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Cynthia Lewis

WHILE I WAS STALKED

He looked at me, unable to speak. Everything, every gesture, every word I spoke, was gathered and piled, fuel for the long winter of his obsession.

— Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love*

"Why is DeFlores attracted to Beatrice-Joanna if she's so mean to him?" I asked my class on Renaissance drama. "Why does he suffer her abuse?" The play was *The Changeling*, a chilling, decadent Jacobean tragedy by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley about a young woman's loathing for the servant who will eventually commit murder to claim her virginity as his reward. I had taught the play too many times to count, and although its horror never failed to grip me when I reread it and introduced students to it, this particular day might have been any other in the life of an English professor and her neophytes. What made this class different was my near certainty that one of the nineteen students sitting in the discussion circle — actually, one of the eleven men — had been sending me anonymous, obscene e-mails for the past two weeks. So I was hyper-conscious of my surroundings and highly sensitive about teaching *The Changeling*, a work full of sexual blackmail and sexual dominance, with that student in the room. I thought I knew who he was, and I was also convinced that the other students in the class hadn't picked up on the situation. As yet, however, the long line of people outside of my class who were searching for the student's identity hadn't succeeded.

The first of the e-mails I read was not, apparently, the first that had been sent.

dr lewis why didnt you respond to me, i just want to know if you would ever consider going out with someone from class ok. i am handsome and i know you think i am cute, so i am not one of the ugly kids in the class, just give me an honest answer and keep an open mind, dont get freaked out or anything its all good, i am good at eating pussy, and i am in college i know my cock works better than your husbands, just reply and dont panic or flip out or be crazy, just let me know

Evidently, he had e-mailed me earlier with a similar invitation and now seemed frustrated at not having heard back from me. At the time, I didn't focus on that point as much as on the curiously deferential "dr lewis" in the inappropriate context and the lack of knowledge about my private life: I was single. I believed that only a student at my liberal arts college — Davidson — could be behind the message, but he wasn't identifying himself as a student in one of my classes. Despite the disrespectful content, the message struck me more than anything as a nuisance. I called the college's Information Technology Help Desk to see about blocking future e-mails from the same sender. All I could do, they said, was re-route e-mails from the sender into Junk Mail. So re-route I did, giving the matter little more thought that day. Had I received only this one message, I would likely have written it off as a one-time bad decision on the part of a student who had probably been intoxicated when he wrote it and, once sobered up, had been mortified that he'd sent it.

But another message soon followed, this one riskier, more salacious and more revealing about the author, who called himself "noya clap." I found it two mornings later in my Junk Mail box. It was marked "important."

look i know you think i am crazy, or this is a joke or something well you are wrong, when we were in class today i saw how you looked at me, i know you were flirting with me. your husband cannot satisfy you like i can, just be open minded alright? i also have a big cock, and i know you like that, i think we can have a good time babe, next tuesday during class i want you to talk dirty to me in shakespeare tongue, if you want to single me out and after class we can go to your office, all im saying is that i see how you look at me and i know you fuck a lot too so dont try and act like you are not a little whore, alright baby get back to me, i will try and give you a sign during class, maybe when i am acting i can give you a hint let you know that i am hot for you. its just sex lets do it ok get back to me baby

Although I still couldn't be positive, this e-mail virtually placed the student in my Renaissance drama class, one of the three I was teaching that semester. The specific references to "shakespeare" and to "acting" pertained not only to the class content, but also to one of my methods

for teaching drama — through performance. Students commonly act out scenes in my courses, a detail that someone outside the current class probably wouldn't know.

Now more concerned, I forwarded the second message to the Help Desk and asked for a particular person I trusted in that office to call me. When he did, I explained that I had two problems, the easier one to manage being junk mail and the other being a student who was harassing me. What could I do? My contact explained that, while the e-mails could be traced back to their sender through Yahoo, the process would be expensive and laborious. I should let him know, he said, if I wanted such a search done.

