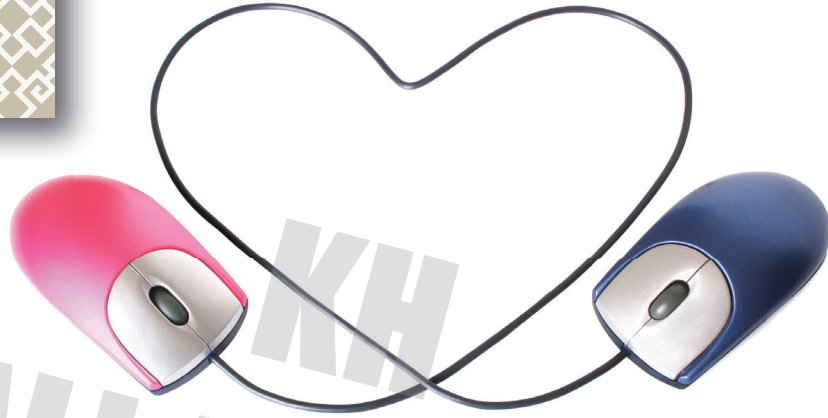


CHAPTER



“We’re not together, but we’re together.” **ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS**



Luis Carlos Torres/ Shutterstock.com

Avery Ross could hardly contain her excitement as she was getting ready for her date. She rummaged through her closet for something extraordinary to wear. She decided on a yellow sundress, which accentuated her curves and slim waist. She wanted to look more gorgeous today than he had ever seen her. She fervently brushed her auburn hair, each vehement stroke matching the velocity of her heartbeat. She rarely wore makeup, but now she put on some eyeliner and lip gloss. She sprinkled her favorite perfume on her neck and lit a candle, and the scent of lilacs immediately filled the room. She knew he wouldn't notice either the perfume or the fragrance of the candle, and it felt like a waste, but she still yearned for the aroma to embrace and calm her.

Her younger brother, Logan, suddenly burst through the door, completely forgetting the rule to knock first.

“Hey, let’s go to the beach. We could hang out and watch the fireworks later. Are you coming?” He sounded exhilarated, and she hated to disappoint him.

“You know I have a date, Logan. I told you. I’m sorry.”

“You gotta be kidding. How can you not come? It’s the Fourth of July.” His face shone with utter incredulity.

“I know,” Avery sighed. “Just go without me this time, okay?”

Logan frowned, but eventually said, “Your call. You’re really missing out though.” With that, he turned and ran out of the room.

Logan might have disappeared, but his reminder of the Fourth of July stayed. Avery loved the beach and the fireworks after sunset. She reluctantly admitted to herself that it saddened her a bit to miss the Fourth of July festivities. But it would have upset her even more to cancel her date with Tibor.

“Tibor Lantos,” she said aloud. After months of practice, his name now sounded familiar; it was like a warm blanket that engulfed and reassured her. At the same time, the syllables were still somewhat foreign, exotic, and electrifying as they rolled off her tongue.

The abrupt buzzing of her phone harshly interrupted her daydreaming.

“Hey, Chase,” Avery said, glad to talk to one of her closest friends. She still had almost an hour until her date with Tibor, and she welcomed a distraction.

“Hey, Ave,” Chase said, his cheerful voice exploding in her ear. “So, how is your Fourth so far?”

“So far so good. We had a backyard barbecue with my family. The usual.”

“So, how about more of the usual? Are you ready to head down to the beach later and watch some fireworks? I heard they’re going to be awesome this year.” Chase’s voice was full of smile and anticipation of a memorable evening with friends. But Avery was looking forward to making different kinds of memories tonight.

“Chase, I can’t,” she sighed. “I have a date.”

“A *date*, huh?” Chase asked, with just a hint of sarcasm. It was barely audible, but Avery knew him, and she instantly felt her defences rising.

“Yes, a *date*,” Avery answered, enunciating every word. “Today is our two-month anniversary with Tibor.”

“Well, congratulations, I guess,” Chase shot back. He paused for a second, then added, “I just think it’s kind of funny to talk about dates and your anniversary when you haven’t even met the guy.”

His comment stung. Avery had to catch her breath before responding. “Don’t be like that, okay? Tibor and I, we’re not together, but we’re together. We *are* a *couple*. Please be happy for me.”

