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Love Virtually

Written by Daniel Glattauer

Translated from the German

by Katharina Bielenberg and Jamie Bulloch

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LOVE VIRTUALLY

DANIEL GLATTAUER



*Translated from the German by
Katharina Bielenberg and Jamie Bulloch*



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses,
organizations, places and events are either the product of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual
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LOVE VIRTUALLY

CHAPTER ONE

15 January

Subject: Cancelling my subscription

I would like to cancel my subscription. Can I do so by e-mail?

Best wishes,

E. Rothner

Eighteen days later

Subject: Cancelling my subscription

I want to cancel my subscription. Is that possible by e-mail?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

E. Rothner

Thirty-three days later

Subject: Cancelling my subscription

Dear Sir/Madam at *Like* magazine,

Are you deliberately ignoring my attempts to cancel my

subscription? If you're trying to offload more copies of your rag which, let's face it, is gradually going down the drain, I regret to inform you that I'm not going to pay another cent!

Best wishes,

E. Rothner

Eight minutes later

Re:

You've sent your message to the wrong address. This is a private one: woerter@leike.com. You want woerter@like.com. You're the third person who's sent me an e-mail trying to cancel their subscription. It must be a really shocking magazine.

Five minutes later

Re:

Oh, really sorry! And thanks for putting me right.

Best,

E.R.

Nine months later

Subject: (no subject)

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year
from Emmi Rothner

Two minutes later

Re:

Dear Emmi Rothner,

We don't know each other in the slightest but I'd like to thank you for your warm and highly original round-robin e-mail! One thing you should know: I just adore round-robin e-mails.

Rgds,

Leo Leike

Eighteen minutes later

Re:

Excuse the written imposition, Mr Rgds Leike. You seem to have slipped into my contacts list by accident – a few months ago I was trying to cancel a subscription and inadvertently got hold of your e-mail address. I'll delete you straightaway.

P.S. If you can think of a more original way of wishing people a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year than “Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year”, please do share it with me. Until then: Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

E. Rothner

Six minutes later

Re:

I wish you a pleasant Christmas break and trust the forthcoming year will rank as one of your top eighty. And if, in the meantime, you subscribe to some bad times, please do not hesitate to contact me – in error – to cancel them.

Leo Leike

Three minutes later

Re:

I'm impressed!

Best,

E.R.

Thirty-eight days later

Subject: Not a cent more!

Dear Management of *Like*,

I have endeavoured to part company with your magazine three times in writing and twice by telephone (I spoke to a lady called Ms Hahn). If you insist on sending it to me, I'll have to assume it's for your personal entertainment. I'd be happy to keep your enclosed bill as a souvenir so that I can continue to remember *Like* when you finally stop shipping me your latest issues. But please don't imagine for a moment that I have any intention of paying it.

Yours faithfully,

E. Rothner

Two hours later

Re:

Dear Ms Rothner,

Are you doing this on purpose? Or have you taken delivery of some bad days?

Rgds,

Leo Leike.

Fifteen minutes later

Re:

Dear Mr Leike,

Now I'm seriously embarrassed. Unfortunately I have this chronic "ei" problem, or rather an "e" before "i" problem. If I'm typing quickly, and I'm trying to type "i", somehow I always manage to slip in an "e" before it. It's as if the tips of my two middle fingers are fighting over the keys. The left one is always trying to be that bit quicker than the right. The fact is, I was born left-handed and made to write with my right at school. My left hand hasn't forgiven me to this day. It keeps tapping out an "e" with the middle finger before the right hand can type an "i". I'm so sorry to have bothered you – it (probably) won't happen again. Have a nice evening.

E. Rothner

Four minutes later

Re:

Dear Ms Rothner,

May I ask you a question? And here's a second one: How long did it take you to write your e-mail outlining your "ei" problem?

Best wishes,

Leo Leike

Three minutes later

Re:

Two questions for you: How long do you think? And why are you asking?

Eight minutes later

Re:

I'm guessing it took you no more than twenty seconds. And I'd like to congratulate you on having produced a brilliant message in such a short period of time. It put a smile on my face. And that's something that no-one else will do this evening. As to your second question: I'm currently involved in a project on the language of e-mails. So now I'll ask you again – am I right in thinking it took you no longer than twenty seconds?

