

# pov

2-MINUTE MEMOIR

## An Unlikely Bond

Seventeen years after being raped, a criminologist finds a surprising path to closure.

BY ALISSA ACKERMAN

**I** **STEPPED FROM THE** thick South Florida humidity into an air-conditioned office building and noticed that my hands were trembling. My colleague and friend Jill ushered me into the sterile meeting room where I would be speaking with a group of men. Under Jill's guidance, they introduced themselves and openly described their offenses. An older gentleman who'd shuffled to his seat told us he had sexually abused a young female family member over a number of years. A tall man in a baseball cap said that he had committed a violent rape when he was 19 and subsequently spent 20 years in prison. A third man forthrightly admitted that he had molested a female friend as she slept.

This was hardly the first time I had been in a room with people who had committed acts of sexual violence or heard the lurid details of their offenses. As a criminologist and expert in sex-crime policy, I have spent countless hours conducting research in prisons and treatment facilities, as well as analyzing large data sets of registered sex offenders to better grasp who they are and the nature of their crimes. I have given



**QUIET SURVIVAL:** ACKERMAN WAS 16 WHEN SHE WAS RAPED. SHE DIDN'T TELL ANYONE.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ALISSA ACKERMAN

presentations on questions like the relationship between early sexual abuse history and later sexual offending, and written papers that address commonly held myths about sexual violence, such as the idea that men rape because they can't find consenting partners.

I built my career on trying to understand why people commit these harmful acts. But I neglected the painful process of confronting my own rape—the pivotal experience that privately provoked my obsession with this question. I had always thought it was important to separate the

personal from the professional—how could I be taken seriously otherwise? In recent years, I had begun to speak out publicly about what had happened to me when I was 16, hoping that it would benefit others. Yet that didn't seem to chip away at the anger and anxiety that had calcified within me. I assumed that the insidious effects of my assault would be with me forever. Then Jill suggested that I might be helped by something that seemed utterly terrifying. She asked me to speak to the treatment group she facilitates for convicted sex criminals—not as an expert, but as a survivor.



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## 2-MINUTE MEMOIR

**THE MEN IN** the room listened respectfully and intently to the story of what happened to me on the night that I tagged along with a friend to a house party. I didn't know anybody else there, and as a teenager who was quiet and socially awkward, I'd spent most of the evening alone on a brown leather couch. The sickly sweet smell of malt liquor permeated the place, but I politely declined the 40-ounce bottles when they were passed my way. I had never taken even a sip of alcohol.

At some point, a tall blond guy with a crooked grin sat next to me. "You seem bored," he observed. "Want to go for a walk on the beach? This party sucks."

We walked in silence toward the large rocks that marked the border of Deerfield Beach. I was barefoot, carrying my flip-flops and kicking cool sand behind me. I knew the area well. Many of my childhood summer days had been spent climbing those rocks and building sand castles on that beach. During the day, the shore was typically crowded with lobster-skinned beachgoers. But at that moment it was dark and desolate. The familiar contours of the beach contrasted with the stranger beside me. A knot in my throat signaled that I was alone with a man I didn't know. It didn't feel right. After passing two rock pilings, I blurted that I wanted to turn back.

"I thought you wanted the same thing I did," he said, clenching my wrist.

"I'm really not interested," I said, feeling queasy. "I just want to go back to the party."

I turned around to head back but the wet sand sucked at my feet, making it hard to move. There was no clear path to get away from him. He grabbed my arm and dragged me to the ground. I tried to fight. I tried to get away. The harder I fought, the angrier he became. The jagged rocks scraped against my arms and back.

"Please don't," I pleaded. "I'm

begging you."

