

AN OBSESSION TURNS VIOLENT ACROSS DIGITAL PLATFORMS

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THE STORY AND THE VIOLENCE

Four years ago, when Alma was 20 years old, a man whom she had never met named Admir covertly took photographs of her performing at a concert in her home country of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Later Admir began interacting with Alma through Facebook by sending her the pictures he had taken. She was initially disconcerted, but after several "charming" messages where he indicated how much he liked her, they started talking regularly on the phone. Later Admir admitted to Alma that he was a wheelchair user, and from his only profile picture she could see that he was much older than she was. She says, "I got scared and I wanted distance. As bad as it might sound, I didn't want that kind of obligation, being this young. I knew I wasn't ready. He felt my lack of interest... so he became more persistent and pushy... Then he started getting verbally aggressive."

During this period Alma was highly distressed, and before long her mother noticed something was wrong. When she finally told her parents about the situation, they immediately took away her mobile phone and computer and locked her inside the house for nearly 20 days. She says, "I guess they got really scared and started panicking... They also took away my ID card and passport." Her parents blamed her for entering into a correspondence with Admir in the first place, especially after Alma's father learned that Admir was over 40 years old, and divorced with a child.

Despite her ending all contact with him, Admir still continued to pursue Alma. One day a friend brought something to Alma's attention: a YouTube video. She recalls, "The video was about forbidden love between him and me, where he fully wrote down my name, the city where I am from, and posted my Facebook pictures... If someone who did not know the entire story saw it, they would probably think it was a sweet love story. However, I was going through a horror story." The video was up for three days, of which Alma says, "I don't even have to tell you what three days meant in this case, especially in a city as small as mine. Everyone thought I had a relationship with this person."

Soon after, Alma began receiving calls to her mobile phone in the middle of the night from an anonymous number; she knew it was Admir. He also began sending her Facebook messages from fake profiles that parodied the accounts of people from her city as well as her female friends. The only time Alma actually met Admir was unexpectedly, during a work trip to Istanbul. She recalls the incident: "I was shocked and physically unable to move... I knew he had a lot of friends in Istanbul and I was afraid of everything and everyone." Upon returning home, Alma saw that Admir's new Facebook cover photo was a picture of her hometown. Later a friend of hers rang up to tell her: "I am sitting with a man who said you broke his heart." Alma learned that she was not the first woman Admir had harassed in such a way, and she says, "I realised that he already did this to a girl before."

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Alma characterises the last four years of her life as a point from which she had often thought she would never mentally recover. The incessant abuse left her feeling angry and frustrated. She says, "A lot of thoughts, negative ones, crossed my mind. I was literally ready to go and kill him, get this story over, and go to jail... I do not know what stopped me from doing that." Her fraught state of mind was heightened by the fact that she was afraid of being disbelieved. She says, "As in every other story with ICT and the harassment one experiences through it, there is a fear that no one will take your story seriously, much less understand your fears and anxieties that are a product of the situation."

SEEKING JUSTICE

Alma made several attempts to put an end to the abuse and seek justice. However, both at the level of law enforcement and when it came to the concerned service providers, her battle was futile. After Admir uploaded the video on YouTube containing Alma's pictures and details of her identity, she reported it to YouTube. YouTube refused to help and did not take it down. Later when Admir began ringing Alma anonymously at odd hours of the night, she called BH Telecom to find out what her options were. But there was a loophole in the telecom provider's rules, one that Admir was already exploiting. Alma explains: "They told me that they can block a person only after he has called you three times a day. He obviously knew this rule, because he never called more than two times per day... All these threats and him knowing the rules of BH Telecom just drove me crazy... I felt terrified."

When Admir established that he did not want to remove the YouTube video, Alma approached the

police. She says, "They told me they could not do anything about it and that it was up to his good will to remove it. As I recall, the police officer told me. 'Don't you worry, it's just love." If the police had intervened. Alma would have had the law on her side. Admir's YouTube video could have been clearly deemed as damaging to Alma's honour, dignity and reputation, particularly in that it presented false facts about her. Given that Alma hails from a small town, this negative impact on her reputation would have been felt within Alma's immediate environment. The Law on Obligations in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has clear provisions for such offences. Furthermore, the fact that Admir adopted false identities on Facebook could fall under identity theft, which is a criminal offence under Article 393 of the Criminal Code of the Federation. But given that the police refused to intervene, these laws were not invoked.

FINDING AGENCY

During the initial period of Admir's harassment, Alma changed her phone number several times. But Admir was always able to learn what her new number was. Finally after Admir's YouTube video and anonymous phone calls, Alma shared the extent of the abuse with her parents. She recalls, "This time, my parents' acts were different. They were by my side and I had their full support. I felt like I was the victim this time and he was the perpetrator... Knowing that I had my parents' support calmed me down and empowered me." Ending the isolation she had felt up to this point in time allowed Alma to deal with the situation better. But because no form of legal justice was attained, Alma believes that Admir's pattern of abuse will repeat itself and that "there will be other girls after me."