“I want to be happy for you, Ave,” Chase sighed. Suddenly all the sarcasm was gone, and his voice was filled with concern instead. “I just don’t get it, and I’m worried about you. I mean, you don’t know the guy. That’s a fact. He could be anyone. Yeah, he could turn out to be the greatest guy in the world, but he could also be an axe-murderer. And he’s halfway across the world. How could you even meet him? You can’t even pronounce his name.”

"I can pronounce his name just fine, thank you," Avery said, heat rising to her face. "And we're *getting to know* each other. We talk every day. I do know him. And I do know he's right for me. You're right about one thing, though: you don't get it. But I wish you at least tried."

"I am *trying*, Ave," Chase breathed, sounding weary. "I just don't want you to get hurt. But I'll shut up for now and let you get ready for your date."

"I appreciate that," Avery finally smiled. "And I appreciate your concern, but believe me, I'm fine. I'm happy. Enjoy the fireworks, okay? Talk to you later."

"Talk to you later," Chase echoed.

As they hung up, Avery still felt a little shaken by their exchange. Why did Chase have to ruffle her sea of happiness, and why on her anniversary? And why did he have to call? Why couldn't he just text like a normal person, like he usually does? Then they could have avoided this futile back-and-forth.

To get her mind back on Tibor and evoke the excitement about their date again, Avery conjured up her first memories of him. They had met on Second Life, a huge online virtual world, 9 months ago. For the next 3 months their avatars ran into each other occasionally. Then they started seeking out those meetings and talking more. First, they strictly communicated through their avatars, as avatars, and mostly about the things they were doing or aspiring toward in Second Life. Then one day, about 3 months ago, Tibor's avatar suddenly blurted out that his real-life name was Tibor Lantos, and he was a 23-year-old law student from Hungary. His admission changed the game. Avery also told him her full name, that she was 20 years old, she lived with her parents and younger brother in Daytona Beach, Florida, and that she was a freelance personal care aid for the elderly. They exchanged Skype account names, and while they still spent time together and chatted on Second Life as avatars, they gradually migrated more to Skype. Avery remembered how self-conscious, nervous, and giddy she was the first time they saw each other on webcam. Tibor's deep-set, warm brown eyes and cute accent instantly charmed her.

Their Skype sessions really helped them open up and share a lot about themselves. About 3 weeks after they had begun to talk on Skype, on May 4, Tibor seemed uncharacteristically quiet and melancholic. After some prodding from Avery, he blurted out that he saw some lilacs on his way home. They were in season in Hungary, and their exceptional beauty and soft fragrance reminded him of Avery, which made him realize how much he would like to walk hand-in-hand with her among the lilacs and give her a bouquet. Once he started talking, words were flooding out of him. He

told Avery how much their conversations meant to him, and how beautiful she was, inside and out. Finally he whispered that he loved her. Then it was Avery's turn to grow quiet. She might have appeared serene, but on the inside she was battling mammoth waves of emotion that his words stirred in her. She felt more elated, but also more scared than ever. She had a simultaneous urge to laugh aloud and to cry. Eventually she didn't succumb to either, just simply and evenly told Tibor that she loved him, too.

They decided to make it official and changed their Facebook status from "single" to "in a relationship" that day. Since then they spent almost all their free time together on Skype, at least 2 to 3 hours per day during the week, around 12 hours per day on weekends (including sleep), and once a record 24-hour stretch. The 6-hour time difference could be tricky, but they learned to work around it. This meant that sometimes they had to stay up late or get up very early, or go to bed at odd times when they both slept with Skype on. The difficulties of time management didn't faze them; in fact, they often felt as if they were masters of time and space by synchronizing their lives and carving out a time and mutual virtual space for themselves. On Second Life they were literally in the same space and on the same time. Physical distance and time zones ceased to matter and disappeared. Their time together online *was* their space together. Couples tend to be defined by "being together," and they were together *all the time*, so how could Chase or anyone else question that they were a couple?

Avery glanced at the clock on her laptop and noted that she still had about 15 minutes until their date. She reached for the stuffed bear that Tibor had mailed her. She clutched it and breathed in Tibor's cologne that he had sprayed on it before sending it for their 1-month anniversary. The scent was getting faint now, but closing her eyes it still helped her imagine Tibor next to her.

