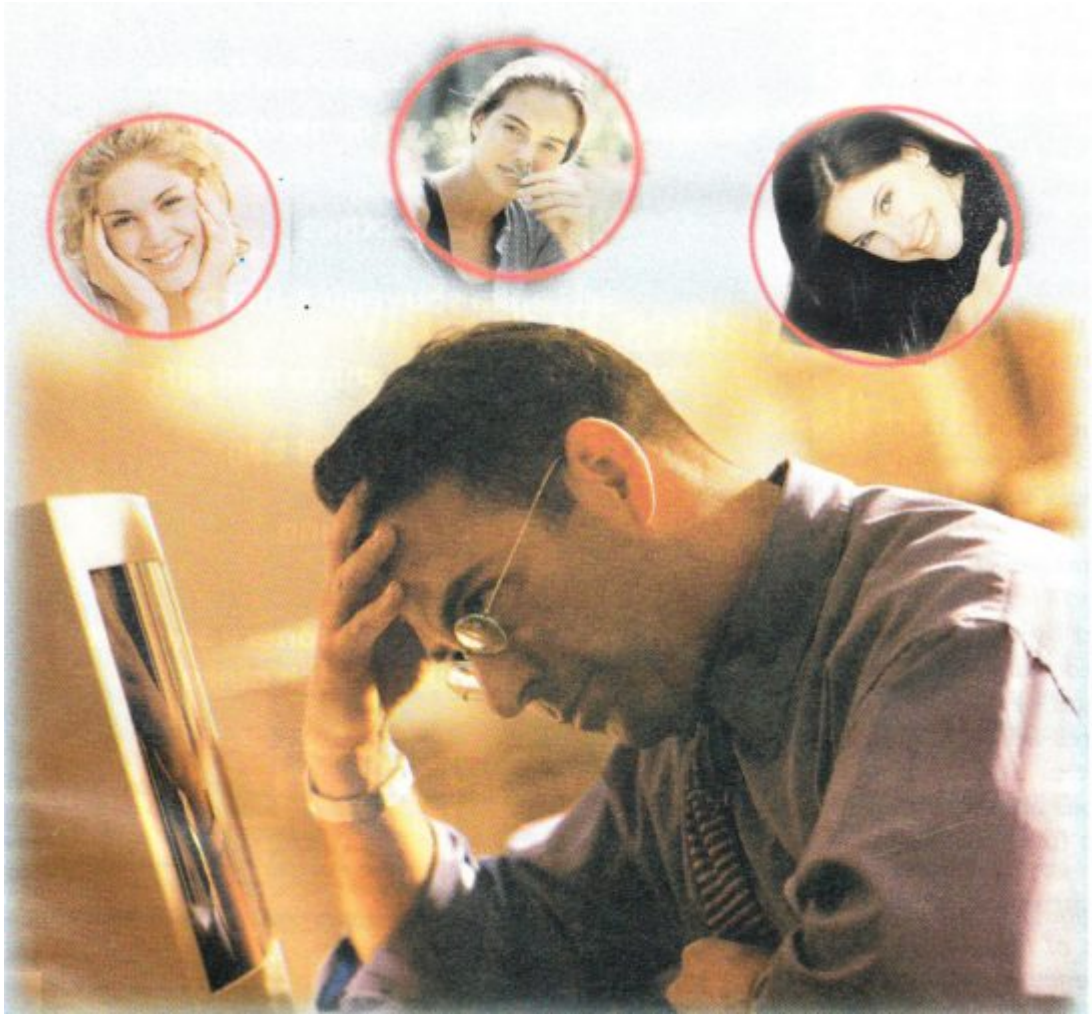
Sweet Nothing’s In The Net?

A Wizard

Beginning a relationship over the net can raise eyebrows. But it is so much easier on the conscience being the biond-haired, guitar-wielding hunk you are not.



THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION where my cousin studies got hooked to the Net in a big way. Where once even e-mail was most unreliable, suddenly full- fledged graphical access was available all day and night long. Campus life and conversation got affected instantly. And, as is usual with the Net, even after many months the novelty has just not died.

True, free graphical access can keep a bunch of hormones surfing the YNot top-of-the-charts for a few months. But soon, one reassured oneself, the bright boys and girls would begin that ritual Netscan before beginning on yet an- other report, finally seeing the Net as an edutainment tool. Soon has come and soon has gone, yet one can call popular usage patterns ‘edutainment’ only in the broadest sense of the term.

For, on the Net, there is no end to this boy-girl business. The pictures have been there for long and MPEGS have moved in lately. I am told sound effects are the norm in some of the better sites. And one or two-way video is the hotcraze.

