Asking Good Questions Is A Superpower
Long Distance Relationships: The Good And The Bad

1. For Fun: Desert Island and What If?
2. Today
3. Life Right Now: Who Are You?
4. What Do You Think?
4. Tell Them…
5. Highlights and Lowlights
6. Life Then: The Rear-Vision Mirror
7. Childhood
8. Family and Relationships
9. Holidays, Birthdays and Other Traditions
10. Work and Study
11. Passions, Interests, and Talents
12. When The Pressure Rises: Stress and Self-Care
13. As A Couple: Your Journey So Far
14. For Couples in Long Distance Relationships
15. Money and Other Priorities
16. Spirituality and God
17. Death and Dying
18. Life In The Future: What Do You Want?

What Next?
About The Authors
Also By Lisa McKay
Free Sample: Love At The Speed Of Email
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Asking Good Questions Is A Superpower

“Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.”

(Anne Morrow Lindbergh)

**Asking Questions = A Superpower**

Do you have someone in your life you would love to get to know better?

Maybe this person is a good friend. Maybe you have just started dating them, or maybe you have been married for years. In every scenario, there is one superpower skill that will help you get to know them better. One superpower skill that will encourage them to open up, help you understand them, and deepen and strengthen your relationship.

Actually, there are *two* such superpower skills: They are ‘asking good questions’ and ‘listening well.’

A good question is a powerful catalyst. And when you ask someone a question, you can’t always predict where that question will take them.

Perhaps your question will challenge them, make them think, prompt them to search deep within themselves, or force them to clarify their thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

Maybe it will dredge up memories they usually keep tucked away.

Maybe it will flood them with nostalgia, stir up affection, set their teeth on edge, or make them laugh.

It’s all a bit of a wild adventure, really, but one thing is for sure… If you ask good questions and listen well, you will learn new things—*important* new things—about someone you love. They will feel valued, heard, and understood. Likewise, if you are prepared to share your answer these questions yourself, your partner will get to know *you* better. And over time, step by step, that invisible living bond between you—your relationship—will grow stronger and more resilient.

**401 Great Discussion Questions**

OK, so you’re convinced that asking good question is a great idea. The problem? Good questions are not always that easy to think up on the spur of the moment.

That’s where this book comes in. You can use the questions in this book in just about any context to spark great discussion. They will work equally well whether you’re talking via a long distance phone line or across the dinner table. And many of these questions will lead to other questions you will want to explore.
We’ve divided the questions in this book into different chapters for easy reference. Here is a short description of each chapter. You can tap or click on a chapter title to go directly to that chapter.

**For Fun: Desert Island And What If?:** Light-hearted questions that ask you to dream, play, imagine and laugh.

**Today:** A dozen alternatives to: “How was your day?”

**Life Right Now: Who Are You?** About who you are and where you are at right now in life.

**What Do You Think?** What you think about life, love, lying, and everything in between.

**Tell Them…** A chance to share your own thoughts and memories… about *them*.

**Highlights and Lowlights:** About the extremes—the highs and lows—of life.

**Life Then: The Rear-Vision Mirror:** About the past.

**Childhood:** About how and where you grew up.

**Family and Relationships:** About your parents, siblings, and other important relationships.

**Holidays, Birthdays And Other Traditions:** About holiday customs, birthday traditions, and other important celebrations in your life.

**Work And Study:** About what you choose to do with your time and how you make a living.

**Passions And Talents:** About what you’re good at, and other things that ‘light you up.’

**When The Pressure Rises: Stress And Self-Care:** About how you react under pressure, cope with stress, and manage conflict.

**As A Couple: Your Journey So Far:** About your relationship to date.

**For Couples in Long Distance Relationships:** Questions only long distance couples need to answer.

**Money And Other Priorities:** About how you handle money and make other important decisions.
**Spirituality And God**: About the existence of something beyond the tangible and physical.

**Death And Dying**: About the end of this life.

**Life In The Future: What Do You Want?**: About where you’re headed and what you want from the future.

Did one particular chapter catch your attention? Great, start there. If not, just start at the first chapter and work your way through. There are no rules when it comes to using this book. So pick and choose from these questions—if one doesn’t sit right, skip it. Just take your time with them, and focus.

**Listening: A Stealthy Superpower**

While we’re talking about focusing, how do you feel when someone listens well to you? Think about the last time someone gave you his or her full and undivided attention. Perhaps they turned to face you, looked at you, waited patiently for you to answer, and then let you know they understood what you were trying to say.

It is a powerful thing to ask someone a good question. It is just as powerful—if not more so—to *listen well* to another person. This book gives you hundreds of good questions you can choose to ask, but it’s totally up to you to listen well.

If you are in a long distance relationship, read the next chapter before you get started. If you’re not, then dive right in and jump straight over to the first chapter of questions. Click on the chapter titles and links in the table of contents to jump back and forth between different chapters.

Have fun. Enjoy sharing some of your own thoughts and stories along the way. First and foremost, though, take the opportunity to practice the stealthy superpower. Listen well—with your your full attention and with an attitude of curiosity, patience, encouragement, and respect. And, remember, don’t rush through these questions, or treat them too much like a to-do list. The process of communicating and connecting is, after all, the main point.
Long Distance Relationships: The Good And The Bad

Are you in a long-distance relationship? You’re not alone. All across the world, more and more people are dating long distance or traveling regularly for work. However, being far apart from someone that you love doesn’t mean that you have to be distant emotionally as well.

You can build and sustain a real relationship across the miles. We know; we’ve done it.

When we met, Lisa was living in Los Angeles and Mike was living in Papua New Guinea. If you would like to learn more about how we went from meeting via email to marriage in just over a year, check out Lisa’s award-winning memoir, Love At The Speed Of Email. Critics describe this book as, “part grand romance, part travel memoir, and part essay on life’s most precious gifts. It is clever and comedic, poignant and pitch-perfect.”

The Bad News About Long Distance Relationships

Let’s be honest here. Being far apart from someone you’re dating (or want to be dating) is tough. Here are just a few of the common challenges:

1. When you get to know someone at a distance you run the risk that your e-chemistry will evaporate once you’re up close and personal.

2. Dating at a distance means that you miss out on important information that can only come from spending time together, such as learning how someone treats friends and acts in public.

3. Distance can rob you of opportunities to identify differences and head off or resolve conflict.

The Good News About Long Distance Relationships

However, there is some good news about long distance relationships! Did you know that being in a long distance relationship for a season can actually be good for you? Long distance dating can bring some unique benefits, and probably the biggest benefit of them all is the fact that being apart forces you to communicate.

When you’re in a long-distance relationship, you have nothing to build your relationship with but words. Research suggests that long-distance couples talk less frequently than those who live in the same city, but that their interactions tend to be deeper and more meaningful.

Communicating across distance slows you down and grants you extra time and space to think. This will add depth, intimacy, and range to your relationship. When you’re in a long distance relationship you can get to know your partner better in some ways than you
would have if you were sharing the same city during this time. In the process, you also develop communication skills and habits that will help your relationship in the long run.

Here are **five other good things** that can come with being in a long distance relationship for a season:

1. **You really appreciate the time that you do spend together.**
   Seeing each other less often can help you fully appreciate the time that you *are* able to spend together. You’ll savor and make the most of your visits regardless of whether you’re out on the town together or snuggling at home.

2. **Being far apart teaches you a certain amount of self-reliance.**
   When you’re in a long distance relationship, your partner can offer emotional support, but won’t be able to sweep in and fix things for you. The distance between you can help you grow in strength and independence. This, in turn, will only make you more attractive to your partner.

3. **You have more time to pursue other passions and interests.**
   I don’t advocate being in a long distance relationship because it frees up your time, but it *can* be a silver lining to being far apart. Use some of your extra time to pursue things that are fun or fulfilling – invest in friendships, read books, work out, or do something creative.

4. **You are less likely to confuse lust with love**
   Attraction in a long-distance relationship tends to be based primarily on a foundation of emotional intimacy and shared values rather than physical intimacy. Being attracted to someone mostly because of the conversations you have (rather than the sex you share) is not an iron-clad guarantee of long-term relationship success, but it certainly helps.

5. **You get to road-test your trust.**
   When you’re far apart from your partner, it can be difficult not to let your imagination run wild sometimes. When they’re out without you and having fun, it can be hard not to let jealousy or insecurity get a foothold in your mind. But spending time living apart can let you practice trusting and being trustworthy.

**What We Hope For You**

Mike and I had fun writing this book. Many of these questions are ones that we discussed during the year we spent long distance dating (and the many, *many* months we’ve spent apart since getting married).

We hope the questions in this book will spark many discussions—discussions that lead you new and wonderful places on your journey of getting to know one another.
We hope that when those discussions mire you in misunderstandings or lead you into challenging territory, you will have the goodwill, patience, and self-confidence to ask more questions, share your own thoughts and feelings, and seek clarity.

We hope that each discussion lays down one more brick in a firm foundation for your shared future.

Lisa and Mike
For Fun: Desert Island and What If?

