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Literary Material

Marked in 20 Word Groups

Online Rumors

Lauren didn't think much of it when a classmate came into the band hall and said, "Hey, Lauren, did you ¹ hear about all the stuff about you on the Internet?"

Lauren didn't have to ask where on the Internet; everybody ² at Lake High knows it's where kids go to gossip, spread rumors, and talk about each other. When Lauren finally ³ got around to looking at the boards a few days later, she saw an anonymous message that made the usual ⁴ remarks seem like love letters.

The subject line was, "Lauren is a fat cow, moo bitch." The message was worse. ⁵ The writer called her a "suicidal cow who can't stop eating" and urged her boyfriend to dump her.

Reading these ⁶ messages didn't make Lauren cry. "It pissed me off," she says. A year and a half ago, Lauren was diagnosed ⁷ with multiple sclerosis. In the course of treatment,

she's had several rounds of steroids, which have made her gain weight.⁸

Lauren's boyfriend, Chris, who is also her neighbor and classmate, helped make her feel better about the messages. "He said,⁹ 'those people don't know what they're talking about because they don't know you.'"

So at first, Lauren managed not to¹⁰ be too upset. "I was just like, Okay, a lot of people have gotten slammed on the Web site before,"¹¹ she says. "I thought it would go away."

It's difficult to imagine why someone would treat anyone this way. But¹² Lauren is an especially unlikely candidate for such cruelty. Now 16, with a constant smile, she seems effortlessly friendly and¹³ easy to get along with.

Walking into the Starbucks at a shopping center near her house, Lauren stops at a¹⁴ table full of guys to say hi. "They installed a new stereo in my car," she explains later. She adores¹⁵ her '84 Volvo and always gives friends rides. At the counter, where she knows most of the employees, she¹⁶ spots a young guy working the register. Before she places her order,

Lauren sticks her hand across the counter to ¹⁷ shake. It's easy to see why she often ends up getting her order free.

As it turns out, her tormentor ¹⁸ was just warming up. His first message became a separate discussion thread on the site, and he went on a ¹⁹ rampage against Lauren, posting messages daily, often more frequently, that sometimes consisted of nothing more than the words "Die, bitch ²⁰ queen" repeated over and over. The anonymous poster even got artistic, in a twisted way. "He scanned in my yearbook ²¹ picture and put it on the body of a cow," she says. "That was mean. Creative, but mean."

Quite a ²² few students added their own messages, defending Lauren and telling the writer not to hide behind the anonymity of the ²³ Internet. Lauren herself checked the site all the time. "Someone was writing shit about me," she reasons. "I wanted to ²⁴ see if he was going to write his name or not."

As the days piled up into a week, the ²⁵ writer got more vicious, even threatening Lauren. "He said he would kill me if he knew that he wouldn't get ²⁶ caught," Lauren recalls.

At first, Lauren, who lives with her mother and 17-year-old brother, Mark, didn't tell her ²⁷ family what was happening. But when murder was brought up, she figured she had better let them know. Her mother ²⁸ reassured her. "She said, 'Don't respond to it,'" Lauren recalls.

Meanwhile, the taunts about Lauren's medical condition became downright bizarre. ²⁹ The writer claimed Lauren was giving her drugs to kids around the Lake High area. This she found fairly easy to ³⁰ ignore and calls the charge "bull."

Nearly two weeks into the attacks, her boyfriend wrote a message denouncing "everyone ³¹ that has had so little of a life to revolve it around slamming the person I love." Lauren and Chris ³² suspected that one of their acquaintances might be behind the postings, but they figured time, and a little online discouragement, ³³ would calm things. Others who didn't know Lauren responded to her attacker too. "My God, what is wrong with you?" ³⁴ one asked. "I hope you get a lot of crap for this." Lauren tried to stay above the fray by ³⁵ letting other people do most of the online talking for her.

About two weeks after the teasing started, Lauren's mom³⁶ heard a thump on the front door and opened it. She found a 2-liter bottle spraying a cloud onto³⁷ the front of the home. It exploded and Lauren's mom wasn't able to close the door before her arm was³⁸ burned by the material.

Even though they weren't sure there was a connection between the bomb and the stuff online,³⁹ Lauren had been through enough. The next morning, Lauren posted a message on the student board. "This ends now," the⁴⁰ subject line read.

After the bombing, the online harassment did stop. Lauren thinks that's because she gave the police the⁴¹ names of a few suspects. While they never pinned the online attacks on anyone, Lauren believes the interrogations frightened the⁴² person behind the messages into silence.

The school couldn't do anything to shut down the message board, since it is⁴³ owned and operated independently. Long before Lauren was being taunted, the administration had blocked access to the site from the⁴⁴ school's computers.

Lately, Lauren only goes online occasionally to download country music or email a friend. She hasn't read her⁴⁵ school's

message board since the summer. Until recently, you could still access a fair number of the postings about her. Now, though, they have been taken down. These days, the online board is a bunch of gossip about who is dating whom and which fights in the lunchroom were best.

Article by Ethan Smith

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