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DOLLY ALDERTON

# Hopeless Romantic

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the  
pound  
project.



# **the pound project.**

small change, one story at a time.

The Pound Project is an independent publisher based in the UK. Established in Birmingham in 2018, the company campaigns to put the value of reading and writing first. This is the third title in the movement and more information and the company's ethos, products and services can be found at [www.poundproject.co.uk](http://www.poundproject.co.uk).

Dolly Alderton is a journalist, co-host of the weekly news and pop culture podcast The High Low and author of bestseller Everything I Know About Love. She lives in Camden, London.

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*For my parents*

## FOREWORD

I met Dolly on Northampton Square in the autumn of 2009. We were studying journalism at City University London. Our first job was to cover a news beat in the borough of Camden. We were to learn about local storytelling, the nuances of council sources, death knocking and tragedy, how to make copy good enough for a non-existent publication to down tools.

I'd been assigned the elderly, becoming interested in the stories I wasn't given time to hear. Dolly, given education in Bloomsbury, had already started developing her now-familiar image that bares all for a greater good. We both looked for ways to waste time. She became a good friend.

Years later when I started The Pound Project I immediately thought of Dolly. She is entirely passionate about writing and we have stayed in touch here and there to talk about why the craft of storytelling is so crucial.

Dolly writes with her soul. She knows words are comfort to the solitude. Choose any of her stories or articles and they will make sense, from the difficulty of watching friends settle down to the lists we keep to comprehend life's milestones. We may not have experienced things in exactly the same way, but that doesn't matter. Dolly takes such pain and pleasure in the telling; we take the road with her.

That must be what pulls us in: the stories coiled around her past; the voice honest and addictive; we slide in and out of familiarity with what she's saying and who she is. And the form - anecdotes, essays, memoirs - is intimate. Reading something by Dolly is a personal experience. In between the lines of her prose we can create and remember our own stories. That's our struggle to find love. Those are our tears for music. That's our calamity. Those are the faces of our loved ones. Dolly reminds us that the details matter; a heart is public and private at the same time.

As you will see in this essay, Dolly is Hopelessly Romantic, about her parents, about old musicals, about Soho, about romance itself. It is a story of passion and dependency. Love, here, is a bug. Nothing is held back.

Dolly holds on to 'dated' notions of beauty, imagination and creativity. But this is not, and should never be, a bad thing: when a teacher shouts run to children at playtime, the last one to set off is your dreamer.

Like Dolly says: "The obsessives, the believers, the fantasists. The letter-writers, the kissing-in-the-rainers, the borderline-stalkers ... know and love them all."

*JP Watson*  
*October 2018*

# HOPELESS ROMANTIC

## HOPELESS ROMANTIC

I caught Romantic young.

I don't know who or what exactly gave it to me, but I know that I contracted it before I was a teenager. For the extortionate sum of £80 an hour in my late twenties, week in week out, I sat on a sofa opposite a tough-talking Australian woman in a chair and tried to work out where I might have picked it up. Was it from my mum and dad? Of course it was from my mum and dad. Mum and Dad are the answer to every equation when you're sitting on one of those sofas in one of those rooms. It is like saying: "Is it...pathetic fallacy?" in an English GCSE class - "is it because of my parents?" always earned me a proud nod from The Australian, and faith I would get a gold star for that session.

In this case, I think we may have actually been onto something. Mum and dad were not like a lot of other married parents I met when I was growing up, who behaved as if they were formerly CEOs of two separate thriving companies that had been reluctantly forced to merge because of a miserable buyout. My mum and dad always kissed on the lips and sometimes danced in the kitchen and laughed most nights when I heard them turn off the lights and come upstairs.

There were also, of course, screaming fights on the M25 and hissing about timekeeping in the driveway and doors slamming because of a misreading of “skimmed/semi-skimmed” milk on a shopping list – but when you stripped off the day-to-day meat of the mundane, unbreakable, solid bones of love made up their marriage. Even to this day, when I take my dad out for his annual birthday lunch, after a few glasses of wine he starts talking about my mum like some girl he’s just met off Tinder who he thinks I’ll really get on with when we inevitably meet.

They like to tell their story just as much as I like hearing it: two weary people who were war-torn from love, who had given up hope that it was for them, finally found each other. After a fairly short courtship, they eloped one afternoon – walked to Finsbury Town Hall and picked up some bloke at the bus stop as their witness. Then that night they went to their favourite restaurant on Camden Passage for dinner, just the two of them.

