

Close Encounters with a Net Stalker

A Young Girl's Terrifying Story

Based on an actual case investigated by Taskforce Argos.

Everyone at school uses online networking sites to socialise. We chat about boys at school or post dumb photos of ourselves trying to look sexy or whatever. I used to spend maybe two hours a night, sometimes more, chatting to my friends and posting up photos and funny videos or 'pimping' my pages, which means 'glamming' them up, making them an extension of me, expressing myself.

I had 500 friends on Myspace and maybe the same on Bebo. A lot of them were 'randoms' — strangers who come and ask to be your friend because they see your profile and think you look cool or whatever. A lot of my friends were guys. Some of them were from really weird places like the Ukraine. I thought it was cool that I was interesting to guys in faraway places.

I've always been self-conscious about my weight and the boys at school don't really look my way because I'm not that pretty. Mum says I have beautiful eyes. I think they are too big for my face.

On Myspace, I was called 'Sxc_babe'. I got my friend to take some cute photos of me. I wore my school uniform and I posed like Britney does on the poster on my wall. It was a good feeling to be able to reinvent myself online — be who I wanted to be. I made sure my parents never saw my profile. They would have freaked out.

For my 14th birthday, I asked mum and dad for a web cam. Mum said: "what's a web cam?"

All my friends had them. I posted a video of me dancing to that Justin Timberlake song SexyBack. It was supposed to be a laugh, but some of my guy friends on Myspace said I looked "hot". It made me feel good. One of my guy friends from Italy said he wanted to see some more. "Maybe some breast next time. Bellissima!" But I was like: "no way".

My life online was an open book. My profile was open for anyone to see. I always kind of hoped I would meet a guy on the net. The ones at school were total losers.

Then I got a friend request from a guy called Joel. He said he lived in Sydney. His profile said he was 17, six foot, athletic, liked footy and rock climbing. It said he was single and 'NOT a virgin'. He had some random photo of Bart Simpson as his profile pic so I didn't know what he looked like, but he sounded cute. He said he was voted 'most likely to become a male model' by his senior class. He said he was really embarrassed about that. He said I looked cute and fun. He said the girls at his school were so childish. He was looking for a real woman. He said I sounded more grown-up.

I chatted to him every day. He kept asking me to go somewhere 'private', meaning MSN for real-time chat. We had a lot of the same tastes in music and movies. Sometimes he used older people's phrases and some big words. I thought it was weird but cool.

I agreed to meet him on MSN. We chatted for like two hours and the conversation got pretty graphic. He was telling me about his experiences with other girls. Some of the stuff I had never heard of before. I imagined this was what my older brother's porno movies must be like.

Then he started telling me what he wanted to do to me, you know, in bed. I had never even kissed a boy, but I knew that I really wanted to. He asked me all these questions about my house and my neighbourhood. He gave me his address and told me to look at his house on Google Earth. Then he wanted to see my place. I was like: "no way, my place is a garden shed compared to yours, I'm embarrassed." He said: "I want to know where you live so I can look at your house and imagine kissing you in your bedroom."

So I gave him my address. He said my house was nice. He said he'd checked it out on Street View and he'd worked out which window was my bedroom. He said he'd done a virtual walk up and down my street.

He started saying he wanted to meet me in person. He said his parents were really rich and he could fly up to Brisbane for the weekend. I was scared to meet him, mainly because he was so experienced and I didn't know whether I wanted to go that far. I told him I wasn't sure that I was ready to go all the way with a guy.

He came back with all this stuff about how great it would be — how it would be the best time of my life. It freaked me out. I decided this guy was too full on for me and that I wouldn't chat with him anymore.

But he had already flagged me, so that he would be alerted whenever I was online. Every time I logged on to chat with my school friends, he would come on. I didn't know how to handle it, so I just ignored him.

He started sounding more desperate, telling me he had fallen for me and that he couldn't live without me. I told my friends what was happening. They just joked that I'd got myself a 'net stalker'.

A lot of my girlfriends had picked up net stalkers at some point. One of my friends confided that she'd sent a guy in Norway some pics of her breasts in return for an Ipod.

A net stalker is typically an adult male who spams hundreds of young people's profiles until he gets a young person who's willing to accept him as a friend.

Sometimes net stalkers are honest about their age because they are twisted enough to believe that some 14-year-old is going to be into them. Sometimes, they pretend to be a kid, which is worse.

Sometimes they stop stalking you online and start stalking you for real.

But I wasn't worried. Joel was only 17, he was basically a nice guy and he would get over me in time. I hadn't heard from him for a couple of days. Then one day, I was on my way to school. As I walked down the sidewalk near my house, I noticed one of the cars parked on the side of the road had its door slightly open. As I passed by, a man jumped out and pulled me into the car. He flicked on the central locking and drove off. I was too terrified to speak or do anything. I just stared straight ahead and prayed. Who was this man? Was he going to kill me?

He looked over at me and said: "I'm Joel". My heart leapt higher into my throat. "I've been missing you so much babe. I just had to see you. Why have you burned me?"

This wasn't the handsome young Joel I'd been speaking to. This guy was in his 30s, balding, chubby. He was sweaty and he smelled bad.

He pulled into the parking lot in an abandoned factory near my house. He reached over and pulled me roughly towards him. I screamed and started kicking and punching him. I managed to hit the central locking button in the centre console of the car and fall out. I got up and I ran faster than I have ever run in my life.

I felt sick and ashamed. Mum and dad would kill me if they knew I'd been talking to some fat old guy, telling him my deepest fantasies. And now he was here, he knew where I lived, which bedroom was mine. I didn't want to go home so I went to my friend Janie's house. I was bawling when I got there. I had blood on my arm from where he'd scratched me as I tried to escape and a huge bump on my head from when he pulled me into the car.

Janie's mum rang my mum straight away and the police were called. I told them that the man was Joel, who I had been talking to on MSN. A policewoman got online at my house to look at our chat history. Within 10 minutes, Joel was back online, apologising for scaring me and confessing his 'undying love'. The policewoman pretended to be me. She made out that I was just shocked that he was older, but I was curious about seeing him again. She arranged a meeting with him for two hours time.

I didn't see what happened after that. But I know he was arrested and charged. He is in jail now, where he can't hurt anyone else. But I still worry that he'll be out in a couple of years and he knows where I live.

Even though the police and my parents helped me choose a new profile name, improve security on my profiles and generally taught me how to be safe online, I didn't want to go online for a long time after that. I kept imagining that Joel would appear.

The police found hundreds of girls like me on Joel's computer. Most of them were only 14 or 15. I've been having counselling, but I still have nightmares and I'm afraid to leave the house alone.

For information on how to stay safe online see our Internet Safety Tips on page 10.