After gently putting the bear back on her bed, Avery pulled up the "Loving From a Distance" website on her computer. She loved the advice, inspirations, and activities she found there for long-distance couples. Her favorite were the forums and blogs, where she could chat with others in long-distance relationships. Unlike Chase, they always seemed to completely understand what she was going through. While most posts were extremely helpful and reassuring, a few bothered her. When people complained about their sweetheart being 300 to 500 miles away and "only" seeing them every few weeks, once a month, or every couple of months, she couldn't feel very sympathetic. Didn't they realize how good they had it? Tibor lived about 5,000 miles away, and he once said that he could kill for a distance of "only" 300 to 500 miles. Of course, he was talking about kilo-

meters, not miles, and she had had no idea what distance he had in mind until she looked it up on a measurement converter online. That was not the only thing she had to look up; for example, when he first mentioned he was from Hungary, Avery only had a vague recollection of where that was, but luckily she was sitting in front of her computer, and Google maps quickly came to the rescue. In the last few months Avery often stared at the two dots on the map: Daytona Beach and Budapest. Sometimes they didn't seem that far, but other times they seemed to be worlds apart.



Avery decided to take a quick look at another website, “In Love Abroad,” which had useful tips for international long-distance couples. Before she could have immersed herself in a sea of valuable information, she heard the easily recognizable tune of an incoming Skype call, which became the familiar soundtrack of her life. Her heart jumped, and she answered the call with a wide smile, “Hey, love.”

Tibor's face filled the screen. “Hi, szerelmem,” he said. Avery knew that “szerelmem” meant “my love” in Hungarian, and she let the cadence of those foreign, but now oddly familiar, unique words reach into her heart.

“How was your day?” Avery asked.

“You know, just the usual. Pretty busy day at my internship. Then I went for a run on Margaret Island.” As Avery learned, Margaret Island was a beautiful island on the Danube in central Budapest. Tibor lived close to it and loved to run the track around the entire island, which was about 5

kilometers, or 3.1 miles, as Avery figured out later. “What about you? Did you have a busy day at work, too?” Tibor asked.

“No, I had the day off. Fourth of July, Independence Day, remember?” Avery laughed. She knew that Tibor grew up in a different culture and Independence Day in the United States didn’t mean anything to him, but she still found it funny that he would completely forget about it.

“Right,” Tibor said, sounding a little embarrassed. “I knew that. But working all day, I guess I just forgot. So did you have a good time with your family?”

“Yes, definitely,” Avery smiled. “Logan was a little disappointed that I’m not going to the beach for fireworks, but he’ll be fine.”

“Were you? I mean, were you disappointed, too?” Tibor suddenly sounded serious, his voice full of concern. “I don’t want you to miss something important.”

“That’s OK,” Avery assured him, not admitting that she *was* slightly melancholic about the fireworks, and not mentioning Chase’s comments, which unexpectedly just popped into her mind. “I have seen like 20 Fourth of July fireworks, I can miss one. But I have never had a 2-month anniversary with you, I can’t miss that.”

“Alright, if you’re sure,” Tibor was now grinning. “Hey, check out the attachment I’ve just sent you in chat.”

Avery clicked on the file, and a picture of blooming lilacs filled her screen. She felt moved; Tibor did manage to give her a bouquet of lilacs after all.

“Thank you! I have the scent to go with them,” she said, moving her laptop closer and pointing to her candle.



Shulevskyy Volodymyr / Shutterstock.com



Christian Jung / Shutterstock.com

“Cool,” Tibor said as he sent a kissing face emoticon on Skype. “Love your dress, by the way. You look very pretty.”

“Thanks,” Avery breathed as she sent a kissing face emoticon back.

“Are you hungry? Do you want to eat dinner yet?” Tibor asked.

Avery felt stuffed after the family barbecue earlier, and it was only 3 o’clock in the afternoon, so technically it wouldn’t be dinner, but she didn’t want to miss out on the chance of a romantic meal with Tibor on their anniversary, so she nodded. “Sure. Let me get my food.”

They returned with their food a few minutes later. Avery got some left-over salad from the barbecue, and Tibor had something that she couldn’t identify, so she had to ask, “What are you eating?”

“Oh, it’s cottage cheese noodles,” Tibor explained. “It has sweet cottage cheese, noodles, and bits of bacon. It’s good.”

“Hmm, that sounds... I could say it sounds and looks appetizing, but actually not really,” Avery laughed as Tibor pushed the plate right in front of the webcam so that she could see it better.

