



## **An Unexpected Patriot**

### ***Terrorist Hunter***

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[http://www.philly.com/philly/hp/news\\_top/8632902.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/hp/news_top/8632902.html)

Michael Curtis Reynolds, a failure from Wilkes-Barre, leaves Room 205 of the Thunderbird Hotel in Pocatello, Idaho, in December 2005 and heads for a rest stop on a remote stretch of I-15.

His agenda for the day is to pick up a bag of money from al-Qaeda so he can destroy America.

A belligerent drifter who once tried to blow up his parents, Reynolds, 47, is a regular in the Osama bin Laden Crew chat room, searching for jihadists to help him cripple the U.S. economy.

Reynolds has made contact with a self-described Islamic extremist who says he'll pay Reynolds \$40,000 for his scheme to blow up U.S. energy pipelines.

Hurricane Katrina taught Reynolds that disruption of oil hurts America.

And in that chaos, he believes, lies opportunity.

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### ***Becoming "Radicalized"***

Shannen Rossmiller spends Sept. 11, 2001, frozen in front of the TV in her Montana home.

"Oh, my God," she tells her husband, Randy. "They're going to need thousands of body bags. This doesn't seem possible. It's so surreal."

Randy had never seen his wife so tense. "We can't do anything about it, Shannen," Randy says. "Just take a Jacuzzi or something."

Rossmiller, a municipal judge in a small town, complies, but the hot water doesn't help. Still shaken, she steps out of the tub and slips.

She lies on the cold white tile, staring at the two towels on the rack, willing them to fall and cover her in case one of her three kids comes in. She can't get her legs to work.

Calling for help, she waits until Randy finally runs in and carries her upstairs. But it is agony. She has broken her pelvis.

Rossmiller spends the next six weeks in bed, becoming "radicalized." Fox News, MSNBC, CNN - they saturate her brain.

She asks Randy to go into Great Falls and buy her the books about radical Islam and the Middle East written by the experts she sees on the news shows.

For reasons she cannot articulate, Rossmiller immerses herself in all things Arabic, studying the culture and learning the language.

It's as if a powerful force has taken hold of her, compelling her to think about 9/11 and little else, save for the spasming pain.

*I can't figure it out, she thinks. Is this post-traumatic stress? It's more than passion. It's anger. This is the ugliest, darkest thing I've ever seen.*

Depressed and aching, Rossmiller reads Middle East Quarterly on the computer and wonders why people hate America.

She reorders her checks to have them read, "9/11: We will never forget." She festoons her car with American flags.

"You're not the same woman I married," Randy says. Before 9/11, Rossmiller would laugh, watch *Melrose Place*. Now it's 24.

"You're right," Rossmiller says. "I'll never be the same."

### ***Forts and Serial Killers***

Recovering from the fall, Rossmiller moves around the house on a walker. She is petite and blond, with green eyes and a warm smile. "She's easy on the eyes," Randy likes to say.

Rossmiller projects a down-to-earth style, from her deferential politeness to her attire - flip-flops and jeans. If you didn't know she's a mom, a wheat farmer's daughter, and a former cheerleader, you might guess.

But if you think that's all she is, you've misread her entirely.

Breaking her pelvis is the first in a string of events that will lead Rossmiller, now 38, to become a highly valued al-Qaeda hunter who works with the FBI in an extraordinary partnership to expose terrorists, domestic and foreign. Recently, the FBI publicly acknowledged her efforts.

But much of Rossmiller's work is considered confidential, and federal law enforcement officials will not comment about it. Other law enforcement officials say Rossmiller has received death threats, and they monitor her to try to keep her safe.

In 2001, though, Rossmiller is only beginning to understand how terrorism works. One of the first lessons she learns is that many Arab extremists connect on the Web.

With the help of a translation program, she reads the Web sites and postings in Arabic chat rooms.

Slowly weeding out the pompous and the blowhards, she homes in on radical Islamists who sound dangerous - though she learns to turn down the sound on the beheadings. This world of anger and hatred holds her in thrall.

Rossmiller can't sleep much. Never could, really. So her post-9/11 routine is to wake around 3 a.m. and monitor extremists.

