

## Confronting My Cyberbully, 13 Years Later

*By Francie Diep*

When I was thirteen, I had a falling-out with my best friend, after which she tortured me over the Internet for the next three years. We were so close that she knew the answer to my security question, so it didn't matter if I changed my password. Over the course of three years she would periodically go in and delete all of my emails, leaving only cruel notes for me, from my own account, as the sole messages in my inbox.

The worst part were the calendar reminders. Written in the first person, they notified me of my own plans to kill myself. I would be quietly browsing, then the reminder would pop up: "Throw myself off the \_\_\_\_\_ bridge." (There are a few rivers and creeks in my hometown, so she could be specific.) These reminders were always set for midnight, in the dead of winter. I was an imaginative child, so they would bring up the whole scene for me immediately: I would see my own hands on the bridge railing, the darkness of the water below.

I told few people about this and never any teachers or parents. One of the first times I talked about it to an adult, I was an adult too, almost 29 years old. I was cyberbullied in 1998. That's why it was over email and also why I didn't change my security question. Yahoo didn't even offer that option until I was in my late teens. At the time, I didn't want to get a new account and let my ex-bestie know she'd won.

More than ten years later, I got in touch with Amanda. (That's not her real name. None of the names in this article are real. But it doesn't really matter.) I didn't want her to say sorry. It doesn't matter to me, either way. Instead, I thought about the strangeness of our young minds. How could I have suffered for three years instead of changing my account, or going for help? What kind of person sends suicide notes to another girl for three years straight? I saw on Facebook that Amanda had children now. Had she changed?

I remember my consternation when some of the first cyberbullying stories started making the news in the late 2000s. I was in college. I kept reading about the parents and the bullies, but I wished I could hear from the girls who had been bullied. This was impossible,

however. These girls had made the news because they had killed themselves. I thought about how good it would have felt if I had known, at 13, that I would survive, and that I wasn't alone.

\* \* \*

Amanda is now a fat, happy mom in the suburbs and I'm still terrified of her. I know this because, for this story, I started contacting her on Facebook Messenger. I soon developed a Pavlovian response to the Facebook pop. It made my hands shake and my heart race. Sometimes I buried my face in my palms for two breaths before I checked the message.

Amanda and I are not Facebook friends (I know, shocking), but we have friends in common. Coaxing her to talk to me took weeks and not a few messages to our mutual friends. The whole time, my anxiety never lessened. I spent a lot of time hyperventilating on trains and on my couch at home.

At first, Amanda said she didn't remember anything. "We were friends, and then we went different directions socially. I don't remember many details, it was a long time ago," she wrote.

With prompting, she recalled signing into my email, "likely multiple times." As a kid, I had asked her face-to-face if the person disappearing my entire inbox was her. At the time, she had always denied it.

"Do you remember what it felt like to sign into the account? Was it fun or exciting?" I asked.

"I think I probably felt smart," she replied. I thought that was the most I would get out of her.

When I finally felt I'd buttered her up enough—and how painful it was to have to feign sweetness and sympathy with her!—I asked the Big Question. "Do you remember leaving calendar reminders for me to kill myself?"

"Omg no! That's horrible," she wrote. "I'm really sorry."

She has still never admitted to leaving the calendar reminders. Later, she said they "sound plausible"—plausible that she could have set them—but she also wondered if someone else might have been in on it, too, because she couldn't recall doing it. How would I know? "Did you share my information with anyone else?" I asked.

"I can see it as something I \*may\* have done, because, who knows what goes through a teenager's mind, but I really have no recollection," she said. "I can't remember if Diana was involved or not." Diana was a friend Amanda had had since elementary school. She, and two other girls, made up Amanda's core of closest friends at the time.

What I really wanted to know was what kind of person sends another girl prompts to kill herself. But it seemed like I would never find out. She didn't remember setting the calendar reminders, she kept saying. Either she was lying to me, or they mattered so little to her, she forgot.

\* \* \*

Amanda chose to befriend me soon after we started at the same junior high. I'm not sure why. I was still kind of a kid who liked books and fantasy and playing pretend. Amanda came with a ready set of three other girl friends she had made in elementary school, who showed me how to play the things older girls played. Mall-loitering. Truth or dare. Spin the bottle. I was fascinated. After we friend-broke up, I used everything she taught me with my next girl friends, from how to do my nails, to how to talk on the phone for hours.

When Amanda decided to excise me from the group, two of her other friends called me to tell me they were thinking of dropping me because everyone else in the group was kind of cool—they gave examples of the other cool friends and activities they had/did—but I wasn't. Then they made my life at school as unpleasant as possible for a few weeks.

I have little memory of what happened with us away from the keyboard. Amanda recalled over Facebook that she and Diana would pretend to talk about me in the halls when I walked by, which I didn't remember. I do remember watching Amanda excise other girls while we were still friends. One effort involved Amanda saying loudly at lunchtime, ostensibly to those of us still in the group, "Don't you hate when people try to sit with you when you didn't give them permission and you don't even like them? You try to shake them off, but they keep following you, like a little dog. It's like they can't take a hint."

