Influenced

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

“Pernicious” is the word. The internet is pernicious. Pernicious and addictive.

What is an “influencer”? How can they trap people the way they do? It is pernicious.

I was just an ordinary guy. A shy person. I suppose one of the generation brought up with a screen before my eyes. Introverted you might say. Absorbed by the screen. Absorbed by the world wide web.

I could say I had friends. Gaming friends. Chat group friends. I preferred text chat rather than verbal. It is anonymous. Impersonal.

Was I a shy person? I really do not know. I never had much of chance to find out.

I went to school like everybody else. I studied. I did my homework. If the teacher asked me a question, I answered. If a classmate asked me a question outside class, I answered. Nobody ever asked me to join them in any activity. If they had, I would have said: “Sorry, I’m busy today”. I had to get back to my screen.

I thought that I had the desires of a normal guy. I jacked off looking at girls online. That is normal, I guess. I never saw any girl in the flesh who could match what I saw on screen. I suppose that is normal too.

Then I was influenced. Influenced by Maddy Miller. Maddy Miller the beauty tutorial girl.

No guy would be interested in makeup and women’s hairstyles, right? It makes no sense. I was just interested in her. I could watch her all night. Sometimes it seems that I did. Like, the same tutorial again and again. Watching her flick her hair, her gestures, listening to her giggle, watching how she applied that makeup with those beautiful manicured hands.

So, what makes a guy go out and buy foundation, blusher, eyeshadow, mascara and lipstick? This is where it gets weird. This is where enthralment becomes perversion.

It seemed like I was not happy to watch. I needed to participate. I needed to interact with her. She was inviting it. “Do it like this”, “You try”, “Are you finished?”, “Does it look good on you?”

It is not like I could message her: “Hi, I’m Darryn and I am guy who just loves watching you”. That is sick. So much easier to say: “Hi, I am Daphne and I have been following your tips to get the right look”.

But, did I really need to follow the tips? Well, how can you really interact unless you do?

Sure, that meant putting a mirror beside my screen and having a special locked drawer for my stuff, and washing it all off before bed, every night. But we had something to talk about. Being pretty.

The first time she referred to me: “I’ve had some feedback from Daphne who follows my videos …”, well I almost ejaculated on the spot.

I decided to grow my hair out a bit, so I could follow some of her tips. But her hair was so long and beautiful. Daphne asked her for some tips for girls with short hair, and she did a video on it, but mainly with images of other girls. I was not interested in other girls. My hair could not grow fast enough.

But her skin regime was a huge success. It all starts with a good diet, you know. Eat healthy and look good. My mom was happy that my eating habits were healthier, even if it meant getting in some odd items. But good food and Maddy’s recommended night cream did the trick. All blemishes faded (eventually) and my skin became smooth and soft. Hairless too, because the roots of whiskers are where filthy oils collect – that is what she said. Those roots must be destroyed.

Initially I stopped short of the eyebrow shaping. I am not stupid, and I knew that if I turned up at school with eyebrows as pretty as hers, people would brand me a fag, and probably beat me up. But the fact is that I was already getting stares.

One of the girls at school actually asked me: “How do you get your skin to look so perfect?” I just scuttled away, like the weirdo I am. But I bubbled as I messaged Maddy with the good news that girls at school envied my skin. She mentioned it on her video. I almost fainted at the mention of my name – Daphne.

Things started to get peculiar when Matt Harris started to take an interest in me. He was stuck behind me in a crush for lunch and he must have been close enough to smell my hair. He said: “Hey Darryn, are you using girl’s shampoo? Your hair looks so soft and shiny and smells like flowers.”

Of course, I said nothing. It was not really a question. He was just giving me a hard time. But he was looking at me in a very strange way. Not just then, but later too. I saw him looking at me.

Maddy had a separate blog on boys. I was not interested in that. I liked watching her do her hair and put on her lipstick. But I wondered if she might have answers to my getting unwanted attention. I mean, she was a genius on skin care, so maybe?