I told him I'd think about it, but of course I wanted it done. Would I be perceived as high-maintenance and imperious if I gave the order for the costly, time-intensive investigation? I called the Dean of Students to tell him about the e-mails, then forwarded them to him. He agreed that there was no question as to their seriousness. In prior cases, he said, he'd used various methods to detect a culprit, including interviewing all of the male students in a questionable group. But this instance was worse than any he'd seen — probably, I later realized, because it involved a student's harassing not another student, but a professor. The Dean wanted a surer method: if he interviewed all of the men and no one admitted to the offense, what then? I confessed that I suspected someone in the class that had been alluded to in the second message, but I added that I felt bad about my suspicions because of the person's ethnicity. Was I being racist? For a class of students at my college, this one was a little more ethnically diverse than most. The only student who seemed suspicious happened to be a person of color. But, I reassured myself, I suspected him because of his behavior. He sat through most classes speechless, staring at me intently. That, too, might have been a cultural peculiarity, but my gut instinct was that this student was somehow fixated on me. In addition, he showed almost no affect — he never laughed, winced, yawned or frowned. He just stared.

Within two days, the college's Chief of Police and the President were involved. Both known for intolerance toward the kind of behavior displayed in the e-mails, they set out to nab the offender. The President's backing meant high-level legal support: the college filed a civil suit against "John Doe" in my behalf for "extreme and outrageous conduct" causing me "severe emotional distress," a move that would produce a subpoena requiring Yahoo to divulge the real name of "noya

clap." One week after receiving the second e-mail, I signed off on the complaint for the law suit. It was a Thursday. The next day, a lawyer at the college's firm told me that Yahoo would probably yield the name of the e-mailer by Monday or Tuesday. "Hang on," she said.

Yahoo, however, dragged its feet. By the following Tuesday, I had to teach another class, the e-mailer was still at large and Yahoo was now telling us that our subpoena for the name would take fifteen days to yield results. The e-mailer would be notified of the subpoena and have two weeks to produce a compelling reason that Yahoo shouldn't comply with it. Disheartened, I went to teach my favorite play, *Twelfth Night*, and came out feeling that I'd never taught a worse class. Not once during the entire seventy-five minutes could I get my mind off of "noya clap's" being there — staring, as usual. One night later, almost a week after the first e-mail had arrived, another message came. It was the morning of the next class I was to teach, at 1:00 p.m., with the student present. The message was sent by "gary bush" and was entitled "class notes." The sender's address, in brackets, was "cynthiayouaretoomuch@yahoo.com."

you arrogant little slut, you cant respond to my e-mails, you are a terrible teacher, you dont know jack shit about shakespeare i bet you i know more than you. now i told you i can help you in bed, but you refuse so fuck you i am too good for you anyways, i have decided to have sex with my history professor instead of you, you probably have a smelly old pussy anywyas. this is noyaclap baby, and i am the pimp when we go over the play tomorrow i am going to pull out my penis during class and start stroking it because i am horny, bottom line is you are a biatch, and you need to teach at community college or some shit, you dont deserve to teach at davidson. so if you want a real man instead of your impotent husband you reply and i will let you suck my dick you little slut

- big stud

By now, I'd become demoralized. And I was frightened. This e-mail was more demeaning and abusive than the previous ones. In the lowest of spirits, I forwarded the message to the Dean of Students and the President. I also called the Dean and left a message saying I was

paralyzed about going into the class again within a few hours. I didn't believe the student would act on the threat in the message, but he'd meant to throw me off-kilter, and he had. I was scared of my job.

The President called me and said he wanted to come to my 1:00 class for the first few minutes and announce that someone was e-mailing me grossly inappropriate messages and that, if it was anyone in the room, he should desist contacting me and, as soon as possible, come forward. I balked at the President's suggestion. This class, but for the single renegade student, happened to be one of my all-time favorites. The students were bright, engaged, gregarious, and, for the most part, sweetly innocent. They included a few men I'd taught before and now enjoyed nice relationships with. I wished more than anything to preserve the equilibrium in a superb discussion class. I thanked the President for his offer, but asked that we follow a different course. I felt that I could make it through the class if I were accompanied by a male colleague under the pretense that he was attending to observe my teaching. The Dean of the Faculty was busy; a senior colleague in the English Department availed himself, assuring me that, if any student made a false move during class, he'd be swept into the hall for a proper thrashing. I felt safer, but had become aware of two disparate, and gendered, approaches to the situation.