Now moving around on a four-post cane, Rossmiller feels more capable, more daring. She wants to participate.

Her plan is to break through the wall of anonymity that the Internet provides and interact with the jihadists.

She knows she can't communicate as a woman, let alone an American. *Women in extremist cultures are lower than the family goat*, she says. So Rossmiller invents a persona, a young radical bent on the destruction of the United States.

In early winter, she posts some rudimentary Arabic online, basic "Death to America" cheerleading. And waits.

No one bites.

*Come on, Shannen, you look like an idiot out there*, she tells herself. *Get it right.*

Snow is falling, and the wind roars hard enough to make a woman rethink living in Montana.

Gusts seem to blow ceaselessly here at 3,900 feet, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Pioneer diaries are filled with references to wind, how it can drive a person crazy.

This state can be a raw tableau, despite satellite TV and restaurants with goat cheese. Winters seem to last forever. Without a side interest or a lover, a person can run into trouble.

Twenty-five miles outside town, the Rockies give this land its lore and beauty. They're pretty but treacherous. Cars skid on quick-freezing roads and spiral into death plunges off non-barricaded highways. And the trackless woods are filled with wild animals.

Kind of like the shadowy quadrants of cyberspace that Rossmiller frequents.

Rossmiller has had an affinity for languages since childhood. Her father, a farmer with a college degree, and her mother, a teacher, always stressed education.

As a child, Rossmiller eschewed dolls and slumber parties. In fact, she barely slept. Maybe two to four hours a night. She'd pop out of bed at 3 a.m. to pore over history books or read about serial killers, an endless fascination.

In seventh grade, she made a class presentation about Ed Gein of Wisconsin, who skinned women and pieced the remains over his dead mother. Rossmiller's classmates were spellbound; her teacher was aghast.

Able to relax only at night, Rossmiller avoids sunlight, which she says kicks off her frequent migraines. So when everyone fell asleep, she'd build forts in the moonlight, fort tunnels in haystacks, or enclosures made out of rocks.

When her parents found her asleep in the flower bed at 6 a.m., they began locking her in her room at night. She'd just drag her bed into her closet, making a fort out of it.

Rossmiller needs to feel safe, she says, in a spot she can control. Outside her fort, she feels exposed. Outside her fort, she hunts bad men.

Dangling her "Death to America" taunt online hour after hour, Rossmiller gets no response. *What could I even say after that?*

She feels her resolve waning. So she calls up a Web slide show of 9/11 victims set to the song "Can't Cry Hard Enough."

The presentation reinspires and recommits her. It's morning now, and Rossmiller has to get ready for work. But she'll be back online tonight.

Rossmiller studied criminal law at the University of Montana at Missoula, then became a municipal judge in Montana, where sitting on the bench doesn't require a law degree.

She had a reputation for being tough, even fining her father for speeding.

One day on the bench, she has an epiphany: *The criminal mind-set is like jihadi thinking.* It makes sense.

The toughest people in court are in for assault, fueled by drugs and alcohol. The jihadists are like those assailants, Rossmiller decides. Their intoxicant isn't crystal meth but fundamentalist Islam, a perversion of the Muslim religion.

Believing in the wisdom of the law, she locks up bad guys, then goes home and sleeps well. For a couple of hours.

### ***'Death to America'***

It's 3 a.m., early May 2002. By now, she is continuing physical therapy, but she's done with the pain pills and the cane. The jihadists, though, have become central in her life.

*Go on, I dare you,* she murmurs as she finds her way to a new Web site, The Arab Castle. *OK,* she says. *Watch this.*

"Death to America," she types in Arabic, a phrase now as familiar as "Good morning."

It has been eight months since 9/11, and Rossmiller is well on her way toward completing online Arabic courses from the Arab Academy in Cairo and from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She waits for a reply.

An answer comes quickly enough: "I wish someone would blow up the American base in Afghanistan," a person writes in Arabic.

"It would be great," another responds.

No one corrects her, which must mean Rossmiller has said it right, in the right spot. She's elated. *They're buying me as one of them.*

Having digested a clutch of Arab novels, Rossmiller uses the devices of fiction to invent characters she can be on the Web.

