

## Into the Arms of Strangers

By Sara Lukinson

A hot summer day in 2014, when I wished I could have been going anywhere but there, I flew to Little Rock, Arkansas from New York City for the second time in two months and was surprised to be picked up by a smiling woman I didn't know named Pam. "How was your trip," she asked, "your sister is excited to see you."

I couldn't wait to see Karen but at the same time I was thinking, how is this ever going to work? It had taken almost eight hours to get there, with an interminable wait in Atlanta for a connection. We didn't know a soul in Little Rock or anyone who did, except now apparently there was Pam. As much as I didn't want my sister to be there, as much as I didn't want her to have chosen this doctor and cancer clinic instead of staying at home with her oncologist in Washington, as much as I worried about how alone this would make her, this was Karen's battle with fate and on this decision, my usually reticent, hesitant sister insisted.

We had been lucky, at least in terms of finding her a place to live, a sunny one bedroom in a small complex belonging to the Guesthouse motel where we stayed when we met the doctor. The rental apartment, like the motel's lobby, seemed to be furnished with its original 1980's sofa and chairs, but unlike the motel, which overlooked a big box shopping mall, the red brick apartment building sat on a residential street shaded by the branches of shaggy oak trees. It shared with the motel one essential thing, a courtesy van that drove the patient-guests to and from the nearby clinic all day, every day. And anyplace within three miles of the motel.

It also shared the services of the clinic's visiting nurse, a perky cherub named Maria Jolly. An English expat, Maria and her husband, also a nurse, had visited Little Rock a few years back and stayed for the weather. Three mornings a week she extracted blood samples, cleaned chemo parts, circled the what-if questions, and left behind the sound of her laugh, as free and easy as a child's. The morning after my arrival, I was scrambling eggs and onions when there was a knock on the door. Karen's eyes lit up. "That's Maria." They nattered away while Maria checked for signs of infection under Karen's implanted port, until it almost seemed as if the illness was a pretext for their visit. In the days to come, there would be Sunday picnics in Maria's backyard and rides in their blue convertible.

Karen's time in Little Rock went from weeks to months, as the cancer in her blood played hide and seek with the doctor. I'd fly down riddled with anxiety, afraid for her isolation, imagining her alone in the waiting rooms, and there would be my sister introducing me to the nurses and orderlies. The young geneticist. The motel owners and the woman who fitted the free wigs. Her doctor and his wife often took her out to dinner, usually Italian. Wine, talk, a toast to optimism. When I showed up, there was a standing invitation for "the sisters" as they called us. As in "the sister's here" or "here come the sisters."

I never sensed pity in their kindnesses or the formality of duty, but rather an affection born of an eagerness to love her for who she was, beneath the wig and the pallor: a once reserved woman with a hope in her eyes that looked a lot like joy, as if "yes" were just around the corner. Fate had pulled the threads of a new narrative, and Karen had fallen into the arms of strangers.

Take Pam, the woman who met me and would again, every time I flew down. Unfussy, but nicely dressed and lipstickked, she volunteered through her non-denominational church to help out on her days off, and met Karen

after a complicated procedure required a family member or friend to take her home. Pam asked if she wanted to stop off for a little gelato. “Little Rock has gelato?” my sister’s eyes widening, the very idea lifting her up from the floor of her fatigue. There at Zaza’s Café, over scoops of hazelnut and chocolate, they discovered they were both interior decorators and talk right-turned to florals and stripes and paint colors, and would you like to take a drive to see the big houses on the hill? When Karen could muster an hour of wobble free attention, they’d poke around fabric stores or craft fairs, trading tips. Pam didn’t waiver through the afternoon fade-outs and chemo nausea, and the snowy night I flew down for what we thought was an emergency and I called ahead for a taxi, Pam said she was baffled. Why hadn’t I called her?

Then there was the courtesy van, which at first looked like a fairly common, white nine-seater, but the friendly familiarity of the drivers turned it into something more like a Cinderella coach, that came when you called, a smile and a hand waiting to help you in. Karen chatted with the drivers about their children and what they did over the weekend, a conversation of neighbors sharing a ride downtown rather than a stranger dropping off a patient for her MRI. All the drivers were courteous, but it was Kevin with his gap-toothed grin, Bermuda shorts, and ever-present book (which turned out to be the complete works of Trollope) who seemed to take in the most. Was it something my sister said to him, some wink of the heart which she could do or something in his own past, some hard road he’d traveled, that added the deeper notes to their driving connection.

One night Karen went to a downtown dinner honoring her favorite nurse. All spruced up in the white pants and striped top she had mail ordered for the occasion, she wilted before dessert and called the van to pick her up. Kevin was on duty. When they arrived back at her apartment, he gently woke her up and walked her up the stairs, waiting until she was safely inside. The next time he saw me, he handed me his personal cell number, “just in case.”

