

## Q: FEAR A: FACTOR

As a terrorism expert, **Jessica Stern** has met scores of violent men worldwide. But could she cope with meeting her own childhood rapist?

■ **JESSICA STERN** knows terror. When she was 15 years old, a stranger broke into her home in the historic town of Concord, Massachusetts, while she and her 14-year-old sister were home alone. The intruder, wielding a gun, cut the phone wires and raped each girl multiple times, forcing the other to

watch. Afterward, he announced that his weapon was merely a cap gun, then disappeared. On that terrible night, "Something got cut out of me," says Stern. "My capacity for pain and fear was removed."

Indeed, that early brush with terror, back in 1973, eventually led Stern to become a terrorism expert for the Council on Foreign Relations, crisscrossing the globe from Pakistan to Palestine to interview violent men about their motivations. She didn't feel afraid in such dangerous situations, she says, because her fear had been replaced by "a blanket of numbness."

Stern remained comfortably numb until 2006, when the Concord police decided to reopen her long-unsolved rape case. Suddenly she had an

opportunity to find the man who had changed her fate—and to learn what had motivated him. We talked to Stern, now a professor at Harvard Law School and author of the memoir *Denial*, about her own personal war on terror.

**Q: Why do you think your rapist felt the need to tell you about the cap gun?**

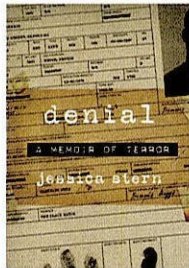
**A:** I think on some level he wanted to persuade himself that he wasn't actually hurting us. He kept saying, "It won't hurt. It doesn't hurt." I think he was trying to prove to himself that he wasn't really a violent per-

son who forced himself on girls under the threat of death.

**Q: You sensed at the time that your rapist was a broken man. That's pretty insightful for someone so young. >>**

JEFFREY WESTBROOK/STUDIO D

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# marie claire BULLETIN

>> **A:** Yes, I had a feeling that he was afraid; even in my confused, altered state, I could sense that this person was a broken person. It was an intuition.

**Q:** Do you have that kind of empathy when it comes to interviewing terrorists?

**A:** I've found that I'm able to silence judgment as I listen, and to stop myself from feeling fear or horror. I've found that if I allow myself to feel only curiosity and empathy—which is not to be confused with sympathy—the terrorists talk to me.

**Q:** What made the police reopen your rape case?

**A:** I was writing a book about terror, and I wanted to see my old files for a vignette. The officer who gave me the files discovered that there had been many other similar rapes; he realized this could be a serial rapist who was still at large.

**Q:** How did you feel about revisiting your case?



**A:** I was surprised, and I was interested. The whole thing was so overwhelming that my reaction was not to feel too much.

**Q:** The police learned certain things about your rapist: He tended to rape girls in pairs. He served 18 years in jail for three rapes, but he likely raped 44 girls in all. After getting out of jail, he hung himself. But that wasn't the end for you.

**A:** No, I think I would've felt some kind of closure if I'd been able to talk to him, but that wasn't possible. In order for me to truly put him in the coffin, I needed to understand who he was. I'm cursed, or blessed, with obsessive curiosity.

**Q:** So you started talking to people who had known him. What did you find?

**A:** It appeared that he may have been abused as a child. He had attended a church that suffered a series of predatory priests, three of whom were convicted in a church scandal.

**Q:** How did your discoveries about your rapist help you in your professional life?

**A:** One thing I have found in talking to terrorists is that the word *humiliation* comes up regularly. There's an element of sexual humiliation. I haven't been able to do a large study, but I've talked to enough terrorists to come away with a very strong hypothesis that humiliation is a major factor for the kind of terrorism we face today. Not that it excuses a terrorist's behavior. Just because someone feels humiliated doesn't give him a right to become a terrorist. But I think it is important to understand. In Afghanistan, I learned, Thursdays are known as "man-loving day"—in other words, the day when warlords rape boys. Friday prayers absolve sinners of wrongdoing. This isn't covered in the press here.

**Q:** And in your personal life?

**A:** I guess I feel that I can be all of myself in my personal relationships. There isn't this side that I've cut off, that I've buried, that I'm in denial about. I'm my full self now. The more of yourself you have access to, the more you can have a full life.

—Abigail Pesta