Sinful, and if you are forgetting how many writers and film-makers began with a ‘no-GIFs-please’ tirade, employment generating. But till recently, I’d have said that even Mom, with some persuasion, would dismiss it as a boys- will-be-boys thing.

Not anymore. What was once a fun thing has slowly worked its way into a deadly serious affair. Whatever the feminists might say, pictures are mere objects of desire and forgotten soon. So are sounds and videos and anything packaged for mass consumption.

It is when real people begin interacting in a deeply personal way, that real social issues become important enough to warrant discussion. Men and women (and other combinations, I dare say) are falling in love over the Net. Across nations and cultures and anything that an electronic link can bridge.

Love before even a first sight is not really a post-Net phenomenon. I remember times when we used to scan penfriend lists for girls of about the same age, and preferably in the West. No one I know ever got down to correspondence, but penfriend marriages were reported once in a while.

In the US, calls within the country are terribly inexpensive (they are bent upon reducing international rates as well), and that is another medium of “meeting”. That’s how D’Souza nearly met his match. After a wonderful academic performance in his engineering studies, D’Souza flew to America for an MS degree. Life in the US got to be terribly dull, and socializing was one skill he lacked badly. Until a friend in a far away state introduced him to this lady from his own country over the phone, and suddenly D’Souza’s day revolved around 8:00 p.m. when she’d call. It was so much easier with only voice involved. D’Souza could push his specs up his nose and yet not appear the nerd he thought he was. From love to lovers’ tiffs they

progressed, without ever meeting or even exchanging pictures. They broke-up after their first and only meeting.

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If you are saying that phone-love is foolish what with never getting to see one's counterpart, then you are probably in favor of Net-based love. There is little you cannot exchange. But that little may just be why such relationships could go wrong. No one has ever done a survey of the success-rate of such relationships, and I can't guess.

It is difficult even to hold a definite opinion on the issue. As always there are pros and cons. In any case, who ever said there are definite answers to any questions on relationships?

Cyber-affairs begin usually over e- mail. But with full Internet access (which means one is not restricted to e-mail) chat sites are bringing more and more people together. In the institute I was talking about at the beginning, a lady chat-site denizen with the assumed name Sexy Baby, is rather popular and has been lavishing special interest on my cousin. He doesn't even know for sure if Sexy Baby is a girl! A Yahoo search revealed a girl's site but without a picture. My cousin says he just knows she is a girl. We nod in understanding.

Once it was weird to see him rushing off at dawn or earlier to meet his on-line girl. Now everyone is used to it. I once even glimpsed a bit of their conversation (dirty me!).

My Cousin: "So if I do come over to your place, what will you do for me?"

Sexy Baby: "Well, I'd like to make you dinner."

Either that was really dull, or I was missing something.

My cousin's interests are definitely not as gourmand, but no one fears for him. The intriguing stories all have people living abroad. It is probably the social isolation that the West is said to push you into, if you are not beautiful, or rich, or both. In an Asian's case, it probably has something to do with going abroad being a sign of success and that success. might mean a dry social life. It might simply be due to more Net access in the West.

If you think about it, the Net is a great way to do a difficult thing. Over e-mail, you have the time to craft messages that you'd never think of off-the-cuff. You can project the right side of your personality, even with a bit of untruth. You can play a role, and have the satisfaction of a believing audience. Dates don't mean new shaves and gel in the hair. If you are not particular about live interaction, then you can even have your date at a time convenient to you.

There must have always been some kind of romance in the idea of wooing



a maiden's heart across the oceans, aided only by what the French call a billet-doux. It has only become a hundred times easier and less expensive with the Net.

Beginning a relationship over the Net can at worst be termed unusual. The eyebrow raiser is the ease with which false and unfounded affairs can grow. Somehow, it's so much easier on the conscience being the blonde-haired, guitar- wielding hunk you are not, if it is over e-mail.

When it is time for electronic promises to be exchanged, the girl is in love with a hunk who's wondering what she saw in him in the first place. The guy's quite right in asking, of course.

From e-mail liaisons to wedlock is a tough decision and not many take it without going through a courtship the natural way, if they take it at all. Making vows is… serious business.

Breaking vows, how ever, is beginning to see redefinition. One wonders exactly when cyber- infidelity begins. Especially when all of it might be without the slightest physical touch. It probably be. gins the first time you exchange pictures while your spouse sleeps. Probably when you type things usually said in bed. Probably with the first introductory e-mail, saying nothing of what is in your mind. Probably, it begins with the very thought. But if infidelity begins in the mind, aren’t all of us guilty anyway? Probably.