Then it was as if I separated from my body and watched the scene unfold from a distant point in space. There was the vast Florida coastline, whose hulking hotels and condominiums were dotted with glowing windows. There was the inky plane of the Atlantic Ocean and a foamy ribbon of surf where it hit the shore. There were palm trees silhouetted by the moonlight and the wooden boardwalk just behind the entrance to the beach. There were the rock pilings I'd

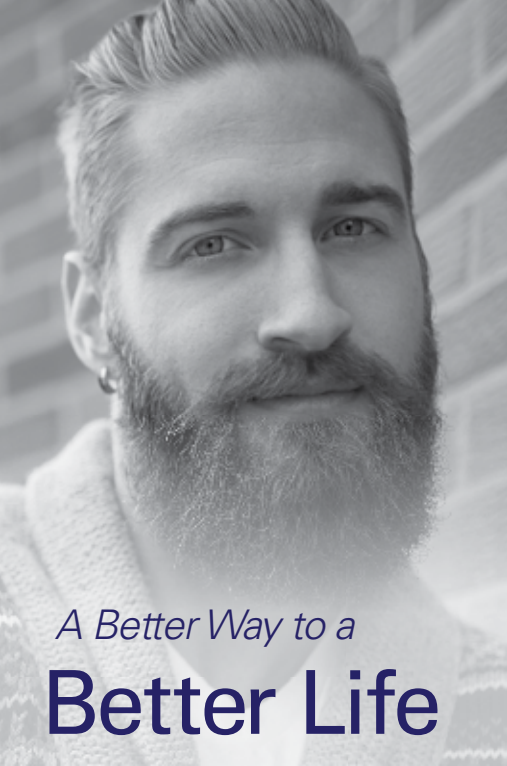
**I recognized that sex offenders and victims are not so different. We all experience shame. We've all suffered a loss of hope and been altered by violence.**

scrambled over as a child, and there was a young man forcing himself on a young woman, me.

Eventually it was over. "I'm so sorry," he muttered. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

I shook uncontrollably, unable to speak let alone acknowledge his hackneyed apology. One of my flip-flops had disappeared in the surf. I transferred all my panic to this loss—it was an accessible problem compared to the incomprehensible thing that had just happened. I searched anxiously around the rocks and the wet sand. The sandal was nowhere to be found.

**AFTER TELLING THE** men sitting in the circle of chairs about my assault, I described its aftermath—the



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**PEACE AT LAST:** ACKERMAN'S EMPATHIC DIALOGUE WITH SEX CRIMINALS GAVE HER THE COURAGE TO REVISIT THE SITE OF THE CRIME.

high-pitched anxiety and fear, the flashbacks and nightmares, the strain on my relationships, the bitterness of feeling reduced to a narrow identity: rape survivor. Their faces radiated with unmistakable empathy. The tall man in the baseball cap leaned forward. “What would you say to your rapist if he walked through the door right now?” he asked.

I knew exactly what I would say. “Do you still think about it?” I asked my invisible assailant. “I do. It still affects me. It affects the way I raise my kids and my ability to walk outside at night. It affects the way I interact with people. I want you to know that I am not angry. I was very angry for a very long time, and even though I will never forget what you did, I forgive you.”

The men nodded, and then began to reveal their own feelings about the crimes they’d committed. One talked about how he thinks about his victim every day. Another spoke haltingly about his awareness that he had destroyed his victim’s life and how he could never forgive himself. I couldn’t help but recognize what my work has long shown about sex offenders and victims—that they are not so different. We experience the same complex stew of shame and embarrassment. We’ve all suffered a loss of hope and been altered by violence. I realized that as scared as I had been to speak to them, they had been even more terrified at the thought of facing my judgment

and anger. We all had preconceived notions about this encounter, but instead experienced something that none of us predicted.

For me, it was profound. In all the years of harboring anger at my perpetrator, I’d never wished for him to have gone through the criminal justice system for what he did. I’d wanted nothing more than to sit face to face with him and tell him how his actions affected my life. I’d wanted an apology. Telling my story to the men in that room, hearing them acknowledge my pain, and accepting their regret and apologies about their own sexual violations helped me find the peace and closure I had been craving for more than half my life.

Not long after that evening, I drove out to the beach that had been shrouded in dread and danger in my memory. The sky seemed so much brighter than on the night of my rape. The moon seemed to cast a halo of protection. I found the rocks where it had happened and inhaled the salty sea air. I felt no fear. It had been nearly 17 years since I was last there in the darkness. But now I was no longer wrestling a formidable opponent in any sense. I turned back toward the boardwalk with a smile. It’s just a beach, I told myself.

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