Karen’s residence in Little Rock continued into the following year. I’d stay for two weeks at a time, guilty every time I left. Yet each time I came down I saw that something else was at work. Maybe because I wasn’t there, the louder sister overshadowing her, Karen stood in the light on her own. She was taking on her cancer with both hands fully extended, and what these one-time strangers were giving her was a life to wrap her arms around. Private jokes and shorthand expressions. A quick dance in the lobby with her two left feet, a Saturday coffee out a picture window. Everyday encounters radiated a kind of warmth, like the feeling you get when the sun warms your face on a winter afternoon. Karen’s illness was between her and her doctor, but her laugh, her music, her days were between her and them. An effortless back and forth, without any shred of artifice. In the midst of all that was uncertain, what was certain was them.

Fourteen months passed and things seemed to stabilize, we talked about a trip to Maine. Then, the cancer numbers spiked, the disease broke through all the ropes. Karen was checked into the hospital and I moved in with her. Each day’s news churning up the sand and the shoreline. Late one afternoon, a circle of doctors walked in, and the word hospice was spoken so quietly you hardly noticed it reversing the direction of your fate. The first thing that happens is that numbness takes over, the anesthesia nature administers before draining away all your hope. The edges of the world blurred. I don’t know where love comes from or why people behave the way they do, but a communion of people was standing at our door, without having been asked, without asking anything in return.

Maria was no longer part of Karen’s medical team, but of course she came, gently, knowingly guiding us into the unknown, describing people who had chosen to keep on with useless treatments, IV’s, the metallic clatter of the ICU, and then the hospice with its trees outside the window, the pain patches, her own room. Her voice as gentle as a wind rustling the leaves. Pam took clothes home to wash and sat with me as I talked to the funeral home and signed the papers. The motel owner and van drivers asked to visit. The day we had to move to the hospice, I called Kevin’s cell phone and found him on the golf course. “I’ll be right there.” He carried our things to his car, the vase of flowers, my suitcase, my sister’s notebooks, slippers and newly washed

nightgown. We drove ahead, Karen came later in an ambulette, and set up her room so she would know it as her own, her in the bed, me on the couch. As he left he turned and said, "Call anytime, night or day."

They accompanied Karen like a flock of birds in formation, turning whichever way she had to go. Maria checked with Karen in the mornings. Just like always. Karen's face would soften, and I'd hear them laugh. She cooked me a shepherd's pie. "Is here anything I can bring?" Pam asked. I could have said Maine lobster or quail eggs and I'm sure she would have found it, but it was seltzer, club soda and lots of it, a childhood staple that the Arkansas hospice kitchen didn't stock. The head nurse from the clinic came after work. Karen's doctor texted every day, the ping went off on her iPhone. "I'm thinking of you." She wrote him back, "I regret nothing."

We were at the hospice just over a week. My sister passed away on a September morning, and I walked out of the room, encased in grief. The next moment, the flock turned toward me. Pam bought me black ribbon which we fixed with a pin to my shirt, a Jewish custom and without which, for reasons I can't explain, I couldn't leave the hospice. A badge of sorrow, something to touch and finger. Her doctor wrote me in tears. Kevin packed up the room, I couldn't go back in, and drove me to Maria's where a key waited under the flowerpot. That evening Maria and her husband told funny stories, how my sister made the neighbors laugh. How she drove the chemo nurses crazy. As Maria tucked me into a freshly made bed, she told me Karen had asked them to take care of me. "Stay with us as long as you like." I hadn't known Maria a year earlier.

The next morning, I sat in Maria's backyard looking at the garden and wondering where my sister used to sit. By midday, Pam arrived to drive me to the airport. I put my suitcase in the back, along with the vase we'd taken to the hospice. "The blue will match her kitchen," Karen told me. "I'd like Pam to have it." I was eager to go home. Friends had planned a memorial service. But a few days later I realized that Karen and I had been home the whole time.

I kept in to touch with everyone for a while, but the reality was, I knew I'd never see Maria or Kevin or Pam or anyone from Little Rock again. Except in my mind's eye. Next to my sister, her arm around her new friends. How she shined. It's been over a year and I'm still unmoored without her, but there is something back there I hold onto. What had begun as acts of small sharing turned into a state of grace.

In the novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, the narrator is haunted by the death of his young mother. "There are too many conflicting emotional interests involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable." Certainly, losing my sister was not acceptable. Yet, I think of those who gave her the chance to fill up on life. To be valued and enjoyed. How they came out of nowhere and never let go of her or me. I see them still, even as they fade back into the distance, strangers I once knew. Kindness in the dark, in the forever. A sight of heartbreaking loveliness.

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