

Victims are forced to look over their shoulders constantly.

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Real Girls Who Get Stalked

Celebrities aren't the only ones who are terrorized by unwelcome—and often unrelenting—admirers. Cosmo talks to several women whose tales of being pursued are so hair-raising, they rival any Hollywood thriller.
By Sabrina Rubin Erdely

■ The anonymous letters began arriving in Tera Stockdale's mailbox in 1997. "I hope you get raped," one read. "I hope you kill yourself," read another. Tera, then a 22-year-old guitarist in a Columbus, Ohio, rock band, had no clue who they could be from. And yet it was obvious that the writer knew a lot about her: He'd gone to see her band's performances and said he'd watched Tera doing yard work one morning.

Terrified, Tera called the police, who told her that because of the writer's careful wording—he wasn't directly threatening her—there was nothing they could do. "I couldn't believe it," remembers Tera. Over the next two years, as she received more harassing letters and phone calls, Tera continued to get no help from the police. "One officer even joked,

'It's not against the law to write love letters,'" remembers Tera. "I was being stalked, and the police were telling me that I wasn't. I didn't know where to turn."

AN INVISIBLE EPIDEMIC

Most people think of stalking as something that happens only to high-profile celebs such as Britney Spears or Madonna. But in reality, "the vast majority of stalking cases concern ordinary people, not celebrities," says Linden Gross, author of *Surviving a Stalker: Everything You Need to Know to Keep Yourself Safe*. A recent study in the journal *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* found that anywhere from 15 to 24 percent of American women have been stalked. Study author Brian H. Spitzberg, Ph.D., a professor of communication at San Diego

State University, points out that as alarming as those numbers are, the stalking of civilians still isn't perceived as a crisis by the general public or, more important, taken seriously by law enforcement everywhere. "Stalking often mimics ordinary courtship or a relationship gone sour," explains Spitzberg. "So to a large extent, if the victim isn't a celebrity, the police see it as a gray area, almost as some sort of domestic problem."

What makes this oversight more upsetting is that stalking has been considered a crime since 1990, when the first laws against it were passed in California. Stalking is now illegal in all 50 states and is a Federal crime as well. Even so, victims have a hard time getting police to intervene, in part because it's very difficult to prove that someone's stalking you. The legal definition of stalking is an intentional pattern of unwanted attention that a reasonable person would find threatening. But most of the individual acts that make up stalking—someone leaving dead roses on your windshield, for example—aren't technically crimes. So in order to press charges, police usually insist on a long list of offenses to establish intent. And who has to collect the evidence? Often, the victim herself. "It's a terrible situation where you feel that you're all alone," says Gross. "But for most stalking victims, that's the reality."

And as it turns out, stalking is a hard crime to deter—there is no one recommended course of action, and victims who do get authorities to step in by issuing a restraining order against the stalker often find it does no good or even makes things worse. "Stalkers have a hard time taking no for an answer, so a restraining order can often actually incite them," says Gross. As a result, many women are being forced to take their personal safety into their own hands... with varying degrees of success.

INTIMATE STRANGERS

One of the first hurdles women face with a stalker is realizing that telling them to go away or threatening them won't work. "Many stalkers are ego-

involved, which means that they see the relationship with the victim as core to their own identity," explains Spitzberg. "You can't negotiate with them because any sort of interaction just reinforces that bond." Usually, a stalker will stick to psychological intimidation by repeatedly reminding his victim of his presence or violating her privacy, but sometimes he will resort to physical violence. A stalker can be a stranger, a casual acquaintance, or—in an estimated half of all cases—a former paramour.

