

WELCOME TO CYBERMATE

By

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WELCOME TO CYBERMATE, THE ONLY WESTERN HEMISPHERE GOVERNMENT-SANCTIONED MATE CERTIFICATION SYSTEM. PLEASE AUTHORIZE 15,000 CREDITS ON YOUR ACCOUNT CHIP AND FULL ACCESS RIGHTS TO YOUR BIO/SOCIAL DATA CARD.

I spat into the DNA verification cup even though the 15,000 credits were going to bring my balance down to just over 100,000. Allen Colby next door always was complaining that finding a mate was expensive, but I thought he had been talking about the face-to-face meetings: dinners at nice restaurants, tickets to holoplays, that sort of thing. I'd never thought about the expense of the first step. It was almost enough to make me want to join the Naturalists. They dated whomever they wanted. Then again, when they got serious they were never approved for a qualified marriage, which was essential to obtaining a procreation license. I wasn't sure if I wanted a kid one day, but it was probably worth 15,000 credits not to limit my options.

THANK YOU. THE FOLLOWING DATA, ALONG WITH YOUR HOLOGRAPH, WILL BE DISPLAYED TO POTENTIAL MATES:

NAME: MYRON [LAST NAME WITHHELD]

SPECIES: HUMAN

AGE: 35

HEIGHT: 5'5"

WEIGHT: 170 LBS

FITNESS INDEX: AVERAGE

HEALTH INDEX: ABOVE AVERAGE

HAIR: BROWN

EYES: BROWN

RACE: CAUCASIAN

PROFESSION: ACCOUNT CLERK

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: HOMOSPECIES HETEROSEXUAL

Stupid biochip. Cybermate made me sound as sexually alluring as a paper bag. Maybe I had a bit more flesh around the middle than I had in college, but I didn't look that bad – at least with clothes on.

YOU MAY NOW CHAT. IF YOU AND YOUR POTENTIAL MATE APPROVE OF THE MATCH AT THE CLOSE OF THE CHAT SESSION, YOU MAY BEGIN SANCTIFIED FACE-TO-FACE DATING. ARE YOU READY?

It was 11:30 PM, and I had to go to work in the morning, but what the heck? I took a bite of the cold pizza leftover from dinner and keyed in yes.

GENERATING MATCH NUMBER 1...DONE. YOUR FIRST POTENTIAL MATE IS KELLY, AGE: 28, HEIGHT: 5'4", WEIGHT: 100 LBS, HAIR: BRUNETTE, EYES: GREEN, FITNESS INDEX: AVERAGE, HEALTH INDEX: AVERAGE.

Her holograph flashed onto my desktop. She looked like the kind of girl it was fun to flop down on your couch with on a Sunday morning. I wondered if she owned a pair of those fuzzy dorgel slippers with pink ears.

YOUR SESSION BEGINS NOW. REMEMBER – BE YOURSELF!

What was I supposed to say? It felt like the time my mother managed to get me a family-approved date in high school. We had sat in the holothheater, both knowing what the approval meant. Our proximity implants had been set on low, permitting a fairly high level physical contact. So, what did we do? We watched the holoplay as stiff as a couple of display window robots. We didn't so much as hold hands. After the date, I couldn't sleep. My erection wouldn't go away.

Hello?

I'd been waiting too long. Kelly was getting impatient. *Hi*, I typed, *I'm Myron.*

I know. Cybermate provided your name along with some other traits.

Damn, she looked at my fitness rating. *I'm really in very good shape. Just yesterday I carried six bags of groceries up five flights of stairs and I wasn't even winded.* It was two bags up three flights, but who was counting?

Are you for real?

"For real"? What did she mean? This wasn't going as well as I'd hoped. I changed tactics. *Let's just forget about the fitness rating. I mean, you got an "average" just like me and I don't care. I took one look at your hologram and knew you'd look good in some flannel pajamas. You know, the kind with—*

MATCH NUMBER 1 HAS DISAPPROVED.

"I wasn't finished!" I yelled.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BEGIN WITH MATCH NUMBER 2?

I wanted to pull my computer from my holocube and hurl it into the matter destabilizer. A pop-out ad materialized in front of me. It was a guy in a old-fashioned-looking top hat and tails with a smile so white he must have had tooth implants. Kitschy music played in the background.

"Are you tired of Cybermate rejections?" asked Top Hat Guy. "Does it seem like you'll never find someone who'll meet you in person? Let me help! I'm Drew Dreer, owner of Personality Enhancements Limited. I can transform you from drab to dapper in just one easy session. So, call or stop by today at—"

Top Hat Guy dissipated when I flipped the off switch. I was sure glad I wasn't *that* desperate.

