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Ahead of Our Time

by K.S. Mueller

I was 24 years old when I met my significant other. We started dating online. In 1985.

He owned the travel company where I worked, the now defunct "American Leadership Study Groups," a student group tour company – you know, the French teacher takes thirty 16-year-olds to France for a week of study. Not your Natalie Holloway-party-till-you-drop tours... we operated real study tours for serious kids, no nonsense.

I was hired by his then "IT" person (although they weren't called IT people back then) to operate their IBM System 36 mainframe computer, as well as their Vax mainframe computer, do data entry and customer service/billing. Each of those computers took up an entire room of their own inside our swank offices at the famed Worcester Regional Airport.

Coming from a background at a collection agency, and prior to that a broom and mop manufacturing plant, I already had experience operating the IBM System 34, which was the previous model.

I took a 3-day course at IBM in Worcester, in the big glass building on Main Street that some man had jumped off of a year or two before – the place always gave me the creeps. I remember going to Worcester for that 3-day class and crying my eyes out in the middle of traffic because all of the downtown streets were one-way streets and I hadn't a clue how to get "over there" to the street where I needed to be.

I studied for my Travel and Tourism degree on the side while I worked at the collection agency "second-shift". The agency got tired of that, and I moved on, applying for this job at what I did not know was a travel company – they just had the same computer, and had a second shift position, that's all I knew.

Was I ever surprised when it turned out to be a travel company!

And this guy, who I ended up spending the rest of my life with, basically invented the internet in 1985.

We had a server in the computer room -- the aforementioned Vax mainframe. People from all over the world could dial into our server using a method called "dial-up" which very few people knew about then. We had several thousand users and they all paid a monthly usage fee by MasterCharge (not called MasterCard yet) or Visa. We didn't take American Express.

They all had usernames and passwords. We had chat rooms, email and games – years before aol, Gmail and Facebook. Our programs were DOS-driven – little, or no, graphics. We didn't know it then, but we were about a decade ahead of our time.

This guy, the owner of the company, started emailing me at night when I was working the lonely second shift in his big offices at the airport. He was often on the road, so he'd write to me whether he was at home, or someplace else in the world – Rome, Cape Cod, Paris, the Caribbean. He'd just "dial-in" and "log in" and start writing me letters. I thought we just had a little crush on each other. Oh, how cute.

My non-work friends would come to my house for parties (I had a lot of them in those days) and I'd disappear into my room, unplug my phone line from the telephone, and plug the cord into the bottom of a portable computer called a "Model 100", manufactured by Tandy Corp., aka Radio Shack. The boss had given all of us one of these laptop prototypes. Again, ahead of our time.

My friends would scratch their heads and say "You're doing WHAT?" And I would explain, "I'm dialed in to the computer at work, sending messages to my boss (and others)."

Their first complaint was they had no idea what the dickens I was talking about. Their second complaint, I was absent from my own

party, locked in my bedroom, talking to "some guy 20 years older than you". Their third, "But this is your time off. You're not supposed to be working on your time off."

I tried to explain, it's not really work, it's just writing back and forth with people I work with – sometimes about work-related things, sometimes personal things. They thought I was absolutely insane.

He and I got to know each other pretty well through our letters, and eventually went on a real date, some more dates, met the families, moved in together a few years later, and have been together ever since -- going on 27 years. No wedding bells, no kids (unless you count the multitude of cats and dogs we've raised).

Just as I maintain that my parents invented the use of acronyms in their World War II letters (i.e., MTAITW, which stands for More Than Anything In The World); I like to think he and I were the original pioneers of cyber-relationships and online dating, email, the internet, being "online all the time," and message boards.

Alas, the little server that could was just a tiny bit ahead of its time, and not greatly successful. It lives on in our memories. We ourselves still work together every day, in student travel. We use the internet all the time.

We now carry iPhones and MacBooks instead of Tandy Model 100s. Little has changed! Sometimes we see ads for online dating, or we look at Facebook or Twitter... we laugh and say "We were doing this YEARS ago! Too bad, we were ahead of our time."



K.S. Mueller writes short stories about dogs, cats and other topics during her spare time from her "real job" as a travel executive.

Mueller lives part-time in North Eastham and the rest of the time in the farm country of central Massachusetts, with her significant other, Gil, their dog, Hobie, and three cats: Cali, Tux and Newman. Mueller has shared her life with dozens of dogs and cats since childhood, and volunteers for several animal-related non-profit organizations.

In 2010, she discovered a box of letters written by her late parents during WWII, and is currently publishing those letters in a three-volume biography of the Mueller family.

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