

INSTANT MESSAGE

by Louis S. Pettey

angie45: I said a prayer for mom to-nite just like when I was a kid
angie45: you know, hands together, kneeling at the side of the bed
granpaclag: I can just see you doing that - but now little girl - it's time for bed
angie45: ok dad we'll talk again tomorrow
granpaclag: good sweetie love you
angie45: me too!!! ☺
angie45 signed off at 10:19:55 PM

Henry Clagett stared for a moment at the farewell from his daughter on the computer screen, clicked on the shutdown button and closed the cover to his laptop computer. This new computer was probably the best thing that his children had done for him, he thought, it had given him something to concentrate on, something to learn, in the wake of the death of his wife, Sheila.

Sheila Clagett had passed away just six weeks ago. A sudden illness that appeared to be only a bad cold just got worse. By the time she had gone to the doctor, pneumonia had taken hold, and in spite of, or perhaps because of modern medicine, her disease was ironically resistant to the usual course of drugs. Sheila died peacefully in the hospital ICU, her whole family present, weeping and praying to the end.

Widower Henry Clagett had not slept well these past few weeks, always reaching for the figure that had been by his side at night for over fifty years. Once during a sleepless night he lay there doing the math, realizing that he and Sheila had slept together for over 20,000 nights. He had realized that this would be a difficult

transition, that his world had been turned upside down, and while his children were doing all that they could to help him cope, it would ultimately be up to him to make something of what remained of his life. At 76, he guessed that, health-wise, from here on out a high quality of life was going to be an elusive goal. Tonight he would get a good night's rest he hoped, as he clicked off the light.

After a few hours, Henry awoke, his bladder swollen from some carbonated diet soda, and, after relieving himself, decided to pull open his laptop and look up the statistics for this past week's pro football games. He logged on as usual and began "surfing the net." His AOL instant messenger program started as soon as it detected the internet connection, and he clicked the button to drop it to the tray at the bottom of the tiny screen, knowing that at this late hour, none his friends and relatives would be on-line.

Soon after finding the NFL website, Henry was surprised by a pop-up screen from instant messenger that blocked his view of New York Giant's passing yardage, announcing: "BIGGAL29 wants to send you a message. Do you ACCEPT? DECLINE?" The words ACCEPT and DECLINE were in the familiar box that he knew would be activated by the click of his mouse. He did not have a friend with an email or screen name of "BIGGAL29" but had begun to receive on his computer the inevitable junk email promoting pornography and sexually related drugs and thought it might be something like that. He stared at the screen blankly for a moment, letting the pixels of the LCD screen mesmerize him as he pondered what to do. Sheila's nickname, or at least the one he had often used with her, had been "big gal." Not that she had been physically large, but she had always seemed to take on the role of the leader in every situation, including their marriage, and he had given her the moniker as a recognition of her authoritative persona. Also, she had been born in 1929. The name was an interesting coincidence and his curiosity was piqued. He decided to take a chance and clicked on the ACCEPT button.

BIGGAL29: you know those diet drinks make you piss like a racehorse
granpaclag: huh
BIGGAL29: how many times did i tell you that over the past 50 years
granpaclag: shiela?
BIGGAL29: so here you are, up all night again – you'll have a bad day tomorrow now, cranky and groggy – man am i glad i'm up here
granpaclag: whoever this is, I don't find it to be very funny at all

The sweat had started to soak Henry's nightshirt and he pulled back the comforter from the bed, leaving just the flowered sheets his wife had loved draped over his bare legs. He vacillated between anger and astonishment as he stared down at the screen. Someone was obviously playing a cruel practical joke that he did not appreciate. He assumed it had to be one of his kids, since no one else would know enough about him to fabricate these messages. His mind was spinning the possibilities as the next message popped.

BIGGAL29: hankie lighten up – i'm getting worried about you a little
BIGGAL29: it's like since i'm not there to boss you around you've lost direction
granpaclag: sheila?
BIGGAL29: sheila may be gone hankie, but somebody's got to look after you ;-)
granpaclag: why are you doing this to me – who is this
BIGGAL29: don't be thinking that i don't know how hard it has been for you without me around
BIGGAL29: and don't think that I don't know how you always had a thing for edna marshall
granpaclag: you mean edna potts?
BIGGAL29: you never liked marv potts – you called her marshall like it was her first name for 50 years i think just to annoy marv
granpaclag: that's not true
granpaclag: what do you think I have the hots for her?
BIGGAL29: the hots for potts, yep that's just what you've got hankie
BIGGAL29: of course now she is *ednamarsh@aol.com*

Henry was really sweating now. He tried to recall whether any of the kids would have suspected that he liked Edna Potts, or that he had always liked Edna since high school. The best thing about this new computer had been that another old high school friend had given him the email addresses of their mutual friends which had included the widow Potts. He had been emailing back and forth with her, exchanging information, pictures and some silly jokes. Emboldened by the email exchanges, he had even managed to get the courage to meet her for lunch this past week. It had been a marvelous meal and had rekindled a little of the old spark he had felt for her.

BIGGAL29: don't try to kid a kidder hankie, after your lunch date this week i see that you no longer delete all those junk emails about how you can get viagra
granpaclag: that's not true

But it was true and now he was truly frightened. No one could have known that he had not deleted the last couple of Viagra emails. He didn't know if he'd have the need for the little blue diamond pills that could give him the erections of his 20's, nor did he know if Edna would even be interested much in sex if their little dalliance ever grew to romance. He had felt very guilty about not deleting the junk email and a little unfaithful to Sheila, and now he was being chastised for it over instant messenger.

granpaclag: good bye whoever you are I'm tired of this game
BIGGAL29: don't go
BIGGAL29: i love you henry :-*
BIGGAL29: don't be shy with edna – go have some fun, you don't know how much time is left – no one knows like me

Henry did not even formally go through the computer shutdown procedure, but just lowered the top and shut the case. He placed it on the nightstand, and feeling a chill from his damp nightshirt, pulled up the comforter and rolled onto his side to fall asleep.

When the dawn sun broke through into the bedroom waking Henry, he immediately opened the computer to log on. The boot up took forever, he thought, as he impatiently looked for "granpaclag's Buddy List Window" to appear. Clicking on the IM button, Henry quickly typed in the buddy name "BIGGAL29" in the window and typed "Hi Sheila." A box quickly appeared labeled *Information* saying:

User BIGGAL29 is not available.

THE END

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