There are plenty of deep and meaningful questions in this book, but let’s start with some that are mostly for fun.

We all need fun and playfulness in our lives. “Playing” is one of the best ways to exercise your creativity and boost your mood. And sometimes the strangest questions can yield the most interesting information, or surprisingly thoughtful responses.

I (Lisa) met my husband, Mike, via email when he was an aid worker living in Papua New Guinea and I was living in Los Angeles. We wrote letters to each other for months before meeting. In one of our early email exchanges, I asked Mike which tree he wanted to be. The lyricism of his reply caught me by surprise:

“I’d like to be a poinciana tree, with those beautiful orange blossoms screaming from the forest canopy with passion and vigor. I’d like to be the white oak, spreading its magnificent sturdy branches into the air. A eucalyptus tree, defying drought. A Douglas fir, because their green is so deep and rich that the candles just don’t do it justice. A ponderosa pine, whose needles give off the most delightful odor when they hit the ground in the warm air of summer. And the mango tree in Uganda in the center of the displaced peoples camp, where everyone gathers for meetings…” (Love At The Speed Of Email)

If I hadn’t already been interested in Mike before reading that, I certainly would have been afterwards—all because I asked a goofy question about a tree.

So have fun with these questions. Dream, play, share, and laugh. Enjoy.

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1. If you could have any superpower, which would you pick? Why?

2. If a magic mirror could tell you the truth about yourself, life, the future, or anything else, what would you want to know?

3. If you could trade places with anyone for one week, who would you trade places with and why?

4. If you could have a round trip ticket to anywhere in the world, where would you choose to go? What would you want to do there?

5. If you could repeat an experience you’ve had in life with someone special to you, what would it be?

6. If you were stranded on a desert island, would you rather be there alone with high-speed internet access, or with no internet access but one other person?
7. If you were stranded on a desert island for five years and you could take four other people (other than the person you’re talking to) who would you take?

8. If you could only take one book and one movie with you to this desert island, which ones would you choose?

9. If you could spend a month living in any period in history, when and where would you choose to live?

10. Which two historical figures would you like to watch debate, and on which topic?

11. If you had to do something really fun or unusual every month for the next year, what are some of the things you would choose to do?

12. If you had to live without one of the following for a whole year—alcohol, sugar, hot water, and internet access—which would you choose to forego? What if you had to give up two of those luxuries?

13. If you had a million dollars to give away, what would you do with it?

14. What would you do with an extra $1,000 to spend only on yourself?

15. If you had to move permanently to another country, which one would you pick?

16. If you could speak one other language well, which one would you choose and why?

17. If you could choose your area of study and/or your job all over again, what would you do differently?

18. If you could be part of the first human colony on Mars, would you go? What qualities do you have that would make you a good member of that team? What would your liabilities be?

19. If you could cure one disease, which one would you pick?

20. If you could be invisible for a day, what would you do?

21. If you were to start a business, what would you do?

22. If you had to make your living as an artist, what would you try to make and sell?

23. Who is a celebrity you find fascinating or attractive? What draws you to them?

24. If you could meet any famous person you wanted to, whom would you choose?

25. If you had to get a tattoo, where would you get it and what would it be?

26. What would you do with your time if money were of no concern?
27. If you could be an animal for a day, which one would you choose?

28. If you could spend one hour doing anything at all, what would you do?

29. If you were to write a book, what would it be about?

30. If you could be in the movie of your choice, what movie would it be and what role would you play?

31. If you could go anywhere for dinner tomorrow night, where would you go?

32. If you could choose to do something extraordinarily well, what skill would you pick?

33. If you had to change your first name, what new name would you choose?

34. If you had the ability to compete in the Olympics, which event would you choose to compete in?

35. If you were in charge of eliminating hunger in the world, where would you start?

36. If you had to design and teach a class at university, what would you teach on?

37. If you could redesign and redecorate your home at no cost, what would you do?

38. If you could relive one year of your life, which would you choose?
Today

“How was your day?”

We’ve all asked this question, haven’t we?

It’s not a bad question. After all, if you actually want an answer, then asking this question means that you care about the other person. You are genuinely interested in what is happening in their life.

But asking the same question day after day (no matter how sincerely) can start to get old. Your conversations can begin to settle into the same old grooves night after night—work, and what’s new with the kids. And you may not even know where to start when your partner says, “How was your day,” anyway. After all, the same day can contain mountains, valleys, and everything in between.

So if you’re in the mood for something a little new, here are some alternative questions you can try asking tonight.

***

1. How are you feeling right now?
2. What is something that made you smile today?
3. What was something that made you feel frustrated today?
4. What have you been thinking about today?
5. When did you feel appreciated today?
6. What is something you did today that that you really enjoyed?
7. How did you show kindness to someone else today?
8. What (or who) encouraged you today?
9. What’s something that you intended to do today, but didn’t? Why not?
10. Was there anything you wanted to happen today, but didn’t?
11. What did you learn today?
12. Tell me two good things and two bad things from the past week.
**Life Right Now: Who Are You?**

Sometimes we are so focused on the future or the past that we forget to take stock of where we are *right now* in life. Today. The season we are actually *living*.

Your likes and dislikes, wants and needs all change over time. So the questions in this section will help you explore what you are doing and what is important to you *now*.

And when you’re asking and answering these questions, keep the timeless wisdom of Dr. Seuss in mind: “Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind.”

***

1. What is the story from your own life you find yourself telling the most often?
2. What is one cliché you sometimes catch yourself saying?
3. What is the joke you tell most often?
4. Do you prefer exercising your mind or your body? How frequently do you do either?
5. What is your idea of fun exercise?
6. What is one of your pet peeves?
7. What is something that bothers you if it’s not done perfectly? Why?
8. What is your favorite book, movie, or TV show right now?
9. What is a poem or song you really love?
10. What’s your favorite board game?
11. What is your favorite piece of furniture in your house?
12. What is your favorite restaurant? What do you love to order there?
13. What do you daydream about most often?
14. What does your perfect day look like?
15. What are you a “natural” at doing?
16. Which of your personality traits or habits do you work the hardest to resist or change?
17. What is something about yourself that you hope will never change?
18. Where is the biggest mismatch in your life right now between what you believe and how you are acting?

19. In which ways do you create your own suffering?

20. What do you wish you were better at saying no to?

21. What do you spend most of your leisure/entertainment time doing?

22. Do you tend to play it safe or take risks?

23. What is something you’d like to do, but are scared to try?

24. In what situations are you most likely to procrastinate?

25. What is a “deal breaker” for you in a relationship?

26. What is something you should probably throw out or give away, but don’t want to? Explain.

27. Is it harder for you to stick to a plan or be spontaneous?

28. Who is someone you have a difficult time loving?

29. Which do you need to practice the most: patience, kindness, gratitude, joyfulness, strength, or vulnerability?

30. Are you more of a leader, or more of a follower?

31. Are you more of a feeler or a thinker?

32. What causes you to get flustered?

33. What time of day do you feel your best?

34. What is something that amazes you?

35. Where is your favorite place to take out of town guests?

36. What’s one thing you’d rather pay someone to do than do yourself?

37. What are three qualities that draw you to someone new?
What Do You Think?

How well do you really know what your partner thinks about life, love, lying, and everything in between? For that matter, do you have firm answers to all the tricky questions that life throws up?

No matter how well you think you know your partner, you don’t know everything about what goes on inside their heads. You never will. The good news is that this means there is always more to learn about someone we love.

Below are some questions that will help you to learn something new about the person you’re talking to. Guaranteed. Try taking turns picking from the list.

***

1. Do you spend more time thinking about the past, the present, or the future?
2. Who is one of your heroes? What do you admire about them?
3. How important is it to set personal goals?
5. Fill in the blanks: “I used to think ___, and now I think ____.”
6. What is the most significant problem facing the world?
7. What is a social or political issue that you feel strongly about?
8. What is a social or political issue you feel like you need to learn more about before you form an opinion?
9. What is one social or political issue you have changed your opinion about during the past decade?
10. What is a law or custom that would make this world a better place to live in?
11. What is your favorite quotation? Why do you like it?
12. Tyron Edwards once said: “Seek happiness for its own sake, and you will not find it; seek for duty, and happiness will follow as the shadow comes with the sunshine.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
13. What is the ideal age to get married? Why?
14. Why do you think divorce is so prevalent?
15. Is it more important in life to be honest or kind? Why?

16. Is ignorance ever really bliss?

17. Why are bad habits so hard to break?

18. What is more important: What you say or how you say it?

19. Is silence ever really golden? When?

20. Is it ever appropriate to break the law?

21. Is conflict a necessary part of a healthy relationship?

22. If money doesn’t bring happiness, what does?

23. What is one thing you know for sure?

24. When is it OK to lie?

25. Do you agree, or disagree with this saying: “An adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered” (G.K. Chesterton).
Tell Them…

Asking good questions is an entirely under-rated skill. It’s a beautiful thing to have someone you love ask you a thoughtful question and listen well while you answer. However, there is something else that can feel just as good—sometimes even better. What’s that? It’s listening to someone that you love talk about you.