Last year, Claire DeHaven, a 25-year-old office manager, began dating an engineer named Shane, whom she met through friends. (Their names have been changed.) "One night, after about two months of dating, I noticed a gun under his car seat, and I flipped out," she remembers. "He said it was for protection, but I realized he wasn't the guy I thought he was and told him it was over." But Shane wouldn't let Claire go. He began calling her 50 times a day, scream-



Tera Stockdale

"One police officer joked, 'It's not a crime to write love letters.'"

ing that if he couldn't have her, then no one could. He'd drive by her office just as she was leaving work. When she emerged from a doctor's visit, Shane was waiting in the parking lot. Two weeks later, Claire looked out her window and saw Shane standing in front of her house, holding a baseball bat and grinning. "Your life is going to end," he taunted.

Claire decided not to call the police, hoping his infatuation would simply fiz-

zle. But what she didn't realize is that ex-boyfriends who become stalkers are actually more dangerous than total strangers. While only one-third of the stalking cases in Brian Spitzberg's study escalated to violence, other studies have shown that 50 percent of women stalked by former sexual partners are physically assaulted. One morning while Claire was driving to work, Shane pulled up beside her car on the highway and tried to run her off the road. "At that point, there was no doubt in my mind that he was going to hurt me seriously or kill me," remembers Claire, who managed to speed off safely. But when she later called police, they said they would need to catch Shane in the act or establish a pattern before they could do anything.

Claire felt like a sitting duck, so that Saturday at the crack of dawn, she moved into a new apartment. On Monday, she found her voice mail full of furious messages from Shane, screaming that he was going to skin her alive, shoot her, torture her...and that he'd come for her at work that very day. Police, responding to Claire's desperate call, found Shane waiting in her office parking lot with a knife, a gun, and a hundred rounds of ammo. He was arrested, convicted of stalking, and sentenced to one year in prison...and is still sending Claire menacing letters.

Even though he's likely to get an additional three- to four-year sentence for drug and weapons charges, that may only put his terror tactics on hold, as stalkers who go to jail often come out even more fixated on their victims. "A stalker who goes to jail usually loses his job, his place to live, and his friends," notes Gross. "All he has left is the thing that got him into prison in the first place. So after he's released, the first stop he frequently makes is his victim's home or workplace."

That's what Claire is afraid of in her case. "When he gets out of jail, I'll probably have to leave the area and change my name because he's not going to stop," she says.

A MADDENING CATCH-22

Even with the police now involved, Claire is probably stuck in a long-term stalking situation. "The longer it goes on, the more aggravated the stalking becomes," says Gross. "A victim often needs to take



Samantha Furgason

Samantha found a note on her windshield complimenting her body.

action herself to nip it in the bud." Gross recommends implementing an immediate plan of total avoidance: Change your route to work, get a new phone number, and do whatever you can do to cut off contact as soon as possible. The one thing you must not do is agree to meet the stalker. Even if he says that he'll leave you alone afterward, he won't.

Out of frustration, some victims have been known to try anything they can think of. In February 2000, 32-year-old Santa Fe art promoter Samantha Furgason returned to her car after walking on a popular mountain trail and found a note on her windshield complimenting her "beautiful body." The writer added that he'd watched her a couple of days earlier. Samantha scanned the parking lot and saw a man sitting behind the wheel of a nearby car. Completely freaked out, Samantha drove off in a hurry. That evening, she received four hang-up calls at home. She called the police, but they just told her to be careful.

Since the police weren't going after him, Samantha decided to track down the pervert herself. A few days later, she went back to the trail with two male friends in tow. Sure enough, the stranger's car was there, and they were able to scribble down his license plate number. Before long, the Santa Fe police discovered that the stalker was actually a fellow law-enforcement officer: 35-year-old detective Danny Valdez. Eight months later, Valdez pleaded no contest to harassment charges and was sentenced to a year's probation. He hasn't bothered Samantha since.

7 SIGNS HE MAY BE A STALKER

At first, it's hard to tell the difference between a stalker and an overzealous suitor. But according to Brian H. Spitzberg, Ph.D., a professor at San Diego State University, "stalking behaviors always exceed the boundaries of normal social contact within a consensual relationship." In a recent comprehensive analysis, Spitzberg identified seven common early warning signs. So keep your distance if a guy you know...