In class, all went more or less as planned. My colleague attended class; I introduced him by saying that, in our department, we often observed one another teach. Then I went on to teach an even worse class than the previous one. The student suspect normally came in just moments before class started and tried to sit directly opposite me, but today he had been usurped by my colleague, who had snagged the student's usual seat. When the student tried to sit outside the discussion circle instead, I asked him to join us inside the ring. He was thus forced to sit almost next to me. Had the scenario been a matter for mirth, we would have seemed comic in our mutual squirming. As it was, I only confused my class by tossing them questions about *Twelfth Night* that flew over their heads and indulging in explanations that didn't cohere. The suspect looked as bad as I felt. Noticeably unkempt, he slumped in his seat and, for once, glared straight ahead, rather than at me.

I hadn't shared my suspicions as to the e-mailer's identity with my male colleague. But several minutes into the class, he caught my eye, then looked over at the student sitting next to me, stared for a moment as if to target him visually, then looked back at me with slightly raised

brows. He was tacitly asking me if the young man next to me could be the one. When class concluded, my colleague followed me out of the classroom and into my office to ask about the student he suspected. With apologies for having put him through such a miserable class, I divulged my own hunch, but said we'd have to wait for confirmation before taking action.

The e-mailer wasted no time following up that class with another message, sent in the evening after the Thursday class. It was again from "gary bush" and entitled "you arrogant woman."

look cynthia i am trying to be nice to you and you are being such an arrogant bitch, i saw you wearing those high boots today, you should have worn a mini skirt so i could see your panties, anyways, i just want to let you know that i know you are fucking that [visiting] professor and i think it is rather sad. i dont understand you, you will fuck that wrinkled up professor but you wont fuck a real man...anyways see you on tuesday and wear something sexy, one time i went to the bathroom and whacked off thinking about your sweaty pussy on my balls, so atleast wear some low cut skirt and a tank top with no bra ok, thanks darling

Later, I realized that, at the point of having received this message, I'd gone numb. I could register only that the student had finally affirmed that he was in the drama class, as the references to what I'd worn that day and to my colleague's visit attested. With a curious detachment, as if I myself were not the recipient, I immediately forwarded the e-mail to the President and the Dean of Students, adding only that now we'd surely narrowed the list of suspects. I simply wasn't letting myself respond to the personal affronts in the message; otherwise, I feared, I would melt down.

The President, more outraged than ever and frustrated by not having found the student's identity, responded to "gary bush" on the next day — a Friday — in an effort to make him stop e-mailing me and turn himself in.

The tone and content of the e-mails sent to Professor Lewis are both repugnant and a serious violation of the harassment policies of the college. A

John Doe lawsuit was filed yesterday and a subpoena issued to Yahoo. This action, in conjunction with those of ITS, will yield your identity.

You should cease such contact with Professor Lewis and contact either [The] Dean [of Students] or myself immediately.

As the week ended, I was left hoping that the e-mails would stop and wondering how I was going to go into class the next week and teach as if nothing unusual were happening. I was also scared that the same person whose misogynist e-mails were becoming increasingly angry would become more riled by the President's message. How would he deal with his anger? Or would fear overtake him? Would he spiral into despair and even hurt himself? Would he hurt me? My fourteen-year-old son? Police were watching my house around the clock; I had told my son to watch his surroundings and tell me if he saw a student loitering. Over the weekend, I obsessed about our safety.

I also obsessed about managing my class in the coming week. Of all coincidences that could have befallen me, here was the most unthinkable: I was scheduled to teach *The Changeling*, among the most sexually explicit of all English Renaissance plays. Its tragic heroine, Beatrice-Joanna, loathes her father's servant DeFlores, who in turn lusts after her. Betrothed to one man, Beatrice-Joanna falls in love with another, Alsemero, regretting the first match. DeFlores steps in to rid her of her fiancé, a gesture she believes will free her to be with Alsemero. Once DeFlores has murdered for her, however — an act he documents by showing her a finger he has removed from the corpse — she discovers that he means to blackmail her sexually. She marries Alsemero, but has already slept repeatedly with DeFlores, always worrying that her husband, who expects to marry a virgin, will uncover the truth. Ironically, despite her initial repulsion to DeFlores, she gradually begins to show signs of falling in love with him. How would I get through a class with such content under the current circumstances?