Victor Hugo once said, “The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves, or rather, loved in spite of ourselves.”

Sharing fond memories that you have of someone or offering specific words of admiration or appreciation is perhaps the most potent way to warm someone’s heart, encourage them, and make them feel truly loved.

So stop asking questions for just a little while. Instead, tell them…

***

1. About a time they did something romantic.
2. How they helped you get over something and move on.
3. About a time they kept you from making a mistake.
4. About a habit they have that you think is great.
5. Something you like about their sense of humor.
6. Something you admire about them.
7. About a time they made you feel good about yourself.
8. About a thoughtful gift they’ve given you.
9. Something you love about their body.
10. Something they’ve done recently that you appreciate.
11. A way in which your differences complement each other.
12. About a time you saw them do something out of character.
13. About a time they made you laugh.
14. One way they touch you that you love.
15. About a cute quirk they have.

16. Something you appreciate about how they take care of you.

17. About a time they were a good friend.

18. About a time when you respected their skills.

19. About a time they sacrificed to support you.

20. One way they help you be a better person.
Highlights and Lowlights

Jim Morrison, the wild-child lead singer of *The Doors*, once said, “I think the highest and lowest points are the important ones. Anything else is just in between.”

Given that Morrison died of an accidental heroin overdose at the age of 27, perhaps we shouldn’t take those words as a mantra to live by. However, there is some wisdom tucked into this quote. You can learn a lot about someone by how they handle the extremes in life.

In this section, we focus on these extremes—the highest and lowest points. Here are some questions to help you explore the summits and the depths.

***

1. What is something you’ve achieved that you are really proud of?
2. What has been your biggest disappointment in life so far?
3. What has been the biggest challenge you’ve overcome?
4. Tell me about two things you greatly fear.
5. Tell me about a time you overcame a fear.
6. What is the most adventurous or daring thing you’ve done?
7. Tell me about a time when you felt very loved.
8. What is the greatest thing you’ve done for someone else?
9. Tell me about a time you felt very hurt.
10. Tell me about a time you felt extremely happy.
11. Tell me about a real sacrifice you have made.
12. What event in your life has changed you the most?
13. What is one thing you’ve learned the hard way in life?
14. What good things have resulted from the suffering you’ve experienced in your life?
15. What is something you regret having done?
16. What is something you regret *not* having done?
17. What is the most dangerous situation you’ve encountered? How did you react?
18. What were your New Years Resolutions or goals this year?
19. Tell me about a New Years Resolution or important goal that you succeeded in keeping.
20. Tell me about a New Years Resolution or important goal that you didn’t keep.
21. When was the last time you really pushed yourself to your physical limits?
22. When was the last time you remember being stunned by beauty (or ugliness)?
Life Then: The Rear-Vision Mirror

What happens to us in life (and how we interpret and remember these experiences) shapes our core identity. The events of the past help define who we are today, and they will influence who we become in the future.

Use the questions in the next several sections to look in the rear-view mirror of your lives. Ask your partner about their stories. Tell some of your own.

***

1. Where is the most beautiful place you’ve ever been?

2. Tell me about something mischievous you’ve done.

3. What is one book that has changed your life or stuck with you?

4. What movie have you watched (or book have you read) over and over again? Why?

5. When is the last time you had “butterflies” because you felt so nervous? How did that turn out?

6. What is the most embarrassing gaffe you’ve ever made with emails, texts, or instant messages?

7. Has anything bad ever happened to you that turned out to be for the best?

8. What’s the wildest animal you’ve been close to?

9. What is something you’ve won?

10. What is one of the nicest compliments anyone has ever paid you?

11. When was the last time you were bored out of your mind?

12. When was the last time you really wanted to scream at someone?

13. Tell me about a time you helped (or were helped) by a total stranger.

14. What is one of your favorite souvenirs from your travels?

15. What was your first job? What did it teach you?

16. What is the biggest surprise you’ve ever gotten? How did you react?
17. When is the last time you told a “little white lie?”
18. Tell me about a time you successfully resisted temptation.
19. What life experience has strengthened you the most?
20. What’s the best job you’ve ever had?
21. What’s the worst job you’ve ever had?
22. Who was your first boyfriend or girlfriend? What was he or she like?
23. Tell me about a time you laughed when it was inappropriate or mean.
24. What is something you have done that required great endurance or discipline?
25. When was the last time you found yourself “walking on eggshells?”
26. When was the last time you cried?
27. Tell me about a time when you did something that required courage.
28. Tell me about a time when you received some amazing news.
29. When did you feel like you really became an adult?
Childhood

Childhood is often referred to as the most beautiful—the most innocent—of all life’s seasons. And Tom Robbins once said, “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood.” Not everyone agrees, however. Here some other ways that childhood is characterized:

“A promise that is never kept” (Ken Hill)

“The fiery furnace in which we are melted down to essentials and that essential shaped for good,” (Katherine Anne Porter)

“The period in which we first learnt to suffer the experience of total loss—more than that, it was the period in which we suffered more total losses than in all the rest of our life put together.” (John Berger)

Which of those quotes do you most resonate with?

We all have very different experiences of childhood—even those of us who grew up in the same family. And, like it or not, those childhood experiences have been very influential in shaping you.

The questions in the next several chapters will help you explore this crucial season in more detail.

***

1. What do you miss about childhood?
2. Where did you grow up? What was it like?
3. What did you do for fun when you were a child?
4. Describe a magical childhood memory.
5. Ask a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?
6. What is your earliest childhood memory?
7. Did you have any pets when you were young? Tell me about them.
8. What did you get in the most trouble for when you were young?
9. What was something you did as a child that made you feel all grown up?
10. What childhood accident stands out in your mind?
11. Tell me something you did as a child that you feel embarrassed about at the time. What about something you did as a child that you feel embarrassed about now?

12. What was something you were good at/not good at when you were young?

13. What games (make-believe or otherwise) did you play when you were little? Do you think those games influenced your career choices?

14. Tell me about a significant childhood achievement.

15. What was your favorite book, movie, and album as a young child? What about as a teenager?

16. What was your favorite/least favorite subject at high school? Why?

17. What clubs, sports, or activities were you most involved in during high school?

18. Did you find it easy to make friends when you were young? What kinds of kids did you hang out with at school?

19. Who was your best friend in high school? Where is he or she now?

20. Did you ever cheat at school? Share the details.

21. What’s something you did growing up that your parents never found out about?

22. What is one book that you were forced to read in high school that you hated? Why? What about one book you loved?

23. What do you think of when you hear the word “home”?
Family and Relationships

Shirley Abbott once said, “We all grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies.”

In that poetic snippet, Abbott is basically talking about the fact that your parents and other important relationships shape your understanding of life and love. They have a huge influence on everything from how you communicate and handle conflict, to what you instinctively consider to be “normal.”

As such, these relationships have a profound and continuing influence on how you relate to your own partner, and (if you have children) how you parent. If you are in a long-term relationship, issues associated with your partner’s childhood and family experiences (and yours) will rear their heads.

So get to know as much as you can about your partner’s early relationship experiences. How someone answers questions about important relationships in their lives (past and current) can tell you a lot about someone’s natural “love languages”—how they give and receive love.

These sorts of questions can give you clues as to how to love someone well, and also let you know how he or she may often try to express their love for you. If someone is unable to answer these questions, or uncomfortable doing so, that can tell you things as well.

***

1. What is a favorite memory with your grandparents?

2. If you have siblings, who are they and how did you get along with them while you were growing up? How do you get along with your siblings now?

3. What are some things your siblings did that annoyed you when you were all young? What is one thing your siblings do now that annoys you?

4. What’s the meanest thing you did to a sibling? What’s the meanest thing a sibling did to you?

5. What is one thing you admire and respect about each of your siblings?

6. Did you have any aunt or uncle or adult mentor figure in your teenage years? Tell me about the role they played in your life.

7. Does your family have a “black sheep”? Who is it?

8. How did you rebel against your parents while you were growing up?
9. What are three words that describe your mother?

10. What are three words that describe your father?

11. What are some things your parents did well as parents?

12. What are some things you wish your parents had done differently?

13. What is one thing you admire and respect about each of your parents?

14. How are you similar to your parents? What about different?

15. How often do you speak with your parents? When you do speak with your parents, what do you talk about?

16. If you could change anything about your relationship with your parents, what would it be?

17. What are two things you admire about your parents’ relationship?

18. What is one way you want your relationship to be similar to your parents’ relationship?

19. What is one way you want your relationship to be different than your parents’ relationship?

20. What is the most important quality in a marriage/partnership?

21. If you could restore one broken or damaged relationship in your life, which one would you choose?

22. Are you more likely to avoid conflict, or face it head on?

23. Which of the following ways do you most prefer to give and receive love: touch, words, gifts, time spent together, or acts of kindness?

