



## DRAWN TO TROUBLE

When she listened to the victims of traumatic crimes, Jeanne Boylan “saw” something other sketch artists didn’t—and that something often helped to catch the criminal. But what was it about these terrifying cases that made her need to get involved? Sandy M. Fernández reports

**T**he morning of September 11, 2001, at about 9:00 A.M. Eastern Standard Time, forensic sketch artist Jeanne Boylan was at home (in a location she doesn’t disclose), painting her nails and watching TV. When the first plane plowed into the World Trade Center, Boylan, forty-seven, called her boyfriend, who was in Boston. Together, they watched with horror as the second plane hit and the Twin Towers collapsed.

In the days following, details of the hijackers’ plans began to trickle out. The terrorists had traveled up and down the East Coast in small cells of five or eight, staying in rented houses and motels. While the hijackers were dead, presumably still very much alive was the network that had supplied them with funds, fake documents, and other help.

“There are thousands of people who will claim to have seen [the terrorists],” Boylan said urgently on the phone a few days later. “The FBI is going to have to do their field interviews and bring in only the highest-caliber witnesses.” Her voice—sharp and fast, as it always is when talking about work—showed an immediate grasp of the challenge that lay ahead for investigators.

Over the last twenty years, Boylan has built a storied reputation as a police sketch artist, tweezing fragmented memories out of traumatized crime victims and witnesses and spinning them into eerily accurate

portraits of wanted criminals. First with the Portland, Oregon, police department and then as a freelancer hired by investigators, families, and the FBI, Boylan has been called in on some of the nation’s biggest cases, including the Oklahoma City bombing, the search for Polly Klaas in Petaluma, California, and the hunt for the Unabomber—in which her iconic portrait of Ted Kaczynski in dark glasses and a hood ended up on the cover of *Newsweek*. Her uncanny intuitive abilities—and, undoubtedly, her petite, chiseled features and Barbie-doll mane of blond hair—have won her unprecedented media attention. There are hundreds of forensic artists in the country, but by comparison Boylan is a rock star.

She is also controversial. For one, there’s her technique. Most composite artists use visual aids to help jog a witness’s memory. The FBI *Facial Identification Catalog* is one of their most relied-upon tools, offering 960 full facial photographs from which to select eyes, ears, hair, and other features. Boylan

**Seeing double:** Boylan, above left, crawls into the minds of witnesses, sketching uncanny likenesses.

vociferously repudiates the use of such pick-and-choose visual cues, which, she says, “pollute” or “contaminate” the witness’s memory. She is almost always called in only after another artist’s sketch has failed to turn up leads. To Boylan, the method that creates these early sketches is not only faulty—it can be deadly. “It costs lives; it wastes dollars; it wastes man-hours,” she says. “Something has got to change.” >

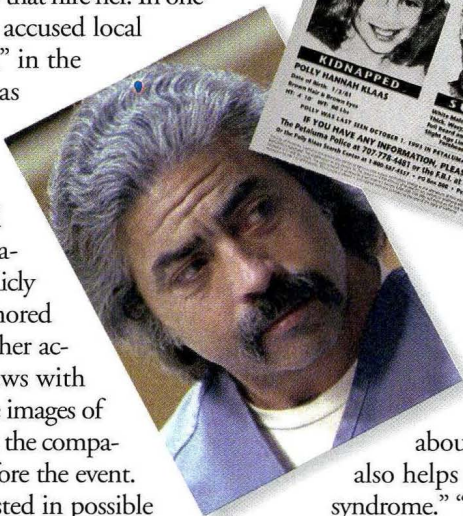
Perhaps more important, Boylan has been vocal in her criticism of the very institutions that hire her. In one high-profile murder case, she accused local police of “throwing up a wall” in the search for the killer, and has called investigative methods “flawed.” Last summer, with the impending execution of Timothy McVeigh—convicted for his role in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing—she publicly suggested that the FBI had ignored the existence of at least two other accomplices. Based on interviews with witnesses, she had sketched the images of two men who had been seen in the company of McVeigh in the days before the event. But the FBI seemed uninterested in possible co-conspirators, leaving Boylan in possession of information she could neither use nor forget. It was a position she’d been in many times before. Boylan is, it seems, a woman who knows too much.

