

Romancing the Phone



The long-distance junkie tries to keep love alive despite time, geography and staggering utility bills

BY ALLISON BELL

You dream that he touched you, but you wake up alone. Alone, except for the telephone, glowing in the light of the clock radio. Its push buttons are soft and white, as seductive as plastic can be. They tell you to dial. Not to connect, just to dial. You can stop whenever you want, the buttons whisper. But you know you will complete the call. You're a long-distance junkie.

Consider the case of Allison, who happens to be me. This month she used eight hours of long distance. The phone company hasn't billed her yet. She suffers something like dread of nuclear war, only worse: nuclear war wouldn't be quite so hard on her credit rating.

Neither heredity nor peer pressure caused Allison's addiction. Both her parents control their phone bills; none of her friends duck when AT&T is mentioned. A few years ago Allison didn't even know how to place long-distance calls. She chose her sickness.

Why? Like other LDJ victims, Allison fell in love. Friends dragged her to a fraternity party last fall. She sat in the corner, sure she wouldn't meet anyone. Then a giant, sporting a couple of bandages on his chin, asked her to dance. He was bigger than Allison. She danced.

Prince Charming: It turned out that the giant had fallen down and gashed his chin. When the stitches came out, he looked like Prince Charming's handsomer brother. His name was Nick. He insisted on taking Allison out to dinner and carrying her backpack. He bought her a bouquet so big that it wouldn't fit in a vase. They spent part of every day together for nine months until he earned his degree and enrolled in graduate school half a continent away.

Enter the phone company.

Telephones aren't all bad—at least they transmit voices. Nick can describe his statistics course and Allison can burble about how much she misses him.

Unfortunately, all this simulated closeness is expensive.

On a typical Saturday—after 11 p.m., when the rates go down—Allison sets a half-hour time limit on her alarm clock before she calls Nick. She talks about classes for 5 minutes, Ronald Reagan for 10 and the weather for 20 (he's in somewhat-sunnier Charlottesville, Va.). Then she attempts to say goodbye:

ALLISON: I love you.

NICK: I love you, too.

ALLISON: I miss you.

NICK: I miss you, too.

After 87 variations on those themes, they make another try at hanging up.

ALLISON: Goodbye.

NICK: Goodbye.

ALLISON: Oh, did I tell you about your old roommate? He ran away with your adviser's wife.

(There follows about half an hour of gossip.)

No matter how hard she tries, Allison never can stick to her half-hour limit. Her habit consumes about \$90 a month, using up nearly all her work-study money. And still, she's never satisfied.

It's not as if long distance were unadulterated pleasure, either; it doesn't transmit hugs, kisses or the texture of Nick's sweaters. And static always seems to interrupt within the millisecond if Allison mentions love. Worst of all, Nick and Allison can't hold hands across a phone line.

But somehow, none of the alternatives seems quite right. Letters are a clear channel of communication—at least they might be, if Nick and Allison wrote legibly. You can touch letters, smell them and draw pictures on them. But letters take lots of time, and they don't talk back. They just sit there—and besides, 50 weeks' worth of first-class stamps costs as much as a half-hour phone call.

Sending flowers is romantic but outrageously expensive; travel is even worse. And breaking up, while horribly probable, is not something you want to discuss. If it happens, it happens. Otherwise, you work under the assumption that your love is eternal, that nothing will change.

That's the point: trying to keep love safe from time.

Buddy system: College aggravates long-distance addiction by accustoming us to feelings of closeness. At college, everybody is your buddy. You walk through the quad and a dozen people say hello. You talk till dawn about truth, beauty and the food service. But as each term, and then each year, ends, many of your friendships decay to passing acquaintanceships. You say hello, they say hello, and it's as if the all-nighters spent together were golden hallucinations.

Even if you and your friends do stick together for four years, graduation separates you. Once you toss away that funny black hat, you have to act as if people who've changed you don't matter, as if the knowledge that one close friend is moving to Portland, another is living in Boston and a third is planning to settle in New Guinea was great news.

Eventually you realize that if you want to preserve relationships despite distance, you've got to work at them. And if you're linked to one special person by lust, love, perhaps even mutual understanding, you're eager to hold on to something wonderful—even if it wrecks your budget.

And so you try to maintain your day-to-day intimacy. You talk about people you both know, movies you saw together. You try to describe your new friends and associates, but nothing crosses the phone lines as poorly as your rendition of a despised professor's grumpy snort or descriptions of the incredible dewiness of the 18-year-old children living down the hall. You babble and listen and imagine a kiss . . . and the conversations go on and on. You're trying the impossible: to communicate intangibles that fiber-optic cables can't carry.

Can society cure long-distance addiction?

No. And we LDJ's don't want to be cured.

Sometimes long-distance addiction pays off. Sometimes true, unabashed, anachronistic, sentimental love triumphs over separation.

We hope.

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