24. Think of someone you greatly respect. What are three things you admire about that person?

25. Tell me about your closest friends. Are you happy with the number and quality of friendships in your life?

26. What’s a valuable lesson you learned from a previous romantic relationship?

27. What is something you’ve experienced in a previous relationship that you wouldn’t want to repeat again?

28. Think of a couple you greatly respect. What are three things you admire about their relationship?
Holidays, Birthdays, and Other Traditions

Susan Lieberman sums up the importance and influence of family traditions this way: “Family traditions counter alienation and confusion. They help us define who we are; they provide something steady, reliable and safe in a confusing world.”

On the other hand, William Somerset Maugham also warns that tradition should be, “a guide and not a jailor.”

Do you feel more comforted, inspired, confused or imprisoned by your family traditions (or lack thereof)? Here are some questions to help you explore special holidays and family rituals.

***

1. How did your family celebrate your birthday growing up? Tell me about one particularly memorable birthday party. Why does it stand out?

2. How does your family celebrate your birthday now?

3. What would your ideal birthday look like?

4. What are some of the best gifts you’ve received? Why were they so special?

5. What are some of the best gifts you’ve given to others?

6. What do you typically do to mark birthdays of your parents and siblings?

7. What is your favorite holiday of the year? What are some of the things your family always used to do (or does now) to celebrate this holiday?

8. What is the most important holiday of the year for your family? What are their hopes and expectations of you around this holiday?

9. What family traditions did you have while you were growing up around celebrating other important holidays?

10. What is your favorite family tradition?

11. What’s a tradition you wish your family had, but never did?

12. What is a tradition you would like to have in your own family?

13. What was the best vacation your family had?

14. What was the worst vacation your family ever had?
**Work and Study**

The question “what do you do?” sometimes gets a bad rap as unimaginative and banal, but I think it’s a very important question to ask when you are getting to know someone. What a person does to earn a living tells you a lot.

It helps you understand what they’ve studied and what they find interesting about their jobs (or whether they’re trapped in a dead-end role they hate). It tells you what they spend a good chunk of every day doing and thinking about.

However, don’t just ask someone what they do and then make assumptions about what they think and feel about their situation. Follow up! Ask them what they love about what do, and what they find unfulfilling or draining. Ask them whether they see themselves doing that sort of work in the future, or what their other hopes, dreams, and plans are.

Ask these deeper sorts of questions even if you’ve been with someone for years and think you know everything about their work. Our thoughts and feelings about our work tend to change over time. If you spend some time digging deeply into what your partner is doing on a day-to-day basis, and how they feel about that, you might be surprised by some of their answers.

***

1. What is your job?/What are you studying?
2. What does your typical workday look like?
3. How many hours a week do you work? Do you normally work on evenings or weekends?
4. How do you feel when you wake up in the morning and think about going to work?
5. John Ruskin once said: “In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed: They must be fit for it. They must not do too much of it. And they must have a sense of success in it.” What do you think of this quote? How do those three things apply to you in your working life?
6. What do you most enjoy about your job/field of study?
7. What do you find challenging about your job/field of study?
8. If someone asked you for advice on a career choice, would you recommend your line of work? Why?
9. Why did you choose this line of work?
10. Are your motivations for this work now the same as they were when you started down this path? If not, how have they changed?

11. How does your job allow you to express or “live out” what you value?

12. Aristotle once said: “Where talents and the needs of the world cross, therein lies your vocation.” Do you believe in this concept of vocation? What would you say is your vocation?

13. What sort of job do you want to be doing (or not doing) in five years time? What about ten?
Passions, Interests, and Talents

When you are dating someone (or thinking about dating someone) it’s important to learn about their interests and passions. Even across distance, this will help you judge how those interests and hobbies line up with your interests and hobbies. Can you imagine the two of you enjoying spending your leisure time together, or not?

The fact that they love Indian food while you loathe it probably shouldn’t be an automatic deal-breaker. However, if he or she eats gluten-free and spends all of their spare time training for marathons, while you love to spend Saturdays baking cupcakes and reading novels, that should tell you something (primarily that one or both of you will ultimately have to make some significant lifestyle leisure changes or you will both need to be content spending much of your “fun” time pursuing different interests).

It is still worth spending time on these questions if you are already married or in a well-established relationship. If you ask all of these questions and listen well to the answers, you are almost guaranteed to learn something new about your partner. And when you really understand what most motivates your partner—that lights them up, energizes, and fascinates them—you are much better placed to connect well with him or her in ways that matter most to them.

***

1. What do you most enjoy spending time doing?
2. When do you feel most “like yourself”? Why?
3. If you had a Saturday all to yourself, what would you do?
4. What are two of your guilty pleasures?
5. What would you like to do more of in life, but don’t? Why not?
6. If you had the opportunity to work on one local community problem, what would it be?
7. What are two things that tend to “get you excited” (or “light you up”) when you are talking about them?
8. When and how did these passions start to develop?
9. “Flow” or “the zone” is being completely absorbed in an activity with a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. When do you experience flow?
10. How have your interests and passions changed over time?
11. What do your family and friends think about your passions?

12. What are three things you are good at doing—three of your personal talents or strengths?

13. What are two things you are not good at doing?

14. What strengths do you admire in others but feel you do not excel in yourself?
When The Pressure Rises: Stress and Self-Care

Do you understand how your partner typically acts and reacts when they are stressed and tired? Do you know how to help them during those times?

Many couples communicate well when life’s skies are sunny and it’s all smooth sailing. When clouds roll in and the wind picks up, however, it can be a different story.

When your or your partner (or both) are tired and stressed, misunderstandings and conflicts can arise as quickly as summer storms. You can find yourselves confused and frustrated by your partner’s mood, words, and actions. You can feel helpless to know how to approach them, or what to do or say. It can be even more difficult to know how to help if you’re physically separated—if you’re traveling for work or you’re in a long distance relationship.

One of the best things you can do to make these times easier is to discuss these dynamics when you are not tired or stressed. The better you understand how each of you typically thinks or feels during times of stress and pressure, the better you will be able to encourage and support each other during those times. Here are some questions to help you do that.

***

1. What are the biggest sources of stress in your life right now?
2. What are two issues or themes around which you most frequently feel as if you struggle to find balance in your life?
3. Theodore Rubin once said: “The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem.” Do you agree with this? What role do you think your expectations play in your stress levels?
4. To feel rested, how many hours of sleep do you need?
5. When you feel stressed, how does that show up in how you interact with other people?
6. When you are under pressure, what are some of your “early warning” signs of stress?
7. When you become aware of your early warning signs, what do you do to help prevent your stress from growing?
8. When you feel sad, what do you do for comfort?
9. When you feel stressed, fatigued, or anxious what (positive and negative) coping strategies do you use?
10. What advice do you give to others about how to manage stress?

11. What helpful self-care strategies do you wish you were using more regularly?

12. Have you ever been in counseling? If so, what were some things you learned?

13. When you are struggling, how can your partner best help you? What about friends or other family members?

14. What is a good way to approach you when you’re stressed? What is a good question to ask?

15. Since self-care is foundational to being able to care for your relationship, what are ways that your partner can encourage you to take care of yourself?
**As A Couple: Your Journey So Far**

Do you ever sit around and talk about the good-ole’-times in your relationship? If not, you’re missing out.

Reminiscing about your good times and shared adventures can give you the feel-goods, make you happier, and draw you even closer together. When you retell fun parts of your relationship history you are *recapturing* pleasant experiences.

A couple of words of warning, however. Not *all* reminiscing is necessarily good for you and your relationship, and talking about the tough times together is riskier than talking about the happy times.

Talking calmly and respectfully through the tough times *can* help you understand each other better and figure out ways to do things differently in the future. However “talking calmly about painful events” is not an easy thing to do! And there is a very big difference between a productive (if uncomfortable) discussion about a conflict or misunderstanding, and repeatedly reliving an argument all over again without anything changing.

With that in mind, let’s take a look at some of your experiences together so far, and the patterns you have already established in your relationship.

***

1. What was your first impression of me? In what ways was it accurate or inaccurate?
2. What is a favorite memory you have of time we’ve spent together?
3. How have you had to compromise or change since we got together?
4. What do you miss most about being single?
5. What are some things you love about being “coupled”?
6. How do we each get some “recharge time” during the week?
7. Where was the location of our most memorable kiss?
8. What household or personal habit of mine has been driving you crazy that you haven’t told me about?
9. What is the silliest disagreement we’ve had so far? What started it?
10. In what ways are we similar? What about different?
11. How do these similarities help or hinder our relationship?
12. Tell me about a time you remember us laughing together.

13. How do you feel about how many friends we have as a couple, who they are, and how often we see them?

14. What would you change about our social circle if you could?

15. Which of us is more likely to start an argument?

16. Which of us usually gets the last word?

17. What was one of our best dates ever?

18. How do we signal when one of us needs rescuing from boring relatives or awkward situations?

19. What is something we’ve done together that turned out to be more fun than we expected?

20. How do we currently divide up working, household, and childcare responsibilities?
   Who is primarily responsible for:
   a. Getting the car serviced
   b. Washing the dishes
   c. Cleaning the house
   d. Doing the laundry
   e. Caring for young children
   f. Making dinner
   g. Grocery shopping
   h. Paying the bills

21. How do you feel about those decisions and patterns?

22. How would you like those roles to shift when we next move/change jobs/have a child?

23. What is something I’ve done that melted your heart?
For Couples in Long Distance Relationships

Wait, why is there a section for couples in long distance relationships when the whole book is supposed to be for couples in long distance relationships?