## Jeanne Boylan is used to flouting

authority. In 1977, when she took her first job at a sheriff’s office outside Portland, she was just a college student looking for an easy way to support herself. Pretty soon, though, something at her new job began to intrigue her. “I was assigned to do follow-up calls re-interviewing crime victims, and I noticed that the information I was getting four or five days later would be radically different than what was in the police reports. I’d see the sketches and think, That’s not right. That’s not what I hear them saying.” She started doodling her own composites, trying to find out what was causing the discrepancy. Her bosses helpfully suggested that if she kept it up, they would fire her.

But Boylan, the third in a family of six, was headstrong. She moved to the larger Portland police bureau and sought out scientific research to help explain her findings. She turned up the work of Elizabeth Loftus, a now-renowned psychologist at the University of Washington who had just begun to study how and what crime witnesses remember. What Loftus had discovered was that human memory—long considered an indelible, static record—was malleable, and that fear and stress, among other factors, could distort the picture. Suggestions after the fact, especially from authority figures, could easily meld into the subjects’ memories.

“When you take a trauma victim and throw all those images at him, you are providing information that the subconscious can use to block out the original trauma, which it doesn’t want to see,” Boylan says. “What I tell police [about the FBI



book] is that it’s like if you have a print on a weapon and instead of picking it up with an implement and putting it in a Ziploc baggie, you first pass it to 960 people with bare hands.” Researchers like Loftus contend that once a memory is altered, the original is gone forever. Here, Boylan disagrees. “[Memory] is like a mine shaft that’s caved in, and I have to go and excavate; I have to dig back down,” she says. To avoid having her traumatized subjects flinch from their bad memories, she turns her interviews into long chats, with questions about the crime slipped in only occasionally. This also helps resolve what Boylan calls “tip-of-the-tongue syndrome.” “It’s like when you try real hard to remember the name of a song, but can’t. Two hours later, when you’re not trying anymore, it will surface.” Little things—eye contact, an inflection at the end of a question—can encourage witnesses to give certain answers, so Boylan monitors her own demeanor carefully. In this way, she says, she is able to exhume the original memory.



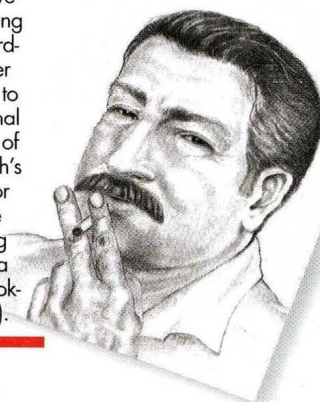
## As Boylan’s methods began

to bring numerous “hits” (the term used by forensic artists to indicate a successful ID), the demand for her work spread, and she eventually left the Oregon police to work independently. In October 1993, a TV producer covering the disappearance of twelve-year-old Polly Klaas in Petaluma suggested to the FBI that they bring Boylan in. Polly had been

abducted from her own house, in front of two other twelve-year-old girls. Within hours, police had released a sketch by a local artist depicting a chubby-cheeked, wild-eyed man, six feet three and wearing a yellow headband. About a week later—with millions of flyers of the sketch distributed but leads drying up—Boylan reinterviewed the witnesses and revised the description. The intruder, she said, was probably closer to five feet ten, with gray-streaked hair and a furrowed forehead.

When parolee Richard Allen Davis was identified from a handprint nine weeks later and his mugshot matched Boylan’s sketch perfectly, police knew they had their man. Polly, it turned out, was alive when the first sketches were released, according to Davis, and alive when two policemen stopped him for trespassing and let him go. >

**Dead ringers:** Boylan’s sketches revealed the faces of Polly Klaas’s murderer (top) and Unabomber Ted Kaczynski (above right, young and beardless). Her changes to the original drawing of Molly Bish’s abductor include showing him as a chain-smoker (right).



They then went back to the station house, saw the just-released sketch, and noted no similarity. By the time Boylan had finished her version, Polly was dead.

"We literally could have saved [Polly] the first night if we'd had accurate information, but they completely missed it," she says. "He was initially described as six feet three. The man was a giant! Well, according to who? Two scared little girls."

