

Alone, Together

When Billy met Cindy, it was love ^{at} first “site.” She was virtually the girl of his dreams: bright, caring, funny, and she had the hottest home page he'd ever seen.

When Cindy met Billy, she knew he was the one. He was her virtual knight in shining hardware: compassionate, charming, humble. The fact that his font size was smaller than most didn't bother her one bit.

When Billy and Cindy met, they made an instant broadband connection. They had everything in common: a ravenous palate for Thai take-away, a down-home ear for country music, a silly soft spot for *Friends* reruns. They even had the same ISP. It was as if Billy and Cindy were virtually made for each other. They spent every evening together, chatting and laughing for hours and hours; the fact that they lived on opposite coasts and in different time zones made no difference at all.

Billy and Cindy's nightly interludes always started off with an intimate, home-delivered Thai meal. Billy would have his sent from the dive around the corner from his luxury apartment building near Central Park, while Cindy's was delivered to her one-room studio from the Mexican-owned, authentic Thai/American buffet across town in San Ysidro. They would then commiserate as they sated themselves on pad woon sen noodles and spring rolls. Their conversations usually began with a generic discussion of the weather, then they would ask each other how work went - which instigated a twenty-minute session of aggravation, itself igniting a tepid outrage that turned into a debate on the world-wide war that was rapidly escalating into hopeless anarchy, at which point Billy and Cindy would quickly change the topic to something less morbid, such as their favourite movies and books.

When they ran out of things to talk about, Billy and Cindy would sit and stare into each other's j-peg eyes. Sometimes they'd double-click dance to a Dolly Parton CD they both owned. He listened to his on the impressive surround sound system in his spacious living room with the corner fireplace; she played hers on her Sanyo boombox that sat on the shelf in her half-bathroom. Billy and Cindy were perfectly content to just hold each other in parenthetical arms, basking in the warm glow of each other's virtual presence until the morning sun rapped on one of their windows to remind them that life required their attention. Billy and Cindy would then unwillingly separate, begrudging the eight hours of pointless penance their respective professions forced upon them.

Billy held a lucrative position as a systems engineer for a global investment company that commanded uncompromising hours, while Cindy enjoyed more flexibility as a dispatcher at a desert Air Force base. She could come in whenever she wanted and leave whenever she wanted- and what she wanted after meeting Billy was to mirror her Pacific time zone schedule to his eastern. They left for work at the same time and returned home at the same time. They even took their lunch breaks at the same time, often forgoing eating in favour of savouring every possible minute of each other's company before having to dash back to their dreary daily grinds.

Several weeks flew by like minutes as Billy and Cindy rode the aerial thrill of their whirlwind affair, and soon they found themselves entangled in a gooey web of obsession. They grew closer with each passing day and, at the precise moment when time lost all meaning, Billy and

Cindy fell virtually in love. It was a love that could never be deleted, and they yearned for the day they would be granted unlimited access to each other.

They began to perceive their lives outside their perfect world as vindictive usurpers of their happiness, so they formulated a counter-attack. Their initial course of action was to simply show up late for work or leave early or extend their lunch hour. But that wasn't enough, so they fortified their strategy and started skipping entire workdays, offering up such flimsy excuses for their absences as "I'm overworked and about to crash!" or "I think I feel a virus coming on!" For Billy and Cindy, the world wide war provided a godsend of justification - they could easily get away with claiming they were too emotionally traumatized to be productive.

Ultimately, Billy and Cindy stopped going to work altogether, and when their employers sent pink slips to their in-boxes they couldn't have cared less. They never left their apartments, so they no longer had any use for a steady income. They each had enough left on their credit cards to cover the Thai deliveries and their monthly ISP subscriptions. In fact, getting fired was a blessing. Billy and Cindy were now free to enjoy night and day the unlimited access they desired.

However, the reality outside their dimension of digital desire was less than picture-perfect. The world wide war had taken its toll. Bound and blinded by their bliss, Billy and Cindy were ignorant of the annihilation that had transpired. The real world they had once intimately known had been erased from the universal mainframe, but their love was backed up on a floppy disk of fortitude.

Or so they thought.

One day the unthinkable happened: Billy and Cindy lost their connection. It vanished in a blink right before their pixel-strained eyes. Billy stared at his lap top, unable to grasp why he couldn't get his Microsoft up.

Cindy pounded her processor and poked her zip drive, frantically attempting to restore her passion.

No amount of key stroking or power stripping was going to bring them back. For the first time in months, Billy and Cindy were virtually alone. They stared in desperation at their blank screens, praying for a miracle to pop up. When no rapture arose from the dark, glassy void, they wandered in a disconnected daze through the empty Thai take-away boxes sullyng their apartments, searching for the happiness that had abandoned them. Telephone numbers had never been exchanged, street addresses had never been revealed; they knew the city in which each other lived, but specifics were never shared. Billy and Cindy weren't even sure of each other's last names. The only thing they knew was that they loved each other.

When their woeful roaming led them to their beds that hadn't been slept in for weeks, they crawled into their cradles of sorrow, their pillows soaking up torrents of tears like sponges of heartbreak.