Well, because a lot of couples that aren’t in long distance relationship are using this book. And because long distance relationships have some unique dynamics and stress points that you can benefit from discussing openly. So here they are, some questions that only apply to you long distance lovers.

***

1. What are two ways that being in a long distance relationship has been good for you?

2. What helps you feel most connected to me?

3. What sort of communication patterns have we established as a couple? How often are we talking, and for how long? How frequently are we emailing or texting?

4. How would you change those patterns if you could? When, how often, and how would you ideally like to connect?

5. What do you find most rewarding and enjoyable about long-distance communication?

6. Are you better at asking your partner questions, or listening well?

7. What is one thing you think we’re “doing well” in our relationship?

8. What do you find most challenging about being in a long distance relationship?

9. What is one miscommunication we’ve had as a couple? What led to that miscommunication? How could it have been prevented?

10. What is one thing you think you could “do better” in our relationship?

11. Distance makes it much easier to see someone through rose-colored glasses. What is one way you think that I may be “idealizing” you?

12. Have you ever felt jealous during our relationship? If so, is your jealousy a general problem, or are your jealous feelings focused on specific situations or one particular person?

13. What are the “ground-rules” or “core values” in our relationship? How can these ground-rules help us make decisions on a day-to-day basis?

14. Are you open to the possibility of relocating if this relationship were to become more serious?
Money and Other Priorities

Do you know that differences with regards to money are frequently a major problem for couples? Many experts claim that differences in how a couple saves and spends money are the No. 1 cause of tension and conflict in a relationship.

Achieving financial harmony in a relationship is very, very important. However, it’s not necessarily easy to get an accurate picture of someone’s approach to money while you’re dating, especially if you are in a long distance relationship.

Some couples find that they are naturally aligned in this area. These lucky couples are largely similar in how they value, earn, save, and spend money, and in the level of financial risk they are willing to take on.

Other couples are very different in how they approach money. Those differences won’t necessarily sink a relationship (although they can). However, they are bound to cause stress, tension, and conflict unless they are well understood and respected, and the couple has agreed-upon guidelines in place for managing money.

Whether you’ve just started dating or you are in a committed relationship, you will learn valuable information if you take the time to answer questions like the ones in this section. Some of these questions are suitable for new couples that are just getting to know each other. Others are more suitable for couples in a serious long-term relationship. Pick and choose what is appropriate for you to ask, and get talking…

***

1. Did your family have enough money while you were growing up? Did money feel tight, or plentiful?

2. How did your parents make decisions about money?

3. Did you work to earn money while you were growing up?

4. What did you spend your money on as a teenager?

5. How do people treat and talk about money in your family now? Does your family loan or give others money easily? Are your parents or siblings reckless, generous, careful, or downright stingy with their money?

6. What do you think this quote means: “A wise person should have money in their head, but not in their heart?” (Jonathan Swift)

7. Do you have any outstanding loans or debts?
8. Have you ever been unemployed? How did that influence the way you handled money?

9. What is something you would like to change about the way you spend or manage money?

10. How do we manage your money as a couple right now (e.g., do you have merged or separate accounts, who pays bills, who pays for dates)? Would you change anything about those arrangements?

11. What is the limit we can spend on an item before you need to confer with each other before purchasing?

12. What is the first thing you would buy/pay off if you won or inherited a lot of money?

13. Thomas Jefferson once said: “Never spend your money before you have it.” Do you agree, or disagree?

14. If and when your budget is tight, where would you make changes first? What “luxuries” are very important to you and which ones could you let go?

15. How do you feel about income imbalances? If you’re in a committed relationship, do you think that the person who earns more should have more say about how money is used?

16. Is having a nice house or having a nice car more important to you?

17. Is it more important to you to be able to spend money on a family holiday every year, or have a nicer house?

18. How much are you willing to spend on:
   a. A night at a fancy hotel
   b. A car
   c. Airline tickets
   d. A house
   e. A holiday
   f. A bottle of wine or spirits
   g. A nice meal out
   h. Your hobby
19. How would your answers to the previous question change if money were no constraint?

20. If money were no constraint, what kind of party would you throw, and where?

21. If money were no constraint, what is something you would buy for yourself that you won’t buy now?

22. If money were no constraint, how would your general spending habits change?

23. How much of your income do you give away? What causes/charities do you support? Are there other causes/charities you would like to support?

24. Do you expect to support your parents or other family members financially in the future?
Spirituality and God

Most people believe that there is something more to life than just our immediate physical existence and experiences. In fact, this topic of spirituality may be more central to someone’s identity—their core concepts of who they are as a person and what makes life meaningful—than any other.

For something so basic to human nature, however, spirituality can be curiously difficult to discuss. It is a topic that is complicated, deeply personal, and often quite private.

The very word “spiritual” (along with many other words often paired with it—such as faith, truth, or religion) can make us uncomfortable and anxious. These words can also mean different things to different people.

Here are some questions to help you explore your ideas about spirituality. And, as you tackle these questions, here is just one definition of spirituality that you might find helpful to take as a jumping-off point: *Spirituality includes a sense of meaning and purpose, hope and faith. This can be related to an explicit belief in God, a sense of connectedness with nature or a life force, or a clear set of values.*

Take your time with these questions—answers may not come quickly. And remember to be especially respectful and gentle when you are talking about this topic. It is sacred ground for many people.

***

1. Do you think God or a higher power exists?
2. How have your ideas of God changed since you were a child?
3. Do you believe in life after death? What about reincarnation?
4. Would you call yourself religious or spiritual or neither?
5. How does spirituality or religion “show up” in your life?
6. Did spiritual beliefs or ideals influence your choice of career/field of study? If so, how?
7. Does your spirituality tend to be most strongly connected to “thinking”, “experiencing”, or “behaving”? How?
8. Tell me about a time you felt spiritually “alive”.
9. Do you think that all major religions are fundamentally the same, or different?
10. Which religion makes the most sense to you? Explain.

11. What is a tradition from a different culture or religion that you admire?

12. If you believe in heaven, what do you think it will be like?

13. Do you believe in miracles?

14. Do you think sin exists? How would you define it?

15. Do you believe prayer accomplishes anything? Explain.

16. What is it about God that most confuses you?

17. If there is a God, what does he/she want?

18. Can anyone know for sure that his or her religion is “right” and “true”? Explain.

19. Do you believe we are all born inherently perfect and sinless, or not?

20. Was there ever a time in life when you feel like God spoke to you?

21. Have you experienced divine direction or ordainment in your life? When and how?

22. How have your beliefs been challenged and/or changed recently?

23. What are things that refresh you, inspire you, and remind you of what’s most important to you?

24. What has led to the greatest spiritual change in your life?

25. What has been the most spiritual experience of your life?
Death and Dying

Death is not exactly your go-to topic of conversation after a hard day at work. And unless you have a serious macabre streak, it’s probably not going to feature highly in your conversations while you’re dating, either.

However, if you are in a serious relationship, death is something you should discuss. Death is an inescapable fact of life. If you are with someone long enough, people that they love deeply will die. They will grieve. Eventually, one of you will die. Discussing questions like the ones in this section can help prepare you to weather those dark days and embrace life with more gusto in the meantime.

***

1. If you could, would you choose to know how and when you will die?

2. What qualities do you want to be remembered for? How do you want people to describe you after you die?

3. If you knew you were going to die next week, is there anything in particular you would want to do, say, or discuss before then?

4. If you only had five more years to live, what would you change about your life?

5. Have you ever considered committing suicide? Explain.

6. When have you grieved deeply? What happened? How did you react in your grief?

7. If tragedy strikes and you are in a coma and declared “brain-dead”, what decisions would you want me to make about life support?

8. If possible, do you want to donate your organs after you die?

9. Do you want to be cremated, or not? Where do you want to be buried?

10. If we both died tomorrow in a car accident, what would you want to happen to our money and other possessions (and, if you have them, children)?

11. What, specifically, do we need to do to put these plans into place (e.g., write a will, talk to guardians, and organize finances)?
Life In The Future: What Do You Want?

Have you ever heard this saying? “When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen, those who make it happen, and those who wonder what happened.”

John Richardson, Jr. said that, and to a certain extent, he’s right. Of course, there is a lot about your future that you can’t predict or control. Life is always going to throw you unexpected curve balls and hand you unexpected blessings. However, if you have the resources to access and read this file, then you pretty much get to decide the rest—what you want to do with your time and energy, where you’d like to be while you’re doing it, and who you would like to be nearby.

Barbara Kingsolver penned one of my all-time favorite quotes: “The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.”

Her words have challenge Mike and me to get specific when we think about what we want in our future, and whether what we are doing today is helping us head in that direction. Here are some questions to help you think about your future.

