ALSO BY JESSICA STERN

Terror in the Name of God

The Ultimate Terrorists

denial

A MEMOIR OF TERROR

jessica stern

ecco

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Erik and I have a few preliminary conversations, and eventually we agree to meet in a town located between where he lives in Maine and where I live in Massachusetts. We agree to meet at the home of one of his friends, a fellow soldier, another Iraq War

veteran. I take Route 93 up north. That's easy. Then I drive just a few miles off the highway. There are only four additional turns. I make it without mishap.

When I arrive at Erik's friend's home, I dial Erik's cell phone. He ambles out of the house, looking as if he just woke up. He is wearing one of those sleek jackets, warmth without bulk, the kind you get at Patagonia. The green of the jacket sets off his olive skin. He is good-looking, I observe, in a kind of wholesome way, despite an apparent hangover. I notice hiking boots on his feet. He must have worn combat boots in Iraq. I wonder if he likes to hike. It is 11:10 AM.

He suggests that we go to a coffee shop near the highway. Dunkin' Donuts again. All my interviews seem to take place in Dunkin' Donuts.

He gets into my car, directs me back toward the highway. As we are driving, I try to make small talk.

Erik is having trouble making ends meet. He has two jobs. I know that he drove down to his friend's house in New Hampshire last night, that he has a rare weekend day off.

"What did you do last night?" I ask, trying to feel and sound bemused by his apparently sleepy state.

"We were playing drinking games," he says.

"What are drinking games?" I ask, feeling awkward and confused.

He tells me that he and his buddy were playing cards, telling jokes, and drinking until morning.

I tell him how grateful I am that he is willing to talk to me, how grateful I am to his father-in-law for introducing us.

"He's not really my father-in-law," Erik says. "Not anymore. Betsy and I are divorced."

I wonder why Karl didn't tell me this.

"The last time I came back from Iraq, I found out she had been doing bad things. But I always liked Karl. He's a great guy. A brilliant guy. I have no problems with him, only with his daughter."

I don't ask what "bad things" means. I know that a high percentage of Iraq vets' marriages end in divorce.

When we arrive at Dunkin' Donuts, Erik orders a large coffee, a large cup of juice, and an egg sandwich with bacon. He seems famished. I wonder if he eats enough. He wants to pay for his own meal, even though I am the one who has torn him away from his normal life.

He has chosen a table in the back of the coffee shop.

"Where did you grow up?" I ask.

"In Maine," he tells me, close to where he lives now. "In Union."

"How did you end up in Iraq?" I ask.

He tells me he wanted to be a chef. He applied and was accepted to Johnson and Wales, which I will later learn is considered the Harvard University of cooking schools.

"At that time, the army was running an experimental program called College First," he says. "They paid us a hundred and fifty dollars a month, and promised to pay back our federal loans if we signed up with the army when we finished our degrees. Four years," he says. "We had to join up for four years."

"What if you didn't want to join when you finished your cooking degree?" I ask.

"We'd have to pay the stipend back," he says. "Everything they gave us, plus interest."

Erik's dream was to open his own restaurant in Camden. Camden is perhaps the fanciest resort town in Maine, popular with wealthy New Yorkers with refined palates. If you have a cooking degree and want to be a chef, Camden would be a good place to start out. But when Erik finished his degree, there were no cooking jobs to be had in Camden.

"The army told me they would pay off all my loans if I joined the service, and I didn't see a way to pay them back myself. They told me I'd be skydiving," he said. "Jumping out of planes from ten thousand feet. All this cool stuff. But I never did any of that. They lied to me."

He has some trouble telling the story in chronological order.

"I was injured by an IED [improvised explosive device] in Iraq," he blurts out.

This is the first I have heard of any physical injury. Karl did not tell me that his daughter divorced the man who was his son-in-law. He did not tell me that Erik was injured.

"Right outside of Tikrit. Blew out my right eardrum. I had skin grafts. My arm was completely mangled," he says.

Without my asking, he rolls up the sleeve on his right arm. Two large sections of his arm are red and raw, as if, in remaking Erik's arm, the surgeon had run out of human flesh and was forced to substitute a side of beef. Instinctively I pull away, and then quickly lean in, embarrassed by the cruelty of my animal reaction to his wound.