Holding a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream, I sat down in the holocube. I took a big bite, and the ice cream dripped onto my lucky brown bathrobe. I didn't care. I'd gone through a gallon of ice cream in the last three days. Cybermate was making me fat.

WELCOME TO CYBERMATE. GENERATING MATCH NUMBER 17...DONE. YOUR NEXT POTENTIAL MATE IS ARIANNA, AGE: 33, HEIGHT: 5'9", WEIGHT: 145, HAIR: AUBURN, EYES: BLUE, FITNESS INDEX: EXCELLENT, HEALTH INDEX: AVERAGE.

Her holograph revealed a thick but well-proportioned woman. She wore shorts, showing off her shapely legs. Her red hair fell to just below her broad shoulders, and her face was freckled.

YOUR SESSION BEGINS NOW. REMEMBER – BE YOURSELF!

Hi, Arianna. I'm so happy to meet you. I pulled up your holograph and I was blown away – you're so beautiful! Of the first lines I had tried, this one had been the most effective.

Tx. I try to stay in shape. I luv volleyball & swimming. U?

I was a horrible athlete. When I was ten I'd managed to break my nose playing badminton. In high school, I'd tried out for the soccer team and got laughed off the field when I shot the ball into the wrong goal.

Anyhow, I sensed this question was a trap, and I tried to avoid it. *I haven't done any organized sports in awhile, but I've been thinking I should get back into something. Maybe—*I thought fast, something she wouldn't be interested in so she wouldn't ask me to do it with her —*skiing.*

Skiing? I LUV skiing. I tried 2 tele but it was 2 hard. 2 much time on greens and I wanted 2 get back 2 blues. So now I'm back 2 shaped Nordic skis. What do U like 2 do?

Uh oh. I felt my ship slowly sinking, but I tried to paddle anyway. *Pretty much the same thing. I like blues, too. Maybe the occasional red.*

Red?

My nimble brain told me I'd screwed up. Too much improvisation. *You may not have heard of a red. They're pretty rare, only occurring on the winter solstice when the moon hits the snow just right and gives it kind of a crimson glow.*

MATCH NUMBER 17 HAS DISAPPROVED.

Damn.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BEGIN WITH MATCH NUMBER 18?

"No, I wouldn't," I said. I was depressed and out of mint chocolate chip. I disconnected and Top Hat Guy showed up again.

"Are you tired of Cybermate rejections?" he asked in the annoyingly cheery voice. "Does it seem like you'll never find someone—"

I cut him off, but I had to admit I was getting tired of Cybermate rejections.

I'd gained five pounds in the last thirteen days. My cramped studio apartment was littered with candy wrappers, empty doughnut boxes, and ice cream cartons. My eyes were dry and red, and I had a constant headache. Diagnosis: Cybermatitus. I should take out the trash. I should get some exercise. I should throw my pesky computer out the window.

What match number was I on? I was pretty sure it was under 100.

"You have reached your destination," chirped the autocab in a low, synthetic voice. "Total trip length, sixty-two miles. Please authorize 30 credits on your account."

I spat into the cab's DNA cup. Thirty credits! Autocabs were such a rip-off. I would have taken the bus if I could have found one that traveled to this remote, industrial part of the city.

"Thank you," oozed the autocab. "Please ride with us again."

The door opened with a hydraulic hiss.

At first, I was convinced the autocab had made a mistake. This couldn't be the building. It was sandwiched between a green plastone edifice advertising "Sensual Robotic Massage" and a dilapidated My Burger restaurant that filled the air with a scorched-something smell. The prefab concrete walls of the building were splotched with peeling brown paint. A single metal door was centered in one of the walls and a three foot square sign hung next to it. "Personality Enhancements Limited" was printed in purple letters on a white background. I was in the right place after all.

Inside, there was a reception desk, several chairs, and a coffee table with three e-magazine modules flashing the cover pages for *Sports Illustrated*, *Human Male Weekly*, and *Western Hemi News*. I hoped I wouldn't have to wait since I hated all three of those rags. The room was brightly lit despite having no windows. It was carpeted with that multicolored commercial grade carpet that hides stains well, and the walls were painted a subtle shade of violet. The furniture looked relatively new, but it was the cheap, industrial kind you can order out of a catalogue.

"Hi, there!" blurted the blonde woman beyond the desk. The metallic nameplate pinned to her pink blouse read, "Gwen." She was the only other person in the room. She looked young, in her twenties, but her face and her breasts were almost too perfect. Probably surgically enhanced. She could have been 50 for all I knew.