I may well have caught it from mum and dad. That would be the easiest answer.

But then again, I could have picked it up off all those Frank Sinatra albums that played in the cars and rooms of my childhood. Or there were the old musicals I watched on rainy Sundays under the cotton sheet roof of a den – Doris Day and Rock Hudson, Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds, Grace Kelly and Bing Crosby. All those scenes of long, lingering kisses and tap dancing in tandem and being taken, suddenly, in a determined pair of arms. Maybe you just need to have one too many of these movies – like

seafood or tequila shots – to come down with a really nasty case of Old Romantic.

Wherever you pick it up, I can confirm that once you've got it, it is incurable. Even when all the odds are stacked against you; even when your heart is shattered like a broken Christmas bauble; even when it feels like Aphrodite is just trying to spell it out: You. Are. Unlucky. In. Love. – a Romantic's optimism may fade but the underlying ailment will remain. It can be chronic, time-consuming, all-encompassing, irrational and maddening. But, as I've learnt, it can also be managed.

Die-hard romanticism is like shingles. It's something that lies dormant, just waiting for a flare-up at a moment of weakness. I feel, for example, a twinge of Old Romantic every time I pass that tiny restaurant on the ground floor of an eighteenth-century townhouse in Soho, where the candles in empty wine bottles always flicker and the table cloths are always crisp and white and crab mayonnaise and calves' liver are always written on the blackboard

menu in cursive bistro font. I peered through the Dickensian window the first time I walked past it and decided it would be *Our Place with My Person*, where we'd have our third date and our first anniversary dinner. Then, maybe decades from now, we'd go for champagne after making vows in a town hall in front of a man we picked up at a bus stop. That was the play I wrote, and this restaurant was the set I chose and I've never wanted any other scene played out in it. So, for years, I've avoided it – my leading man yet to be cast. When an ex-boyfriend suggested it for dinner, I said I'd been and it wasn't any good (how do you gently say to someone that you'd like to go to the restaurant, but just not with them because you only want to ever eat there with the great love of your life and you're not quite sure they've passed with flying colours?). When a friend mentioned she wanted to go there for her 28th birthday, I secretly hoped she wouldn't be able to get a table (she didn't, we went somewhere else – thank you for that one, Aphrodite).

“I do the same with shooting stars, don’t worry about it,” my friend Sabrina tells me, a fellow sufferer. “I want to see a shooting star for the first time with my husband standing next to me.”

“But it’s not like going to a restaurant,” I say. “You can’t make a reservation for a shooting star.”

“No, but I can avoid them. I avoided one in Argentina once. Some friends and I were lying on the grass outside, looking at the sky and someone pointed out a shooting star. I immediately turned away and looked at the ground.”

Ducking out of perfectly good dinner plans, ducking out of rare celestial wonders – it’s a humiliating thing, the plight of being a romantic.

And once you’ve known a shade of this madness, you understand so many of those we pity, ridicule and fear. I understand the people who send flowers every day to the same address until police intervention stops them – I get how that happens. I stood in front of Van Gogh’s self portrait, his ear bandaged, his eyes heavy, and felt the pain of

unrequited love and longing for a family that I'd read about in his published letters. I saw a production of *Madam Butterfly* mere days after being ghosted by yet another candidate for the restaurant in Soho and tears slid down my cheeks as I watched *Butterfly* watching ships come in and out of the nearby harbour, waiting for the naval officer who spurned her. I thought of all the times I've stared at my phone waiting for a ship (phone call, WhatsApp message) to come in, suspecting it never will again.

"I think you're taking it well," my friend Max whispered to me in the final scene as *Butterfly* staggered on stage with a dagger plunged into her own neck.

We're all connected, *The Romantics*. Me, Van Gogh, *Madam Butterfly*, the people who look at couples' trolleys in Sainsbury's and piece together the dinners they eat and the life they share, the idiots who listen to the *Sleepless in Seattle* soundtrack, the chumps who believe Scarlett O'Hara did get him back and he did in fact give a damn and that tomorrow

really was another day. I feel connected to all the songs – I've floated along Moon River, I've seen that light that never goes out, I've climbed the mountain that wasn't high enough to keep me from getting to you, babe. I have been and, I'm sure will once again be, my friend who went on three dates with a barman and was so nuts about him, we rang the bar on a withheld number over and over and over again, waiting for his voice to answer so we could check if he possibly wasn't replying to her texts because he was doing a shift that night.

