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HAPPY TRAILS

by

TRS



After the end of a thirteen-year marriage and well into my forties, I discovered my computer. Typical of many people at mid-age, I'd complacently concluded that I knew everything necessary for the rest of my life. I'd learned enough about my PC contraption to get by at work.

Someone gave me a disk for AOL, and one hot summer night I installed it. Learning as I went, I followed the instructions until I found myself in the midst of a zillion people chattering away soundlessly. It amazed me...I was sitting in the attic of my quiet house invisibly observing a party. I'm not a loquacious person, and that trait--added to my sore psyche--made AOL chat perfectly comfortable.

I hung back and read the rapidly scrolling lines of banter and flirting. Eventually someone noticed my name in the roster of the room and sent a private message. I do not remember the content, but I do remember the warmth of camaraderie. By admitting I was just new on-line, I--a cyber Doris Day--became a born-again virgin!

I quickly became addicted to being on-line. Late at night after closing my restaurant, I could fire up the computer and meet, flirt, do whatever and go wherever I wished, while still safe at home, a glass of wine by my side. When I tired, I could simply say "Goodnight" and go to bed. It was a wonderful opening up for me.

Most of the conversations I had were sexually charged; in those days the respondents at least seemed to be adults. At this time, I was consulting a therapist and learning to recognize my emotional triggers. I relearned how to talk to men, and I recognized, during chats, how in the past men had manipulated me--or rather, how I had allowed them to. Rejecting the cads was easy because I was a click away from hordes of other, acceptable men to chat with. By the way, I quickly found that women were not particularly interested in chatting with other women, though I did have one uninteresting experiment with a lesbian. AOL allows each subscriber to have multiple screen names (i.e.: personalities) if they so choose. This added a spice of the masquerade, and I must confess I've on occasion become a virtual transsexual.

What a spree! Pheromones flew, emotions spiraled, and I was in no danger of waking up next to a monster. There is something new, even radical, in communicating instantly by typed word only. It must be like injecting a drug rather than sniffing it; content runs straight to the brain and response is not tempered by facial reactions. This spontaneity, combined with perfect anonymity, creates an intimacy unparalleled. I fell in love a lot, the state typically lasting until I woke up the next morning. Some of the friendships I made lasted for long times, by cyber standards. A few I met in "real time". It always was interesting, sometimes hilarious, as when a stockbroker who described himself as dark-haired and -eyed revealed himself to be of a different race than I, and a married father to boot.

When AOL offered to scan members' photos, I found the best picture taken of me in the last ten years and sent it off. I was amazed by the mail it generated! Just as in a nightclub where a group of men will hang out by the Ladies' Room door checking out the talent, people look at the new photos in the "Gallery" to see what's out there. It may prove the adage that men fall in love with their eyes, while women, with their ears.

About a year after I joined AOL I received a letter from a man in North Carolina. It was reasonably written and pleasant, and so I responded in like. We discovered we worked in the same industry, though in different ways. Correspondence was frequent,

every day or so. It was friendly and cool; we both were maintaining cyber friendships with several people. In time our letters became more frequent, and I looked forward to reading his when I woke in the morning (my time) and after work (again, my time). We wrote about our days, about happenings, about work, about the weather.

After four months on cyber friendship, he began hinting that I should join him during his annual motorcycle tour of the West. He described Sturgis, a small town that every year hosts tens of thousands of motorcyclists: a circus. I allowed that it sounded like a nice trip; I was waiting for him to take responsibility for the words of invitation. When he finally did ask me if I would care to join him, at least for a portion of the time, I agreed to try to find a way to get away from the business. I'd recently hired a manager in whom I had great confidence, and it seemed possible that I could take the first vacation in several years. My friends were aghast that I'd consider flying to Rapid City, South Dakota, to climb onto a motorcycle with a person I'd not met, or even spoken to. They were sure I was off to meet an axe murderer. I knew better of course, knew him quite well actually. When we corresponded about the arrangements I raised the question of sex. Would we or not? In short order we agreed that there were three possibilities: one would want to and the other not, both would not, both would.

Easy.

So there I was in a puddle jumper flying the second leg of the trip, from Denver to Rapid City, packed with a saddlebag of clothes, a leather jacket and a helmet. The small plane was filled with an odd assortment of ranchers, students flying home from college; one lovely young woman was drunkenly squatting over an open duffel bag, rummaging through dirty clothes looking for her wallet to buy another double vodka on the rocks, and there was Hazel. She was sitting next to me, a homely and not so young woman with frizzed out hair, wearing tattoos and a Harley Davidson camisole.

Hazel was quite friendly, saying with a grin and a nod at the helmet on my lap that she knew where I was headed. She also was going to Sturgis to hook up with some friends. I wondered just what I'd gotten myself into. When I walked into the terminal there was Jerry, looking more attractive than in the digital photo he had e-mailed me, and happily he was a great kisser.

Our story has so far, after four years, turned out well. Once together ours became like any mature relationship—a continuing effort in making a reasonable life with another adult. We do have a good ability to be frank with one another, maybe due to our ages and experiences, maybe from the early e-mail habit. Cyber relationships, like the "real time" kind, will be whatever the partners cultivate. A person who wants to lie will lie, and a person who wants to believe the impossible will be gulled. It just happens faster because of the mainlining effect of written word to brain.

In a way cyber meeting is far more democratic because prejudices of image are bypassed; had I met Jerry in person, I may not have let what he had to say impress me, because he is not what I had perceived to be my "type." I suppose it's a symptom of our culture's current malaise that caution in meeting seems to be most important. I once attended a talk by a law enforcement officer; he claimed that the percentage of violent crime to population was about the same as that historically. Because there are so many more people than we realize, and because our information systems are more immediate, and because shock sells, we the people are more afraid of our fellowman than we should be. In my opinion.

Of course there are predators of all sorts, and an unaware, unthinking person will be prey. The first time I agreed to meet a person I'd met online, we agreed to rendezvous at a prominent landmark in the city near where we both lived, and to have dinner together, Dutch of course. This was the dark-eyed stockbroker. In all, the experience was humorous; it was better than renting a movie and eating popcorn for dinner. I hadn't invested emotion into the anticipation, and was able to learn a good lesson painlessly.

That lesson is: don't let your imagination to fill in the blanks...you will be disappointed. I've thought that meeting the phantom is like seeing the movie of a beloved book. No matter how carefully and accurately someone may describe themselves to you, no matter the depth of secrets you've shared, a lot of information cannot be imparted by word.

Through history, people have met other people in an enormous variety of ways: informally, formally, arranged. We had the uptight Eisenhower Fifties and then the wilder Sixties, when we were not supposed to discriminate about anything. And if you fancied someone it was hypocrisy to not have a liaison. The Sixties ethos has pretty much failed, so now we have been looking for another way.

Anything can be acquired on the Web, even a mate. One can find the exact book, the perfect piece of furniture, information for any project because the supply seems endless. America Online, for example, has many millions of users. Some are good guys, some bad, but somewhere is the one...as my experience proves!

END OF STORY

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