'I Will Find You': In search of her rapist, two decades later

By Joanna Connors

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Reviewed by

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On July 9, 1983, a stranger in an empty theater grabbed Joanna Connors from behind, brandished a knife, and pushed her against a concrete wall, his hand over her mouth. Then a 30-year-old journalist for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, Connors, faced with what every woman knows and fears but does not think will happen to her, thought: "My turn." The assailant, David Williams, was arrested, convicted, and sent to jail. Connors stopped talking - and tried to stop thinking - about the rape.

Twenty-one years later, while visiting a college campus with her teenage daughter, Connors heard a tour guide promise that help would arrive within five minutes if students called from a "blue light" phone - and she resolved that the best way to protect her children was to tell them what happened to her.

In I Will Find You, Connors retells the assault, her attempts to "get on with her life," and her quest to find out why Williams became violent and predatory. Her main theme is that "nothing can be changed until it is faced." She also argues that Williams "did not deserve what happened to him."

Within days, Connors indicates, she was telling everyone she was fine when, in fact, she blamed herself for being late for her appointment at the theater; wanted her mother, husband, and sisters to leave her alone; feared that someday, somehow, her assailant would return; and yearned, above all, to withdraw from the world and be safe. She suppressed her anger, she writes; in its
absence she felt nothing; interpreted this absence as evidence that she had recovered; and stopped seeing a therapist after three sessions. Now, of course, she knows better.

Connors' claim that Williams was also a victim is based on her discovery that he grew up in a family in which violence, sexual abuse, drug addiction, and prostitution were everyday occurrences. And that Williams spent time in an appalling prison system that, alas, also serves de facto as America's largest mental health institution.

When the warden at Lebanon Prison warns Connors that sympathy for Williams is misplaced - "Lots of people have hard lives but they don't rape and murder other people. The guys in here deserve to be here" - she acknowledges that "well, that was true, too." But it seems clear Connors thinks she might excise fear, "the monster in myself," by coming to some sort of resolution with Williams (who died of cancer in prison, after serving 16 years of his sentence) and moving "instead toward warmth and life."

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