More validation of her method came in 1994, when the FBI called her in on the search for the Unabomber. Until then, the public face of the Unabomber had been a watercolor sketch featuring a man with a pointed chin, mustache, and broad forehead peering out of the hood of a sweatshirt. It was created from the memory of a woman who in 1987 had caught a glimpse of a man placing a package in the parking lot of a Salt Lake City computer store—her boss was injured in the blast when he tried to move it. The unknown criminal had sent sixteen mail bombs to university professors and airline executives, killing three and wounding twenty-three, and the FBI was desperate to catch him. "There was an entire floor in the San Francisco FBI office and half a floor in their Chicago office dedicated to nothing but chasing leads based on that image," says Boylan. "But it was the wrong image." Seven years after the blast, the FBI sent Boylan to reinterview the witness and create a new composite. In one version, she removed the mustache, shortened the forehead. After Ted Kaczynski was fi-

Bish's interview with Boylan was far different from the two-hour one she'd had with a police specialist: They met for nine hours in a bed-and-breakfast outside Warren. It was, says Bish, "like a sleepover. We got junk food. We shared stories, even about dating. We played music that reminded me of Moll. We both cried. We were able to laugh, too; it was very intense. She would say, 'What do you mean by "bold [features]?"' using my own words to get at what he looked like. It was like she magically weaved in and out, because you can't stay there too long. She'd know when it was too much."

At the end of the day, when Boylan showed Bish her sketch, something about the lips seemed not quite right. "He was smoking when I saw him, so I kept putting my hand up [to my lips]," Bish says. The next morning, when they reconvened, Boylan showed Bish a paper cutout of a hand holding a cigarette that could be placed on top of the drawing. "From what Magi said, he's likely to be a chain-smoker," Boylan explained later. "This is how people will be used to seeing him." (At press time, Molly Bish was still missing.)

When Boylan works on a case, she concentrates on more than catching the bad guy; she identifies strongly with her witnesses and immerses herself in their lives, creating a bond of trust. During the search for Polly, Marc Klaas says, "she would come to the volunteer center looking to help out. [Afterward], she made a special trip out to the trial. I hadn't

**"IF TWO WEEKS FROM NOW THERE'S SOME BUILDING THAT BLOWS UP AND YOU SEE ME ON TV, DON'T BE SHOCKED."**

nally turned in by his brother David in 1996, the image proved to be a dead ringer for him as a clean-shaven young man.

**For witnesses who have had brusque and intimidating encounters with the police, the kind of attention Boylan lavishes on them can be downright intoxicating.** A former small-town Colorado homecoming queen, she retains both a meticulous attention to grooming—Marc Klaas, Polly's father, says on first glance she "looks like show business"—and a casual, Western approachability. During a conversation, she has a habit of tilting her face up and widening her eyes while nodding in a slow, encouraging way. Her self-deprecating humor and freely shared personal stories—dating woes, worries about money—make her a reassuring confidante.

Magi Bish, a motherly schoolteacher, met Boylan nine months after her sixteen-year-old daughter, Molly, disappeared on June 27, 2000. Bish had last seen Molly at approximately 9:50 on the morning she vanished, when she dropped her off for her eighth day as a lifeguard at a pond in Warren, Massachusetts. Shortly after 10:00, when the other mothers arrived with their children at the tiny, secluded beach, Molly was gone. Her sandals, water bottle, and an opened first-aid kit sat by her chair. The case's only lead—Bish's memory of a middle-aged man idling in a white car in the pond's parking lot the day before—became a widely distributed police sketch, but its subject had not been identified. "The composite looked to many people like their uncle. It looked like everybody," Bish says. "All we could do was make a better picture."

asked her to do that."

Boylan's unswerving devotion to her witnesses may have something to do with the fact that, as she puts it, "I've been on that side of the desk." Coming home on a dark road as a twenty-one-year-old college student in Kansas City, Boylan was attacked by two men. It's an episode she's never described in detail since then, when she was interviewed by police, and she resists giving it too much weight. "I don't like antiques, I don't collect old things, and I don't watch the History Channel. I move on," she says. She does, however, acknowledge the impact of the trauma on her work. "I feel I've helped to provide [victims] a way to move on, which is tremendously gratifying." Her case was never resolved, and Boylan admits she scans faces wherever she goes and "has never stopped searching."

But helping other people put their fractured lives back together has taken a toll on her own. In 1994, her four-year marriage, to a former cop, broke up (they have no children). Her allegiance to her job was a major contributing factor, she says. She had trouble turning down work ("How do you say no to a mother whose daughter is missing?"). The FBI's cases took her away from home for weeks on end. Once, she and her husband met on the road to their house as she was headed out to the store. They chatted about what they needed—eggs, milk. As she drove off, her cell phone rang with a call from the FBI. The next time she contacted her husband, she was in another city.

After Boylan's divorce, her caseload got even more unwieldy. "Up until mid-1998, I was traveling twenty-five to twenty-six days a month," she says. "I was always packed; I

knew the number of United Airlines by heart. I got to the point where I just didn't go home. I had storage lockers in three different states holding my things."