Now he points to his face. I note his blue eyes, long lashes. A sweet boy, I think to myself.

"All this is dirt and shrapnel still stuck in my face," he says, pointing to flecks of gray and black metal embedded in his skin. Still, his eyes make the strongest impression. Vulnerable. Also angry. I don't know why it should occur to me, but maybe he's not angry enough.

"My right mandible—"

He starts again. "The whole side of my right jaw was completely shattered. They wired my mouth shut. They took skin grafts from my right thigh to use on my right arm and right elbow."

In this recitation, body parts are jumbled together, as if the pain in his jaw were referred to his right elbow and arm. I do not

ask to see the thigh from which the flesh was removed, though now that I know what to expect, based on what I saw of his arm, I am curious.

"They tried to rebuild my right eardrum. I lost about half my hearing," he says.

I try to listen as a doctor would, taking in the facts. But the look of pained innocence on this boy's face makes it hard to stay detached. I am irritated by a familiar feeling of wooziness, which I try to hold at bay.

"I need to warn you that I might ask you questions more than once," I tell him. "I might forget what you said five minutes ago. I didn't go through anything like what you went through, but I've been told that I have some symptoms of PTSD. When I hear a story like this, I begin to lose track."

I don't know why I feel the need to confess my difficulty maintaining control of my thought processes. I have not been asking many questions, so how would he know that I cannot follow? His story is coming out on its own, according to a logic I don't yet understand.

"That's okay," he says, grinning cheerfully. "I can't remember what I told you three seconds ago!"

I recognize this grin, the gallows humor of a man whose psyche is still partly in the grip of the threat of death. It isn't yet clear how much of his psyche death is prepared to return.

"How did your parents feel about your joining the military?" I ask. "How did they feel when you got wounded?"

In this moment, I am furious with the parents of this beautiful boy. How could they have allowed their son to join the military? Did they not understand the risk? Did they not understand that this war is a kind of class warfare?

"They didn't want me to join, but what could they do? I couldn't afford to pay back my college loans. I was over twenty-one. When I was wounded, they were devastated," he says.

He looks away, processing some private pain.

"When was this?" I ask, trying to impose a timeline on this narrative, if only to keep myself connected to historical time.

"This happened in April of '06. I had done my time. I was supposed to be free by then. Betsy and I were going to move to Canada. But then I got a notice: stop-loss."

"What does that mean?" I ask, stalling for time.

"Stop-loss means that you have an extension of your contract. At the request of the U.S. Army."

The word *request* throws me. "Does that mean you could say no?" I ask, although I already know the answer.

"You have no choice. You can go AWOL, but then they put you in jail.

"So Betsy and I find out, we're not moving to Canada," he says. "I'm going back to Iraq."

And when he comes back, I know now, he will discover that this wife he wanted to start a new life with was "bad." Instead of starting life in a new place, he will return to his hometown, a changed man, a man he barely recognizes as himself.

Once again I try to tether us to time.

"What year did you finish your degree?" I ask.

"I finished college. I signed a contract that said four years of active duty. I did that in June of '02."

I take note that he has to talk himself through time to discover the year, to get the sequence right.

"What happened after you signed the contract?" I ask.

"I went to basic training."

"For how long?" I ask.

"Two months."

"Then what?"

"Then I went to AIT."

"What is that?" I ask.

"Advanced individual training. That takes two months, too.

Then I went to airborne school in Georgia. That's where they teach you to jump out of planes."

"Did you like it?" I ask, knowing that skydiving was part of his dream, hoping for a moment of relief.

"No," he says. "But I didn't mind it—"

"But you wanted to parachute," I insist.

"You're crammed into a plane with a hundred other guys. You're connected to a line. You have your rucksack, that is fifty pounds. You have your gun. You're so loaded down, you waddle like a duck."

In my minds eye I see a duck loaded down with a gun and a rucksack. He dreamed of soaring. He wanted to soar like a bird of prey, not waddle.

"Then you jump. You're only eight hundred feet off the ground. They had told me, you'll be at ten thousand feet, jumping out of planes. It's nothing like they told me it would be," he says, bitterly again. But maybe not bitterly enough.

"How long did that take?" I ask.

