased. At the pharmaceutical company the wall in the reception area has water running down it, like nature. I say it's like nature the way smiling on Zoloff is like

being happy. We are clearly out of place here. Water on a wall. He in a wool hat pulled to his eyebrows like a terrorist, me in a thrift store plaid man's winter jacket. All around us swirl people done up in suits and hair gel, including my sister. "Everyone says it's very feng-shui," she says of the water-on-wall.

At a sushi place we talk divorce. Not very feng-shui. He's been divorced a year and thinks in the end the ones who might be worse fucked up than him are his kids. My gelled sister of divorced parents soothes him, trades some of her California rolls for his kappa maki. The Zoloft Smile. Maybe he will fall for her and dump ungelled me, Spam in jeans. *I too am out of groove.*

Naked, I am peeing in the hotel bathroom. Two and a half hours before I have to catch a shuttle to La Guardia. In my stomach is the start of a little sickness, not home not sea. I might cry. *Spatula. Spatula.* In the bedroom he's combing through newspaper advertisements for computers, as his hard drive is growing moss. *When you're forty I'll be sixty.* I'm on the toilet and in he walks with the newspaper, slips one hand between my legs and tastes his wet palm. Later, in a deli near Grand Central: "Did that shock you?" I admit it did. Across the table he is blinking at me, his eyes sea. *Up fish jump.*

And then I have to go back where I came from.

### *Tempus Fugit*

Virtual romance is the runway at La Guardia airport. Planes more often than they should during takeoff careen into the water surrounding the airport: the runway is too short. In the beginning you have every intention of taking off. Back in Utah, I think not of him but of his e-mails: *You will have to use a crowbar to get my arms off you when I see you again. Right now, any part of you I touched would burn me.*

### *Interim, Utah*

I return to the apartment where my boyfriend and I still live with each other. *Spins the steering wheel in futile circles.* We'll get through Christmas together and I'll move out New Year's Day. We're splitting for good in a social season, everyone decking halls and coming all ye faithful except me, he the cuckolded. Will I go with him to his company Christmas party anyway? All around us swirl people done up in hair gel and holiday attire. "Are they all Mormon?" I ask, already woozy on wine. Of four conversations I

have, two concern fertility issues. Of two men in couples concerned with fertility issues two are named Bryce, one with an “I.” I want to say, “We have futility issues.”

My boyfriend gets an award for on-time delivery: fifty bucks and a toy FedEx truck as big as my leg. He’s on time, I’m thinking about moss and math. Several people comment on what a great couple we make. Does no one else see our futility issues? After the party we sit in our holiday attire on the kitchen floor and drink Painkillers made with rum I got from Cane Garden Bay. Grating the nutmeg I cut my finger.

“So you and grandpa really dig each other?” he asks. Is it possible for a heart to go rancid? “Do me a favor and don’t go running in to check your e-mail in your underwear,” he says. We walk together with our drinks from one end of the apartment to another. Feeble box elder bugs, refugees from summer, make cameo appearances on the windowsills. He smears them with his hand.

“I waited eight years to live together, then two more after you moved in. You never talked,” I say. He shrugs, nonplussed by my calculations. “Irish people don’t talk.” We’re standing on the balcony, me shivering in velvet, him with his ubiquitous pack of smokes. It’s my computer I miss.

### *Cyberspace*

From: Tully@aol.com  
To: Wendy@aol.com  
Subject: Re: Romance

*In a message dated XX/XX/XX 13:53:44 EST, you write:*

*<< You know, to me it’s just an organ that for the most part all I do is WIPE. >>*

*You know, sweetie, there are ways of writing about this that can imbue it with epic romance—and you choose these words? For example, I prefer to think of it/you as the humid scabbard into which I will thrust my fiery sword! :)*

### *Tempus Fugit*

In what ways does a romance in cyberspace collapse the opposition between silence and speech? Between being there in person and not being there at all? Between saying and feeling? Online, we send and receive messages so quickly and so often that my typing (hurried, harried) and reading (hurried, harried) of messages feels like feeling itself, like ink spreading on cloth.

*Cyberspace*

From: Tully @aol.com  
 To: Wendy@aol.com  
 Subject: Re: Romance

*You know I'm kidding, right? About the scabbard and the fiery sword?*

*Remote, Utah*

Our landlord has promised me an apartment four blocks from our apartment. It's New Year's Eve, two hours until the year is new, eleven until I make my move. The two of us, each on our own sections of the sectional sofa, are watching Dick Clark's Rockin' Eve and drinking Painkillers. In between the bands people have volunteered to do what the host calls "the world's most dangerous stunts." *You will have to use a crowbar.* The evening's pièce de résistance will be a man in a truck dropped from a crane an absurd yet calculated number of feet. He's going to escape the truck before impact.

"A cat lives in the boiler room of that apartment," my landlord calls to tell me. (It's 10:37 P.M. on New Year's Eve.) "It's forced heat. Are you that allergic to cats?"

I'm that allergic. Cats give me a necklace of hives, just for starters. The landlord has an apartment I can rent in the building next door.

"Next door?"

My ex says he'll help me move my things across the courtyard. *The runway is too short.* On e-mail, Tully will want to know how far from the ex-boyfriend's door to mine. How far can I stretch sixty feet?