The obsessives, the dreamers, the believers, the fantasists. The letter-writers, the kissing-in-the-rainers, the borderline-stalkers. I know and love them all.

We all enable each other too. Over Sauvignon, we listen to the long stories about new love or lost love or unrequited love. We revel in the detail of the hand that brushed away the strand of hair before the first kiss or the specific words used to say the last goodbye. We send each other screen grabs of texts

at the beginning of a relationship and we underline, annotate and analyse enthusiastically, as if “Hey, free on Thurs? Maybe a beer by the canal if weather good? x” is as complex as a Jacobean play (I often think no man would ever go on a date with a woman again if he could see the contents of various WhatsApp groups).

And when our friends finally bore of talking about it, we go hunting for treasure. These are hits to sustain a romantic’s soul; Lego bricks to help us build the person in our minds in the absence of their real-life company.

My friend India calls them “nuggets”. There are “premium nuggets” – such as a Facebook page, replete with photographs dating back to a 2006 holiday in Corfu, or a Twitter account including revealing tweets to Stephen Fry back when we all thought it was like sending him a text. Premium nuggets are worth their weight in gold – they provide enough material to regenerate a whole new batch of daydreams about a person and can happily sustain

a romantic in-between two real-life encounters. But eventually its novelty wears off and the nugget-hunter won't experience the same frisson from revisiting it. At this point, a second-tier nugget is needed, such as an old Bebo page or the "tagged photos" section of their Instagram account. Sadly, this too loses its buzz pretty rapidly – like the fading scent of a perfume spritzed on an arm in a department store earlier that day. Then you have to go to the sparsest, least fulfilling, lowest-rung nugget: an old JustGiving.com fundraising page your beloved set up a few years ago asking friends to sponsor a 5K run in aid of The Swan Sanctuary Shepperton. Barely buried treasure – a disappointingly hollow and short-lived thrill.

I am aware there will be people reading this who will be totally baffled, and perhaps completely appalled, by my confession. But to understand how much of a romantic's life happens in our heads is to understand the catastrophising, adolescent, totally disproportionate grief we often feel when it all goes wrong. Which is why I truly think

Die-Hard Romantic is a manageable affliction – because so much of it can be controlled by thoughts; by de-programming from a cult that has been sending secret signals to the susceptible since our first breath.

“You don’t know him, Dolly,” the aforementioned Max once said to me one summer evening at his flat, as I picked at dinner at moaned about another romantic endeavour gone wrong. “You’ve met him four times.”

“I feel like I really do know him though, I feel so connected to him.”

“You feel like you know him because you’ve spent a month thinking about him constantly,” he said. “He hasn’t been there for the majority of it though. This is all a one-sided invention.”

It was then that I realised that the inventing, the alchemy, all that time in my mind’s laboratory was the thing I had fallen for. The man in question – a beardy, forty-something media type who I was slightly indifferent to – had simply been the cradle to

the creation; the Petri dish of the person I longed for. Every time a die-hard romantic thinks they're falling in love three dates in, the chances are they are simply marvelling at a monster they've built – and just as the original story goes, it will always overpower and overwhelm its creator.

“Every time you have a thought about him, I want you to pop it like a giant bubble,” Max said. “Recognise it as something that isn't real. Then pop it.”

His words stayed in my head like a mantra and every night for the following few months I did just that. I imagined a giant drawing pin, one so long I could lean on it rakishly, like a cane. And every time a romantic thought floated by – a big, iridescent, wobbly bubble – I jumped up and stabbed it. I popped the thought and the nonsense of it drenched me, making me realise how silly it was in the first place. I constructed road signs in front of parts of my mind that I knew were dangerous to go down: DO NOT ENTER – TIME-CONSUMING FANTASIES AHEAD. When I saw the branches of trees change their

seasonal outfit, I pushed aside Keatsian thoughts of who I might kiss under them on a bench. I listened to my favourite Jeff Buckley songs and managed to not fold my own memories of old love in between the chords. Soon it became second nature. I became an exterminator of romantic pests that rattled and scurried through my neural pathways. I was, and still am, forever popping bubbles. Pop. Pop. Pop.

I recently interviewed the author Marian Keyes for my podcast Love Stories (my idea was to host a sort of Desert Island Discs for relationships). For her third choice, I asked her to describe a story of passionate love to me, and she spoke in an incredibly profound way about the needlessly dramatic relationships she sought out in her twenties that she mistook for passion. “I was generating fake emotions to stop me from feeling the pain of being me,” she said.

