

Praise For *Love at the Speed of Email*

“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* and *A Sound Among the Trees*

“Love at the Speed of Email, Lisa McKay’s engrossing memoir about life and love and home, is a wild ride that spans the globe. At turns funny, contemplative, and romantic, Lisa’s story resonated on many different levels and kept me eagerly turning pages, hoping for a happily-ever-after ending to this modern day fairy tale. I can’t recommend this extraordinary book highly enough!”

- Nicole Baart, bestselling author of *Far From Here* and *After the Leaves Fall*

“A travel memoir with a deep soul, Love at the Speed of Email takes us around the world but always brings us back to the heart of the matter: humanity’s longing for place, purpose, faith. Lisa McKay’s seamless storytelling helps us find ourselves in every corner of her globetrotting and even learn a little about love along the way. A true pleasure for the journeyer in all of us!”

- Leeana Tankersley, author of *Found Art: Discovering Beauty in Foreign Places*

“Love at the Speed of Email is a riveting memoir by a talented author and globe-trotter. I loved journeying with Lisa McKay as she sought the love of her life and a place to call home. I can’t recommend this beautiful and triumphant story enough!”

- Gina Holmes, award-winning author of *Crossing Oceans* and *Dry as Rain*

*LOVE AT THE
SPEED OF EMAIL*



Lisa McKay

Love At The Speed Of Email
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For Mike, who wrote a letter and changed my life

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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.”

“Where 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 tends 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 tingles, 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."