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*I Found A Keeper—Online*

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**I FOUND A KEEPER—ONLINE**

**by**

**T. Jerry Williams**

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As I signed on to America Online, my Buddy List popped up. TRS was online! I smiled at the thought—though, across the way, she was really less than 60 feet from me. Should I zip her an Instant Message? I settled back into my chair and studied her: Tricia's back was turned, but I could still see that she was downloading digital photos from her new Kodak 260...a Christmas gift from me. Probably photos of Clara Belle Richardson, Tricia's granddaughter, 3 and one half months old. I didn't IM her, figuring she needed no distractions as she transferred those digital photos to her new Zip drive.

Quickly, I finished my e-mail and signed off. Tricia was still fiddling with those photos, so I turned my attention to digital photos taken during a motorcycle tour two years back. I wanted a photo of my friend Gerald Bartee from Oregon, known in Harley circles as Billy Bob. I planned to e-mail his photo to a former employee of mine who was now in Oregon.

Yeah—I was playing matchmaker again. And why shouldn't I?

See, Trish and I met online. On April 12, 1995, I was playing around online and stumbled into the AOL Gallery. Was I checking out the chicks? Of course. I was hooked. In various AOL chat rooms, people let one another know that their photos are in Gallery III or Gallery IX. Pretty soon, I learned how to find those digital photos in all those galleries.

I surfed through the galleries for about an hour and found a photo of a certain "TRS." Her profile intrigued me further. She was a small business owner in Pennsylvania. As president and CEO of the North Carolina Restaurant Association, I lobby for small business—a perfect excuse to e-mail her. I sent a breezy note, introducing myself and letting her know I'd stumbled across her photo on AOL.

The next night, I signed on to find a nice reply from TRS. She asked if I was associated with the restaurant industry because I'd listed restaurants as a hobby in my online profile. Turns out Tricia operated an independent restaurant in West Chester. The restaurant, Ristorante Bellagio, featured Northern Italian cuisine. Naturally, I was pleased to find restaurateur online...specifically, an attractive female restaurateur. I wrote back immediately, telling her what I do for a living and asking if she belonged to the Pennsylvania Restaurant Association. Yes she did, she said—but she wasn't an active member.

Clearly, duty called. As an executive fully committed to the Association, I wrote back, explaining to Tricia that she really should become active and proceeded to explain why. That evening, I signed on and saw that she'd written back. I couldn't wait to open her e-mail. Uh oh. Her e-mail's tone was decidedly irritated. She'd judged me as merely a pushy AOL stranger, eager to give orders.

Time for a rethink. This relationship wouldn't go far, I guessed, if I couldn't even communicate my thoughts and feelings with enthusiasm. No more coming off as an officious bureaucrat!

I signed off AOL and headed out to Ray Price Harley-Davidson to ogle the latest in Harley gear. I managed to put TRS out of my mind—for a few minutes. Even as I cruised on my Ultra Classic, Tricia's digital photo dominated my thoughts. What else could I do? I headed home and signed on again. But no new e-mail. I signed off and wondered how to respond to the irritation in her letter.

More than once I've been instructed that honesty is the best policy. Time to test that policy, I concluded. Tricia had obviously misinterpreted my letter, so I'd apologize and simply suggest that she be active in the Association. After all, members and directors really would value her opinions. I know the state executive in Pennsylvania and knew he'd welcome her views. So, that night I wrote her.

The next day, I signed on, hoping for her response. Nothing.

Nothing the next day either.

And on the third day, as I signed on, I suffered some skulking doubt about that "Honesty is the Best Policy" notion.

"*You've got mail!*" the friendly record voice announced. Yeah, there it was: e-mail from Tricia. And it was a friendly note, not a hint of irritation. Relief! I wrote back right away—with my professional duties discharged, I now wanted to become friends with this female restaurateur from Pennsylvania!

We did become friends—and more.

Of course it took a while. I was very interested in her right from the start, but I took it easy with the lady restaurant owner. Naturally, we wrote to each other about the restaurant business. She told me about her parents and her brother, sister and daughter. I told her about my family and how I grew up on a tobacco farm. She explained that she had only one daughter and I told her about my married son and his wife. I also mentioned my single daughter, who was madly in love.

We even wrote and chatted about Harley-Davidson motorcycles. She'd ridden a motor scooter in Mexico once and thoroughly enjoyed it. I then told her about my planned excursion to Sturgis, South Dakota for the Black Hills Rally in August. This would be my sixth such round trip from Raleigh to South Dakota, Wyoming and Montana.

As the weeks and months flew by, I learned her father was retired from DuPont. He had been a chemist for that firm but had met her mother in Switzerland during World War II. Her mother was a Swiss native and had driven an ambulance during the war. Her mother and father also helped smuggle downed pilots out of Switzerland. Because the country was neutral, a pilot shot down over Switzerland was supposed to stay there until the war's end. However, a few hid in a false bottom of the ambulance and were smuggled out.

At the same time, I was busy lobbying the state General Assembly. With fingers and toes crossed, I hoped the sessions would end in time for my motorcycle trip. Then one night, I thought of asking TRS about the possibility of her joining me on the trip. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. So, a few evenings later, I wrote that she ought to take some vacation time and fly out to join me in Rapid City for the bike rally. "I wish I could, but I run a restaurant!" she replied. I was disappointed, of course, but I didn't push it.