Three minutes later

Re:

Ah, so you work professionally with e-mails. Sounds fascinating, although now I feel a bit like a guinea pig. Oh well, who cares? Do you by any chance have a website? If you don't, would you like one? If you do, would you like a better one? That's my job, designing websites. (So far this has only taken me ten seconds – I've been timing it, but then again it was a work conversation, and they're always much snappier.)

I'm afraid you were completely wrong about my utterly banal "e" before "i" e-mail. It must have robbed me of at least three minutes of my life. I wonder what the point of it was? Now I've got a question for you: Why did you assume that my "e" before "i" e-mail took only twenty seconds? And before I leave you in peace once and for all (unless those guys at *Like* send me another bill), there's one more thing I'd like to know. You wrote above: "May I ask you a question? And here's a second one: How long did it take you etc...?" I've got two questions in return. First, how long did it take you to think of the joke? Secondly, is that what you call funny?

An hour and a half later

Re:

Dear unknown Ms Rothner,

I'll answer you tomorrow. I'm going to turn off my computer now.

Good evening, goodnight, whatever.

Leo Leike

Four days later

Subject: Open questions

Dear Ms Rothner,

Please forgive me for not having replied earlier, but my life is somewhat chaotic at the moment. You wanted to know why I wrongly assumed it had taken you no longer than twenty seconds to tell me about your "ei" mistake. Well, your e-mails seem to "effervesce", if I may be allowed to make this observation. I could have sworn that you were a fast talker and typist, a bubbly individual who cannot go about her daily business quickly enough. When I read your e-mails I can't detect any pauses. Both their tone and tempo seem to be bursting with energy – breathless, zippy, even a touch excited. Your written style is not that of somebody with low blood pressure. I imagine that your spontaneous thoughts flow into your e-mails unchecked. And then your language shows confidence; you have a skilful and deliberate way with words. But if you're telling me that it took you more than three minutes to write your "ei"-mail, then I must have painted a false picture of you.

Unfortunately, you asked about my sense of humour. It's a sorry state of affairs. To be witty, you have to find at least one thing about yourself that's remotely funny. I can't think of anything about me that's comical at the moment, to tell the truth – I feel utterly humourless. When I look back at the past few days and weeks, all laughter escapes me. But that's my personal tale and it has no place here. Thank you, in any case, for your refreshing manner. It's been awfully nice corresponding with you. I believe all your questions have now been answered, more or less. If you happen to err into my inbox again, I'd be delighted. Just one request: Please could you cancel your *Like* subscription now? Or would you like me to do it for you?

Best wishes,
Leo Leike

Forty minutes later

Re:

Dear Mr Leike,

I have a confession to make: actually, my “e” before “i”-mail didn't take me longer than twenty seconds. But I was irritated that you'd presumed I was someone who just dashes off e-mails. It's the truth, of course, but you had no right to know it before now. Still, even if you have no sense of humour (at the moment), you obviously know a lot about e-mailing. I'm impressed that you managed to see straight through me! Are you a professor of literature?

Best regards,
“Bubbly” Emmi Rothner

Eighteen days later

Subject: Hello

Hello Mr Leike,

I just wanted to tell you that the folks at *Like* have stopped sending me their magazine. Did you have anything to do with it? You could e-mail me sometime, by the way. I still don't know whether you're a professor. Either Google's never heard of you, or it knows how to keep you hidden. And how's your sense of humour these days? Mind you, it's carnival time. No competition there then.

Best regards,
Emmi Rothner

Two hours later

Re:

Dear Ms Rothner,

I'm so glad you've written again – I've missed you. I was just about to get myself a subscription to *Like*. (Beware, my sense of humour is coming back!) And did you really Google me? How flattering! But to be honest I'm a little disappointed that you think I might be a "professor". You see me as some old fart, don't you? Stiff, pedantic, a know-all. I'm not going to bust a gut trying to prove to you that I'm quite the opposite; that would only be embarrassing. But I may be writing like someone older at the moment. And I suspect that you write like somebody younger than you are. As it happens, I'm a communications consultant and a university assistant in language psychology. We're currently working

on a study that's looking at the influence of e-mail on our linguistic behaviour and – the much more interesting part of the project – e-mail as a medium for conveying our emotions. This is why I tend to talk shop, but in future I promise to restrain myself.

