



An Unexpected Patriot

'What I do is lonely sometimes'

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Michael Curtis Reynolds wants his payday.

"I need funds," he writes to a person he thinks is an al-Qaeda operative on the Web.

In exchange for information about making and placing bombs to blow up energy pipelines, Reynolds, a Pennsylvania loner whose three children live with his ex-wife in Connecticut, is expecting \$40,000 in cash.

"There's not a question a lot of thinking and work went into the plan," he writes on Dec. 1, 2005, to his al-Qaeda contact, now FBI special agent Mark Seyler, taking over for terrorist hunter Shannen Rossmiller.

Reynolds tells al-Qaeda what materials to buy at Wal-Mart, Radio Shack and other stores, how to make and place the bombs, how to escape - even which Motel 6 to stay in.

"Buy. Build. Leave," he writes. "My kind of operation."

Worried about consequences, he delineates the stakes: "If I am discovered, I could get life in prison, perhaps even execution as a traitor."

Reynolds and his online contact agree on a pickup point for the money: a picnic table at a rest area, off Idaho's I-15, called Hell's Half Acre. It gets the name from a nearby field of hardened lava that locals say looks like the moon.

The ground is covered with crystallized snow. The wind blows, and it's 10 degrees above zero.

An FBI video camera hidden behind sagebrush shows the mustached, 6-foot-3 Reynolds in a bulky blue waistcoat, dark pants and black ski cap walk toward the spot where the black-and-red money bag is sitting. It's 12:47 p.m. on Dec. 5, 2005.

Reynolds bends over toward the bag, then turns quickly to his right, as though he hears footsteps in the crunchy snow.

An FBI SWAT team closes in, forces him on his belly, then handcuffs him.

In the 20-minute car ride to the FBI office in Pocatello, Reynolds says he was merely checking to see that the money was there. Then he was going to call a private security group called Northbridge to capture the al-Qaeda terrorists he was communicating with.

"I was enticing them," he says.

"That story," an FBI agent tells Reynolds, "makes no sense."

A swift verdict

She *looks* calm, at least.

How could anyone in the courtroom know that a minute ago she was getting sick in the women's room?

Taking the stand in the trial of *United States v. Michael Curtis Reynolds* in Scranton two weeks ago, Rossmiller does her best to keep it together.

She avoids Reynolds' eyes and ticks off the case against him - how he went online to enlist al-Qaeda to take down America by blowing up energy pipelines.

Back in 2005 when she was tracking Reynolds on the Net, she knew this day would come. But something about the way Reynolds is defending himself - saying that he was a terrorist hunter just like Rossmiller - upsets her more than she could have anticipated.

Comparing himself to me makes me feel dirty, disgusting, she thinks. *It's like a personal attack.*

That some guy willing to sell out his country for \$40,000 would say that he and she, a patriot who loves the law, are equals riles her endlessly.

She stews on the plane ride back to Montana. At least during the trial the FBI finally acknowledged for the first time publicly that Rossmiller indeed works with them.

Things brighten even more when Rossmiller hears that the jury took little more than their lunch hour to find Reynolds guilty of terrorism on Friday, July 13, after a five-day trial.

Well, Rossmiller says to herself. *That's another one locked away.*

Back at the computer

Even after all the work she put in to capture Reynolds and Ryan Anderson, Rossmiller knows they are just drops in the ocean. Terrorism goes on.

The thought of an endless tide of hatred can be overwhelming, and more than once Rossmiller finds herself daydreaming at her computer.

I hate what these people do, she says. But I also admire the culture they live in.

Through the years of cyberintelligence, Rossmiller has immersed herself in Islamic culture and has come to love it.

The Afghans cherish culture but abhor rules.

It's an observation from *The Kite Runner*, a novel by Khaled Hosseini, a physician who was born in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Rossmiller remembers that line, and many others in the book, which she loves. It has helped inform some of her online personae with intimate details of the Islamic mind-set.

It also sheds light on how complex the Islamic world is, and how hard it can be for an outsider to understand it.

One night online, when the vitriol gets to be too much, Rossmiller begins to read about Lahore, Pakistan. Since then, she has become charmed by the place.

There's not enough uniqueness to Montana, she thinks to herself. But Lahore. . .

In an odd sort of transference that occurs in the wee hours at the computer, Rossmiller sometimes has a sense that she is a man from Lahore. It's bizarre, she knows, but she has become so used to thinking like a Muslim man over the last six years that when she contemplates living in Lahore, it's as a man. *I find myself almost looking down on women*, she says to herself.

Especially in the cold months of Montana, she can feel the heat of Lahore, practically smell the dirt and the flower farms that stretch for miles. *I've adopted this place as mine*, she says to herself.

The land is beautiful, the people soulful and dignified, if their Web postings are any indication. Keeping up with the local news, Rossmiller knows the buzz and rhythm of the place, which has begun to feel like home.

In another life, Rossmiller says to herself.

Wrestling with 'why?'

One day, Rossmiller's phone rings with an unlikely caller: Debra Burlingame, sister of Charles Burlingame, the pilot of American Airlines Flight 77, which was hijacked and flown into the Pentagon on 9/11.

"I just wanted you to know how deeply what you've done has moved me, and how much it means to me," Burlingame says to Rossmiller. Then she adds a question:

"Why do you do what you do?"

Flustered and honored, Rossmiller pauses, then says: "I don't know. The people on 9/11, they're not part of my memories. But I still feel it. I just don't know why."

"God bless you," Burlingame tells her, before hanging up.

The *why* has always been tough for Rossmiller to explain - to her family, to curious outsiders, to herself.

"I'm afraid people think I'm anointing myself as a savior or something," she tells friends. "But I can't give it a label. Who is there to understand the way my mind works?"

Certainly no one in Rossmiller's family. Not her best friend, Chris, or anyone else she knows, for that matter.

Some who don't know Rossmiller believe she gets paid for the work. Except for reimbursement for expenses, Rossmiller has not accepted a dime from the FBI. Independent of spirit and will, Rossmiller does not want to be told what to do. Nor does she want to become part of a bureaucracy in which she needs permission and a memo to find terrorists.

Besides, Rossmiller is so far advanced in this work that federal authorities have come to her and taken notes on how she does it.

During a long session with the terrorists one night, as she finds herself once more exhorting others to do their duty against the crusader U.S. military, Rossmiller is hit with a kind of epiphany:

Right now, I don't know what it's going to take to make me stop. Now, I need it. I definitely feed off of it.

So, yes, there is something inside that requires her to continue. But it has a cost.

What I do is lonely sometimes, she says to herself. There's no one to talk to to say, "Oh, God, the terrorists were really nasty online today."

Three hundred million Americans saw the towers fall on 9/11. As far as anyone knows, Shannen Rossmiller is the only private U.S. citizen who learned Arabic, lurked on Web sites, and helped capture terrorists, from 2001 until this very minute.

Even she can't clearly say why. But it certainly has made life difficult.

All I know, Rossmiller says, is that if I could go back to pre-9/11 life, I would. I liked life then.

I used to be happy.

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