

Chatroom

a short story by
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1. George

"O come on, why do you always take so long to come on." George's frustration was not justified. The computer was ancient, and doing its best given the circumstances it found itself in. Upgraded software had grown out of all proportion over the years, and was now bloated with functions George would never understand, let alone use.

E-mail! Now George understood e-mail. It was his introduction to the World Wide Web. True it had taken some time, but he had mastered it, and it was now second nature to him. He had had a little bother finding a name for his account. There already was a George at Tesco.net, so George had decided to climb the numbers until he found a George that was available. So, George was now, George the sixth@tesco.net

It was one day in June, when George's friend Eddy said, "So, have you been in a chat room yet?" George was not exactly sure what a 'chat room' was. Eddy obliged by explaining that it was a place where you could meet friends and generally be a nuisance. The idea appealed to George who immediately went home and searched the web for a 'chat room'.

He did eventually find one, and even managed to register with them. His chosen name was, Ace Adventurer-M-25. Which means Male aged 25. "There," he said, "that should pull them in."

George logged on and sat looking at the screen for someone to chat to.

2. Ethel

Ethel was really excited. Her new computer was arriving today, and she had been given the URL of a chat room by her best friend Margaret. All day she had been rehearsing what she would say on her first log on. She was going to call herself, Rampant-f-22. She felt sure that this would be a good draw for all the young talent out there in chat room land.

The time came for Ethel to leave work, it was half day closing, so she had arranged for the computer to arrive mid afternoon. It did. The man set it up for her and showed her how to use it. Ethel had shown some surprise at the mouse, thinking at first that it was a microphone. The man then went on to emphasise that the CD tray was not a drinks holder. Ethel tried to look as though she already knew this, but the man showed no signs of being convinced.

Finally he left, and she was all alone with the new beast. Gingerly, she sat before it and loaded the web browser. Then, she carefully typed in the URL that Margaret had given her. Some very funny noise came from the little box the man had called the moped, or some such, and there it was. The web site appeared as if by magic. 'Chillout Chat' it was called. There were so many things blinking, and changing colour, that at first, Ethel was confused. It took her fully several minutes to find the log on box. Signing up was both a thrill and a terror. But Ethel got there in the end, and felt very smug that she had actually managed it.

The window opened, and there she was in the chat room. Text was appearing on her

screen almost as fast as she could read it. There was Louis from Wigan, talking about his prize rabbits, and someone named Hot lips, answering back. Ethel became very excited by it all, and began to pluck up enough courage to actually type something. She began... Rampant wishing to talk to anybody. She hit return and held her breath. Several minutes later, her line of text appeared at the bottom of the screen and slowly got pushed up by all the other chatters. In twelve seconds it had gone. Lost from sight, and not a single taker.

Ethel was more than a little disappointed by it, as you might imagine, and was about to go and put the kettle on, when a box opened up on her screen with the words, Hello rampant, this is Ace adventure. Fancy a chat? Ethel fairly flew back to the computer, banging her knee on the shelf under the keyboard. She tried to ignore the pain and type her reply. She had not a little difficulty typing as she could hardly see through the tears welling up in her eyes. She had to stop and give her knee a good rubbing. As the pain began to ease, she tried typing with one hand and rubbing with the other. It was not too successful though, and she had to back space quite a bit to erase kllkoihbdu. This done she hit return, saying. I would be delighted to chat.

The time delay in the system gave her ample time to 'fix' the knee in readiness for the reply. When it arrived, she was somewhat confused by the term, go to 17. Frantically, Ethel scanned her screen for a clue as to what 17 might be. She was becoming quite frantic when she saw a row of numbers down the side of the page titled, 'available rooms'. Not really knowing what she was doing, Ethel crossed everything and clicked on 17.

3. Number 17

Ace was waiting for Rampant to arrive in the room. She seemed to be taking ages. There was a timer on each room, and inactivity for more than a minute or so would trigger and automatic expulsion. Ace was holding his breath. Rampant arrived, so he typed, hi there, it's nice to meet you, are you new here? As they were now in a private room, there was no system delay due to other chatters. A reply came back quickly, yes I am, have you been here long? Ace had to think about this one. It was his first time in a chat room, but he didn't want her to know that, so he replied: Oh, I've been around a while, that's why they call me Ace!

There was a longer pause this time, and Ace wondered if he had over done it a bit. He needn't have worried though as a response came: you sound so manly, I hope you'll show me the ropes. Ace could hardly believe his eyes. Perhaps she really was rampant. A sudden chill of reality hit him. "No," he said to the monitor. "I couldn't be so lucky on my first attempt." He typed: sure I will, just stick with the Ace and you'll be fine.

The buzzer went on the micro wave, Ace's tea was ready. Sorry, Rampant, I have to go. Can we meet up again later? Ace crossed everything and held his breath. Seconds turned into minutes, and Ace had visions on his Pizza starting to droop. Ok then, where shall we meet? Ace hadn't expected this, he assumed she understood he meant meet back in the chat room. Perhaps this was his lucky day after all. How about the pictures? he typed, forgetting that she could be anywhere in the world. What's on then? Came the reply. Now he really was in trouble. He didn't have the faintest clue what was on. The mad scramble for the news paper caused him to crack his shin on the corner of the coffee table. The air turned blue, and Ace turned dutifully towards the screen and shouted, "sorry." As if she could hear him. He found the page he was looking for and typed back: The Day the Earth Blew Up. Visions of his pizza were now becoming desperate. Ok, see you at 7.