***

1. What would you like to do more of in life?
2. What is something you really want to do in life that you haven’t experienced yet?
3. What are three words you would like to characterize the next year of your life?
4. What change would you most like to make for your health?
5. What is something you would like to stop doing in the next year?
6. What is something you’d like to start doing in the next year?
7. If you could only accomplish one big goal in the next year, what would it be?
8. If you don’t already have children, do you want to have children some day? How many?
9. What hobbies or passions do you want to continue to pursue, even if life becomes very busy and your time and energy becomes a precious commodity?
10. What worries or scares you the most about the future?
11. Describe your dream vacation.
12. Tell me about the sort of person you hope you’ll be in a decade.

13. What is something you want to accomplish in the future?

14. Tell me about one place you really want to visit.

15. If you could have great seats to any concert or play, what would you like to see?

16. Do you want to spend time living in another country? If so, where? Doing what?

17. When you think about your life ten years from now, what are some things that you see in that vision?

18. What does retirement look like to you? What age would you like to retire, where do you want to live, and what do you think you’d like to do after you retire?

19. What is one thing you’re looking forward to about growing older?
What Next?

We hope this book has sparked hours of wonderful conversation for you! If you found this book useful, we’d be so, so, soooooo grateful if you left a short review on Amazon, GoodReads, or other forums.

Leaving a positive review is the single best thing you can do to help other readers find this book (and it’s a quick way to do something super nice for us)! A review doesn’t have to be long. A simple, “this book was great” is just as effective at boosting a book’s visibility on Amazon as a more detailed review.

Finally, if you’re in a long distance relationship, visit us at www.modernlovelongdistance.com for more things to do, advice, stories, and other goodies.

And keep reading if you’d like a free peek at Lisa’s award-winning memoir, Love At The Speed Of Email. We’ve included the first chapter here for you.

Thanks for reading,
Lisa and Mike
About The Authors

Lisa McKay is an online dating and long-distance relationship veteran. She is also an Australian psychologist with masters degrees in Forensic Psychology and International Peace Studies.

Lisa has worked in a maximum-security men’s prison, with a police department, and for many years as a stress management, resilience, and communication skills trainer for humanitarian workers around the world.

In 2007, when she was living in Los Angeles, she received an intriguing email from a stranger named Michael who lived in Papua New Guinea. Just over a year later, she married that stranger.

Mike and Lisa celebrated their seventh wedding anniversary this year. They currently live in Vanuatu where Mike, an engineer, oversees a humanitarian organization.

When Lisa is not running after their two little boys and saying things like “no eating, that's yucky” and “pat the dog gently”, she is working to provide quality insights and tools that help people thrive in long distance relationships.

Visit www.lisamckaywriting.com to find out more.
Avoid common long distance relationship pitfalls and build a true connection even while you’re far apart

- The wonderful news: You’ve met someone who might just be perfect for you.
- The catch: They live in a different city, state, or country.
- The million-dollar question: Can you really build a good relationship across distance?

The answer? Yes you can… but it really helps if you establish healthy patterns in your relationship right from the beginning.

*From Stranger To Lover* is designed to give you the insight and skills needed to build a great relationship long distance – a relationship so strong that it will “go the distance”.

If you’re in a brand new relationship this book will help you avoid common LDR mistakes such as idealizing, rushing intimacy, and coming across as too needy.

If you’re in an established relationship, the book will help you identify strengths and weaknesses in your relationship and think of new ways and creative ways to connect.
What does this book cover?

- How the halo effect intensifies **idealization**.
- Why so many LDRs begin with casual, **hasty intimacy**.
- Why **healthy boundaries** are so important and how to establish them.
- Signs your partner might be cheating on you and other **non-verbal signals** you can read across distance.
- Tools to help you avoid **miscommunications** and resolve **conflict**.
- How to build your love map and creative **ways to connect**.
- Critical considerations for first meetings and **before you move**.

**BUY NOW**
About the book
Lisa looks as if she has it made. She has turned her nomadic childhood and forensic psychology training into a successful career as a stress management trainer for humanitarian aid workers. She lives in Los Angeles, travels the world, and her first novel has just been published to some acclaim. But as she turns 31, Lisa realizes that she is still single, constantly on airplanes, and increasingly wondering where home is and what it really means to commit to a person, place, or career. When an intriguing stranger living on the other side of the world emails her out of the blue, she must decide whether she will risk trying to answer those questions. Her decision will change her life.

“Love at the Speed of Email is part grand romance, part travel memoir and part essay on life’s most precious gifts. Lisa McKay is a phenomenal writer; clever and comedic, poignant and pitch-perfect. You will love this love story.”
(Susan Meissner, award-winning author of The Shape of Mercy)

“It is such a treat to read a well-crafted memoir, written with a journalists’ elegance.”
(Judge, Writer’s Digest 21st Annual Self-Published Book Awards)

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Chapter 1: Spinsters Abroad

Los Angeles, USA

Almost two weeks after my thirty-first birthday, the alarm on my mobile phone went off several hours earlier than normal. It was still dark when I opened my eyes, and as I groped for the phone I was seized by the sudden and horrible conviction that I had entirely forgotten I was supposed to be getting up and going to the airport.

This, I realized, could be worse than the time I booked my ticket to New York for the week before I needed to leave. It could be worse than the time I traveled to Colorado before discovering that I’d left my wallet in my gym bag at home. Surely, though, it couldn’t be worse than the time I was stranded in Germany for a week because I’d neglected to get a visa for the Czech Republic. Could it?

When I finally managed to illuminate the screen on my phone, a Task list was displayed. There was only one item on it.

That item was Lisa’s wedding (Australia).

This did not immediately clarify things for me.

If the phone alarm was going off that early, I reasoned, still sleep-fuzzed, I was supposed to be going somewhere. According to my To Do list, however, that somewhere was Australia. For my own wedding.

Except … I was having a hard time recollecting ever planning a wedding in Australia.

Or remembering who I might conceivably be marrying.

Then, slowly, it came back to me.

Two years earlier, I had been sitting in a California theater waiting for the movie to start. One of my good friends, Robin, had just gotten engaged. She was talking weddings and bemoaning the twin hassles of setting a date and finding a venue. I had constructively suggested that a lot of time and angst could perhaps be saved if you settled those details before you were even in a relationship. In response to her answering challenge to do just that for myself I had named a place (Australia, the closest thing to a home country I have) and a safely distant date.

Laughing like a loon, Robin had commandeered my phone and programmed in my wedding date for me, complete with an alarm reminder to get engaged three months before the actual day.

“No worries,” I had said loftily when she explained what she was doing. “Three months will be plenty of time to plan a wedding.”

Now, three months before that safely distant date, I groaned and silenced that alarm. Whatever had possessed her to think I’d want to start planning said wedding at 5 a.m. on a Friday, I wasn’t sure.
One of Jane Austen’s most famous novels opens with this sentence: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” Now two weeks past the landmark of thirty-one I was starting to wonder whether it was also a truth even more universally acknowledged that a single woman of a certain age and in possession of no fortune of which to speak must be in want of a husband.

Many of my friends and family certainly seemed to think so – this was not the first time in recent history that I had been ambushed at an early hour regarding the pressing matter of my nuptials. Even total strangers in African airports were in agreement on this point.

Accra, Ghana

The interlude with the stranger in Ghana came first.

I was sitting alone at dawn on a cold metal bench in Accra airport, reading, when he sat down beside me.

He was tall — that was the first thing I noticed. Easily six-eight, he towered over everyone else in a room that was already full of tall men. His skin was so shiny black, like oiled coal, that the fluorescent light glanced off him at odd angles. His hair was sectioned and bound into a dozen spiky knobs. He wore spotless red and white Nike exercise gear and sported an enormous square diamond in his left ear. He pulled out a portable DVD player and slid in a disc.

He waited longer than most, four minutes, before striking up a conversation.

“I am Gabriel,” he said. “What is your name?”

I looked up from my book and sighed mentally.

“Lisa.”

“What are you going?”

“Nairobi.”

“Why?”

“Work.”

“What work?”

“I run workshops on stress, trauma, and resilience for humanitarian relief and development workers.”

I could see that this last sentence didn’t register, and I wasn’t surprised. It usually took some time for native English speakers to fit those pieces together, and Gabriel spoke English with a thick West African-French accent.

“What do you do?” I said, wondering, as always, what was compelling me to ask this.

It’s not that I wasn’t interested in what he did — I was especially curious as to where the diamond came from. It was just that I didn’t particularly want to end up chatting at length to yet another strange man in an airport in Africa. But no matter how many times I tell myself that I’m not responsible for reciprocating interest in situations like these, it breaks all the normal rules of polite behavior to give a one-word answer to a question and return my eyes to my book. Five questions is about my limit. After that I usually buckle and return one.
I learned that Gabriel was a seaman, working cargo ships out of Djibouti. His family was from Cote D'Ivoire but now lived in Ghana. English was his fourth language, and his worst.

“Are you married?” Gabriel asked me. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

This is why I don't enjoy chatting with men in airports in Africa.

