

FROM THE
ACADEMY AWARD®
WINNING
DIRECTOR OF

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/1evpktA>

N.Y. / REGION | SUMMER LOVE

The Roller Coaster Couple

By **ELIZABETH A. HARRIS** JUNE 19, 2015

They trotted up the ramp to the Cyclone, that grumpy old rattler of a roller coaster in Coney Island, Brooklyn, a young man and a young woman who would spend the day never more than a few inches apart.

They were hoisted high in the air on the octogenarian tracks made of creaky wooden boards, then shot down and around and into a twist. She screamed through her smile; he kept his hands in the air the entire ride, his shoulder-length hair standing straight out behind him.

As they walked the Coney Island boardwalk this month on a perfect Sunday, her slender arm slipped easily into his. His sea-glass eyes lingered on her when she made him laugh. They talked eagerly of roller coasters with a connoisseur's depth and flair. And on the Thunderbolt, a ride with tracks the color of Cheez Doodles that sucks its passengers into horrifying curlicues, theirs were the only hands in the air.

Summer love in New York City: It strikes young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, immigrant and native, introvert and extrovert, toned and never-been-to-the-gym; a shared sampling of the divine thickened by radiating heat, when air rises off the pavement in waves.

This summer, Metro reporters of The New York Times will be telling stories of love, and lovers, drummed out to the beat of New York City, where the pulse of the season thrums on sidewalks and boardwalks, rooftops and stoops, in backyards and bars, at concerts under the stars or in the dance of a

soaking summer rain.

Some of the stories will have happy endings. Others will merely end. Love, after all, is complicated, in any season.

WE BEGIN WITH the pairing of Lisa Guerrero and Rich O’Flanagan, their fingers intertwined on the boardwalk in June.

They seem like a natural couple.

But on their first meeting three years ago, she said, he really wasn’t her type. He had just graduated from their alma mater, Oceanside High School on Long Island, where he was a star of the football team and a guy who played cello in a rock band. She was a rising senior, the president of the mock trial debate team and a girl excited about her science classes.

“If you want to get stereotypical about it, it’s like the nerd and the jock,” Mr. O’Flanagan said.

“Ugh, the worst stereotype ever,” his girlfriend called out. “It’s like, ‘When I take off my glasses, I’m actually pretty!’ ”

In high school they had some friends in common, but their paths never crossed in the hallways or the cafeteria. When they met, it was summertime and they were at a house party, and as with the beginning of all great love stories, she was standing by the refrigerator. He walked over and poured her a drink.

“I kind of picked her out,” he said, adding that he thought she was older, maybe a college girl. “Like, ‘Oh. Who’s that?’ ”

They chatted, and one innocent thing led to another until they were talking about getting “the spins.” He said they reminded him of roller coasters. And with that, just a few words exchanged, the football player and the girl from mock trial had found something in common. They both loved roller coasters.

After the party died down and they had both gone home, Mr. O’Flanagan found that cute girl on Facebook, and he wrote a short message on her wall.

“Just ‘roller coasters,’ ” he recounted. “So if she wanted to see my Facebook, she’d know where to look.”

Roller coasters became a thing, Ms. Guerrero said. When one sent the

other a card, for example, the sender might draw a little roller coaster on it. For their first anniversary, they spent about 12 hours at Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey, riding as many rides as possible. Though they very rarely get to amusement parks together, roller coasters remain a language they both speak, an inside joke that brings back sweet memories of their earliest beginnings.

“I DIDN’T REALLY LIKE HIM that much when I first met him,” said Ms. Guerrero, now 19.

“I thought he was nice,” she said, but she considered “nerdy hipster” guys more her speed.

Mr. O’Flanagan, 21, had some reluctance of his own, he said, after a previous relationship he described as “terrible, terrible,” that spanned the length of high school. Their friends, however, saw potential.

“My friend called him ‘The Fog,’ ” Ms. Guerrero said, “because he would slowly but surely creep up on me, and I would like him more and more.”

That friend, Gabriella Grosman, 19, said she was pulling for Mr. O’Flanagan, but she was not optimistic. Ms. Guerrero seemed resistant.

“I told her ‘The Fog! The Fog!’ so many times,” Ms. Grosman said. “You need to hold out, I promise, you will like him. She was like, ‘No, I don’t know, I can’t see it, he’s not really my type.’ And I said, ‘Stop it! You’re going to fall in love with this guy.’ ”

Ms. Guerrero remembers exactly the moment she knew Ms. Grosman was right. That summer, she, Mr. O’Flanagan and several other friends were taking a trip in early August to eastern Long Island, where the parents of a mutual friend had a house. She asked the host which car she was taking for the ride out.

“He said, oh, you’re with X, Y and Z, but you’re not with Rich,” she recounted. “And I thought, ‘Oh.’ I was slightly disappointed. And I was like, ‘Wait, why am I disappointed?’ ”

When she got out of the car at the end of the ride, she looked at him and realized: The Fog had descended. She was hooked.

Mr. O’Flanagan’s recollection of the nickname was only slightly different.

“One of Lisa’s friends, Gabby, she called me a ‘silent mist’ or something,” he said.

Three years on, they still fit, and given their ages and the course of the intervening years, that in itself is unlikely. They don’t attend the same college, or live in the same town. They work hard, and sometimes they go weeks without seeing each other.

Ms. Guerrero, a petite woman with dark hair, bits of blond growing out at the tips, lives in Harlem and studies chemistry at the City University of New York’s Macaulay Honors College. This summer she is doing research, making new compounds for use in the biomedical field.

Mr. O’Flanagan, solidly built and with soft blond stubble, lives in Rockville Centre on Long Island, where he has been studying music education at Nassau Community College. He plans to start at Queens College in the fall. In addition to the cello, he plays the upright bass, bass guitar and guitar.

And yet it works. She goes to Long Island to see him. More often he comes to the city to see her, where they might get dumplings in Chinatown or just get coffee or watch “Game of Thrones.” They are careful to call each other often, staying up on the rhythms of the day-to-day.

“All in all, I think we just really get along,” she said. “We like the daily things, normal things. We really like to have conversations.”

They also like to be challenged by each other, which might help explain how they’ve done so well through so much change. Mr. O’Flanagan said he feels lucky to have someone in his life who forces him to consider different perspectives, especially when it comes to politics. And that goes both ways, said Ms. Grosman, Ms. Guerrero’s friend since freshman year in high school.

Ms. Guerrero is not ostentatious about her mind, but she is plainly very smart. (When asked where she learned so much about different roller coasters, like the Kingda Ka or Superman at Six Flags, she cried, “Physics!” and proceeded into rapid chatter about inertia.) Ms. Grosman said few people really challenged Ms. Guerrero before Mr. O’Flanagan.

“A lot of high school couples go into college and they grow apart,” Ms. Grosman said. “But they’ve gotten through the issues they’ve had and

managed to come out strong, and very much in love.”

She paused, then added quietly, “I want that.”

A version of this article appears in print on June 21, 2015, on page MB1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Thrill of It All .