

LOVE IS BLIND

Emily Simon



“IT’S THE SHITTIEST SITUATION I’ve ever been in because I’m forced to make a decision.” Not because the contestant on Netflix’s *Love is Blind* has to choose between two women through a wall, but because Jeramy has to choose at all. And so Jeramy chooses one, without understanding why this and not the other. He tells Laura *I love you* through the wall. They’ve only met through the wall.

Days later, Laura and Jeramy are engaged at a resort in the Dominican Republic. They socialize on the beach with the other engaged couples from the show. It isn’t long before Jeramy makes a dirty joke, which insults another engaged couple and horrifyingly implicates his fiancé. Laura’s reaction is allergic. She calls him a child; he says he wants to “home,” and he means *home*, home, far away.

Other contestants have trouble choosing, too. Jimmy doesn’t know where to direct his proposal until the very last day, and it seems that Chelsea says *yes* to the first man who asks her. Chelsea is so happy to hear the words. Their engagement is exhausting, as Chelsea pleads all season, every episode, for Jimmy to keep choosing her. Stone-cold Jimmy professes his love again and again until finally, he breaks things off.

Brittany and Kenneth have no trouble choosing. Brittany and Kenneth, who connect through the wall and talk of miracles, divine ideas, blessings, and big plans. When they meet face-to-face for the first time (after just days, perhaps a week of wall-talk), Kenneth is stunned. “God is good,” he says. Later in the DR, while other couples anxiously mouth each other, Brittany and Kenneth seem touched by pure peace. They get into bed without disturbing the red rose petals.

My friend Abigail texts me asking if we should go to church. “We need to find Jesus, apparently,” I text back. “Jesus will keep this couple together. Jesus alone!”

When the gloss of new love is foregrounded by the strength of religious principles, I can tell you, it’s very hard to look away; and so *Love is Blind* converts two apathetically Jewish girls to something we can’t put our finger on.



The location of religiosity seems to have been shifting from American institutions to popular culture; and this religious feeling or belief has also become a more subterranean thing, aside from the invocation of God in political speeches and Bushwick poems. Reverent, enlivening, even hope-giving ideas persist, even as many of us identify an overwhelming sense of doom and apocalypse. Through social media channels that promote the language of self-care, actualization, and authenticity, for example, we are moved to understand the self as boundlessly deserving. Through parasocial relationships with catastrophically successful “stars” like Taylor Swift – whose image becomes so multiple and so present in the public forum, one wonders about the privacy or preservation of the body – we become beautiful, rich, and powerful in proximity; we enter the spectacle and are immortalized as image.

In bed one night, I watched a live-stream of Taylor Swift performing onstage in Indiana. I studied her paleness, the nostalgic wave of her hair and the soft bangs, the coy cat-eye makeup and the painted red lip. She sang and played and I didn’t swipe away. She was mashing up a few of her own songs with the same key progression and people were going nuts in the comments on the livestream. It sounded nice enough to leave me cold, until the camera zoomed out and I could see the whole arena, starry with cameras. Taylor’s long song ended, and while the crowd was weeping and screaming, a portal opened in the floor for Taylor to

disappear into. She dove into it as if into the loveliest swimming pool. Then, I could hear the woman filming: “This was the hardest year of my life. I bought these tickets in February...” she said. “And I’ve got a bad leg so...” Enormous, fluffy clouds descended from above the stage. They shifted position. One of the clouds threw down a ladder. “I’m in a lot of pain but it’s worth it,” the woman said. Dancers came forward, all parading big sculptural clouds. “I think I’ll remember this for the rest of my life.” And as the woman spoke, Taylor came down the ladder singing.



The wall that separates contestants in the “pods” on *Love is Blind* is difficult to describe. Amoeba-blue, almost gooey. Like a space portal or a door to heaven. It’s a perceptive boundary, an intermediary between strangers who will become sensitive to each other, and then, perhaps, contractually obligated.

Contestants approach the wall, rest their hands, their foreheads, on its strange surface. They dance, shout, cry, kneel before the wall. They decide to marry on either side of it.

The wall is a conduit of transformation. Contestants are concealed behind the omniscient screen, fall in love “unseen,” become engaged there, and then finally reveal themselves, in lots of makeup, to the stranger who completes them.

Who doesn’t want to be transformed, or at least, lifted from this world to some other? In communion with some other?



To love myself more authentically, a cognitive behavioral therapist suggested I organize my life into four categories: Mastery, Connection, Enjoyment, and Self-Care. Every day, I filled these quadrants with data points. For example: counseling with a student, dinner with a friend, an episode of TV, a bath, etc. But when I surveyed such evidence of my own competence and happiness, I felt hollow and grim. The evidence didn’t make sense, or it wasn’t really true; because what was inscribing me and my little life, or perhaps looming atmospherically, was all dread, rupture, and endings. Fatal distractions, escalations, impunities, and fabrications.

Violence, profit, and amnesia.

Online, I swipe away from the perversion and censorship of language, from “coverage” that warps and obfuscates, from political actors and their fundraisers, from the destruction of social life, ethnic communities, even history, toward the safely manufactured news. I navigate to celebrity real estate, marriage and divorce, fashion crimes, all things pointless. I pivot towards the gossip that spins like light snow and comes to rest. I follow this trail and catch my breath.

I worry that the soft stuff wounds me, too. It might be too late for criticality, even irony, if I am so entertained. Maybe all I can do is romance the spectacle, just like the half-conscious contestants who confess their love through a wall.



After their vacation in the Dominican Republic, Brittany, Kenneth, and the other engaged couples return to Charlotte, North Carolina,

to the “real world.” They move into furnished apartments together, go back to their jobs, and log onto their devices. They film part-time, now. This “third phase” of the “experiment” is famously the most difficult for couples to survive.

“I think Kenneth is trying to find a reason to not make this work,” Abigail texts me. “Is the issue that Jesus is just getting in the way? Or they don’t really like each other?”

We text each other furiously, searching for answers while Kenneth and Brittany break up in Episode 8.

“It seems like Kenneth just couldn’t look at her/their relationship, the same after the first beach hang out... I think he just goes into a protective bubble,” I say.

“What are we missing?” Abigail wonders, “I’m so confused. It’s like they had one convoluted argument and now we’re done.”

“I think that the failure of their engagement or their relationship is still kind of salvaged by their faith in God, like they reinvest their love in God and their faith in God, and they’re just like *God has a plan for us*. And they’re crying, but they’re sort of laying down their swords and they’re just like... yeah, it’s all gonna be OK.”

Brittany and Kenneth show up at the Season 6 reunion with mutual admiration and respect — unprecedented reciprocity on the *Love is Blind* stage.

“That’s a beautiful thing that you guys are at that place...” says the show’s co-host Nick Lachey.

His wife, Vanessa Lachey: “This show has become, not just for everyone watching but also for the people living it, a little bit of therapy for all of us—“

“—Absolutely.” (Brittany)

“—and it’s specifically watching your guys’s conversations—it gave us a space to actually start talking more about things that we had been putting on the back burner for a while,” Vanessa continues. “[It was] the way you spoke to each other... Because we’ve been together for 18 years and you know, life happens, kids, job, and you start getting snippy, and this is the person you’re supposed to be the most respectful to... and to watch you guys speak to each other with so much love just reminds us what it’s about.”

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