"Uh, hi. I have an appointment with Doctor Dreer."

Gwen giggled.

"What?"

"Drew's not a doctor!"

"Oh."

"That's a good one. Your name?"

"Myron Lynde."

"Myron Lynde is here to see you," she said to a holoplate. Then, she looked at me with a big toothy smile. "Have a seat." She gestured toward one of the industrial-looking chairs.

"Do you have access to any other magazines?"

Her smile didn't fade. "Sorry."

What the heck was I doing here? I didn't do these kinds of things. I ate fast food and instant pizzas. I got to work on time every day but left five minutes early when my boss was gone. I rented holoplays and watched them twice in one night to make sure I got my money's worth. I avoided eye-contact with women, people of authority, and strangers. I bought lottery tickets, exercised hopeless sexual fantasies about the woman I sometimes saw on the elevator at work, and broke all of my New Year's resolutions. I didn't go to places like Personality Enhancements Limited – or anything "Limited" for that matter.

I sat and picked up *Human Male Weekly*. I pressed the "select" button and the table of contents showed it had two articles on improving sexual performance. A lot of good that would do me since I had no place to perform – unless you counted solo performances.

"Mind if I ask you something?" Gwen held an emery board poised above one of her long nails.

"I guess not."

"How come you didn't try hitting on me?"

"I..."

"I mean, you're obviously interested in meeting a woman, or you wouldn't be here. Am I right?"

I nodded.

"Most guys think I'm attractive, but you read a magazine you don't like instead of making a move."

Was she really implying that I'd have had a chance with her? I mean *me*, Mr. Average Fitness Index? "You are...very...attractive." I swallowed. God, I was worse in person than I was in keyboard. "But I'm...not a Naturalist." For her, I think I would be. Cybermate be damned.

"Too bad," she returned to her nail filing. "You seem like a nice guy."

A nice guy! That was the best compliment I'd gotten from a woman since my dental hygienist told me I had nice bicuspid. Maybe I should ask her out. I could offer to buy her a drink when she got off work. If it worked out, it wouldn't be an approved match, but it would be a whole lot better than what I had now.

A man emerged from the doorway just behind the reception desk and stood close behind Gwen. He did something with his hand, but I couldn't tell what it was because my view was partially blocked by the reception desk.

"Oh!" Gwen bounced in her chair, turned around, and narrowed her eyes at the man, who returned a wolfish smirk.

The man looked familiar but I couldn't place him. He was around six feet tall. There were bags under his puppy brown eyes and he was in need of a shave, but he held himself in a relaxed, confident manner. A white lab coat, unbuttoned in the front, partially covered a shirt with a loud Hawaiian print. His sizable belly hung over his wrinkled, khaki slacks. "Mr. Lynde?"

"Yes?" I put down the e-mag.

He smiled and exposed a set of teeth so white they almost glowed.

I realized who he was.

"I'm Dwayne Dreer. Come on back."

I stood. "You look different than I expected."

"I get that a lot. I had the holographers take off thirty pounds and ten years. The tux did the rest."

I followed him to a small white room that was filled with computers, electronic equipment, wires, and monitors. In the center, a black, simuleather chair that looked like a dentist's chair was bolted to the faded, yellow, vinyl floor. Suspended just above the chair was an upside-down metallic bowl with green wires and clear plastic tubes coming out of it that led back to the console of machines. I expected the room to have a sterilized, antiseptic odor, but it smelled vaguely of tuna.

"Sit down," said Dwayne.

I eased into the chair and tried not to look as nervous and uncomfortable as I felt.

"I'm sure glad you're here, Myron. Okay if I call you Myron? I believe you'll look back on today and realize it was a turning point in your life." Dwayne's speech sounded a bit canned. I had no doubt he had said the same few sentences hundreds of times. He gestured with his left arm and I noticed he was wearing one of those antique watches that work without a battery. It could have been a fake, but if it wasn't, it was worth a bundle.

"I haven't decided anything yet. They said on the phone I could come in for a consultation."

Dwayne grinned. "Of course. We're not rushing into anything. I'm here to help. You only go through with the procedure if you decide it's right for you."

"What, exactly, is the procedure?"

Dwayne sat down on a small stool with metal legs and a round leather seat. "Well, you've experienced the frustrations of Cybermate. You wouldn't be here otherwise. It's like this. Cybermate makes it nearly impossible to successfully meet a woman. You're already behind the ball. Your hologram and bio/social data are already displayed for your potential mate. There's no mystery at all. You're like one of those frogs pinned down to a lab tray ready for dissection. What's attractive about that? Nothing. The impersonal atmosphere of the Cybermate messaging session makes it even more uncomfortable. It's almost impossible to get to the next step – meeting the woman of your dreams in the flesh – without our help."

