

ae BOOKS

Strange Piece of Paradise

BY DONNA IVERSON

In the summer of 1977, Terri Jentz set out on a 4,200 mile bicycle trip across America with her Yale college roommate, Shayna Weiss. Jentz was infatuated with Weiss, to the point of romantic obsession. But the trip would destroy their relationship and both their lives as they knew them.

In the seventh day into the trip east along on BikeCentennial TransAmerica Trail, the two twenty-year old women unpacked their tent in Cline Falls State Park near Redmond, Oregon. It was June 22, the summer solstice. Their map told them it was an overnight facility, but when they arrived near dark, the sign said "day use only." Terry decided that it would be safer to pitch their tent there, than to continue on. It was a decision she will regret for the rest of her life.

In the middle of the night, a cowboy driving a pickup truck ran over the tent's occupants while they slept. Then he emerged from the vehicle with an ax and attacked both of them savagely. Despite multiple blows to their heads and defensive blows to their arms, the two women survived. Conscious but covered with blood, Terri flagged down help to save herself and her roommate Shayna Weiss, who was unconscious.

In the hospital, Shayna suffered amnesia and could not see, the result of an ax blow so severe that she was missing a piece of her skull. Seemingly blaming Terri

for the attack, she all but refused to talk to her. Shayna's withdrawal was as painful to Terri as her multiple wounds to shoulder, ribs, and arms.

For the next 15 years, Terri lived a split psychic life. Her public persona hid what she refers to as her "scarecrow self." As the years passed, the scarecrow became stronger, causing nightmares, panic attacks and an increasing need for Valium. At the same time, Terri continues to obsess about Shayna, believing that she held the key to letting go of the past. But Shayna remained out of reach despite numerous

attempts by Terri to contact and talk with her. Shayna's withdrawal was as painful to Terri as her multiple wounds to shoulder, ribs, and arms. There is reason to believe that the axe wielder was being protected, possibly because he was a police informant. There was, in fact, plenty of physical evidence and people with strong suspicions about her attacker. Police had photos of the crime scene that included tire marks, paint from the vehicle on a picnic table, and Terri's description of her attacker.

Even more unsettling, Jentz learned that many in that Oregon community in the 1970s did not approve of two willful young women biking across their state. They were Yale college coeds,

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To exorcise her demons, Terri decided in 1992 to revisit the scene of the crime and investigate her own case. The newly published book, *A Strange Piece of Paradise*, is the result. What she uncovered is a possible cover up, and hints that the police and members of the Oregon community knew her would-be killer and did nothing. In fact, he still lives in the area and is known for his jealous rages and collection of axes he keeps in his pickup truck.

After dozens and dozens of interviews, Terri zeros in on the mostly likely suspect, Dirk Duran (not his real name). Although he was arrested a few days after the

they were well to do, and they seemed to be snubbing their noses at the proper way for females to behave, at least in the West. However, 15 years later, the residents of that Oregon community expressed sincere regrets over the way the case was handled. They told Terri over and over again how much the attack traumatized everyone involved, including rescue workers, hospital nurses, police officers, and even those who just read about it in their newspapers. They all expressed relief that she was alive and were eager to unburden themselves of what they knew and how the attack affected them and their friends and neighbors.

While the bulk of the book is



a true crime story written with the emotional intensity, precision of language, and attention to detail as that of Truman Capote, in a sense, Jentz has written two books. In the first 100 pages, Jentz retells the story of her relationship with Shayna (not her real name) and her feelings of attrac-

tion to understand what was going on. But it never happened. The night of the attack, with Shayna unconscious and moaning like an animal, Terri gently kissed her on the cheek. It was as close as she would ever get.

Jentz's book reminded me a lot of the book *Lucky* by Anne Siebold, about her rape and beating during her freshman year at Syracuse University. Both women were able to save their own lives, possessing an uncanny ability to choose words that disarmed their attacker's fury. And afterwards, they are both able to articulate how the mutilation (and rape in Siebold's case) ripped apart their psyches. Both women used writing to allow themselves to come to terms with the experience. Siebold went on to write the beautifully worded *The Lovely Bones*, a fictionalized and somewhat autobiographical account of a young girl's rape and murder. Jentz dedicates her book to her partner, Donna Dentz, and to the people of Oregon.

In the end, she quotes Emily Dickinson, "On my volcano, grows the Grass." ▼

Donna Iverson lives in Winooski.

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