Fake emotions. Is this what being a romantic actually is? I spent the days after the interview carrying a slightly sick feeling of dread, recalling

every moment of my life I have deemed the most romantic to determine whether it was something honest, or a game I willingly took part in to distract from something painful. Was it real when he drilled a hole in his lucky penny, threaded through a silver chain and made a necklace for me? Was it real when we held hands in Jardin des Tuileries? Was it real when he picked me sweet peas? Was it real when he spent five quid on two tickets to walk to the top of The Monument To The Great Fire of London where we drank cava from plastic cups because we couldn't afford The Shard? Was any of it real? What is a real emotion and what is a counterfeit? Which one's the stuff of life and which is the stuff of legend?

In Martin Amis' book *The Rachel Papers*, a male character describes his newly loved-up sister as "spunk-drunk". My friends and I use it quite a lot – normally to excuse someone's bad behaviour on account of their new-found infatuation (e.g. "watch how she drops him into conversation, she's full-on spunk-drunk", "she'll be 15 minutes late, at least,

she'll be spunk-drunk after spending the weekend with him.”). Disgustingly phrased it may well be, but spot-on it is too. There's a reason the people who claim to be the most romantic in the world are often the ones who spend a lifetime semi-single, hopping from one intense, yet short-lived dalliance to the next. Because love is not the thing you fall into in those first six months – it is instead a clumsy trip-up into lust, chemicals and hormones. It is a form of drunkenness; venery OD. The first six months is where many self-proclaimed hopeless romantics thrive. After that it can get a bit too real and intimate.

After all, if you define romance as the day-dreamy, open-ended, anything-is-possible pursuit of love – commitment is the antithesis of that. You have to trap yourself in a cycle of short-lived lust – evergreen romance, novelty and newness, fantasy and fiction – to keep the activity alive. Actual long-term love, and arguably actual romance, means relinquishing the possibility that there is always the promise of another love affair ahead. I once read someone

describe their wedding day as simultaneously the most romantic and saddest day of their life – on one hand, they found a partner to journey through and experience life with. On the other, by getting married they were promising to never fall in love again. It may not be a popular belief or admission, but I can see why marriage might feel bittersweet, even when you know it's right.

I've got it under control, for now. I pop bubbles, I observe the cognitive road-signs, I don't go nugget-hunting. When I meet someone marvellous, I still feel my head filling up like a helium balloon that could float off into space if I let go, but I've learnt to ground myself. I hold back, I keep it cool, I've lowered my expectations to about an inch above the ground. I even follow the formulas: don't text every day, don't kiss on date one, "not to be too prescriptive, but sex and love addicts should wait exactly seven dates until they have sex," The Australian told me firmly. A hopeless romantic in recovery is in a constant state of personal boundary-building – a bid to fall

in love like a grown-up, with rationality, level-headedness and a healthy dose of scepticism. It would only take one persuasive man who said all the right things to have me free-falling into doom again.

I don't think I contracted Romantic from one specific place or song or film. I think it was an unquantifiable amount of micro-moments – an auntie's wedding home-video watched in a crowd on a living room floor in the early 90s, the kiss that awoke Sleeping Beauty, Harry's speech to Sally during Auld Lang Syne. And I think it goes beyond what I've seen and heard – I think it might just be who I am; what I've inherited and how I began.

There is one photo of my mum and dad on their wedding day in May 1988, taken shortly after they made their vows and before they went out for dinner. They passed a photographer on the steps of the town hall and asked if he'd come back to their flat and take a photo of them in the communal garden. Mum is in a batwing sleeved dress, her red hair bouncing in obscene Farrah Fawcett curls. They stand adjacent

to a mulberry tree, one my little brother and I would one day take turns to climb. And – just noticeable under her billowing 80s crêpe de Chine – there I am. All six months of me. I was with my mum and dad on the most romantic day of their lives. I was there at the bus stop. I was there at Finsbury Town Hall. I was at the table in the restaurant on Camden Passage. I was there the first night they came home as husband and wife. I was a walk-on character in the mythology they would go onto create, as all couples do, to help them survive.

Maybe it was predetermined long before I could listen to my first Frank Sinatra song or smell my first rain-beaded rose petal. Maybe it's something no amount of analysis will ever get to the bottom of. Perhaps it was part of my makeup and formation; a line from the prologue of my existence; an epigenetic inevitability.

There was no other way for me to be, but a hopeless, hopeful romantic.



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