“I have a boyfriend,” I lied shamelessly.

Gabriel did not even pause. This was something I’d noticed with other men, too. Apparently, if my boyfriend was allowing me to wander around Africa unsupervised, I was fair game.

“Do you like to make friends with the black man?” he asked. “I know some white woman; they do not like to make friends with the black man.”

Flummoxed, I tried to think. Answering no was out of the question. Answering yes was tantamount to an open invitation to continue this line of questioning.

I recalled the face of an ex-boyfriend and mentally grafted it onto my hypothetical current boyfriend.

“My boyfriend is black,” I said.

Gabriel smiled. “I like to make friends with the white woman.”

I looked down at my book and turned the page.

I have received more attention from men in Africa than anywhere else in the world. Most of the time, however, I don't think it’s because of my sparkling personality. How sparkling can you be when you’re travel-weary in an airport, especially when you’re engrossed in a book? But I’m also not deluded enough to think that these propositions come because of any irresistible physical magnetism I am exuding. Most of the time, I get the sense that when these men look at me – my hair, my eyes, even my skin – what they really see is not brown and white but blue.

Blue, the color of my passport. Or, rather, the color of both my passports – the Australian and the Canadian one.

This sometimes bothers me. And the fact that it bothers me bothers me, too.

My parents spent decades trying to teach me that it’s qualities other than beauty that really matter. I’d say I believe that. Why, then, do I catch myself at times like these preferring that someone approach me because he desires me physically than because he desires my citizenship and all the other qualities it represents – escape, freedom, and relative wealth? After all, physical beauty and citizenship are both, to a large extent, assets bestowed on us as accidents of birth. Objectively, citizenship even has some major advantages over beauty – it tend not to depreciate in value over time, and you have to screw up really badly to lose it altogether. Physical assets, however, are subject to degradation caused by any number of things, like gravity, sun damage, neglect, and the overconsumption of ice cream and takeout Chinese food.

“Do you do lots of travel for work?” Gabriel asked me suddenly, interrupting my concentrated study of page 231.

“Yes, lots of travel!” I said, trying to sound busy, mobile, unavailable.

“I travel lots, too, but when I get married I will stay at home with my wife and our children,” he said, clearly hoping I would take the hint and apply for a starring role in that story line immediately.

My strategy during these conversations is to be reserved but polite. Rarely will I be confrontational and firmly shut someone down. Sometimes, however, I will run away.
I dug for the last of my Ghanaian Cedes and headed for the small stall selling bottled water. Then I wandered into the one store in the airport, thinking.

It’s not that I blame the men for trying, I don’t. I even admire their moxie sometimes. It’s more that I hate the way it makes me feel defensive and objectified when I suspect that I’m simply being seen as a walking one-way ticket to wealth and a better life. But why should I feel any less objectified, or any more flattered, by a man looking for a pretty smile and a tight shirt?

“Perhaps,” I thought as I stood alone in the airport on that sultry morning in October, “I’ve been coming at this all wrong. Maybe my parents are right. It is other qualities that matter more than beauty – it’s my passports. Maybe I should start seeing them as just as tangible (and more indestructible) assets than my cup size.”

Behind me a voice called my name.

I turned and looked up. Gabriel had come to find me, to make sure I’d heard that they had called pre-boarding. He pressed a piece of paper containing his phone number and an email address into my hands.

“Where I come from we have a saying” he said, “‘My blood met your blood.’ When I saw you here today, my blood met your blood.” He looked at me meaningfully and paused.

“Then again,” I thought, “maybe I should just invest in a fake wedding ring. Call me demanding, but I need someone to be drawn to my passports, my pretty smile, and my personality.”

I smiled, awkward, and tucked the slip of paper into my bag.

“It was nice meeting you, too.”

Washington, D.C., USA

Two months after transiting through Washington’s Dulles Airport on my way home from that trip to Ghana, I was back on the East Coast again to spend Christmas with my family.

Washington D.C. can be a magical place to spend Christmas. The last time we had all spent Christmas together in D.C., we were living there during my last year of high school. That year we walked out of the candlelit warmth of the Christmas Eve service and into a still, deep cold. Snow was falling straight and thick from an inky void, the flakes so incandescent they seemed a stately, silent parade of displaced stars. The everyday landscape had already disappeared under a transforming layer of white. I can still remember the paradoxically warm tingle of midnight snow on my tongue and how the sudden shock of all that unexpected beauty kindled a reverential hope.

O holy night, indeed.

This Christmas wasn’t exactly like that.

We were all together. My sister, Michelle, who married her high school love, Jed, was the only one of us still living in D.C., and it was their house we were invading. My parents had come from Australia. So had my brother, Matt, and his girlfriend, Louise. I’d flown over from Los Angeles.

So we were all together, at least. But on Christmas morning it was dripping a cold, dreary rain that did not even bother to pretend that it might turn to snow. And despite the
fact that I was wrapped up in a blanket, nursing a cup of coffee and staring at a positive mountain of presents under the Christmas tree, there were no warm tinges, no reverential hope.

Instead there was the feeling that we were all trying hard to create a happy Christmas vibe and not quite getting there. It was Louise’s first Christmas away from Australia and she was homesick. Michelle was three months pregnant with her first child and not feeling like eating much, or sitting up. My father was trying too hard to make sure everyone was having a good time, and his anxious organizing was annoying me. Jed, who was periodically calling me by a nickname he knew I loathed, was annoying me, too. And I’m pretty sure we were all annoying Jed, who in that moment was probably feeling a bit sorry that we regularly took his hospitable invitations of “come any time” at face value and descended full force upon his house for two whole weeks instead of just the couple of days that normal American families devote to celebrating the Christmas season.

Collectively we were a bit like an out-of-tune guitar trying to play carols.

This feeling all-out-of-tune thing is aggravating when it happens after you’ve worked hard to coordinate travel schedules across continents so that you can spend time together. And it’s particularly frustrating when it happens at Christmas, because everyone wants Christmas to be special.

Perhaps that’s part of the problem. Christmas is a glorious ideal. I love almost everything about it — tiny lights gleaming through a dark and spiky green, the smell of warm sugared cinnamon, the way life slows down and gifts us time with family and friends. I love how the compass of Christmas can point us toward what’s truly important in our lives and how the dawning of a new year directs us to consider whether we are living up to our own hopes.

And the music … How can you hear O Holy Night sung with passion and not be stirred?

A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees! O, hear the angels’ voices!
O night divine…

There is something divine about Christmas — in good years, anyway. But perhaps the very glory of the ideal also risks overburdening the actual day. For if Christmas doesn’t quite live up to expectations, you’re not just having a below-average day you’re having it on Christmas, which is ten times worse. It makes you guilty of not only having woken up on the wrong side of the bed but also of transgressing the Ten Commandments of Christmas. For, as we all know, the first of those Ten Commandments is:

Thou shall feel all happy and holy on Christmas morning. Thou shall definitely not sit on the floor in front of the Christmas tree feeling grumpy and a bit jealous that everyone else has someone to cuddle when all the extra warmth you have is a cup of coffee.

But there I was, guilty as charged and about to be put to the test with regard to another of the Christmas commandments: Thou shall at all times remember that presents are not the point of Christmas; people are.

That cold Christmas morning, my little brother was selected as first present-elf. Matt pointed at me, laughed, and pulled eighteen rolls of toilet paper out from where he’d hidden them behind the couch.
“Sorry they’re not wrapped,” he said.
Considering I’d just been gifted toilet paper, it wasn’t exactly the lack of wrapping that bothered me.
“‘They’re a stand-in present,’” Matt said. “Something else is coming, but it didn’t get here in time. And, you know, you didn’t actually have any toilet paper in the house when Lou and I stayed with you.”
He had a point. When Matt and Louise had stopped in L.A. for a visit ten days earlier, I’d been out of toilet paper and, thanks to long days at work, remained so for three days.
“Paper towel works just fine if you rip it up into small enough pieces,” I said, repeating the argument I had used then.
Lou laughed.
“No,” Matt replied, smirking, “paper towel does not work just fine.”
When my turn came around again, my parents were next. The package they handed me was soft. I opened it to find a T-shirt from my favorite clothes store in Australia.
There was only one problem: it was huge.
“This is an extra large,” I said, confused, after I checked the tag.
“I told you she wasn’t an extra large, Merrilyn,” Dad said.
“Oh?” Mum said. “I just thought that looked about the right size.”
I held the shirt up against me. It came halfway to my knees.
“What size do you normally wear?” Mum asked.
“Medium!” I said.
“Really?!” Mum said, “I would have thought you were at least a large.”
“Merrilyn!” my father hissed, kicking her.
I was zero for two, but my sister was next. Michelle is very thoughtful and often keeps an eye out for ways to put people at ease, so it’s perhaps understandable that I failed to take due notice of the grin she wore – one part naughty, one part proud – as she handed me her present. But even if I’d recognized it as such, I’m pretty sure I still wouldn’t have been able to figure out what my younger, married, pregnant sister had wrapped for me so gaily.
It was a book. The complete book of international adoption: A step-by-step guide to finding your child.
“What?” Michelle said into the stunned silence that preceded laughter all around the family circle. “You’ve always said that if you don’t get married you’ll think about adopting kids. Now you know where to start. And it was on sale for five bucks!”