The screen told him that Rampant had logged off, so there was no point in trying to

clarify the geography. Ace went to the kitchen to confirm his worst fears for the pizza. He opened the micro wave door and was greeted by something that looked, and felt like a deflated rubber beach ball.

4. Later

Ethel had logged off and ran up the stairs to get under the shower. She was elated that she was actually going to meet up with Ace Adventurer. It hadn't dawned on her that the World Wide Web was aptly named, so she was getting ready at break neck speed to get to the central Wigan cinema complex by 7.

What to wear was proving to be a problem. Ethel was not too sure how a 'Rampant' should dress. A mini skirt perhaps... No, her legs were too fat, and besides, she hadn't worn it since High School. There was the slinky little black number tucked away in her wardrobe, but she hadn't been able to get into that since she was 39. No, it would have to be the flowery frock that she kept for special occasions. It was a bit creased, but she figured that he wouldn't notice that in the pictures.

Miracle of miracles, she was ready in time to catch the buss. Rampant left the house and walked to the bus stop to wait.

George was in two minds whether to go. "The chances of someone called Rampant being here in Wigan must be millions to one." He said to the bathroom mirror. "Still, perhaps someone is smiling down on me tonight. Come on George, what have you got to lose. If she doesn't turn up, you can buy a bag of chips to make up for the pizza." That was it. George had talked himself into going out for the evening. He got himself ready.

Shortly after George had left the house, he had this horrible thought... He didn't know what she looked like! "Oh no," he said standing at the bus stop. His mind went into over drive to try to find a solution. But all he could come up with was, "Well, she'll probably look rampant." It was the best he could do, and so he went with it. During the bus ride, he tried to imagine what looking rampant meant.

Ethel's bus pulled into the town centre terminus, and she fairly skipped off it and headed towards the cinema complex. She had arrived a little early, and so tried to look casual by looking in the closed shop windows. Slowly she sauntered along the main high street until she was at the cinema. There was no one else there. Well, no one standing on their own waiting that is. There were lots of young couples going in and the odd few coming out, but no one waiting. Ethel picked her spot, and stood as casually as she could whilst craining her neck left and right to see if Ace was coming.

Ace had been at the complex for about five minutes, and the crowds were starting to thin out. There had been a lot of young couples piling into the complex, but less so now. The film wasn't due to start until 8, so there was still plenty of time. Fifteen minutes came up, and George was starting to get a bit cold. The thin shirt and light jacket he had put on were not suited to Wigan evenings. George began to shuffle his feet in an attempt to warm them up. His hands found the depths of his trouser pockets and the collar came up for good measure.

Ethel too was feeling the cold. Her frock was very light weight, designed for the summer really, not cool evenings like this one. Just about everyone had gone in now. There

were a few stragglers and late comers running together to get in on time. But for the main part, the front of the cinema was becoming deserted. Ethel checked the poster again, though it hadn't changed from the last time she checked it. It said, eight o'clock. The film started at 8. It was now a quarter to, and still there was no sign of Ace. Ethel was beginning to get despondent. Being stood up was not new to her. "Once past 40," she thought to herself. "It becomes a way of life." She determined to wait another five minutes and then go home. Another glance left and right confirmed that he was not on his way. Everyone had gone now, well, except for the little fat guy in his late forties on the far side of the cinema steps.

George was starting to shiver. He had taken to walking up and down a little to try and generate some warmth. It had worked to begin with, but the cold was starting to fight back again. He couldn't see Rampant, and as far as he could tell, hadn't seen her in the crowd. Looking up and down the high street wasn't helping either. "Another five minutes and I'm off." He said out loud thinking he was alone. It was then that he noticed the woman in the flowery frock and the other side of the cinema steps. Their eyes met briefly, but they both looked away straight away. "She's certainly not Rampant," He thought as he turned.

The five minutes were up. George looked at his watch and turned to set off for the chip shop. He was still looking at his watch when he bumped into the woman in the frock coming the other way. "Oh, er, sorry." He said somewhat embarrassed. "That's all right." She replied. Her voice was gentle and kind. George thought for all he was worth and came up with. "Can't trust anybody these days." She smiled in response. The smile said without words that she understood what he meant. As he looked at her, though it was just for a second or two, he realised she was not so bad looking as he had first thought. Perhaps it was the cold, no, he'd forgotten about the cold. "Would you like to go in?" George asked more than a little sheepishly. "All right," She answered with another smile. "Why not?"

George offered his arm and Ethel took it. They turned and climbed the steps up to the cinema entrance. "Which film dear?" The attendant asked. "Anyone you like." George answered without taking his eyes off Ethel. The attendant placed the tickets in George's hand, and together they walked up the stairs and into the cinema.

Colin's Shorts
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