“Being stared at by guys is a good sign that you are doing things right”. That was her view. “Pretty girls liked to be looked at.” Just as well. I was looking at her all the time. “Telling them not to look is not an option – you just have to let them know that you are not available.”

What does that mean? Could I just walk over to Matt and say: “Hey, I am not interested in you!” Even if I was capable of doing something like that (which I was not) what if he is not really interested in me at all? I would come across as really stupid. Stupid and gay. I am not either of those, I thought.

But I did not have to initiate the discussion. As it turned out Matt Harris and I were paired in chemistry lab. I did not like paired work. Especially in chemistry. The teacher said that my hair was so long that I would need to wear a hair net like the girls. Believe it or not with my hair all pulled back from my face and my skin so smooth, I guess I looked more like a girl than when I hid my face with the long locks.

“Are you transgender?” Matt whispered. “I am just asking. I don’t mind if you are. If you want to keep it secret that’s OK.” Why was he saying these things to me? And then he said: “I think that you would make a really beautiful girl.”

Pow! I don’t know what I was thinking, but I could not wait to get on line and tell Maddy. Everything that she said was true. She was a goddess. She could even turn a pimply faced dweeb into a thing of beauty.

“Thanks Matt.” That was all I could think to say. He gave me a knowing smile.

It was as if I had just met my first real world friend. It was that kind of smile. It was a smile that said: “I know you and I will keep your secret.” That is the kind of thing friends do – isn’t it? The fact is that he did not know me at all. I was not transgender. Or that is what I thought at that time anyway.

In the language that you have to use on her site, I told Maddy about my new boyfriend. I did not get a response back from her, but I went through lots of her old stuff, about prom nights. I put on full evening makeup and brushed my hair in a feminine style. I draped a sheet from my bed around myself to pretend that it was a long white gown, and I paraded in front of my mirror. Looking back, this was not normal behaviour. And I knew it. When I had removed my makeup and put my night cream on, I lay awake wondering what was happening to me.

Introverts just crawl back into their shell. That is what we do. Curl up and present what is left of our spines to the world.

And then Matt found me alone and said: “If you would like to go out with me as a girl one evening, then I would be happy to take you somewhere well away from here where you could do that. Only if you want to.”

Best to say nothing. I guess I gave him a look. How would I know what kind of look it was? Without a mirror nobody can see the look on their own face. Was it a sad look? Was it a glance that said: “I only wish that I could, you wonderful caring man.” Was that what he thought I was saying?

Maddy, oh Maddy. What do I do? A guy wants to take me out, but so as nobody at school knows that we are doing it.

At last I had unlocked a real conversation with Maddy – in text of course. “Who is he?” “Why do you both want to keep it secret?” “What are you ashamed of?” “Do you care about him?” As long as she was asking questions, I needed to give answers. That is what the thread is all about. Keeping it alive, even if everything that you are typing is a total lie.

The internet is pernicious. It is anonymous, and with anonymity comes dishonesty.

She told me exactly what to do. She influenced me.

She told me what to wear. She told me how to move and what to say. She told me how to style my hair. She told me the eyelashes, makeup and colors that I should use on the night. She told me to shape my eyebrows. I sent her an image of my face. She said that I looked “boyish” and the eyebrows would have to be shaped. She said that soft angled was best for a square face. She sent a template.

Only after this wonderful exchange could I find Matt at school and agree to go out with him. It was like I now had a special line of communication direct with Maddy, who was the true object of my desire, and that required that I engage with Matt, another guy. It would just be pretend, but it would result in more interaction with Maddy. It seems crazy to say it now, but it how I was thinking.

I knew that the eyebrows would be a problem. The soft angled eyebrow was similar to hers and it was gorgeous, but on a guy, it would scream “tranny!”. I was prepared to do it, but not until Friday night. It would need 24 hours for any redness from the plucking to disappear so that on Saturday they would look perfect. And there were other things that I needed to do on Saturday. Like buy a dress, and the right underwear, and shoes, and a bag, and something for my hair. I had Maddy’s instructions.

