“Hi!” The message popped up on John’s screen suddenly as the new website loaded.

“Hello.” John typed back. He guessed this was one of those random strangers.

“Man or woman?” Typed the mystery person on the other end of the connection.

“I’m a guy, how about you?” John replied.

Almost immediately after his message appeared on the screen a big pop-up appeared in the middle of the window with red text. It informed John that the other person had disconnected.

“Was it something I said?” John muttered with a wry smile to himself. He knew exactly why the other person had disconnected and it was the main reason he had hesitated before clicking the link to this site. Usually it was just desperate guys looking for a girl.

Despite his reservations, John clicked the green reconnect button and after a minute of loading a new stranger started typing to him.

“Heya ☺” The other person wrote.

“Hello.” John replied again. He was just about to ask how the other person was feeling when he saw the stranger typing another message.

“Can you do me a favour?” The stranger typed.

“What do you need?” John replied back in scepticism.

“I only talk to people on this other site. Can you come talk to me there?” The stranger typed quickly. It was almost as if they had everything ready to copy and paste.

John rolled his eyes and closed the conversation. It didn’t take a genius to work out what would be on the other side of any link the stranger sent them. It would either be a virus that would likely compromise the computer or it would ask him for money… Maybe both.

The next hour was spent connecting to random strangers trying to scam him, trying to find girls, or just people who were incredibly boring. To be honest, John didn’t know why he kept reconnecting to people except for the fact that he felt lonely and didn’t feel particularly keen to sleep on the couch.

When John’s wife had treated him so badly he felt like he just needed a friend to talk to but this late at night he didn’t want to disturb anyone, Casper was a good listener but he was much of a conversationalist.

When John clicked disconnect on someone who started talking in a foreign language, he stood up and headed towards the kitchen. He walked slowly and felt his way around to the entrance to the kitchen. He flicked the light switch and refilled his drink.

The back garden looked especially creepy at this time of night. With the kitchen light throwing illumination on the patio just outside the window and then being swallowed by the total darkness beyond. John remembered the time he had come down for a late night drink and looked out the window to see a pair of eyes in the darkness. He had nearly had a heart attack until he realised that it was just a fox at the back of the yard.

John was like most guys in that he tried to maintain the façade of being very masculine even though he had fears and wants that were the opposite of manly. John hated the darkness and had ever since he was a child. He had slept with the light on until his teenage years and even now didn’t like to be surrounded by darkness when alone. He would never admit to anyone that he was afraid of the dark but he knew deep down that it was true.

With his glass refilled with water, John turned back and headed to his computer again. As he sat back down at the screen he felt Casper lift his head before seeing who it was and laying back down again.

John decided that he would use the websites “refine search” ability and try to connect to people who were in the local area. He still didn’t know what his goal was, he just wanted to have a real conversation with someone who wouldn’t end up shouting at him. John went into the options and searched for people in a twenty mile radius of him. The computer took longer to search this time and it was just as John yawned and considered the makeshift bed that he saw the little chat box pop-up.

“Hello.” The message said simply.

“Hi, how are you?” John replied as he sipped his water.

“I’m fine. How are you?” The person on the other end replied.

“I’m fine. Bored as heck though!” John said.

“Same!” The stranger replied, “You are the first person near me I’ve found on this damn thing.”

“I only started using it tonight.” John replied, “I’m kind of surprised to find someone that doesn’t seem like they just want to play with themselves or scam me.”

“Ha.” The other person wrote, “Yeah, you get a lot of those folks unfortunately.”

John smiled as he watched the screen, this person seemed nice even if he knew absolutely nothing about them. The fact that they hadn’t immediately asked if he was a woman was a good start.

“I’m John.” John typed.

“Mary.” The stranger responded simply.

The two of them started sharing their experiences with other people and John had to be careful to keep his laughter down so that he didn’t wake Emma. The stranger told him of all the weird experiences she had had on this site and John listened attentively. For John, who rarely got out of the house to meet people, this was like a revelation. A person talking to him in a friendly way!

Before he even knew it the little clock in the corner of the screen read that it was 3am. John was shocked, the time had flown by and his wife would be getting up in a few hours, he had to get to bed.

“I’ve loved chatting, Mary.” John typed with a yawn, “But I really must get some sleep.”

“No problem.” Mary replied, “Do you mind if I give you my e-mail? We can search for each other on the site and chat some more.”

“I would like that.” John replied quickly.

The pair quickly exchanged e-mail addresses and then John said goodnight for the final time before logging off. He shut the PC down before turning to the couch. The discussion with Mary, despite having nothing to do with his home life, had done a lot to calm him down.

John quickly stripped naked and slipped under the cover that Emma had left him. The living room was actually kind of peaceful this late at night. There was no sound except for Casper’s snoring and it was quite dark although John kept the kitchen light on to throw some light across the room. It was relaxing if not as comfortable as his bed.

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Emma woke up the next morning and rolled over in bed only to remember that her husband wasn’t there. She yawned as she slowly sat up and remembered the previous evening. She shut off the alarm clock and chastised herself for losing her temper.