Tibor put on some soft background music to accompany their dinner. They talked about their food, trying to describe its smell and taste, and about Tibor’s internship at his father’s office. Tibor was studying to be a lawyer, following in his father’s footsteps. Avery knew nothing about law, especially Hungarian law, but she enjoyed listening to him. After dinner Tibor grew quiet, stared at her, and said, “Avery, I want to tell you something. Or maybe ask you something.”

“OK,” Avery said, feeling a little apprehension rising in her chest. Everything was going so well, and she was hoping Tibor wasn’t about to say something that would shatter her illusions. He looked so serious, and she didn’t know what to expect.

“Avery, I love you, and I think it’s time for us to take the next step in our relationship. Or at least start thinking about it,” he said.

“I love you, too,” Avery whispered, waiting for him to elaborate. She was wondering what he meant by the next step. Maybe sex. Probably sex. He was a guy, after all. But they had discussed this about a month ago, and Tibor seemed understanding when she said she wasn’t sure if she was comfortable with virtual sex, at least not before they slept together in real life. Despite the obvious chemistry between them that transcended the screen, it might be awkward before they actually met. Their avatars often kissed on Second Life, but that was the furthest they had gone in physical intimacy. So, was he going to bring up sex again, or was it something else?

“I think we should start planning our first meeting,” Tibor said.

Avery was instantly relieved and exhilarated. While she enjoyed their online relationship, she was hoping to meet Tibor offline one day.

"I'm pretty busy at my internship during the summer and then with school from September, but if you came sometime in August, or even September or October, I think we could make that work. If you can get time off, of course," Tibor mused.

"I think I could get some time off, especially because I'm my own boss, and my clients would probably understand. And I'd love to see your country," Avery said. "But Tibor, I don't have a passport. I have never gone anywhere. I haven't even traveled further North than Tennessee. I have never been on a plane before."

"Well, you can get a passport, can't you? I don't think it would take you that long. And flying is cool, you're going to like it," Tibor assured her.

"I don't even think my parents would be crazy about the idea," Avery admitted. "I know I'm 20, but I'm still their little girl, and I know they would be really worried."

"You just need to talk to them, they might surprise you," Tibor suggested.

"I guess I can talk to them and see. I don't have money for a plane ticket either. How much do you think it is? I bet it's like \$500," Avery said.

"Of course, we would split the cost. I think the ticket would be closer to \$1,000 or even more," Tibor said.

"What?" Avery couldn't hide her shock. "That's crazy. And what if you came to visit me first?"

"I don't know. I mean, with my internship and school and everything, I don't think I could before next summer or something, and I don't want to go that long before seeing you," Tibor explained.

"I would like to see you much sooner, too," Avery confirmed. "So how about we both look into it more, like how much tickets are, dates, and I'll talk to my parents."

"OK, sounds good," Tibor said. "I just wanted us to start planning it, so let's do that. The point is that we really want to meet, so we'll make it happen sometime, somehow."

"Yes, we will," Avery smiled. She imagined Tibor hugging and kissing her, and the image was so vivid, she could almost really feel it. As their conversation was winding down, Tibor was "pretend" holding her while he fell asleep. She turned off her lights and lay there for a while. It was only 6:30 p.m., but she forced herself to fall asleep. She listened to Tibor's calm breathing across Skype and dreamed about being in his arms for real.

*

Six and a half months later Avery's dream came true. She was lying in Tibor's arms and could hardly believe how lucky they were that they could finally meet. She was listening to Tibor's even breathing while he was sleeping soundly. She could not sleep and was aimlessly staring at the ceiling. It had been a very long road from their first meeting on Second Life to Budapest, Hungary. They had been so naïve and hadn't been counting on the numerous obstacles that they encountered on this journey. The plane ticket turned out to be the first roadblock. Tickets ran over \$1,000, which was considerably more than what either of them could afford. They had to take a reality check and postpone Avery's trip until they both put some money aside. It took them almost six months to scrape that huge sum together. The cost might have been negligible for some, but it was almost insurmountable for Avery and Tibor. Tibor was too proud to borrow money from his parents, and Avery didn't even ask her own parents, as she knew they were dead set against her trip anyway. In fact, she had never seen them so terror-stricken before. Her mother was begging her not to go, almost constantly in tears for weeks and forecasting various potentially catastrophic scenarios. She predicted that Avery would end up kidnapped, a sex slave, dead, or all of the above. After all, what else could happen if you met a stranger in an Eastern European country, fraught with communism? It took so much energy from Avery to soothe her that she didn't even bother to correct her and explain that Hungary was technically in Central Europe, and communism had been over before Tibor was even born. Her father's stern expression, but petrified eyes struck Avery just as hard as her mother's vocalized panic. Eventually they were mollified by several talks with Tibor and his parents, but convincing them that she wasn't crazy, reckless, and irresponsible for going was one of the most difficult things she had ever had to accomplish.

