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Another Email, More Abuse

A student's cyber-stalking campaign against her professor scars more than his reputation. Edward Kosner reviews James Lasdun's "Give Me Everything You Have."

By Edward Kosner
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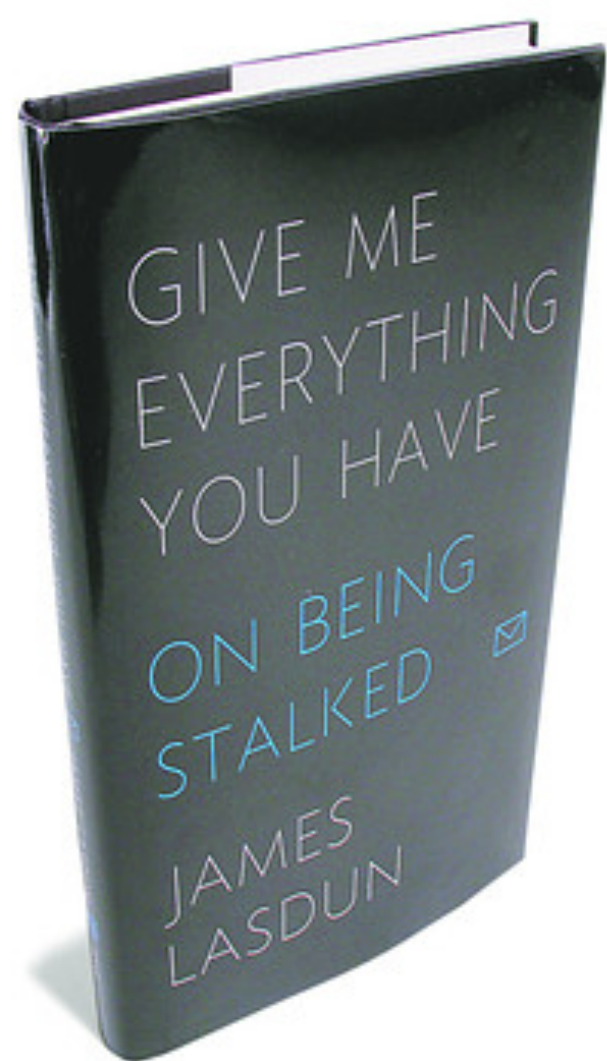
The first emails seemed harmless enough, if slightly flirtatious. Soon, the tone changed. "I'm sorry if I got screwy on you," read one. "Would you like to see me in a veil, sir?" asked another. "I Google -stalked you . . . again," boasted a third. Then the torrent: "When I needed help you disappeared. And wrote a f---ing story in which I am obviously the psychopathic jaywalker." And: "I'm not in love with you. I want your apartment. Give me the f---ing keys." And: "Do you have to be the stereotype of a Jew?"

These scathing bolts from the ether, and thousands more like them, landed in the inbox of James Lasdun, now 54, an Anglo-American novelist and poet who has taught at Columbia, Princeton and other schools. He describes himself as "a standard-issue liberal with unimpeachably correct views on everything" and at another point as a member of the "axis of virtue." Happily married with two children, he lives upstate in Woodstock, N.Y., and for a while had a rent-stabilized flat in Greenwich Village.

The emails erupted from an Iranian-American woman in her 30s whom he calls "Nasreen," one of his graduate students in a fiction workshop he taught about a decade ago at a college in New York he doesn't identify. Increasingly abusive, the "verbal terrorism," as Nasreen herself so accurately describes it, nearly destroys him. "Depression, anxiety, insomnia . . . one by one the symptoms of stress took over my life," he writes in "Give Me Everything You Have," his chronicle of this escalating, if asymmetric, war.

Inevitably, perhaps, it is a vexing book. A memoir, it reads like a literary novel based on material that the playwright David Mamet might use in one of his polemical assaults on political correctness. It begins as a straightforward account of being cyberstalked but evolves into a post-modernish meditation on identity and anti-Semitism.

At the innocuous start of Mr. Lasdun's ordeal, in the fall of 2003, Nasreen submits the first several chapters of a novel about pre-revolutionary Iran, seemingly based on the experience of her own family. Mr. Lasdun is struck by her talent and praises the manuscript lavishly in class. The semester ends, and Nasreen drops from his mind. She resurfaces two years later with the first draft of the book. He likes what he reads so much that he directs her to his own literary agent and to a freelance editor to polish her work for publication.



GIVE ME EVERYTHING YOU HAVE

By James Lasdun
(Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 218 pages, \$25)

But Nasreen becomes increasingly unhinged—and ingeniously adept at finding new electronic ways to torment her onetime mentor, whose dealings with her, he assures the reader, were fastidiously professional. She begins emailing his agent, colleagues and college employers with scandalous tales of how he plagiarized her work and passed it on to other Iranian women who were publishing successful novels and memoirs. She sabotages his Wikipedia entry with a scatological flourish. She accuses him of having affairs with his students and somehow masterminding her "rape" while she was working at a magazine. She manages to send out emails under his address, forwarding articles to others with scurrilous comments attached. Anti-Semitic rants crop up more and more. Opening his email, Mr. Lasdun writes, was "like swallowing a cup of poison every morning." But he continues doing so to track what she is saying about him, not least to friends and co-workers. "I will ruin him" is the message that seems to best capture her mission.

Mr. Lasdun deftly evokes the chill power of cyberstalking. "Spite," he observes, "has never had such an efficient instrument at its disposal." And there is the dread that the infinitely multiplying Internet induces in the targeted victim. "Who else has seen what you have seen?," he writes. "Who believes it? . . . Who has copied it, posted it elsewhere, copied it to a friend?" After all, he concludes, "you are what the Web says you are."

The author seems curiously passive in the face of this diabolical onslaught. His wife is oddly detached, too. A reader may well begin to wonder why he is such a wimp about it all. Then, halfway through the book, he acknowledges that, early on, he had gone to the FBI and a New York police detective to try to get Nasreen to knock it off. The feds didn't think that her words were life-threatening enough to take action. The detective doubted that the authorities would make the effort to extradite her from California, where she had moved. As far as the reader can tell, Nasreen is still at it to this day.

Inexplicably, over the decade, Mr. Lasdun makes no effort to learn more about Nasreen and what may be driving her fury. He speculates that she may be crazy but feels that his account would be more compelling if she is sane albeit demonic.

His narrative begins to lose impetus after its harrowing descriptions of the cyberstalking. There are long passages about men who resisted seduction—Sir Gawain in the Arthurian poem and D.H. Lawrence at the randy Mabel Dodge Luhan's art colony in Taos, N.M.—although Mr. Lasdun professes never to have been seriously tempted by Nasreen. He also pads out the work with those introspections on identity, motivation and his own conflicted Jewish roots.

The book peters out with Mr. Lasdun visiting the Western Wall while on a magazine assignment in Jerusalem. Somehow he manages to conflate the balled-up messages to God that the faithful wedge into crevices in the wall with Nasreen's missives into cyberspace. It is easy to imagine him scribbling down his own message for the Western Wall, something along the lines of: "Deliver me from my tormentor." But even divine intervention is no sure bet in our age of cyber anarchy.

Mr. Kosner's book, "It's News to Me," is a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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