1 WANTS A DATE OUT OF THE BLUE. He's someone you barely know, but he asks you out anyway.

2 IS TOO AFFECTIONATE TOO SOON, saying things very early on like "We're meant to be together" or "I can't live without you."

3 IS SEX-OBSSESSED. He talks about sex constantly or at inappropriate times or tries to engage in excessive PDA.

4 BUYS AFFECTION. He prematurely showers you with gifts like flowers, jewelry, and weekend getaways or does favors that you didn't ask for like mowing the lawn.

5 CALLS INCESSANTLY. He phones you several times a week to check on your whereabouts.

6 RANDOMLY SHOWS UP. He suddenly appears at your office or while you're out with friends.

7 SENDS OVER-THE-TOP E-MAILS. He bombards you with E-mail, complaining that you're not paying enough attention to him.

—ANURADHA KOLI

Tera Stockdale, the musician in Ohio, eventually tried a very different tactic. In 1998—two years after her initial call—police finally arrested 28-year-old John Baba, a Ph.D. student whom Tera had never met. Baba was convicted of stalking Tera, but he got out of prison after just five days, and 10 months later, he violated his probation by contacting her over the Internet. Baba spent 30 more days in prison. Since jail wasn't working as a deterrent, Tera tried a more aggressive approach: She sued him, and in February 2002, she won a \$105,000 jury award. But Baba is appealing the verdict, so Tera still has to deal with him, even though her aim of suing him was to make him go away. "It's been one frustration after another," says Tera, now a 28-year-old art teacher. "He said things in his letters like 'I'm never gonna let this die.' It's a horrible feeling to know that I can't seem to get rid of him."

NO ONE SOLUTION TO STALKING

Although Stockdale hasn't had any real luck yet, the key to shaking a stalker, in addition to acting quickly and decisively, may nonetheless be to use unconventional channels. Consider the case of 24-year-old Virginia resident Angela Moubray. In 2000, Angela was moderating an online message board and occasionally swapped E-mails with another moderator named Michael. One day, Angela found out that someone had hacked into her account and was sending obnoxious messages to people in her address book. The hacker's writing sounded a lot like Michael's, so Angela confronted him. He sent back an E-mail ranting that she should be raped and beaten. "It's all a matter of time," he later added ominously.

From then on, Michael seemed determined to make her miserable. He deleted her address book, continued to E-mail her friends, and told her he knew her social security number. Angela took the correct first step and switched E-mail addresses, but Michael found her new account and again hacked his way in. After three weeks, Angela called the police, who advised her simply to stay offline. Meanwhile, Michael started

threatening to visit, writing "You f-cking waste of life, I will kill you!"

In the meantime, Angela had figured out that Michael lived in Rhode Island, and she contacted Jayne Hitchcock, president of the organization Working to Halt Online Abuse, who offered to help her come up with a solution. Hitchcock put Angela in touch with a Rhode Island police captain who was willing to lend a hand in an unofficial capacity and summoned Michael to the station. Michael turned out to be an unemployed 24-year-old slacker who was terrified to be confronted. He promised to stop stalking Angela, and no charges were filed.

Although cautioning that this tactic won't work with every stalker, investigator Wayne Maxey agrees that creative thinking is essential in any case. Maxey is part of a unique force in the San Diego district attorney's office that tries to help stalking victims defuse a situation before it gets to the point of actual prosecution. "Early intervention can make a big difference," he says. While Maxey has approached stalkers and told them to stop, "we only do it in cases when we don't think it's going to reinforce the behavior," he says. "You have to analyze everything on a case-by-case basis."

So far, Michael has been true to his word. After putting up with a year of his terrorizing threats, Angela is in the rare position of feeling glad to be free of him. "I couldn't let him keep ruining my life," she says. "I couldn't let him win." ■



Angela Moubray

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