While they were putting money aside for the trip, and Avery's passport application was pending, the wait became almost unbearable. Time had never seemed to pass as slowly as it did then. They felt that they would give anything for a magic power to speed things up. Once it became clear that meeting in September was impossible, they were shooting for Christmas. However, as plane tickets were even more expensive then, and Avery's parents would have been wary of letting her go for Christmas, Tibor and Avery settled on a January visit. Once they had the dates, and she had the ticket, Tibor came up with the idea to set up a countdown clock on both of their laptops until the day they met. Avery loved the idea, as it made her feel more in control of time. Every day, when she woke up and glanced at the clock to acknowledge that another day had passed, she was filled with

an incredible sense of accomplishment. On the other hand, staring at the clock could really agitate her sometimes. While change from one day to the next felt exhilarating, watching seconds and minutes pass gave her a frustrating sense that the wait would last forever.

The plane ride to Hungary, with two layovers, turned out to be the longest 18 hours of Avery's life. She was throbbing with anticipation to finally see and be able to touch Tibor. They had both been convinced that when they finally saw each other, they would be locked in a never-ending embrace and kiss. Surprisingly, when they met at the airport, they just stared at each other sheepishly, neither of them making a move toward the other. Although they had been a couple for more than 8 months at that time, it took them nearly 2 days to finally kiss and almost a week to make love. This timidity took both of them by surprise, given the unbelievable chemistry they had experienced online. After a transitional period of awkwardness, their online attraction eventually translated to an offline, physical relationship. And once that happened, there was no turning back.

Avery's visit was scheduled for 2 weeks, which had seemed like infinity before they met, but appeared to be so short now that they were together. Just as time had been dragging before her visit, it seemed to be zipping by at the speed of a race car now. One day felt no more than a blink. They did their best to make the most of their time together. They were fully in the present and immersed in making memories. They hardly slept to lengthen days. Tibor showed her all his favorite places and introduced her to his family and friends. Although it was late January, they celebrated Christmas late and Tibor's February birthday and Valentine's Day early. They squeezed months' worth of special events into 2 weeks.

Tibor's parents were good sports and played along. They put up a Christmas tree again, complete with beautifully wrapped candy and sparklers, which turned out to be the Hungarian custom. Avery was surprised to learn that Christmas constituted of 3 days in Hungary (December 24, 25, and 26), people ate a poppy seed cake as a traditional Christmas dessert, and it was the little Jesus who brought presents, not Santa. Avery also discovered that Hungarians celebrate name days, based on their first names. As there was no name day for Avery in the Hungarian calendar, Tibor suggested that they dedicate the name day for Eva (pronounced "Ava") as Avery's name day. As that name day fell on December 24, they threw a "belated," makeshift name day party for Avery as well. Tibor's grandmother was the only one not thrilled by this idea, as she insisted that Avery was not an actual Hungarian name. She was even less happy with Avery's last name, Ross, which sounds like the word for "bad," or "wrong" in Hungarian. She was afraid that it was a

bad omen, indicating that Avery might be wrong for Tibor. Of course, Avery didn't understand a word his grandma was saying, but once Tibor translated it, Avery and Tibor just laughed it off. Tibor's laugh was loud and genuine, while Avery's a little forced and uncomfortable.

Now the two most intense weeks of Avery's life were winding down. She was leaving tomorrow. She and Tibor decided not to sleep at all to have more time together. They were both exhausted, and Tibor finally succumbed to sleep, but Avery was determined to stay up and not miss a moment with him. A pang of fear and deep sorrow was squeezing her heart. She found it inconceivable to say goodbye to Tibor. While she had enjoyed their online romance immensely, she couldn't fathom how she could go back to that now. She was suddenly shaken by an enormous wave of sobs. She tried to suppress it and not wake Tibor. He stirred and, half asleep, reached out to caress her face. He felt the tears and suddenly jerked awake, turning to her.