I notice a slight frown on Erik's face. I cannot tell if he is annoyed at my insistence that he tell me this history in chronological order, or if providing the information is difficult for him.

"Airborne school takes three weeks," he says. "After that I was sent to Fort Bragg. You go through the reception area. They in-process you, do all your paperwork. You get assigned to a job. Whatever they need. I was a cook. I studied cooking. I got my associate's degree in culinary arts."

I notice that his sense of time is disjointed. Was there something memorable about this "in-processing" in the reception area of Fort Bragg that makes him recall that moment? Did he provide that detail to demonstrate his annoyance? I wonder, too: Did my insistence that he provide me a timeline make him think that I'm slow? Perhaps he doesn't remember that he already told me that he studied cooking. Or perhaps he doesn't know that it is the sort of thing I would remember. He doesn't know that I, too, love to cook. Running a café is one of my fantasy jobs.

"So I cooked down there," he says. "It was horrible. I worked seven days a week, sixteen hours a day. From four thirty in the morning until eight thirty at night. On top of that, you're staying in shape. It's really hard. Every six weeks you get a weekend off.

"And then I got deployed. They don't give you much warning. You have to inventory your equipment. You have to clean your weapons. Make sure everything is ready."

He goes on at some length about these difficult preparations. I grow impatient with his detailed recitation of bureaucratic requirements, with the military jargon.

I cut him off. "What did you do when you got to Iraq?"

"The first time I was in Iraq I cooked. You cook off of MKTs."

"What are those?" I ask. Once again I find myself impatient. Why all this jargon? Did this boy forget how to speak English? Perhaps, it occurs to me now, acronyms and jargon cauterize feeling.

"Mobile kitchen trailer. It unfolds into a Bunsen burner. Like you would use in the woods. But we have big military ones that run on jet fuel. Everything comes in packages. Mostly you just heat stuff up. But it's hard. It's hot. You've got to do all this with a gun on your shoulder. Eventually they built us a kitchen. Then we could cook burgers, hot dogs, pizza," he says.

"How long did you do that?" I ask.

"Seven months," he says. "You cook, but you also have to do the infantry stuff. Hunting for people. You could be in the middle of a burger. They will say, 'We're going to the base.' We always had our weapons on while we were cooking. That was annoying. You don't want to get it covered in food because it wouldn't work. But we had to be ready to be called up to the base, any time."

"What were the dates you were in Iraq?" I ask.

"First time August of '03 to April of '04. Second time August of '05 to April of '06."

"Do you think you had PTSD when you came back?"

"No, not the first time," he says. "Not the second time either."

"So it's April 2006. You're back from your second tour of duty, and you are on your way to Canada . . ."

"Yes. But then I was handed orders, stop-loss. The orders said they needed cooks. But when I got back to Iraq for my third tour, I didn't serve as a cook, I was in the infantry.

"Before, I was cooking for infantry guys, helping out the infantry guys once in a while. But now I was an infantry guy. Out doing door-to-door searches. I was doing something I hadn't signed up to do, wasn't really trained to do."

I am puzzled.

"I had only two months of basic training," he explains. "When you're a cook, you have to go to the range and shoot your weapon. You get called out to help. But most of the time you're cooking. I was an expert at the cooking part. I was mediocre when it came to the infantry part. The other guys were regular infantry guys. That's all they did, on a daily basis. But they needed people to fill some empty slots," he says. So that was that.

"The day I was injured, we were on a foot patrol," he says. "We were out walking. It's ten AM, my group's time to go out. I was the NCO in charge that day. That means I was the first guy to knock on the door. I was the first one to come around the corner. The first guy anyone would see. We checked a couple houses, no problem there. We talked with the people, tried to find where the bad people were."

I am very nervous now. Petrified of what might be around the corner.

"Where was this?" I ask, trying to anchor myself with latitudinal lines.

"I don't even remember where it was," he says. "Some hut in the middle of nowhere. A bunch of little buildings with a river running through it. They needed our help."

Of course it was in the middle of nowhere, I say to myself. We are lost out there. It's a sea of unpronounceable names, where you can't tell the good guys from the bad guys.

"We were walking through the woods. Not exactly woods, but that's the closest word for it," he says.