I began to relax a little. What this guy said made sense. "So you give me a script of what I need to say?"

Dwayne shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. That's the concept I started with, but it didn't work."

"Why?"

"Cybermate admonishes: 'Remember – be yourself.' That's not just advice, that's a *requirement*. Cybermate won't let you cheat. If you're using a script or having someone spoon feed you answers, the program will call you on it and terminate your account."

"That can't be right." I'd lied about being able to ski and, in one particularly strange session, I'd greatly overestimated the length of my penis. "I've...stretched the truth a few times and Cybermate let me get away with it."

"Of course you lied. Everyone does. That's not the problem. Cybermate let you lie because it was consistent with your personality to lie. Lying is fine as long as it's *you* lying and not someone else lying for you."

"How could it know?"

Dwayne shrugged. "The programming is incredibly sophisticated. It can sense identity through word patterns, fact data, and so on."

"So how do you get around it?"

"That's where Personality Enhancements Limited comes into play. We don't change your words to make it appear that you have a different personality. We actually change your personality. Your words come out in a way that attracts a mate."

I studied his face to see if he was serious. "You're going to change my personality?"

"Now, don't be alarmed." Dwayne closed his eyes for a second and nodded knowingly. "I know it sounds radical at first, but it's really not. People get cosmetic surgery, wear make up, and change their hairstyles all in the name of attracting a mate. But it's still them underneath. This is no different. In fact, it's completely painless and take less than ten minutes."

"I don't know. It sounds strange. I'm used to the personality I have."

“Of course you’re used to it, but just because you’re used to it doesn’t mean it’s good for you. What has your current personality gotten you? Wealth? Fame? A happy family life? If it had, then you wouldn’t be here talking to me, would you?”

I wasn’t exactly leading a charmed life. I had the bare necessities, but who was I kidding? I was lonely, bored, and sexually repressed. My personality wasn’t doing anything to help change all that. “So, how does it work? It’s not surgery?”

Dwayne winked. “No surgery. As I said, it’s painless. You may have some headaches when it’s all over, but that’s about it. All you do is sit in this chair, put this device on your head,” he gestured to the silver bowl, “and a few minutes later, you’re a new man.”

“Yes, but how does the device work?”

“Oh, it’s just a series of electrical impulses and chemical infusions. Very minimal really.” Dwayne stared at me eagerly.

“I suppose that might be okay.”

“Excellent!” Dwayne got up from the little stool, walked to the counter, and brought back a DNA cup. “Did they tell you about the price when you inquired? One hundred thousand credits. Authorize the transfer and we can begin.”

I took the cup. “One more question. What if I don’t like it? What if I want my old personality back?”

“You’re gonna love it! I wouldn’t worry.”

“But what if I don’t?”

Dwayne shrugged. “If you change your mind in the next 30 days, I’ll bring you back to where you were through the same process. No charge.”

It had taken me years to get 100,000 in my account. “I don’t know about this. It’s an awful lot of money and—”

“Let’s cut to the case, Myron.” He sat back down in the stool and looked at me with a steady, serious expression. “When was the last time you had sex?”

No words came to me. Ten – no – thirteen years ago? Had it really been so long since that awkward, strange, but amazing night in Sheila Peterson’s dorm room?

Dwayne nodded as if I’d answered. “If you go through the procedure, you’ll have a woman in your bed by the end of next week.”

I spat into the cup, authorizing the transfer.

Dwayne lowered the bowl over my head and flipped a switch.

That Dwayne Dreer is a fucker. He said there’d be headaches after the procedure, but he didn’t warn me about the goddamn brain-splitter I had last night. I thought I was gonna puke it hurt so bad. I ended up going to bed without even trying to log on to Cybermate.

Tonight my headache wasn’t as bad, so I took a couple of aspirin and switched on my computer.

WELCOME TO CYBERMATE. GENERATING MATCH NUMBER 78...DONE. YOUR NEXT POTENTIAL MATE IS JUNE, AGE: 28, HEIGHT: 5’10”, WEIGHT: 120, HAIR: BRUNETTE, EYES: BLUE, FITNESS INDEX: EXCELLENT, HEALTH INDEX: EXCELLENT.

Her holograph appeared. She was thin but not too skinny. The bulge in her sweater showed that her tits were a nice size, and I could see from the skirt she was

wearing that she had an incredible ass. Her chin was a little pointy and there was a glimmer in her eyes that made me wonder if she was bookish, or maybe she was too smart for most guys. I could deal with that if she was good in bed.

