

NEAR STRANGERS

Betsy had a feeling she'd get a call tonight, but it's still disorienting when it happens. Four in the morning, pitch-black. She had a glass of chardonnay last night, too, which has left her foggy-headed. You aren't supposed to drink when you're on call, but she had her neighborhood anti-racism meeting on Zoom and needed wine to tolerate Jill, the high-strung, condescending woman who leads the group. Plus, she's seventy-three years old. If she wants a glass of wine, she's not going to ask permission.

"There's a SAFE call," the voice on the line says. "Can you take it?"

SAFE stands for something—she can't remember what exactly—but it means someone's been raped, and she will go to the hospital to give them clean underwear and run interference with the police.

"Okay, yes," she says. "I'm on my way."

On her first few calls, she would rush out the door, but now she knows better. She takes a moment to brush her teeth, make coffee and a sandwich, find an extra sweater.

Outside, the air has the slight chill of early fall, and the neighborhood is nearly silent but bright. Long shafts of silvery light sweep down from the streetlights and clouds of artificial white light hang over each stoop, one after another on every row house. Lighting up your whole yard while you sleep was an actual suggestion printed in the neighborhood newsletter to prevent crime, which, as far as she can tell, is pretty much nonexistent. The neighborhood is solidly middle-class these days, filled with anxious strivers—all of these professors and lawyers crowded into their redbrick row houses for the local elementary school, then outfitting their 1,200 square feet with open-concept kitchens and finished basements, big decks and flower beds of tiny manicured rose bushes. “A culture of fear and surveillance” is what someone in the anti-racism group said in the Zoom meeting a few weeks ago about the so-called Citizens on Patrol, but when she said this applied to the local obsession with floodlights, Jill acted like she was senile. “The lights are to see at night, Betsy,” she said. “I think that’s pretty standard.”

The drive to the hospital is just over a mile and through residential streets so quiet she can drive as cautiously as she likes. She passes a soccer field, a bus stop, a giant industrial cube of a building that belongs to the university. She likes spying on the world this way, having a reason to be awake at these odd hours, the sense that she’s doing something both secret and important.

Zaid has not asked her to quit volunteering, but he worries about her being out alone at night and in a hospital in the midst of a pandemic, so she’s considering it. She is under no illusions that she is irreplaceable or even particularly good at this work. Other than being reliable, her strengths are just that she is willing to talk back to the police, and, because she was once a language arts teacher, she is good at the paperwork. She helps the women put their stories in order, gets them to include the details that will mean something to a prosecutor. *He restrained me* will become *He held down my arms and left a bruise on both wrists*. *He threatened me* will become *He said he’d punch me in*

my “fucking ugly face.” Both at the hospital and at the courthouse, where she helps with the paperwork for protective orders, the women fixate on the wrong details—the personal betrayal instead of the crime. *He gave away our microwave just to piss me off* a woman once told her at the courthouse but nearly forgot to mention the time this boyfriend had tried to drown her in a bathtub. If she quits, she’ll miss it, but she would gladly give up a lot of things for Zaid.

Zaid is her son Andrew’s ex-husband, an engineer who lives in Raleigh with his new husband and their children, who keeps in touch with Betsy even though her own son doesn’t speak to her. They separated eight years ago, around the time Andrew stopped coming home for Christmas but a couple years before he cut her out of his life completely. Then, a few years ago, she had an abnormal mammogram and, in a moment of loneliness and terror, wrote a vague Facebook post asking for prayers, and Zaid called to wish her well.

“I wasn’t sure if it was okay to call you,” he said on her voicemail. “But, you’re family. I think about you a lot, in fact, and I hope you’ve been okay.”

She had been so shocked by his message—frankly, she was surprised he was still her Facebook friend—that it had taken her nearly a month to call him back, but then they’d talked for over an hour. He told her about his new job procuring chemicals for a steel company in Raleigh, the two brothers he and his new husband adopted from foster care. He didn’t say, though she suspects it’s true, that this version of his life is the real one, that all of those years with Andrew were simply a tense and unpleasant false start.