That other girl sat a foot away from us at the cafeteria table, weeping, while we avoided eye contact. I felt guilty, but also relieved that Amanda was willing to make sure that other girl never came back. She seemed sweet, but she was much less popular than us, and I didn't want other students to see I was friends with her.

I went to college out of state, so after we graduated, I never saw Amanda, or anyone I didn't want to—at least until Facebook came to my campus. Suddenly I was getting a friend request from the boyfriend I'd had when I was 14, which I declined. Eventually Amanda joined, which I could see through our mutual friends. I saw photos of her walking down the aisle as a bridesmaid at the wedding of one of her three, original, elementary-school friends. They were all there. I could have been one of those bridesmaids, I thought. Weird.

I mostly avoided Amanda's online presence because it made me queasy, but once in a while, I would check her public photos and information. I saw she gained a lot of weight, which I told myself shouldn't matter. It's misogynistic and plain bitchy to feel glad a woman you

don't like has gained weight. I was glad, anyway, and then I felt gross about it. I also felt gross about checking on her in general, but about once a year, I'd give in to temptation. Perhaps it was an echo of what Amanda used to do to me. Those suicide reminders had been an annual thing, on New Year's Eve.

Eventually I learned that I could see all of Amanda's wedding pictures if I searched her and her husband's first names on her own photographer's website. I could find who Amanda's wedding photographer was, of course, by looking at the watermark on the white-veiled photo she used as her Facebook profile picture. I discovered not only her wedding and engagement photos, but also the professional shots she commissioned while she was pregnant, and later with her children in post-fetus form. Oh, Jesus Christ, this crazy woman has two children, I thought. Also, maybe I'm the crazy one for doing this.

"How do you think you would advise your kids if something like this happened to them when they were teens?" I asked Amanda over messenger.

"Change email accounts, go to the school," she said. "Did you go to your parents at the time? Did they help?"

One thing I think about now is how horrified I would be if this happened to my daughter and she didn't tell me. But at the time, I would have never dreamed of telling my parents. I thought I could handle it. I thought my parents would freak out and make things worse for me.

When I told Amanda that, she said, "I don't think I would've told my parents, either."

I remember wanting to die, when I was in junior high. I was just... in a lot of pain, and I didn't see an end to it. A few weeks, a few months, is a long time for a junior high girl. Three years is a long time for any kind of person.

Obviously, I didn't die, partly because killing myself was too scary and partly because I had a strong sense that the person in my email must not win. Then, as I got older, I found new friends. I began caring a lot about getting into college out of state. The desperation faded. The reminders stopped coming as often, too, although I once got the message: "Did you miss me?"

By the end, I thought I was holding down the fort well. I was smart and put together, I was going away to college, and meanwhile, I could ride this out longer than she. I don't know what I would have felt if my 16-year-old self had known that in ten years, I would be checking Amanda's wedding pictures on her photographer's website.

\* \* \*

Did she ever do anything over the Internet to anyone else? I asked her. She didn't. Why

not?

"Maybe it wasn't as easy?" she wrote.

After I told her I was writing this story, with or without her cooperation, we talked a lot more, but it was still hard to get a sense of how she was thinking. She said sorry, and she said she didn't remember. Her not remembering shut off a lot of the conversations we could have had next. What were you feeling. What were you hoping for. What would you have done if.

"What I'd want to know, is what you would have felt if I had killed myself. Did you think that far ahead?"

"I honestly don't know. I don't remember telling you to do that."

Near the end of our talks, Amanda said sorry more and more. "When you first contacted me, I felt it to be awkward and annoying. I didn't realize I had hurt you so deep. I forgot about the email, and I have no recollection of the calendar. For whatever it is worth, I'm sorry." I started to believe her.

I even started to believe it could have been someone else who picked up where Amanda left off, which was what Amanda said she thought. When we were 14, I stole my gentle neighbor Kari's boyfriend. Wouldn't that do it? Kari never confronted me about it. We just drifted away from one another. If it was her, I forgave her immediately.

In my heart, I've been fighting Amanda, or whoever was in my email, for about 15 years now. I'm really tired. I'm tired of being afraid. I built my life and I survived and I won and it is easier not to think about who really did it, and why.

"What do you think changed for you as you became an adult?" I asked Amanda. "Like what makes the 28-year-old you not the kind of person who would sign into someone else's email anymore?"

"I probably wouldn't take the time to get into petty disagreements that would warrant that? I try not to spend time with negative people...people that would compel me to do something like that. I'd rather write off the friendship/move-on instead of trying to annoy someone."

"What kind of things make someone a negative person, to you?"

"Someone who is disrespectful."

"Was I disrespectful to you when we were kids?"

"I don't think so. Whatever it was, was probably some petty argument."