I hope you survive the carnival festivities! My impression of you is of someone who must have quite a collection of false noses and party hooters. :-)

All the best,

Leo

Twenty-two minutes later

Re:

Dear Mr Language Psychologist,

Now it's my turn to test you (as if I haven't been doing so all along): which part of the e-mail you just sent me do you think I found most interesting, so interesting in fact that I urgently need to ask you about it?

And here's some useful advice concerning your humour: the sentence "I was just about to get myself a subscription to *Like*" was promising – or so I thought! But when you added "(Beware, my sense of humour is coming back)", you blew it, sadly: you should have just left that out! I liked the bit about the false noses and party hooters. We've clearly got the same non-sense of humour. But trust me, I do recognize irony when I see it – spare yourself the smiley!

All the best, nice chatting to you,

Emmi Rothner

Ten minutes later

Re:

Dear Emmi Rothner,

Thanks for your humour tips. You'll make a funny man out of me yet. And I'm even more grateful for the test! It gives me the opportunity to show you that I'm not (yet) the "self-opinionated old professor" type. If I were, then I would have guessed that the most interesting part for you must have been: "We're currently working on a study... e-mail as a medium for conveying our emotions." But I'm convinced that you're most interested in this: "And I suspect that you write like somebody younger than you are." Now you're forced to ask yourself: "What makes him think he's right?" And then: "How old does he actually think I am?" Am I right?

Eight minutes later

Re:

You're one hell of a guy, Leo Leike!!! And now you can come up with some good reasons why I must be older than my writing makes me sound. Or, more to the point: how old is my writing? How old am I? And why? If you manage to solve this puzzle, you can tell me what my shoe size is too.

All the best,

Emmi

P.S. I'm enjoying this.

Forty-five minutes later

Re:

You write like a thirty-year-old. But you're around forty, let's say forty-two. What makes me think I'm right? A thirty-year-old doesn't read *Like* on a regular basis. The average age of *Like* subscribers is around fifty. But you're younger, because you work with websites, so you could be thirty or even a fair bit younger than that. On the other hand, no thirty-year-old sends a mass e-mail to clients to wish them "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year". And finally, your name is Emmi, i.e. Emma. I know three Emmas and they're all over forty. Thirty-year-olds aren't called Emma. It's only people under twenty who are Emmas again. But you're not under twenty, or you'd use words like "cool", "wicked", "lush", "totally", "awesome" and suchlike. And you wouldn't begin sentences with capital letters, or write in full sentences either. But most importantly, you'd have better things to do than chat with a humourless man who might or might not be a professor and be interested in how young or old he thinks you might be. Another thing about "Emmi": if your name were Emma, and you wrote as if you were younger – perhaps because you felt much younger than you were – you wouldn't call yourself Emma, but Emmi. In short, my dear Emmi Rothner, you write as if you're thirty, but in fact you're forty-two. Am I right? Your shoe size is 36. You're petite, bubbly, and you've got short, dark hair. And you effervesce when you speak. Am I right?

Good evening,

Leo Leike

The next day

Subject: ???

Dear Ms Rothner,

Have I offended you? Look, I don't know you. How am I supposed to know how old you are? Maybe you're twenty, maybe you're sixty. Perhaps you're 1.9 m tall and weigh 100 kilos. Maybe your shoe size is 46 and you've only got three pairs of shoes, made to measure. And to afford a fourth pair you have to cancel your *Like* subscription and keep your website customers happy by sending them Christmas greetings. So please don't be angry with me. I had fun guessing; I have a hazy picture of you, and I've tried to convey this to you in exaggerated detail. I really didn't mean to offend you.

Best wishes,

Leo Leike

Two hours later

Re:

Dear "Professor",

I do like your humour, it's only a semitone away from chronic seriousness, which is why it sounds particularly skewed!! I'll write again tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it already!

Emmi

Seven minutes later

Re:

Thanks! Now I can sleep peacefully.

Leo

The next day

Subject: Getting to know each other

Dear Leo,

I'm going to leave out the "Leike" from now on. And you can leave out the "Rothner". I thoroughly enjoyed the e-mails you sent yesterday – I read them several times. I want to pay you a compliment. Isn't it exciting that you can get involved with someone you don't know, someone you've never set eyes on and probably never will, someone you expect nothing from, of whom you can't be sure that you'll ever get anything halfway adequate in return? That's very unusual in a man, and that's what I like about you. I just wanted to tell you that up front.