These days, he calls her regularly and hosts her in Raleigh over the holidays and kids’ summer vacations, where she is always surprised by his cluttered house of LEGO sets and IKEA units, how different it is from the stylish high-rise condo of amoeba-shaped coffee tables and Italian sectionals that he shared with Andrew. He’s different, too, sillier and more openly affectionate. A man who makes Mickey Mouse pancakes, chases the kids with Nerf guns, reaches for his husband’s

hand at the dinner table. But around him, she is cautious; she doesn't understand his generosity, it's hard to trust it.

At first, she suspected he'd reached out to her to punish Andrew, but when she asked what he thought of the two of them staying in touch, he seemed embarrassed. "I don't talk to Andrew," he said gently. "I wouldn't know how to reach him if I tried." She now thinks his kindness has something to do with his culture's respect for old people—he was born in Pakistan and moved to the States in middle school—and with his parents, who have maintained a relationship with him by pretending he is not gay. Or possibly, like her, he is just lonely.

The one tricky part of the drive is right before the hospital when the road widens and curves at the same time and suddenly becomes six lanes instead of four. Past the curve, there's a stoplight and then a median that appears out of nowhere, and it's nearly impossible in the dark to stay in the correct lane. She slows down for the turn, and then there's a car behind her, beeping for a long angry time.

"All right, Dale Earnhardt!" she says out loud. "*What* is your problem?"

The car, an older white Honda Accord, swerves around her and takes a left into the main entrance of the hospital, stops at the ticket counter, and then speeds off. She imagines a medical emergency or that the driver might be a sleep-deprived nurse, so tries to "send them goodwill" as the Pilates woman at the YMCA used to say, but the flare of anger stays in her chest. "You're not wrong to feel those things," her therapist had once told her, "it's the size and duration of your reactions that we need to work on." But how to make that pulse of rage go away? How to hear an insult without adding it to the collection of small hurts you'll carry around forever?

She parks in the big parking deck with everybody else—no discount just for being a volunteer—and she goes through the automatic doors to the front desk, where a slight Black woman in pink scrubs and a burgundy wig checks her ID and pushes a button to make heavy metal doors swing open. At the nurse's station, nestled at the end of a

fluorescent bleach-soaked hallway, a beefy redheaded man has a corded phone to his ear and manila folder open on the desk in front of him. When she identifies herself, he points to a plastic chair in the hallway.

“She’s getting her exam?”

He shakes his head without making eye contact. “Not here yet.”

He means the SAFE nurse who is trained to collect evidence without retraumatizing anyone.

“It shouldn’t be long,” he says and points again to the chair.

She expects him to say more, but he goes back to his paperwork, and she thinks, as she often does, how much people reveal about themselves when they talk to old people. Anti-racist Jill, for instance, interrupts her in a high-pitched irritated voice at every Zoom meeting, but then there is that attractive young couple in the group, Maddie and Austin, who will stop a vote to ask what she and the other old lady think. “I’d like to hear from some of the longer-term residents,” Austin will say. “Betsy, Catherine, can you speak to the history on this issue?” Often, she doesn’t have much to add, but just hearing his young, earnest voice acknowledge them in that way shoots a surge of joy through her whole body.

She moves the plastic chair away from a heating vent and sits down across from the closed door with its plastic flag flipped forward to indicate it’s in use. The exam rooms are always the same—thirteen and sixteen, two private rooms with bathrooms used only for these cases and tucked away from the rest of the patients—so that survivors, this is what they are told to call them, can’t be harassed by their assailants.

“That happens?” she asked in the training. She imagined a rapist running through the hallways, ripping open exam curtains, and it felt like the plot of a bad movie.

The leader of the training shrugged. “A lot of bad things happen. In this line of work, there aren’t a lot of surprises.”

The training had been eight hours a day for five days, led by a series of overworked social workers at the women’s shelter in a small conference room where a picture hung of a former resident who’d been shot