When I told my mother that I was going out on Saturday night, she was shocked. That is the right word for it. I had never been out. Ever. I could hardly tell her what I would be wearing. I told her that I would be slipping out quietly. I implored her not to look at me or ask questions. I guess that she was happy that I might have a moment away from my screen, so she agreed.

Now, I can try to rationalize my actions, but it does not make much sense with hindsight. I craved the attention of Maddy, but what did I expect from Matt. It seems cruel, but I never gave him much thought at all. I certainly never wanted for him to fall for me. In fact, I never contemplated his feelings because I really had none of my own that could allow me to understand his.

These days, if you can say that people like this – like me - are “on the autism spectrum”. That we are born socially inept. But I was socially inept because of the screen I was glued to, and web behind that – the pernicious internet.

I did my plucking on Friday night following the template to perfection. I used cream to soothe the inflammation, and on Saturday morning I wore a cap pulled down low over my eyes to hide my work. I planned to wear that cap all day.

I was supposed to be buying some stuff for my sister (I do not have a sister) but the lady in the lingerie section was wise to me immediately.

“I look after lots of boys just like you,” she said. “Shape is very important, so is comfort, and having padding that gives genuine jiggle.” I was in her hands. I just had precise instructions from Maddy on the style. The lady did recommend something “a little less suggestive” but I insisted on Maddy’s call.

She sold me a pair of panties which she told me would give me shape there and allow me to “tuck those male bits away securely with no embarrassing surprises”.

She gave me the sizing for the dress, and before she sent me off, she sold me a patterned slip. She said: “This you can wear under than dress, or as a nightie, or some girls wear it over their jeans just like the ones you are wearing now.”

That was how I left her. With all the underwear on, but with my jeans and trainers, and this slip over the top. And my cap off with my girly eyebrows and hair.

Dressed like this I actually saw somebody from school in the mall, more than one in fact. Nobody recognized me. Who would? I was invisible at school. But somehow, I felt that I was so different that nobody would guess it was me. I felt different.

Again, the genius of Maddy was apparent. It is how you move. The confidence of your stride, even in trainers. Head up. Occasional turns and shakes of the head to show off your hair.

When I walked into the dress shop, I am not sure if they thought I was a boy or a girl. I did not care. I said nothing. I spoke with smiles. I just wished I had bought some makeup. I had plenty at home, but all bought over the net. I bought a modest shoulder bag for my t-shirt cap and wallet. Now I could walk into Mecca or Sephora and browse. There was a free makeover on offer. Who wouldn’t?

Shoes presented my first real challenge. Maddy had been specific, but when I tried them on, I realized that this was going to be a problem. God knows how long it would take to learn to walk on heels like this. “Practice,” the sales lady said. “Walk home in them. But lets tape you up to ensure you don’t blister.”

So, I was tottering along, and I walked past a hair salon. I had instruction on how to do my hair, but I had none of the equipment. Why not take the easy route? Two hours later I stepped out with curls.

I had planned to sneak into my house and go straight to my room, just as I would sneak out without my mother seeing me, but as I hot to the bottom of the stairs she appeared from nowhere.

“Darryn, what are you wearing?” she said, clearly in shock.

“Fancy dress, for tonight, Mom.” She just looked at me, without saying a word, for what seemed an age.

“You look beautiful,” she said. “Truly beautiful. Don’t think that I haven’t noticed. A mother knows. Your skin. Your hair. I am not a fool, Darryn. Or should I call you by another name? A girl’s name.”

“Daphne,” I said. And I ran upstairs. It just came out. It was my girl’s name, I guess.

And as for sneaking out that night, well that did not happen. Both of my parents were waiting at the bottom of the stairs. I was wearing my dress, and I had my heels on, and some clip-on drop earrings, and my evening makeup which, after watching Maddy videos all afternoon, I had done myself with great care.

Mom introduced me to Dad as “Daphne”. I had never seen my father cry before that night. But he was not crying for a lost son. The truth is that he had lost me long ago. We had nothing in common.

“Mom has told me,” he said. “She said you were gorgeous, but I truly was not expecting you to be as stunning as you look tonight. I just want you to know that I am proud to be your father.”