Emma closed her eyes tightly in remorse for what she had done. John didn’t deserve to be kicked out of his own bed and she knew that. A long sleep and a rested mind told her that she had been far too harsh on her husband and she immediately felt the regret that went along with it.

When Emma was younger, as a teenager, she spent some time attending an anger management course and although it helped the vast majority of the time sometimes her anger got to her. She would have to make it up to her husband one way or another.

There wasn’t a lot of time for her to dwell on the previous evening though as Emma had work to prepare for. She rolled out of bed and walked straight to the bathroom to use the toilet and wash up. She showered and dried herself off before going back to the bedroom and getting dressed in one of her smartest suits. Emma was going to be working closely with her boss today and wanted to make a good impression.

Walking downstairs, Emma heard her husband snoring on the couch and felt renewed sympathy. She tip-toed through to the kitchen and stuck a couple of pieces of bread in the toaster. When she had buttered her toast she started quickly eating it, she really had no time to waste if she wanted to get to work early to properly prepare for her boss.

Grabbing a piece of paper and a pen from the drawer next to the sink and quickly scrawled an apology to her husband:

“John,

I’m sorry for everything.

Love,

Emma.”

It was simple but Emma didn’t have time for a proper apology now, she really had to get going. Emma hurried through to the living room and placed the apology on the low table in front of the couch. She gave John a quick peck on the forehead before putting her shoes on and leaving. She would have liked to have stayed after such a traumatic evening but she couldn’t risk her pay cheque.

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John woke up to Casper licking him in the face and whining. Blinking a few times to clear the sleep from his eyes, John looked around at the brightly lit living room. The clock on the back wall showed that it was already the early afternoon, the late night had taken its toll.

Casper whined and wagged his tail when John sat up. John knew what the dog wanted and, still naked, he walked out to the kitchen and opened the back door. As soon as the door swung open John felt his dog bolt past him and into the garden.

Whilst Casper did his business, John made himself some cereal and walked through to the living room. Leaving the door open on such a nice day seemed like a good idea and John knew the dog would appreciate being able to lounge inside or outside as he pleased.

John turned on his computer and went online. After his usual roundup of news and social media websites John went to the website that was really occupying his thoughts. The chatting website from the previous night had been front and centre of his mind from the moment he stood up that morning.

He looked up the e-mail address that he had been given by Mary the previous night and was somewhat disappointed to see that she wasn’t online. They had discussed work a little bit and Mary had said she had ways of making money without working but hadn’t said anymore. John shrugged and did the next best thing, he went to the random search button and looked for someone to talk to.

After an hour of frustrating attempts to find a person to talk to John logged out of the website. It seemed like ninety-nine per cent of the people using that website were just looking for something sexual or a scam.

John got up and spent the next few hours cleaning the house up a bit. Casper lazed by the backdoor as John wiped down the kitchen counters and gave the oven a scrubbing. John scrubbed away but found his mind was only in one place, his mind was with the conversation with Mary. He felt a little guilty to be spending so much time thinking about someone he had only talked to for an hour but he really hoped he would get a chance to get to know her better.

Once the cleaning was done, John took the dog for a walk and found the fresh air very pleasant. He smiled as Casper ran around the park chasing tennis balls and playing with other dogs. On the way home from the park, John stopped by the shop to buy some food for dinner. This was all John’s normal routine and helped him to clear his head a little.

Despite all of the distractions, John felt himself dreading the return of his wife. He loved her greatly but he couldn’t help being worried because he never knew which version of Emma was going to come home. Was it going to be the happy and relaxed Emma or the Emma that made John sleep on the couch?

When John got home that evening he looked at the clock to see that his wife was due back at any moment. John hurried over to the computer and logged back in to the website, before he could even find Mary’s contact details he heard a small noise and saw a pop up. He smiled as he saw Mary’s name on the message.

“Hello ☺” Mary wrote.

“Hi, can’t stay long… Just thought I’d see if you were around.” John replied quickly.

“Going out somewhere?” Mary asked.

“Nah. My wife will be home soon.” John replied.

“Oh, you are married?” Mary asked.

“I am.” John was just about to press send when he heard the key in the front door. He didn’t pause as he quickly closed the website.

John wasn’t sure why he was being so secretive about this website. He was talking to someone as a friend and there didn’t seem like there was anything to hide and yet he felt a strong compulsion to keep everything secret.

“Hello!” Emma called out as she closed the door.

“Hi.” John replied. He made sure there was no evidence of what he had been browsing before standing up and turning around.

John was relieved that Emma was smiling. After yesterday evening it looked like today would be a lot more relaxed and that was most welcome. His smile doubled when he saw Casper get up and run to the door with his tail wagging causing Emma to start giggling.

“Good day?” John asked as he walked across the room.

“Yeah, quiet and easy.” Emma replied. She wrapped her arms around John and gave him a quick peck on the cheek, “I’m really sorry for last night. I got too wrapped up in work and…”

“It’s fine.” John replied, “I understand.”

“I love you.” Emma said as she hugged John tighter.

John didn’t reply. He just squeezed his wife and gave her another kiss. Eventually they pulled apart and, whilst Emma went upstairs to change, John walked through to the kitchen to sort dinner out.