I think of all the scary stories that take place in the spooky woods. "Hansel and Gretel." "Little Red Riding Hood." Stories my son once loved to hear.

"We came out of the woods to a main road. I told everyone to stop. There was a fifty-foot crater. Filled with water. They like to use those over and over."

What does this mean, over and over? I want to ask. I want to put the brakes on this story. I need to slow him down, to make sure there is time to see the scary thing around the corner. But I discipline myself to stay quiet. I can ask questions later.

"They set off bombs in the same place again and again," he explains, answering my unvoiced question. "I went up to see if it was okay. Everything was fine. I get up to turn around, to say to my guys, 'Let's go.' That's when someone with a detonator set it off. The bomb. It was buried in the ground.

"As soon as the bomb went off, the shock wave knocked all of them down. After that it was gunfire and screaming and yelling. Anything that isn't friendly, that isn't a U.S. soldier, is a liability."

His words are coming out chaotically now, associating from the sounds he heard, perhaps still hears.

"You get rid of that liability asap," he adds. He doesn't spell out the letters, as I would, but creates the word *asap* out of the acronym. "Instantly," he continues. "No one knew who had set the bomb off, so whatever you see, you just eliminate it."

Eliminate "it"? Is there some memory still buried, which he is not ready to reveal? I do not ask. Later, I will wonder if the mem-

ory of the aftermath of the explosion evokes in him the pain of some other event, some other "liability" that got "eliminated," or perhaps the opposite—a "liability" that did not get "eliminated asap," and an American soldier died.

"That's how you get collateral damage," he continues, with pained features. A wise boy. General Sherman's words come into my mind now: "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it."

"Later I found out they buried propane tanks. They buried two of those under the road. . . . They can use anything to set them off. They could use a key like that one," he says, pointing to my electronic car key on the table between us.

My mind is so involved in managing this scene that I've forgotten I have a car key, or even a car. I am surprised that Erik is able to shift gears like this.

"Then the medic came over. Did his medic job. Stopped the bleeding the best he could. They called in a life helicopter."

I ask him to explain. "It's a Black Hawk with an ambulance. They medevaced me out to where the military surgeons were. They rushed me there, took me straight into surgery."

But he is not done with the scene of the explosion. I wonder if he will ever be able to expunge that scene from his mind's eye, to stop the tape of the sounds in his head.

His words are even more jumbled now. "When I was lying there right after the explosion. I can start to remember. The medic saying I'm giving you a dose of morphine. Not enough to put me out. Hooked me up with an IV bag. I guess to keep me from passing out from the pain. Still in a lot of pain. I didn't really understand what was going on. My buddy who was with me. I remember he was holding my hand. He said, 'We're gonna have a beer when I get home.'

"I was in Iraq in surgery, not even a day. They stopped the bleeding. Got me to the point where it would be okay to fly.

"A bunch of generals came. You know, the people who don't

do anything," he says, conspiratorially. "They tried to shake my hand, told me I did a good job. They don't even know my name. They say, 'Good job,' and move on to the next injured guy. 'Good job,' " he repeats bitterly.

"I can't see him. My jaw is wired shut, no one told me why. My eyes are swollen shut. I ask for a phone. I asked to talk to my parents. They called. I talked with my mom. I don't remember what she said or what I said. My commander flew in on a chopper to see me. Out to the base. Then I woke up in Germany," he says.

Once again his story is somewhat out of temporal order.

"They put me on a plane," he explains. "It's a cargo plane. They had me on a stretcher. There were nurses and doctors. I don't remember taking off or landing. The only thing I remember is the nurse saying you're in the operating room now. It's cold, the bright lights. They go, 'You're going to be okay.' "

"Did you think you were dying?" I ask.

"I wasn't happy. I knew something was wrong. But I didn't think I was dying. There were people like you. I knew I was in a safe place."

A sense of relief floods my nervous system. I have been so worried about retraumatizing this boy. I am moved, nearly to tears, that he sees me as a "safe place," even though I'm witnessing his recalling of the moment his life hurtled in an entirely new direction. He continues, apparently unaware of the effects his words have on me.

"Once I came out of surgery, they weaned me down. Off the drugs, the painkillers. That's when they told me what was happening. I had a dozen surgeries in four days in Germany. And then they sent me to Andrews Air Force Base and then back to Fort Bragg. Then I went to the University of North Carolina, in Chapel Hill, to get the skin graft. I was there for four days. By that point my parents were there, my sister was there. They stayed with me."