Really! He was never proud of me. Now in a dress and curls he is proud of me?

“Thanks,” I said, and I went out the door.

Matt was waiting. He must have seen my parents behind me. He was still watching them as I got in passenger seat. He then turned to look at me.

“Wow,” he said. “You are a vision. Who are you again?”

“Daphne,” I said. “Now please let’s go. My parents are watching us. It is so embarrassing.”

We were a mile down the road before he said: “I thought that you could be pretty, but I never dreamed that you could be this beautiful. ‘Pretty’ does not begin to say enough. You are perfect.”

I did not want to talk. I don’t talk. I type or thumb out messages on my phone. But what am I doing here? What is this about? I want to report to Maddy and her followers tomorrow. I want to say that I followed her advice, that I went out with the guy who asked me, and we told me that I was perfect, and I said … what did I say? Something.

“This is the first time I have been out as Daphne,” I said. “I hope that I won’t embarrass you. I really appreciate you asking me out like this Matt, I really do. I hope that I haven’t overdone it, with the hair and makeup and everything. It’s just a new thing for me. Something I have only practised at home before.”

“Hey,” he said, stopping the words that were coming out of my mouth, probably the first time I had put more than one sentence together since elementary school. “It’s going to be the perfect evening.”

And that is exactly what it was. We went to a restaurant. A good one. It was miles away from our neighborhood. Nobody knew who we were. Nobody could have guessed that I was not a girl. Nobody thought we were underage. We had a bottle of wine. The food was great. He talked. I talked, and talked, and talked. I mentioned gaming once or twice, and maybe school a couple of times, but otherwise I talked about how I liked to be pretty, how I followed advice on skin and hair care, and fashion, and … all of the other things that girls like. When I thought about it, that was what I was interested in – everything Maddy was interested. I was one of her followers. We were all girls.

When we drove back, I snuggled up to him as best I could. He took me right up to my front door and he kissed me. On the lips, with tongue and everything. I should have been disgusted, but all I could help thinking about was what I was going to report back to Maddy. I had been perfect. It had been perfect.

“This date was for you,” Matt said. “I wanted you to be able to express yourself as a woman. I never thought that I would fall for you. The next date will be for me, Ok?”

“Ok,” I said. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me, and I sighed. I opened my eyes and my parents were standing in front of me.

“I hope that you won’t think we are creepy and interfering,” said Mom. “But we watched that kiss. Who is he? And does he know you are not a real girl?”

“That’s Matt,” I said. “And of course, he knows who I am. We go to school together.”

“Well after that, you can’t go to school as Darryn on Monday,” my father said. “That would not be fair to him.”

I grunted and went upstairs. My parents were being supportive of the person they thought I was, and I was reverting to me.

But the moment that I got online I started gushing out girly banter on Maddy’s blogs. It was all about my new boyfriend (unnamed) – the things he said, the way he looked at me across the dinner table, the smell of him when I was close to him in the car, and the kiss that ended the evening. Ohh. And the crazy thing is that every word I wrote, was true.

My mother took me to the mall on Sunday and we picked up some more clothes. I felt that this was now totally out of control. But when I got home that afternoon I got on line and gushed all about the new outfits I had. There is so much more to say when you start living the life that Maddy was always talking about. And everything that I said about how gorgeous those purchases were, was true.

My father called the school on Monday and told them that they wanted my details changed.

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| The funny thing is that when I turned up for school, I turned heads, but nobody said “Hey, that’s Darryn.” Because nobody knew who Darryn was. And that’s the truth. Daphne is an outgoing girly girl, who knows all about fashion and beauty. She is going out with Matt Harris, don’t you know? Darryn? Who the hell is Darryn?  And Maddy? Well I am my own influencer these days. She got me started, so thank you for that girl, but I am my own woman these days. I am not tied to my screen the way I once was, because people who are, want to hear the way it is from people who live in the real world. And that is me.  The End  © Maryanne Peters 2019 | A person taking a selfie  Description automatically generated |