*Cyberspace*

From: Tully@aol.com  
 To: Wendy@aol.com  
 Subject: Re: pining

*Anyway I am writing this in haste so you have something to read when you get up in the morning*

*Adjacent, Utah*

My ex has overnight guests. I have my computer. In my underwear I trip straight from sleep each morning, a beeline to online. *This time of day is the*

worst. Sometimes there are no messages; sometimes the modem buzzes and halts like a dying fly. Sometimes in my underwear I hit my computer with the heel of my hand: virtual domestic violence.

The overnight guest's name is LaHoma. "What fucking kind of name is that?" I ask. He says Indian. "Indian Indian or Indian Native American?" "American Indian." I think of the pastor with braids to his waist. "So where did you meet this person?" "On my pick-up route." Pick-up route! "How old is she?" She's twenty-three.

### *Cyberspace*

From: Tully@aol.com

To: Wendy@aol.com

Subject: Re: pining

*In a message dated XX/XX/XX 14:50:02 EST, you write:*

*<< It's okay that you've abandoned me; I have a call in to my therapist and she says the Zoloft prescription will be ready this afternoon. Meanwhile, I'm testing my shower rod to see if it can hold a 120 lb. woman >>*

*Okay okay I am trying to race out of here but I got all your messages just now finally and want to let you know I haven't abandoned you . . .*

### *Tempus Fugit*

Virtual romance, the heart's bulimia. You fill and fill and fill on words, and yet it is the necessary silences that absent themselves. "When I look down, I miss all the good stuff," a woman on the radio sings, "when I look up, I just trip over things." *The ceiling is magnificent.*

### *Cyberspace*

From: Tully@aol.com

To: Wendy@aol.com

Subject: Re: lonely online

*Sweetheart:*

*What was I doing? I was trying to catch up with my life. I was going to write you last night but I couldn't get online (AOL is sometimes packed). I think of you about every three minutes.*

*Abiding, Utah*

“What if we get married?” my ex says. We are sitting on his kitchen floor with an almost empty magnum of cheapie Chardonnay. “Is that a proposal?” I ask. *A marriage made.* “What if it is?” On his bulletin board, postcards depicting the British Virgin Islands and Palm Springs. “Who went to Palm Springs?” I ask. “LaHoma.” “Why are you asking me to get married?” I ask. “I’m not asking you to get married, I’m saying what if we get married.” *The Irish don’t talk.* Drunk, I climb back into our old bed with him and go to sleep. In the middle of the night we wake together, groggy and hellbent for water. “That whole proposal thing probably wasn’t a good idea,” he says. We’re in the dark kitchen, trading swigs out of his bottled water. *A virtual proposal.* “No,” I say. “Even though you still love me in some sad and belated way,” he says. *Me pricked bright.* I recognize his words. “That’s from my e-mails.”

“I know,” he says. “I read them all.”

*Retreat, Utah*

In my economy-sized box of Q-Tips, I find a plastic calling card worth ten free minutes of long distance phone conversation: an excuse to call Tully midday, a break with protocol. But bending the rules isn’t always welcome: “He read them all?” (Emphasis on *read.*) “He read them *all?*” (Emphasis on *all.*) He’s been violated, he says.

*Cyberspace*

From: Tully@aol.com  
 To: Wendy@aol.com  
 Subject: Re: hello (again)

*For whatever reason I’ve been drifting farther and farther out of that zone of passion that drove us at first.*

*How to Purchase a Personal Computer*

Midtown, Computerland—Used computers are cheap, but also a risk. They have the marks of other people’s labor: a faded shift key, scuffmarks, some other small but intolerable shoddiness. We wandered through the store in our frayed wool coats, him in his terrorist hat, our noses cold, neither of us

able to pay proper attention. *I just trip over things.* He, the potential computer buyer, was making an attempt to put aside our romance for a moment so he could make his purchase. The sales clerks, all men, seemed to have the same disinterested and elite-sounding accent. *Indian Indian or Indian Native American?* Tully got one man to set up some laptops so he could try them. THIS IS A NICE LITTLE MACHINE. I CAN TYPE VERY QUICKLY, he typed very quickly. I stood beside him, hands jammed in my pockets. Secretly I was watching his face. I LOVE YOU WENDY, he typed. Secretly I was watching his face.

*A Guide to Snorkeling in the British Virgin Islands*

*Common sense will serve you as well in the Caribbean as it does on Nantucket or Catalina. The classic rule around water remains: Don't go alone. Diving with someone of equal ability makes it more fun.*

—Adventuring in the Caribbean

Snorkelers are advised to wear long-sleeved shirts and drawstring pants while in the water in order to protect their skin from sunburn and coral scrapes: "Remember that if you get hurt on coral, you have also injured the coral's own delicate protoplasm." And yet I cannot bring myself to empty my mailbox of the one hundred and sixty-seven messages he sent. *There is the infinitely disappointing trace odor.* If they were letters at least I could build a fire and, as lovers have for centuries, burn them. *I'll be in an urn.* The messages scroll up each time I log onto my account. *Right now, any part of you I touched would burn me.*

Would I like them better if they were a thousand white fish? A thousand bits of shredded paper? I see myself drifting still in bright water, my arms loose and weightless, surrounded by white swarms. Thousands of them. We never touch. 