"Are you crying, szerelmem?" he whispered. "It's OK, don't worry, it's going to be OK."

"No, it won't," Avery sobbed. "How can it be? I'm leaving. Tibor, I don't want to leave. I don't think I can be apart any more."

"Maybe we don't have to be," Tibor smiled gently.

"What do you mean? My plane is leaving tomorrow, I can't stay," Avery said breathlessly.

"Well, maybe you can't stay now, but it doesn't mean we have to be apart much longer," Tibor suggested reassuringly.

"But... but, we could hardly make this one visit work, when are we going to have money for another trip again?" Avery cried. "It might be another six months or more. And then what? A couple of weeks together and six more months apart?" She felt panic rising in her chest. "Tibor, I don't know how we can do this."

"Don't worry, szerelmem," Tibor tried to soothe her. "I have a plan. It's a great one, believe me, and then we can soon be together."

"A plan? What's your plan?" Avery perked up slightly, but she couldn't succumb to hope entirely.

"Look, you know that I'm almost done with college. Once I graduate in the summer, I can start working at my dad's law firm and make some serious money. I know it's a lot to ask, but I want you to come back in the summer, this time for good. It's just 6 more months apart, we can make that work, and then we can always be together," he spoke fervently, his eyes shining with passion and determination.

Avery was overwhelmed with emotion. Her heart leaped with joy, realizing that Tibor wanted to spend his life with her. She had never felt more

ecstatic and more certain of wanting the same herself. Still, a small voice was nagging at her, clawing away at her bliss. For a moment she was puzzled by that recalcitrant voice. What was that about? She knew she loved Tibor and wanted to be with him forever. So, why not feel pure elation? It took her a moment to recognize what was bothering her.

"Tibor, I want to be with you, too," she said slowly. "I've never wanted anything more. But does it have to be here? Is that the only option? Can we at least consider you coming over to Florida?"

"Sure, I'd like to visit," Tibor affirmed. "I want to see where you come from."

"You mean you moving to the United States is not even on the table?" Avery exclaimed. "Can we not entertain that idea at least?"

"Yes, of course, we can talk about it," Tibor said, sounding cautious. "But like I said, I'm about to graduate from college and get a great job here."

"I'm sure you could get a great job in the United States. It's the land of opportunity. So many immigrants go there every year. You could be one of them," Avery beamed.

Tibor didn't smile back, "I wish I could do that. But not with my degree. I have a degree in Hungarian law. What could I do with that in the United States? Nothing. I'd have to start school all over again. I have the job all set here, and my dad is counting on me, too. He's always thought I'd take over the firm one day."

"I get that," Avery sighed, her smile disappearing. "But at least you speak English. You could still have good opportunities over there. But what could I do here? I don't even speak the language."

"You could learn," Tibor tried to console her. "Yes, it's a pretty hard language, but you could learn it, and almost everyone speaks English anyway."

"Like your grandma?" Avery pointed out.

"OK, maybe not my grandma, and not some other people, but mostly you could get by with English and then slowly master Hungarian."

"But you know I love my job, working with the elderly. Yes, it's not much, it's a part-time job, but it's important to me," Avery breathed. "And it's the elderly here who are the least likely to speak English. And how could I help them with errands and stuff when even I don't know where everything is, and how everything works?"

"Those are valid points," Tibor said thoughtfully. "But I'm not worried. In a year or two you'd know all that stuff, plus the language. Of course, we'd have to figure out the bureaucracy and all that, but we can do that together. And I'll help you with everything. I'll stand by you all the time. We'd most likely have to get married right away so that you can live and work here,

but actually that's kind of nice, too, as eventually we'd want to get married anyway," Tibor grinned.

Avery was stunned, "Are you proposing to me right now? And that's the way you're going about it? It's not very romantic. I don't want to get married for bureaucracy, I want to get married for love."

Tibor's smile grew even wider, and he hugged Avery, "I want to get married for love, too, and that's why I want to marry you. Yes, maybe it'd have to be a little bit faster than we'd prefer, but I want to make this happen. And don't worry, I'll propose to you in a *very* romantic way. This wasn't the proposal yet; this is just a discussion to try to be on the same page."

"Hmm..." Avery hesitated. "You really see me here? You think I'd be fine here?"