YOUR SESSION BEGINS NOW. REMEMBER – BE YOURSELF!

I laughed. "It's me, baby! It's all, one hundred percent genuine, grade A me!"

The cursor appeared. I was sick as hell of coming up with the first line. I'd force what's-her-name – June – to make the first move.

Is anyone there?

I smiled. *Is that the best you can come up with?*

What?

Is that the best first line you can come up with? Cybermate is all a big game and we're supposed to figure out how to entice one another. How was that first line supposed to entice me?

Are you really this much of an asshole?

I laughed. This should be fun. *That's better. What you really want to know is why I'm not playing the game like everyone else, why I'm not deluging you with compliments. Shouldn't I be proving to you I'm a nice guy? Well, that doesn't work. I'm interested in the truth. If you can't handle that, then terminate the session now. You're not worth my time.*

The cursor flashed for a second or two. *What do you mean by "the truth"?*

I jumped up and pumped my fist. I had her hooked.

You have reached your destination," chirped the autocab. "Total trip length, twenty-two miles. Please authorize 50 credits on your account."

I frowned and spat into the cab's DNA cup. Fifty credits! Autocabs were a rip-off, but I wasn't going to take a fuckin' bus. You never know what kind of asshole you have to sit next to on a bus.

"Thank you," oozed the autocab. "Please ride with us again."

The door hissed open.

Was this the building? It was a black-glass monstrosity that stretched into the sky, one of those high-class joints where only the rich folks with golden underpants worked. The place I remembered was a prefab concrete structure next to a dilapidated My Burger.

I walked into the lobby and found a directory. "Personality Enhancements Limited, Floor 122."

My ears popped in the elevator on the way up. When the door opened, I was floored. Sitting at the reception desk was the same hot piece of ass that was working here ten years ago. I couldn't believe it. And damn, if she didn't look even better than I remembered her!

I strolled up to her. "Hey sweetie," I said. "I've just been thinking. I've never done it in an elevator before."

She glared at me. "Why doesn't *that* surprise me?" she said.

Strange, I remembered her being nicer.

"Is there something I can help you with, or should I just call security?" she asked.

"Chill, Chiquita. Name's Myron. Here to see Drew Dreer."

"He's expecting you. Down the hall to the right. I'll buzz you through the security door."

Drew looked a hell of a lot better than last time I saw him. He wore a nice-fitting suit, he'd lost weight, and he must have gotten a face enhancement – he looked younger than me. He sat behind a big desk, and he had me sit down on a nice, white leather couch. I didn't see any wires or weird computers.

"Myron. Good to see you again." He smiled with those bright, white teeth. "What brings you here again?"

"I want my old personality back."

"I could do that for you, but you'd need to pay. The 30-day satisfaction policy expired some time ago."

"I know. I've got the credits."

"Very well. What changed your mind?"

I shook my head. "I don't understand it. I loved it at first. I got laid all the time. I can still get laid pretty much any time I want. But that's as far as it ever goes. Whenever I try to get serious, the relationship falls apart. I'm just as lonely as I was when I had my old personality."

Drew nodded. "I'm not surprised."

"Why?"

"I changed your personality, but, deep down, you're the same man. Your new personality attracted the women you wanted but repelled the woman you need."

"But I tried Cybermate before the change. I never found a match."

He met my gaze. "Haven't you gotten it by now? Cybermate is more than a game or a precursor to courtship. It's a filter, determining who will be allowed to procreate based on genetic and socio-economic profiles. The government doesn't think your genes are up to snuff. Cybermate wasn't going to match you with someone who would really be interested in a serious relationship with you. With your old personality, it made you appear unattractive. With your new personality, you were attractive, but only on the most superficial scale. Either way, no procreation license."

This guy was really starting to piss me off. "And you knew all this when I paid all those credits to change my personality?"

"Yes, but you wouldn't have believed me if I told you then. Plus, you got what you paid for at the time – sex. I didn't promise anything beyond that."

"So, you're saying I'm just stuck."

"No. I'll give you your old personality back if you pay for it. Then, my advice would be to forget about Cybermate. Join the Naturalists. You'll find your woman and have a great relationship. No kids, but hey, we can't have it all."

I thought about that piece of ass out the reception area. I could be happy with her, even if we couldn't have kids. Or maybe someone like her, someone who wanted to be around me when I got old.

Drew passed me a DNA cup. Two hundred thousand credits – the price had gone up. I spat.