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I met my best friend on Omegle

Fourteen-year-old me would log onto my dusty MacBook Pro and find my way to the darkest corners of the internet. “Don’t talk to strangers online” was my mother’s catchphrase. Of course, I ignored her.

The internet was the perfect escape from my social anxiety. Omegle, an online chatroom for “meeting strangers and making new friends,” was where I lived.

Growing up, I was awkward and anti-social, so it was comforting to have Omegle at my disposal. Online, I could be whoever I wanted to be. I could age four years within a matter of seconds and reverse time a minute later. I could live in a castle deep in the mountains of Germany, and nobody would question it.

I could connect to anyone, anywhere.

Over time, I witnessed things that a person my age definitely should *not* have witnessed, but regardless, I soldiered on. One day, I stumbled upon a black screen.

“Please don’t skip me!” they begged.

I listened. They asked if I wanted to play a game. “Duh,” I responded.

“Can I guess where you live?” they said.

“OK,” I replied with a laugh. I lived in the middle of nowhere, Southwest Virginia; they couldn’t possibly guess right.

Well, they did. My exact address, too. I slammed my laptop shut and locked all of the doors in the house. I swore I would never log onto Omegle again.

This whole instantaneous conversation thing can be quite hazardous for someone as recklessly curious as me. At times, my curiosity did get a bit out of control. At times, I did completely disregard any cyber-safety intellect I had been harboring in my head.

Before my first Omegle endeavor, I was your typical socially anxious child — too shy to talk to customer service workers and too insecure to put myself out there and make friends. As I began talking to strangers online, though, I became familiar with the world outside of my secluded bubble.

About a week after the address scare, I got tired of practicing this whole “internet safety” thing. I wanted a thrill. What better place to look than Omegle? I set my tag to #top (short for Twenty One Pilots) in hopes of some more ... PG-13 content.

Among the many intriguing conversations I had that night, there was one person that would end up changing my life: Akira. Her camera was off, but something kept me from hanging up. I could tell she was also a poser after telling me her favorite Twenty One Pilots song was “Stressed Out,” the go-to answer for a fake fan such as myself.

We added each other on Snapchat. I didn’t think much of it at the time; this wasn’t the first time I had met someone online. But Akira would end up defining me and much of my future.

Three years after we met on Omegle, I moved to San Francisco. Turns out, Akira was visiting at the same time. As we met in person at Forest Hill Station, I kept my friend on standby over FaceTime, just in case “Akira” turned out to be a 40-year-old man.

Thankfully, she wasn’t. We spent the day jumping around the city — strolling along Ocean Beach, binging an excessive amount of McDonald’s on Montgomery Street and exploring the Ferry Building. I don’t think I could have asked for a more perfect introduction to the city.

About a year later, when I first started attending UC Berkeley, Akira moved into an apartment in the Excelsior District. The rest of my year was filled with late-night picnics, sideshows and chilling with her cat, Harold.

Then COVID-19 hit. At the time, Akira was in Portland seeking job opportunities. To save money she moved in with me in my tiny Berkeley apartment for the remainder of quarantine.

Now, Akira and I are temporary roommates, as we’ve been in Brooklyn together for the past month. It’s safe to say that I wouldn’t even be here in New York without Omegle.

Moving to San Francisco would have been a lonely experience, but having Akira there helped me adjust to my new home. Behind the traumatic experiences it gave me, I have to give Omegle credit for the doors it opened, for bringing familiarity to the unknown.

Trust is extremely important to me in my friendships, and the fact that Akira has stuck with me through thick and thin tells me I can trust her with anything — especially when it comes to advice. She can be a bit blunt, which at times can be shocking, but I guess it’s just the Taurus in her.

Akira was the common denominator between Virginia and California that held me together and allowed me to become comfortable in myself and my surroundings. And who's to say that I would have found that comfort without Omegle?

So thank you, Omegle, for introducing me to my best friend. But I will also never be using your site again — it scares the living s— out of me.

Ryder Mawby writes the Monday column on his transition from the East to West Coast. Contact him at opinion@dailycal.org. LAST UPDATED: November 23, 2020