"I think you'd be great here," Tibor squeezed her hand. "You love it here, don't you?"

"I love that you are here," Avery mused. "I love how your parents have accepted me, and how close you guys are. It's different from my family. In a good way. Your friends are pretty cool. And Budapest is beautiful. The Danube, the hills, the architecture. The opera, the museums, the history. I love the bakeries with all the cakes, gelato, and great coffee. Although probably I could end up weighing a ton living here," she laughed. "Especially with the Hungarian hospitality. Everyone is always feeding me, and when you're a guest, you don't have to lift a finger. I could get used to that. And it's kind of neat how people dress up more here. I like dressing up, and I wouldn't have to have an excuse for that here. This whole thing is like a storybook. A far-away kingdom with my own prince in it."

"You see, I'm so glad you love it," Tibor smirked.

Avery smiled back, but her smile grew slightly faint as she reflected on the sides of Hungary that she wasn't keen on. First of all, it was so cold, at least now, in January. Coming from Florida, Avery was always shivering, even in the thick coat she borrowed from Tibor's mom. And it got dark so early in the winter, which already made her a little depressed. Tibor's family and friends were nice, but strangers were somewhat grumpy. When she smiled at them passing by, they didn't smile back and many gave her a disapproving look. And everything was so small, the roads, cars, houses, bathrooms. Tibor's family was not poor, but they still lived in a two-bedroom condo with one bathroom, which was common for middle-class families here. Avery had always imagined living in a four-bedroom, three-bathroom house near the beach. Well, living here would be as far as it gets from that.

She also imagined having children with Tibor. The thought warmed her heart, but, at the same time, scared her. She envisioned giving birth

here and not even understanding the instructions of a doctor. What's worse, would she understand her own children? They'd be speaking to their father and almost everyone in Hungarian, and what if she never learned enough to catch what they're saying? She wouldn't admit it to Tibor, but the thought of learning Hungarian terrified her, especially because she honestly didn't even like the sound of it too much. And would it be little Jesus who brought her children Christmas gifts, not Santa? Or would it be both? How would they merge Hungarian and American culture? Maybe she could give up her country, but she couldn't fathom giving up her language and culture. Could she still remain an American in Hungary without losing herself? Could she stay in touch with her parents and brother? Now instead of a long-distance relationship with Tibor, would she have a long-distance relationship with everyone else?

The questions came flooding, but there were no answers at this point. Only time could tell. She glanced at Tibor's face, which shone with hope and love. She felt immensely close to him, but at the same time, in a way, she vaguely sensed some unfamiliar distance between them, which had not been there, even when they had been so far away geographically. She hoped that this sudden gap could be overcome the same way they had conquered physical distance. She pushed away her doubts and fears and pulled Tibor closer, resolving that, for now, only the present moment mattered, and the future could be decided later.



Neirfy/Shutterstock.com

Tonis Valing/Shutterstock.com

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think will happen to Tibor and Avery?

2. Goffman (1986) used the term *stigma* to describe a strong negative label that people attach to individuals who do not conform to social norms. Would you say that there is any stigma attached to online relationships? Why/why not? Are there any examples of this in Tibor and Avery's story? Do you expect changes in perceptions of online relationships in the future? Why/why not?

3. What role (if any) do you think gender plays in this story?

4. What role (if any) do you think socioeconomic status plays in this story? What could be different if Tibor and Avery had more money (or less), or if they had different occupations?

5. Discuss the role of cultural differences in the story. Also, would it make a difference if Avery and Tibor lived in the same country, or if they lived even further apart from each other?

6. Many online couples report falling in love before meeting face-to-face (Baker, 2005; Ben-Zeev, 2004). Illustrate this by the case of Avery and Tibor. Do you believe in love *before* first sight? Why/why not?

7. Zerubavel (1991) explained that “[t]o define something is to mark its boundaries, to surround it with a mental fence that separates it from everything else” (p. 2). Berger and Kellner (1964) stated that couples construct their own definitions of couplehood, and others around them could reinforce or challenge those definitions. Apply these theories to the story of Tibor and Avery.