I came up with a plan: the Dean of Students could call in the particular student for a conference, say that a couple of his professors were concerned about him, ask if he was okay, and try to coax a confession from him. The part about professorial concern was actually true, and I sensed that the student was close enough to breaking down that all he might need was a little encouragement. When I revealed my strategy

to the Dean, however, he demurred — and rightly so. Anyone who called in the student for a conference had only one shot. As I reflected on my proposed tactic, I recognized that waiting to gather evidence, although frustrating, was the preferable option.

The week began with more irritating obstacles and further efforts to catch the student. Although the lawyers had forwarded all four e-mails to Yahoo, I was now told that I needed to forward the originals as e-mail attachments. I had no idea how to do so, but learned. In addition, the college's Chief of Police had a contact in the FBI who was willing to look into the e-mails. He needed the header to each message, which I provided. At the same time, the college's administration followed up on possible leads. One e-mail had mentioned a female history professor, for example, prompting a cross-check between my male students and students registered with women professors in the History Department. The cross-check produced no results, but I remained hopeful that we'd get a break in the case.

I got my own break, as things turned out, and it came in unexpected form. It was a change in my outlook. On the next Tuesday, as I awaited my class, I heard from the male colleague who had gone in with me on the preceding Thursday. He was at my disposal. Did I want him to go with me again on that day? Gratefully, I declined. Something had come over me — not anger, exactly, but determination. Partly because the e-mails had ceased and partly out of stubbornness, I was no longer frightened to enter the classroom. I was going to take it back.

I did. I taught for seventy-five minutes without flinching and without acknowledging anything out of the ordinary. It was a fabulous class — one of the best during the whole semester. For this initial discussion of *The Changeling*, I'd set aside most of the class period as an intellectual free-for-all. Ideas flowed easily among class members and between the class and me. Gradually, I directed the conversation to specific questions about the play. Why would DeFlores covet a woman who reviled and rejected him? "Why," I asked the class, "does he suffer her abuse?" Suddenly, the suspect spoke up. "DeFlores says that resistant women sometimes talk themselves into bed with men they think they hate," he ventured. "Here's the passage: As children cry themselves asleep, I ha' seen / Women have chid themselves a-bed to men." Chilled, I looked him in the eye and validated his remark. What he'd said about the play was true; at the same time, it uncannily brushed up against the other situation, our situation: that between an abusive correspondent

and an offended recipient. The person e-mailing me was stalking me as DeFlores does Beatrice-Joanna, apparently waiting, hoping to wear down my resistance toward responding. I not only didn't show my disgust toward the overlap between class discussion and the private scenario that I felt sure was on my student's mind; I even referred back to his contribution later in the discussion, weaving it into the conversation as it had evolved at that point.

The next Thursday's class went much the same. Only now I felt the added incentive of teaching this fellow about respect for women. During the class period, he didn't say a word, but I said plenty about sexual domination, misogyny and mistaken judgment — all themes of *The Changeling*. I left class feeling more empowered than ever. I had refused to be bullied; I had done my job.

It wasn't my reward for such tenacity, of course, that, later in the same afternoon, we got the break we'd been waiting for, but I couldn't help connecting my resolve against intimidation and finally getting the chance to expose the coward who was harassing me. Unexpectedly, the Chief of Police called and, without explanation, asked me to write up a narrative of the whole ordeal to date. Audibly exasperated, I said, "Okay." Then he said, "We've got him." Why hadn't he said so? Okay, then — I'd cooperate in any way I needed to. The Chief's collaboration with the FBI agent had paid off; the e-mail headers had led to identifying the Internet provider, Adelphia. The swift lawyer for the college had filed another "John Doe" lawsuit, this time in hopes of procuring a subpoena through which Adelphia would be required to reveal the Internet user's name. She'd then called Adelphia and, unbelievably, had been able to speak with a human being, who recognized the urgency at hand. He agreed to name the customer if all the paper work could be assembled by the next morning; the present day being Veterans' Day, he understood the difficulty of getting a warrant until the following day. The narrative that the Chief of Police was requesting of me was required for a warrant, which would be issued for the e-mailer's arrest. Oddly, I didn't inquire as to the identity of my stalker, partly because I was distracted and relieved, but also because I was timid once again, wary of appearing weak if I asked for information that couldn't yet be given to me. Not until the lawyer called me later in the evening did I find out that, all along, I had been right about who the student was. She told me right away. How strange, she said, that I didn't already know