I breathe a sigh of relief.

"When was this?" I ask.

"The date of all this is March 27, '07," as if all these events occurred on a single day. "That is when I got blown up. I got discharged on April 13 of '07. After that I needed to get occupational therapy. So I went back to Fort Bragg. I spent a full year learning how to use my arm again."

I see now that the order of his recollections does not follow a timeline, but a system of referred pain. He is walking me from scar to scar.

Now a man walks up to our table. I have a vague recollection of a heavyset man in a red lumber jacket and gray sweatpants. But it is as if I were looking at him underwater. He walks right up to Erik. "I just want to thank you for your service," he says, respectfully. And then, more softly, as if he doesn't want to impose too much, he adds, "You're a great American." I watch the man walk back to the table next to ours to gather the leavings of his late-morning snack.

I had no idea that this man had been sitting next to us. For how long? I am following Erik's story so closely that it is as if I have become him. But I seem to be feeling more emotion in response to his story than he is. The words flow out of Erik like water flows, even if he gets stuck, occasionally, at bureaucratic dams. For me, there is friction, burning, pain.

The appearance of this lumber-jacketed apparition reminds me that I am not in Iraq, not in a hospital, not training my mind to communicate with the muscles of my arm. I feel a great sense of relief to remember where we are, to see that at least one American is prepared to thank this young man.

A small smile plays on Erik's lips. He seems to allow himself to feel the faintest possible fleeting pleasure. But in less than a second he gets right back to work, to the story he is ready to impart.

"I can feel myself touching myself, here," he says, rubbing the meat of his right arm, which is now safely covered by a moss-green sleeve. "But not like this hand," he says, touching the other arm. "You lose sensitivity.

"I got on the list to see a shrink. When you go through the MEB [medical evaluation board] process, it takes a long time. I wanted to get evaluated for PTSD. I had to wait for a full year.

"By that time, it's really too late," he says. "Things get deeper and deeper. It's too late," he says, bitterly.

No, it's not! I want to shout. Somehow, I see the ember of anger in the corners of his eyes as a very hopeful sign. He is not resigned, I am relieved to see. He is angry, even if not angry enough. Suddenly it seems to me that anger can be a lifeline.

"A friend of mine who had gone over in a different unit, he lost a quarter of his skull. He would say to me, I notice that you've changed. He noticed things about me that I couldn't see about myself. I used to be, like, la-di-da about everything. But after my injury, I was easily aggravated. I got angry all the time. I couldn't stand to be in loud places or congested areas. Even something like this," he says, pointing to the nearly empty coffee shop, now that the lumber-jacketed apparition is gone. "I wasn't like that before. Before my injury I liked to go out."

I ask him whether fluorescent lights bother him, wondering if my strange aversion to these lights is more broadly shared.

"Bright light bothered me a lot. I had extreme sensitivity to light. That went away," he says. I find that hard to believe. He doesn't like being where he is right now, in the light.

"But there are still some things I can't handle. Multitasking," he says. "Forget it.

"They knew I would be medically discharged because the surgeon who worked for the military filled out the paperwork. 'This soldier has been hindered due to wartime accidents,'" he says, apparently reciting official language. "That means they should be responsible for my medical care. It means that if my arm

starts to fall off, I can go back to the government and get it sewn back on. But I had a brain injury. Studies show when a bomb blows up next to your face, you have issues. That is why I started the MEB process. There is only one shrink at Fort Bragg who is authorized to evaluate us for PTSD. There were six hundred people all waiting to talk to him.

"It's retarded," he says angrily. "You wait and wait. You have no family and no friends there. My unit was still in Iraq. They let me go home for two months to be with my family, to heal. But then I had to go back to Fort Bragg, to sit and wait. They still make you come to formations. I couldn't sleep. I was having nightmares and flashbacks. They gave me drugs for pain, drugs to sleep.

"I was wondering if I would live," he says, a statement I find startling. When he really might have died, he wasn't afraid. But depression and this state of nothingness he felt, which he calls boredom, were nearly unbearable.