8. Long-distance partners (including online couples) often experience both temporal compression and protracted duration. Temporal compression is the sense that time flies, whereas protracted duration is the perception that time is passing slowly (Adam, 1995, 2004; Flaherty, 1991, 1999; Flaherty & Meer, 1994). Also, geographically distant couples frequently assign extraordinary meaning to an ordinary day—that is, they are converting profane time into sacred time (Durkheim, 1995). Mention examples for all three from the story. Are they engaging in temporal agency, too? In what ways? Temporal agency is an “intrapersonal and interpersonal effort directed toward provoking or preventing various temporal experiences” (Flaherty, 2011, p. 11).

9. Chayko (2008) defined a sociomental space as an “environment in which people derive a sense of togetherness by being mentally oriented toward and engaged with one another” (p. 10). Simultaneity is “the creation of a shared present irrespective of the number of people and spatial distances involved” (Adam & Groves, 2007, p. 202). Zerubavel (1981) referred to the same phenomenon as temporal symmetry. Mention examples of creating a sociomental space and simultaneity/temporal symmetry from the story.

Find the Answers

Go to <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/5-facts-about-online-dating/> to find answers to the following questions.

1. About what percentage of Americans believe that online dating is a good way to meet people? Has that percentage increased in the last 10 years? Are you surprised by these numbers? Why/why not?

2. Which age group is the most and least likely to use an online dating site or app? What could be the reasons for these groups being the most and least likely to use online dating?
3. Do most people who use online dating sites go on a date with someone they met on these sites? Why/why not?
4. About what percentage of Americans have met their spouse or long-term partner online? Is the percentage about what you expected? Why/why not? How do you think the number might change in the future?

Mini Research Assignments

1. Review long-distance relationship activities at <http://lovingfromadistance.com/things-forldrcouplestodo.html>. Which ones did Avery and Tibor also do? Which ones do you consider the best and worst ideas? Why? Can you add any ideas to this list? Do you think activities like these can enhance the stability and longevity of long-distance relationships? Why/why not? Do you think that such activities work any better for online couples, versus couples that had started out close-distance and then became long-distance? Why? Discuss the role of age, globalization, and technology in today's long-distance relationships.
2. Browse through articles at <http://www.ldrmagine.com>. Read at least three articles carefully. Find parallels between the articles and the story of Avery and Tibor. What kind of messages do these articles convey about long-distance romances? Do you find them helpful? Why/why not? What kind of messages are stressed or implied about gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, time, and space?
3. Watch a movie that depicts an online or other type of long-distance romance. In what light are such relationships portrayed in the movie? Is there any obvious or latent stigma? Why/why not? What kind of messages are conveyed or implied about gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, time, and space? Would it make a difference if the movie were set at a different location or in a different era? How so?
4. Interview a couple in an online or other type of long-distance relationship, or interview someone who has ever been in such a relationship. Ask them at least seven questions. Ask them questions that you are curious to know, but also ask questions that might get to the core of any controversies regarding online/long-distance relationships. Draw parallels with the story of Tibor and Avery and analyze the role of gender, social class, age, and any other similar factor you choose in their relationship.

References

- Adam, B. (1995). *Timewatch: The social analysis of time*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- _____. (2004). *Time*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Adam, B., & Groves, C. (2007). *Future matters: Action, knowledge, ethics*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Baker, A. J. (2005). *Double click: Romance and commitment among online couples*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Ben-Ze'ev, A. (2004). *Love online: Emotions on the internet*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Berger, P., & Kellner, H. (1964). Marriage and the construction of reality: An exercise in the micro-sociology of knowledge." *Diogenes*, 12, 1–24.
- Chayko, M. (2008). *Portable communities: The social dynamics of online and mobile connectedness*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1995). *The elementary forms of religious life* (K. E. Fields, Trans.). New York, NY: The Free Press. (Original work published 1912)
- Flaherty, M. (1991). The perception of time and situated engrossment. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 54, 76–85.
- _____. (1999). *A watched pot: How we experience time*. New York: New York University Press.
- _____. (2011). *Textures of time: Agency and temporal experience*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Flaherty, M., & Meer, M. D. (1994). How time flies: Age, memory, and temporal compression. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 35, 705–721.
- Goffman, E. (1986). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York, NY: Touchstone. (Original work published 1963)
- Smith, A., & Anderson, M. (2016). 5 facts about online dating. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/5-facts-about-online-dating/>
- Zerubavel, E. (1981). *Hidden rhythms: Schedules and calendars in social life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. (1991). *The fine line: Making distinctions in everyday life*. New York, NY: Free Press.