

## 'Online Chat' by Norbert Kovacs

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art by Don Hankins

Amy Crumb became obese in high school. Her stomach widened in a way that never seemed to end. Rolls of flesh showed within her shirts, embarrassing her before friends and family. Hot with self-pity, she took second and third helpings at meals and snacked constantly. By senior year, she weighed two hundred and fifty pounds but stood only five feet five inches tall. She believed, with a sad certainty, that she had lost control of her body and, to an extent, herself.

After graduating high school, Amy got a stylist job at a local salon. She thought things now might improve for her, especially when, after saving some money, she moved into her own studio apartment in West Haven. But she proved a mediocre hairdresser, practice and refine her styling as she did: she would not rise to any role at a Hollywood salon as she once dreamed. At night, Amy did not go out with friends like young people her age but stayed home reading romance novels, going fifty to a hundred pages a night. The habit exhausted and often bored her.

At the salon, Amy Crumb listened to the other hairdressers talk about their lives as they styled the customers' hair. She heard her co-worker Melissa, a thin, twenty-year-old with great, jet-black hair, go on about her boyfriend—

"The place we went last night was so nice. There were all these laid-back people. I could really chill in that company all the time. Plus the music there was good. Greg and I plan going back...

"Did I tell you I went with Greg to the fair? It was a ton of fun. They had like twenty or more rides. Greg made me do the rollercoaster. Oh my God, it was crazy! I screamed so much Greg laughed."

Melissa had fun times with a guy, and it made Amy sad to think she herself did not.

Amy decided finally that rather than mope over being alone, she would get a date through an online site. She supposed this a good option as she considered how self-conscious she got around men face to face. She set up a profile on Daters.com, a popular site for singles. She created a self-summary that read:

Hi, I'm Amy! I'm a hairdresser who likes to listen to people. I love to read and talk about favorite books. Let's chat soon!

Interests: movies, TV, food, books

To complete the profile, Amy was supposed to upload a recent photo of herself. She did not want any guy to judge her based on a picture of her at three hundred pounds and five foot-five, so she left her photo area blank. Over the next five weeks, Amy's profile garnered her two "winks", wordless communications meant to show a site member's interest in her, and one email that asked if she might upload a selfie. Amy sent notes saying "hi!" to her winks but received no response. No one turned up in her profile's visitor list over the following weeks, and she worried if she would ever get any positive attention on the site.

At last, desperate to get noticed, Amy revamped her profile to make it more attractive. She wrote a new self-summary that made it sound like she was an exciting, fun twenty-something.

Hey, I'm looking to meet a cool guy. I'm friendly, chatty, and silly. I'm into fun guys, latest thing on the radio, going out, and being with friends. Love to talk, so email/IM me!!

Interests: the beach, music, dancing

Though it was dishonest, Amy also posted a main photo taken from a stock imagery site. It showed a thin, attractive, young woman with tresses of blonde hair and light blue eyes. She had on a pink shirt and denim jeans and sported a twinkling smile. No resemblance at all, Amy thought and smiled herself. But she trusted some guy would like the picture and then, somehow, her.

The day after the revisions, Amy logged onto her profile and got an instant message. It was from a guy on the website whose screen name was Doug. The photo in the IM window let someone see he was attractive with well-kept, blonde hair and strong, blue eyes. He had a fit body whose outline showed in a neatly cut, green

shirt. The picture showed him smiling. The stats beside his photo told her he was twenty-seven, five feet ten inches, one-hundred sixty-five pounds, and lived in Branford. She checked out his profile and discovered nine or ten personal photos of him taken either by himself or by friends. They were the quality of photo a person takes with a smart phone, not borrowed off a professional website. They were his, in other words. The message in his IM read: Hey, you look nice.

Amy looked at the photo and message nervously. How do I begin with a guy?, she wondered as her arms tensed. Say I read his self-summary? Compliment him? She finally wrote: Thanks, you look nice too.

Their on-screen chat went as follows:

Doug: So do you come here often?

Amy: A couple of times a week.

(Actually, she visited daily but was not going to say it and seem desperate.)

Doug: I'm new to the site. Are there a lot of people on here?

Amy: It can depend. I haven't seen that many more on the weekends.

(She did not know if this was true. She only meant to keep Doug typing.)

Doug: Oh, I see...So you're outgoing?

Amy realized he had read her profile.

Amy: Yes, I am. I have a lot of friends.

(Her one friend, Cindy, was the other overweight stylist at the salon. However, Amy thought saying this would not interest Doug as much as claiming several good friends.)

Doug: I do too, especially at work.

Amy: What do you do?

Doug: I'm a nutrition manager at a business center food service.