She must be specific and nuanced to be believed, she thinks, but one persona is not enough.

*It's a control thing, she decides. If I can have an effect on them, then maybe I can stop the evil they do.*

Rossmiller begins to fill notebooks with detailed aspects of her made-up characters - names, photos, occupations. Some are good at bomb-making. Others are facile with small weapons.

*I've got some real doozies here,* Rossmiller says to herself as she reviews her ensemble of grim operators, her own fictional collection of serial killers.

Soon Rossmiller has created around three dozen "people." She searches Web sites for obituaries with pictures, then alters the images so relatives wouldn't recognize them.

The photos are mostly for herself, to keep a picture in her head of whom she's supposed to be, a sense of her character. Once in a while, someone asks to see whom he's talking to, and Rossmiller can oblige.

She researches mosques in Jordan and Pakistan to learn their street locations and the names of their imams. This way, she can make authentic references during online chats.

After several months, she has developed quite a correspondence with dozens of people who seem to believe she is whoever she says she is.

Many of the men with whom she communicates seem to be uneducated and indigent, judging from their poor language and computer skills.

They don't have Web access at home. So they crowd into Internet cafes to chat and bluster, Rossmiller learns by reading the Internet protocol addresses. Over time, she has become so precise with her computer sleuthing that she believes she can tell within a block in which cafe in Abu Dhabi, for example, they're gathered. Her method is to examine details such as computer document properties, which include the cafe name and computer work-station number.

All these young men seem to know is the fanatical side of Islam, and they believe in martyrdom for the cause.

Ultimately, they trust Rossmiller because they're convinced they're always interacting with people like themselves.

To her uncomfortable surprise, Rossmiller discovers that impersonating extremists is getting easier. *That's a little scary*, she says to herself. *What's inside me that lets me do this?*

Sometimes, online, Rossmiller becomes an eldest son whose father has died and passed on to him the responsibility of the entire family. The ruse garners respect and sympathy.

Other times, she plays the unstable, lost kid from Amman who wants jihad, but has no idea how to bring it about.

Often, she is the raging bull taking over the chat room.

It was that way with the Stinger missiles.

"I have Stingers to sell," a Jordanian writes to Rossmiller in July 2002. He says he has gotten them from a source in Pakistan.

Rossmiller stares at the computer screen. She reads everything about the Mideast, and she knows from old news reports that the United States sent Stingers to Pakistan in 1987.

"You are an infidel undercover," Rossmiller berates the man, hurling one of the worst insults in radical Islam. "You have no missiles."

The man bites: "I do, I do" - then types the serial numbers.

Rossmiller can't believe it. Excited, she goes on an FBI tip site and writes what just transpired.

Soon, an FBI agent for the Joint Terrorism Task Force in New Jersey calls, demanding to know how Rossmiller got such information. He keeps her on the phone, grilling her, she thinks, as if she's a terrorist.

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### ***Hello, It's Me***

On a frigid morning in November 2005, Rossmiller boots up her computer.

It's 4:30 a.m., and she's awake. She pops open a Diet Coke.

Wearing pink sweats, a sweat shirt and socks, Rossmiller clicks on Todd Rundgren on the computer. *Hello, it's me . . .*

"You," Rossmiller's best friend, Chris, always tells her, "are the weirdest person I know."

*Oh*, Rossmiller thinks now, *you don't even know*.

On top of the computer monitor is a leprechaun that announces Rossmiller's Irish heritage and, she likes to think, her stubborn spirit.

Around the desk are the bric-a-brac of a patriot: World War I and II posters. A Betsy Ross collectible plate. Inspirational quotes. And toilet paper with Osama bin Laden's face on it.

"Wipe here," it says.

Rossmiller takes a run through the Osama bin Laden Crew chat room to see what the jihadists are up to. A posting jumps out at her like a mountain lion. Every e-mail here is in Arabic. This one's in English.

Apparently some Pennsylvanian is sitting in Thailand, of all places, chatting about a "real opportunity falling from the sky."

"If any real member of the OBL crew is reading these," Michael Curtis Reynolds writes, "do something besides ignoring them. E-mail me."

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