Not surprisingly, Boylan longed for another type of life, one with the small rewards—friendships, plants, a dog—that other people take for granted. "It's my nature to be effervescent and outgoing and perky," she says. "And that just doesn't work in this kidnapping-bombing-and-murder kind of career." So in 1999 she decided to get out. She closed her office in Bend, Oregon, moved to an undisclosed location "for security reasons," and changed her name.

Her departure was not mourned by her professional peers, who regard her fame skeptically. (Of the hundreds of practicing forensic artists, there are upwards of twenty who work on the higher-profile cases.) "We're a pretty tight-knit bunch of people; we help each other out. Jeanne just tears other artists down," says Carrie Parks, co-owner of Stuart Parks Forensic Consultants, the largest composite training program in the United States. The method that Boylan disparages so often is one that Parks has been teaching for the last fifteen years, to everyone from local law enforcement to FBI employees. To her, Boylan's work is at best unproven. "Was the Unabomber identified from her sketch? No, he was identified by his writing. Polly Klaas? No. Her sketch didn't lead to identification. Jeanne is an excellent artist, but honestly, you don't have to be a great artist to do this. You just have to be able to draw something someone recognizes." Part of Parks's exasperation with Boylan may be professional jealousy: "If Jeanne wants to charge between \$3,000 and \$6,000 for a drawing, God bless her. I wish I could charge that; my rate is \$30 an hour," Parks says. (Boylan does not release her rates, saying, "People think I won't talk about it because it's so much. But sometimes, it's because it's so little.") Also, Boylan's high profile draws the kind of media attention that can be nearly priceless to a parent hoping a child will come home or a killer will be caught. The week Molly Bish's drawing was released, police reported the largest number of calls about the case since the first few days after her disappearance.

#### It's that kind of attention that drove a woman named

Debbie Nakanashi to call Boylan this spring. Nakanashi was a postal worker whom Boylan interviewed in Oklahoma City after a bomb ripped through the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995. Nakanashi, who worked across the street, swore that in the days before, Timothy McVeigh had come into the post office—accompanied by a thickly built, dark-haired man who seemed like his boss. "Debbie was such a good witness. I really believed in her." But the FBI, apparently, hadn't.

On the phone, Nakanashi told Boylan she was considering

going public with her conviction that McVeigh had not acted alone. She had one question: "Will you back me up?"

At home, Boylan was just beginning to ease into a rhythm. She had taken a couple of cases since going underground, but nothing that would bring on the media barrage like a contractor of the FBI implying the agency had missed the real mastermind of the Oklahoma City bombing. "Here I was, supposedly in this new life. And yet I'm listening to this woman asking if I'll back her up, and I told her, 'Damn right I will. Absolutely.' Because she's telling the truth."

Boylan also knew Nakanashi wasn't the only one promoting the accomplice theory—she herself had interviewed two men who swore they had seen McVeigh with companions in the days leading up to the crime (they would come to be known as John Does III and IV). And so Boylan left her safe location and used her media pull to land a string of TV interviews. "At that point, I was the only [person who'd worked for the FBI] who was coming forward and saying, 'Yes, there are different people involved in this.'" (Other former Bureau members came forth later.) Queasily, with a mixture of resolve and anxiety, Boylan figured that this might shut the door on her ever working for the agency again. That's how Boylan found herself, on the morning of June 11, 2001—the day Timothy McVeigh was executed—in a television studio sharing airtime with Geraldo Rivera and Stephen Jones, McVeigh's original trial lawyer. All agreed that McVeigh could not possibly have acted alone. As soon as the taping ended, she ripped out her earpiece and ran outside, where the studio had a car waiting. "I jumped in the limo and said, 'I'm done,'" she remembers. "I had done everything that I could possibly do. I thought that was the end."

This summer, Boylan was settling nicely into semi-retirement, going hiking, learning to Rollerblade, even dating someone new. She'd gotten

some calls from producers to comment on the disappearance of Washington intern Chandra Levy, but felt no need. "I talk about how I'm in this new life—you know how many times I've quit? And it hasn't stuck," she says. "So if two weeks from now there's some building that blows up and you see me on *Good Morning America* . . . don't be shocked."

Twelve days after terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Boylan's phone rang. It was the FBI. She was back on the job. □

#### Drawing conclusions:

Boylan believes Timothy McVeigh (below) had a partner. Her sketch of John Doe III (right) is consistent with reports of at least two eyewitnesses.