Amy: Wow!

Doug: I'm always talking with the "corporates" at lunch time. They say I'm friendlier than the past cafeteria manager.

Amy: LOL. So, what is it you like to do with friends?

Doug: I guess talk. Sometimes we go to the local bars.

Amy: I like to go with friends to New York. We sort of take the town by storm. We make a deal of going to Times Square and the shows.

(Amy never had gone once to New York. However, she thought she might suggest she liked a good time out.)

Doug: Cool. Here, what do you do for work?

Amy: I teach in West Haven Public Schools.

(Amy previously had decided to claim this as her job when she chatted with her online connections. She believed claiming to be a professional would get more respect than admitting she was a hairdresser.)

Doug: I know someone who teaches in West Haven. She has a fourth grade class. What grade do you teach?

Amy had overlooked picking one, so thought fast.

Amy: 3<sup>rd</sup>

Doug: How do you like it?

Amy reflected on the distant blur of her own third grade experience.

Amy: I have a lot of eager students. They laugh a lot and put me in a good mood. They're a bright bunch of kids.

She hoped to sound positive.

Doug: My friend's class is very active. I met her students actually. I brought them these snacks I made in the kitchen at work. Lions made of pineapple. Monkeys made of grapes.

Amy was impressed by Doug's creativity. She thought how sweet it was that he should go out of his way for the children.

Amy: Wow! Do you know I'm big on fruit? I think fresh strawberries are great.

Doug: I do, too. Fruit goes a long way to keep a person healthy.

Amy considered this made sense for a nutritionist to say.

Doug: You're into being fit?

Amy: Yes, it's a big thing for me.

Amy enjoyed typing this. She felt it possible to be as lean and healthy as she claimed to him.

Doug: At the gym where I go, I do the bikes. It lets me sweat off the stress from work.

Amy: I hit the bike, too. Also a few miles on the Stairmaster.

She guessed this sounded right for a workout. She had not exercised in ages.

Doug: That sounds like a lot of aerobics for one workout.

Amy answered quickly.

Amy: It can be. But I have a lot of energy.

Doug: Well, all that exercise sure pays off. You have a very good figure.

Though the compliment was misplaced, Amy received it with a happy tingle.

Amy: Thanks

Doug: I used to be heavier, you know, before I started at the gym. It took a while to get in shape but I'm happier with my body now.

Amy: I think many people feel that after they've been exercising a bit.

Amy found she liked to agree with Doug.

Doug: So, you are in New Haven?

Amy: I've an apartment in Westville.

Doug: I've friends who live on Trumbull Street. Right by those art shops.

Amy had never heard of Trumbull Street or the art shops.

Amy: New Haven's a cool place.

Doug: Do you get around the city much at night?

Amy: I like to go to T—Club.

Amy's co-workers had mentioned the place once. She did not know if T—Club was hot or not but hoped claiming she did impressed Doug.

Doug: I've been there. They're a nice place. Good dance floor, too.

Amy: Yes, they're cool.

Several seconds passed before Doug next wrote.

Doug: Say, you know I'm open this coming weekend.

Amy's eyes glued to the screen.

Doug: I've been looking for someone to go with me and see New Haven. Would you like to?

A feeling like fire spread from Amy's heart to her head.

Amy: Yes, I'd love it.

Doug: Good. How about meeting at T-Club?

Amy's excitement crashed. She remembered her body, its three hundred pounds on five foot five inches. She told herself that she couldn't go see him, not when he expected a slim, fit blonde. At the first actual sight of her, she was sadly sure that he would turn and run. Yet here he was, IMing her in good trust, ready to meet in person and have a face-to-face. A sudden fear seized her. She knew she could not tell the truth and disappoint him.

Amy: Yes, T-Club's ok.

Doug: Good. How about meeting Saturday at 9? By the entry?

Amy: Sounds good

Doug: Great

Amy: Here, I know I'd like to chat more right now but I've got to go. Homework left to correct for class. But I'll talk to you later.

Doug: Of course. I look forward to it. Goodnight, Amy.

Amy signed off her profile and stared blankly at the computer screen. She told herself she never would visit the dating site again. She thought she could not face an email from Doug asking why she had not gone to T-Club. He had trusted her. He was handsome, kind, successful, and considerate, and she had lied to him from the first word. She cried with self-pity, bowed her head, and thought, I must be the most awful online dater in the world.

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*Norbert Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. His stories have appeared or soon will appear in Thrice Fiction, Westview, Gravel, STORGY, and Ginosko Literary Journal. Norbert's website is [www.norbertkovacs.net](http://www.norbertkovacs.net) (<http://www.norbertkovacs.net>).*

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