Los Angeles, USA

I laughed in that moment on Christmas morning. The funny factor outweighed the sting I felt, sitting there in my flannel pajamas, looking around at everyone else neatly paired up with someone. But by April, when my early-morning phone alarm reminded me of my July wedding in Australia, it was getting less funny. I was beginning to worry that Michelle’s Christmas present had set the theme for the entire year, for just a week earlier I had also been blindsided by the solitary present I had to open on the morning of my thirty-first birthday.
My birthday started early. Sadly, this was not because of excitement related to piñatas, upcoming parties, or trick candles adorning strawberry cheesecake. It was because I had to drive a friend to the airport at 5 a.m. after a weekend spent celebrating Robin’s long-awaited wedding.

I hadn’t planned anything to mark this birthday – I’d known my California crowd would be all partied out after spending most of the weekend at various wedding-related events. So I had fully intended to get up early, do the airport run, and come back and get straight to work on the final draft of my first novel. I’d already been working on rewriting the novel for a year, and the final copy-editing deadlines were looming. But when I got back from the airport at 6:30 a.m. that Sunday and looked between my desk and my pillow, it wasn’t even a close call.

I was so going back to sleep.

As I climbed back into bed I ripped open the padded yellow envelope that had arrived four days earlier adorned with stern instructions that it was to be saved until my birthday.

Inside that envelope was another book, posted to me by one of my best friends from Australia, Tash.

The title of this book was *Spinsters Abroad: Victorian Lady Explorers*. On the cover was a small brunette. She was wearing a white lacy dress buttoned to her chin and a pith helmet. She was shading this unlikely ensemble with a parasol and stepping daintily through the jungle.

“What spurred so many Victorian women to leave behind their secure middle-class homes and undertake perilous journeys of thousands of miles, tramping through tropical forests, caravanning across deserts, and scaling mountain ranges?” asked the back cover. “And how were they able to travel so freely in exotic lands, when at home such independence was denied to them?”

This scintillating manifesto on international singleness was still lying on my bedside table five days later when my phone woke me with its shrill commands to get engaged, and while I wasn’t amused that morning, by dinner that night I’d regained some of my sense of humor.

“I want to write an essay about this whole topic of being single at thirty-one,” I explained to my flatmate, Travis, from where I was sitting on a stool behind the kitchen counter while he made both of us dinner. “But I don’t want people to wonder whether I’m just putting a brave face on acute psychic pain.”

“They won’t. They’ll just think you’re being a drama queen, as usual,” Travis reassured me. “But while we’re on the topic, are you putting a brave face on acute psychic pain? I mean, I’m thirty and single and I’m just fine with that. But I think this whole topic is harder for women. There seems to be something about turning thirty that freaks women out. And, let’s face it, I can still have children when I’m seventy if I want to. You can’t.”

* *

My first instinct was to issue a quick and emphatic denial in response to Travis’ question about pain.
Sure, being single at thirty-one was not exactly how I had imagined my life playing out when I was in high school. When I was fifteen I had this all sorted. I wouldn’t get married at twenty-one as my parents had. Instead, I’d leave it daringly late and marry at twenty-four. I’d have my first baby at twenty-seven. And I would somehow manage to do all this while being a trauma surgeon and living in Africa.

According to that plan, I am now both off-track and way behind schedule.

But there have been some very good things about my teenage plans’ being turned on their head. If I had married at twenty-four – just after finishing six years of study to qualify as a forensic psychologist – I would not have been free to ring up my parents, confess that I wasn’t that keen anymore on working as a psychologist and ask whether I could come live with them for a while and try my hand at writing novels while I looked for jobs in the humanitarian field.

When one such job opportunity arose, I probably would not have been able to take off on twelve days’ notice to move to Croatia.

After living for a while in the Balkans, I might not have been able to accept a scholarship to spend a year doing another master’s degree in peace studies just because it sounded like fun. Or relocate to California afterward simply because it seemed like a good idea to take a job in Los Angeles as a stress-management trainer for humanitarian workers – a job that keeps me traveling at least one week out of four and sometimes for weeks on end.

I may never have finished my first novel, which I wrote on weekends, when I was beholden to no one but myself.

I would not have had nearly as much time to invest in a wide, rich friendship network that encircles the globe.

All of this I knew, but there was no denying that there had been something about turning thirty that was profoundly unsettling.

Right up until I was 29 years 8 months and 14 days old, I thought turning thirty was no big deal. Then I noticed I was preempting the question.

You know, that question.

“How are you feeling about the big three-0?”

I’d started answering this question before the other person had even finished asking. I’d pull a bland adjective out of thin air – fine, good, great – and deliver it with breezy unconcern.

Then I’d let it sit there.

The other person would usually pause, waiting for me to fill the silence with bright protestations about how I really was fine with the fact that I was turning thirty and still single, with no prospects of popping out babies any time soon, and how it’s all been worth it because I love my job and I wouldn’t trade all the experiences I’ve had in the past ten years for anything. All this was true, but I didn’t like being expected to say it. And when I didn’t oblige with the culturally correct dialogue, the conversation usually moved on.
The day I turned 29 years 8 months and 14 days old, however, the conversation didn’t move on. I looked up to notice that the person who had just asked me the question was staring at me with rather more puzzlement than I thought the answer warranted.

“What?” I said.

“Fine?” she repeated.

“Uh-huh.”

“I ask you how you’re feeling about the situation in Somalia and all you have to say is fine?” she said.

Oh.

This was when I started to get annoyed. I didn’t want to be one of those people who have a crisis about turning thirty. Even now, a year later, I still can’t figure out exactly what might be unsettling me, given that I don’t think the ticking of my biological clock is anywhere near becoming an imperative.

I know it’s possible that I am subconsciously worried about this inexorable biological countdown, but despite offhand comments to family and friends about how I plan to adopt kids if I never get married, I really don’t think it’s my major concern.

When I look at other people’s children, no matter how cute, I still mostly just feel relieved that they’re not mine. This was only underscored by a conversation I had recently with my boss’s wife.

“Oh, little Sam’s getting over his first bad cold,” she said, exhausted, when I asked her how the kids were. “He’s not really sick anymore, just miserable. He’s been hanging off my leg, whining, wanting to be held all the time, and I can’t get anything done.”

“Gee,” I said, “that must make you want to bend down and tell him, ‘Get used to it, buddy, that’s life. You’re going to feel crappy sometimes and people can’t put everything on hold to pay attention to you every time you’re grumpy. Deal with it.’”

“Ummm, no,” she said, clearly making a mental note never to ask me to baby-sit. “It makes me want to pick him up and comfort him.”

No, I don’t feel ready for kids yet. I don’t have that powerful soul-deep hunger to be a mother that I hear some of my girlfriends talk about. I’m not sure I ever will. But I am starting to catch myself wondering sometimes, in a much more abstract fashion, whether I’m going to miss out altogether on those beauties and struggles peculiar to parenthood or on learning how to be genuinely vulnerable in a way I suspect that only the bond of marriage allows. And whether, if I do, I’ll wake up in fifteen years and still believe that it was worth it – this choice that I have made again and again throughout my twenties to pursue adventure and novelty and helping people in faraway lands rather than stability and continuity and helping people in a land I claim as mine.

These are melancholy moments. These are days when I wake up and wonder whether I wouldn’t perhaps feel happier, more fulfilled or less restless on a radically different path. When I would really like to come home to someone who’s vowed to be interested in how my day was. When I just want someone to bring me coffee in bed or rub my shoulders uninvited.

Yet, right alongside these wonderings that sometimes dead-end in visions of my dying alone at ninety lie other wonderings, other fears.

After a nomadic life that has been largely defined by coming and (always, inevitably) going, am I even capable of the sort of commitment demanded by marriage and children and a place called home?
I touched on this confused tangle of longings recently with a girlfriend for whom I was a bridesmaid a decade ago. Jane is now living on a verdant pecan farm in Australia ten miles from my parents’ place, complete with a sweet prince of a husband, two little girls, a dog, two cats, a horse, and a veggie garden.

“You know, I want your life sometimes,” I confessed near the end of our conversation.

Jane laughed. “My brain is turning to mush with no one but the kids to talk to all day, and when you say that you spent – Eloise, I told you to stay at the table while you finished your milk! Sit back down please – when you say that you spent last week in Boston at a conference and you’re off to New York next week, I want your life.”

* *

“No,” I said to Travis in our kitchen in Los Angeles that night after thinking for a minute or two about his question. “I don’t often put a brave face on acute pain. I’m happy by myself. Mostly. It’s just that sometimes I wonder about a different life, you know?”

“Yeah,” Travis said, doubtless wondering whether he would ever achieve his dream of making it big as a Hollywood director and be able to quit his day job. “I know all about that. Write about that.” …

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Praise for Love At The Speed Of Email

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