Now, a few points:

- 1) You have a full-on Christmas-round-robin-e-mail psychosis! Where did you pick that up? You obviously find it deeply offensive when people say "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year". Fine, I promise I'll never, ever say it again. I'm amazed, by the way, that you think you can deduce my age from the way I say "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year". If I'd said "Merry

Xmas and a Cool Yule", would you have thought I was ten years younger?

- 2) I'm sorry, Leo the Language Psychologist, but I find it a touch unworldly and fuddy-duddyish of you to say that a woman must be over twenty if she doesn't use words like "cool", "lush" and "awesome". Not that I'm desperate to write in a way that might make you think I was under twenty, but can you really tell?
- 3) You say that I write like a thirty-year-old, but that thirty-year-olds don't read *Like*. Well, let me explain: the *Like* subscription was a present for my mother. So what now? Am I now younger than I write?

I'm going to have to leave you to ponder this. I'm afraid I've got an appointment (Confirmation class? Dance lesson? Manicure? Coffee morning? You choose.)

Have a nice day, Leo!

Emmi

Three minutes later

Subject: (no subject)

One other thing: you weren't so far off with the shoe size. I'm a 37. (But no shoes please, I have all the ones I need.)

Three days later

Subject: Something's missing

Dear Leo,

If you don't write to me for three days 1) I begin to wonder

why, 2) I feel that something's missing. Neither is pleasant.
Please rectify!

Emmi

The next day

Subject: Sent at last!

Dear Emmi,

In my defence I confess I've written to you every day, it's just that I haven't sent the e-mails. In fact I've deleted all of them. I've reached an awkward stage in our correspondence, you see. She – this Emmi with size 37 shoes – is beginning to interest me more than befits the nature of our correspondence. And if she – this Emmi with size 37 shoes – says from the outset, "We will probably never meet each other", then of course she's right and I agree with her. I think it's extremely wise to work on the assumption that we will never meet in person. After all, I don't want our correspondence to descend to the level of chatroom drivel or lonely hearts banter.

O.K., now I'm going to press send, so that she – this Emmi with size 37 shoes – has at least one message from me in her inbox. (The message isn't that exciting; it's only a fraction of what I wanted to write.)

All the best,

Leo

Twenty-three minutes later

Re:

Aha, so Leo the Language Psychologist doesn't want to know what Emmi with size 37 shoes looks like? I don't believe you, Leo! If a man's talking to a woman and can't see her, of course he wants to know what she looks like. Not only that, but he wants to know straightaway. Because then he'll know whether he wants to keep on talking to her. Isn't that the case?

All best,

Emmi, size 37

Eight minutes later

Re:

That was more hyperventilated than written, am I right? I don't need to know what you look like if you give me answers like that, Emmi. In any case I have you here before me. And I don't need the psychology of linguistics to achieve that.

Leo

Twenty-one minutes later

Re:

You're wrong, Mr Leo. I was as cool as a cucumber when I wrote that. You should see me when I am hyperventilating. By the way, you seem not to be answering my questions on principle, am I right? (And what do you look like when you

say “Am I right?”) But if I may come back to this morning’s e-mail salvo, nothing seems to make any sense. What I think you’re saying is:

- 1) You write me e-mails and then don’t send them.
- 2) You’re gradually getting more interested in me “than befits the nature of our correspondence”. So what does that mean? Is our correspondence not purely based on our mutual interest in complete strangers?
- 3) You think it’s wise – no, you even think it’s “extremely wise” that we’ll never meet. I envy you your passionate devotion to wisdom.
- 4) You don’t want chatroom drivel. So what *do* you want? What should we be talking about to prevent you from becoming more interested in me than befits the “nature” of our correspondence?
- 5) And finally – given the likelihood that you won’t answer any of these questions – you said that your last e-mail contained only a fraction of what you wanted to write. Please feel free to write the rest, and I’ll look forward to every word! Because I like reading your e-mails, dear Leo.

Emmi

Five minutes later

Re:

Dear Emmi,

It wouldn’t be you without your 1) 2) 3) lists, would it?
More tomorrow. Have a nice evening.

Leo