"I was stressed, and I was alone. I don't think this is a good thing to do to soldiers with brain injuries, make them wait that long to see a shrink. But I didn't have any option. Once you start the MEB process, there is nothing you can do but wait. It's mentally torturing people. This went on until April of '08. Finally I get to see this shrink."

"How long did he talk to you?" I ask.

"Half an hour," he says. "He tells me that I'm fine, that I'm stressed out because of the MEB process. His recommendation was 'Deal with it. You're not the worst of the worst. You're fine.' I'm having flashbacks, and I'm having nightmares, but he says, 'It sounds like you're anxious to get out of the military.' "

I ask what he means by flashbacks.

"If I'm in a crowded area and a bang goes off, I'm jumpy. I was having nervous attacks. I wasn't diving behind things, so it could have been worse," he explains. "I'd be out with a couple buddies. If there was too much noise, too much going on, I would just say, I'm leaving. I'm done. I need to be quiet and alone. That is what I learned to do. I knew to leave a crowded area. I knew to go home."

This need to avoid crowds—I know all about that. But I was a shy child, so it was easy to attribute my own dislike of crowds and noise to a personality quirk—and it probably partly is. Still, I am not ready to accept that we have the same syndrome, the same changes in our brains. His symptoms are so much more understandable, so much more justified. His story is so sad, while mine, it seems to me, is all about shame.

"Road rage," he says. "People were always in my way. I yelled at people, cursed at them, 'Get the fuck out of my way.' So easily irritated . . . I was never like that before. I would honk at people, shout at them, 'Why the hell are you going so slow!'

"I can be at work. Someone will say something that I think is ridiculous. I'll say, 'Man, you're an idiot. . . .' I just can't deal with things the way I used to. I get stressed out, anxious. Nervous."

"What do you dream about?" I ask.

"In all of my dreams, everyone dies and I'm the only one who lives. Or vice versa. It's always the same. Two weeks ago I dreamed I was on a boat. Everybody falls overboard and they get chopped up by the propeller and I live. . . . Another one, I'm at the bottom of a hill and a boulder is rolling toward me. I'll wake up drenched in sweat, my heart rate going through the roof. I'll be so thirsty. I never had dreams like this. Very violent. He was wrong," he says, referring to the psychiatrist.

"So you told the psychiatrist all this, and he said you didn't have PTSD?"

"Yep. I talked to him for half an hour, and that is what he said."

"Did the psychiatrist prescribe medication?" I ask.

"No," he says.

I am uncertain what to say. Should I reveal the horror I feel at hearing this story? Would that make him feel better or worse? Is this boy's body and mind considered expendable? Is a soldier's spirit, which he put on the line in the service of the country, too expensive to repair?

"The worst is, I get really spacey. I can't focus. I can't talk on the phone very long. I start to get light-headed and dizzy. If a conversation lasts too long, I'll start sweating and get stressed out. I forget everything. I have to have yellow stickies everywhere. That is why I needed you to e-mail several times about when and where we were going to meet."

I, too, cannot bear speaking on the phone. I, too, get light-headed and dizzy if a conversation lasts too long. I am astonished to hear all this.

"Do you get lost a lot?" I ask, wondering if this personality quirk of mine might also be a marker of trauma.

"It's not that I get lost more easily," he says. "But if I get lost, I cannot find my way back. I just don't know how to handle it. I don't even try to multitask. I can't do that anymore. If the phone rings and I'm doing something else, I won't answer it. At work, I can only handle one order at a time. When it gets really busy, they know I can't handle it. That affects my job. They know me and understand. They can look at me, they'll know, Erik is down."

I tell myself that the right thing to do is to tell Erik what I think.

"You need to take all this seriously," I tell him. "PTSD creeps up on you. It can take years before you realize it. You need to get them to help you."

But I can see, from the glaze in Erik's eye, that this is all he can take. "Are you dizzy now?" I ask him, gently. "Should I take you back?"

"Yes," he says. "I feel a little light-headed. I'm starting to sweat.

I don't know why. We thought it was because of the medication, but it turns out it's not. I was looking at you earlier—and I noticed that the shape of your face got fuzzy."

He will rest, he tells me, before driving back up north. He got one of those GPS systems, he tells me, to help with his problem of getting lost.