However, a week or so later, I brought up the subject again. It'd be terrific if she could fly out and ride with me for a few days. She dodged the issue. But this time, I kept pushing. "We could go to Yellowstone," I wrote. "We could go up into Montana and hit the Beartooth Highway or the Going To The Sun Road."

Judging from her e-mail replies that week, I knew she was thinking about the trip. When she replied she didn't have a leather jacket or helmet, I knew I was making progress. Next she agreed to look at Harley gear in a shop run by one of her restaurant customers.

The leather jacket took another week. I started working on the helmet purchase...another week, another purchase. At that point, I noted that if she managed an extra three or four days, we could also reach the Canadian Rockies, to Banff and Lake Louise. She wasn't sure about that because of work schedules at the restaurant. Still, I pushed.

The following week I sent her a sample itinerary. It didn't work because we had too much riding time and not enough sightseeing time. Then a week later she wrote that she could take a few extra days to go up into Canada. Itinerary number eight did the trick. We were set. She would fly to Rapid City. From there, we'd take in Sturgis and go on to Wyoming, Montana and then up into Canada. She'd ride part of the way home with me and then fly out of Omaha back to Philadelphia.

At this point, I appraised our progress: We had a travel plan, and she had a new leather jacket and a new motorcycle helmet.

And we'd never met. I'd never even heard her voice, or she my voice. We had an e-relationship—all by computer and e-mail.

Here let me say that one must be careful about meeting people online and rushing into a relationship—or even meeting them in person. Caution is essential. But Tricia and I had been communicating for three months, and, frankly, I knew her better than I would someone on a third date under usual circumstances. The initial tension between interested two people was already resolved, and we really were friends by the time we actually met.

I was down near the General Assembly the next week when I ran into Jim Graham, Commissioner of Agriculture for North Carolina. He knew about my annual trips to South Dakota and said, "Well, Jerry my boy, it's 'bout that time when you ride that motorcycle out west again. So, when are you leaving and who's going with you this time?"

My reply shocked him.

"Well, Commissioner, I'm going with a restaurateur this year!"

"Don't know no restaurateur so crazy that they'd ride a motorcycle with you to South Dakota. Who is it?"

"A female restaurateur from Pennsylvania. We met on the net and I've never even heard her voice."

I'll never forget his reply.

"Well, darn, Jerry, suppose she's ugly?"

"So what?" I joked. "She'll sit behind me, so I won't have to look at her." We had a big laugh, and my friend Don Beason chimed in, "My wife is afraid she'll be carrying a knife."

That evening, I told Tricia about the events of the day and we laughed together.

## *I Found A Keeper—Online*

Of course we did speak on the phone before we met, three times, maybe four. I did hear her voice, and I liked it. I still do.

I picked her up at the Rapid City airport on my Harley that afternoon about 6:30 and we rode back to town. We've been riding together ever since. In fact, we haven't spent more than 15 days apart since we met. Don't plan to either!

Our face-to-face meeting took place on August 8, 1995: four months after our initial e-mail exchange in April. For two years I flew weekly to Philly and was met at the airport by this Yankee Woman that I had met online. Occasionally, she made it to Raleigh—sometimes twice in one month. Now, we are both comfortable living in Raleigh, and she's the one who travels to the Philly area.

We've become grandparents and our lives together have taken on a new dimension. Not much beats two grandchildren on your knee over the Christmas holidays. This year, Patricia has created a beautiful garden, and she continues to perfect it—even in North Carolina's hot summer weather. Granted, some yellow jackets slow her down for a couple days now and then. I was slowed down a bit myself by a nasty spill on the Harley—specifically, the Harley and I lost a battle with an oil slick. However, I recently won another battle—specifically, a battle with skin cancer, so I'm not complaining.

Right now we're planning our next trip to the Black Hills Rally in Sturgis. This time we'll be traveling on Elvis, my '97 Harley Road King. We named it Elvis because it looks like an Elvis-kind-of-bike.

I just finalized our travel calendar for this year. This time, we'll ship the bike to Seattle and fly out there for a family wedding. We'll pick up the bike and leave the next day for Vancouver. After that, it's 16 days in the Canadian Rockies, then down to Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota. We'll fly home from Denver and the bike should be along in a short while.

This is the first time I've shipped our bike anywhere, but then I've ridden it out to the Black Hills area and beyond seven times so I have nothing further to prove. Oh yeah...we'll have our digital camera and a laptop in our saddlebags. We can keep up with our e-mail and send digital photos of our trip to our friends and to this location on the Web. Also, I gotta have those *New York Times* Technology Headlines everyday!

Because Elvis doesn't have the big tour pack found on an Ultra Classic, Trish came up with a plan to use a new barbecue grill replacement from Home Depot to expand our luggage rack. Now we can pack a bigger bag for extra clothing.

We're awfully excited about this trip. There's nothing like seeing the highways and byways of America from the saddle of a Harley-Davidson. I say, "Live to Ride, Ride to Live and Surf the Net."

Happy Trails!

## **END OF STORY**

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