

*The true story of a couple that took in and cared for an eighty-year-old homeless woman named Sophie, for nearly three years.*

**The Stranger in my Recliner:**  
**An intimate look at the homelessness and mental health crisis**  
By Doreen McGettigan

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The background image shows a person in a white hospital gown sitting on a concrete floor. They are hunched over, and a white disposable cup is on the floor next to them. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an institutional or public space. In the foreground, a large, dark blue leather recliner chair is partially visible, contrasting with the person's situation.

# THE STRANGER — IN MY — RECLINER

An intimate look at the homeless and  
mental health crisis in America

Doreen McGettigan

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healthcare practitioner to ensure that you are in good health and that the examples contained in this book will not harm you.

Some names have been changed to protect the identity of people in twelve step programs.

This book provides content related to homelessness and mental health topics. As such, use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

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# Chapter 1:

## Guess Who Is Coming for Breakfast?

My husband, John, originally met Sophie at a twelve-step meeting. Prospect Park is a small working-class community just south of Philadelphia. This was not a regular meeting place for him. He was in great need that night, and it was the closest place to home with a meeting scheduled for that time of night. It was shortly after his seventeen-year-old son John died of suicide. Sophie was kind to him that night. John ran into her again many times after that first meeting. He said she always had something empathetic to say to him about the loss of his son. He often gave her rides home. He never forgot the kindness she showed him or her face, and he thought about her often, but he had not run into her again.

Fourteen years later, leaving that same meeting place on an unusually cold and sleeting October night, a disheveled elderly woman stumbled and fell on the sidewalk right in his path. As John reached for her hand to help lift her up, he felt something familiar. He looked into her eyes and asked, "Are you Sophie?" "Yes, yes, it's me, Sophie, and I do remember you, John," she answered.

He gently helped her up onto her feet and then picked up what he thought were her grocery bags. After giving her a quick look over and making sure she had no injuries, he insisted on giving her a ride home. He helped her climb into his F-150. They talked mostly about mutual acquaintances. He drove through the small towns of lower Delaware County as the windshield wipers swooshed away the sleet and rain. She asked him to drop her off at the McDonald's on Chester Pike. He told her he would take her to McDonald's, get her something to eat, and then take her home. He was of course in no mood for any of this nonsense. He was hungry, tired, and wanted to simply see her safely home. He believed there was no other choice for him, and seeing her home safely was the right thing to do in that situation.

After asking her numerous times for her address and struggling not to get frustrated with her, Sophie finally admitted to him she had no



home to go to and nowhere to stay. She explained to John that she had been staying in the basement of a meeting hall. The members allowed her to stay there in exchange for cleaning the place up and making coffee for meetings.

She told him that six months earlier, a handful of members complained about her staying in the building. The members were upset because there was no shower, and they told her it wasn't sanitary. They insisted she could no longer stay there. She started sleeping in the woods behind an elementary school, not far from the twelve-step meeting place. She started to cry and told John it was so cold and wet that all she could do was start walking and hoping she would run into someone she knew, someone that could help her.

John's eyes filled with tears. He could not believe what he was hearing. How could anyone put this kind elderly woman out onto the street? He became angry and promised himself he would find out who it was that was mean enough to throw this helpless woman out. Did they even try to find her another place to stay, some place that was safe?

He was coming up on nineteen years of sobriety, and nothing about throwing a helpless elderly woman out onto the unsafe streets in the cold felt like any of the twelve-step programs to him. He didn't like everyone he met in the different programs over the years, but none of the people he encountered seemed downright mean. Most of them were helpless and vulnerable themselves at one time or another and were now looking for a way to pay it forward, a way to help those still struggling.

John called to ask me if he could bring a woman home for the night. Not the thing you expect your husband to call and request of you. I had no idea what to think or what to expect, but once he explained the situation, of course I said yes. I didn't feel as though there was any choice.

Immediately after I said yes to him, I was stricken with panic. Why was this woman homeless? My first thought was she is mentally ill. Of course, she was. Aren't all homeless people mentally ill? Perhaps she was schizophrenic or some sort of sociopath. Then I thought she was probably a drug addict and an alcoholic. Of course, she was addicted

in some way. He met her at one of his meetings. She was most likely all the above. She had to be, I decided. Honestly, I had no idea what to expect. Nervously, I started walking around the house, picking things up, rearranging shelves, and dusting. I spritzed the furniture and throw rugs with Febreze. I continued walking around in a numb sort of state of panic, talking to myself. I felt guilty for assuming the worst about this woman, as well as anyone who found themselves homeless. The past few years were financially devastating for far too many good, hardworking people.

I was tired. I worked as a companion for an elderly woman. A woman that was extremely ill. I just finished a twelve-hour shift with her. I was in no mood to stay up making small talk with and playing host for someone I did not know, let alone some out-of-her-mind, homeless, alcoholic woman.

I still wasn't completely sold on any of the twelve-step recovery programs. The drug addicts and alcoholics I had come across in my life and some unfortunately in my own family either went to jail, died, or seemed to disappear into the woodwork. I never knew of anyone that truly "recovered." Some would stop using for a while, but almost all of them picked up drugs or alcohol again. What seemed so crazy to me was the fact that some of them picked up their old vices at seemingly happy times in their lives. I honestly believed addiction was basically a life sentence—a terminal, hopeless illness.

That was until I met John. It was a huge red flag when I first met him. He told me he was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict on our first date. Since then, the man proved to me that people that are willing to change are capable of change. It took me a while to understand why after nineteen years, he still went to meetings. For him, it was not only about giving it away to those in need but also a reminder of how he himself was just one sip from death. He was convinced that if he ever took that one drink, he would never be able to stop himself.

I was always more of an enabler. Never being much of a drinker myself, I did and still do enjoy a glass of wine with dinner every now and then. As far as drugs, I was never a fan of them, and I honestly thought poorly of anyone that grew up and was still indulging in them.

John helped me to understand that it truly was a disease, one with no cure. The only hope is treatment that can help to manage the symptoms. My argument always is, if you have a disease, you can choose to get treatment or you can die. I did not understand why alcoholics and drug addicts so often fight getting treatment. I don't know of many people with cancer that decide they would rather die of the disease than go through the grueling hard work it would take them to get well or at least into remission. Even the sickest, terminal patients will endure agonizing treatments for the opportunity of a few extra months with their loved ones. I wondered if the addicts' inability to make the right choices and seek treatment meant that alcoholics and drug addicts underneath their addictions also suffered from some form of mental illness or mental health disorder. I was convinced that was the case. Stopping the drinking and/or drugs was the first step. These patients need psychological help as well.

When Sophie walked through my front door that night, I could not believe my eyes. She was a frail, filthy, and hunched over eighty-year-old woman. I wondered if she had bugs. I struggle with OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). I told her to sit on the sofa, while the whole time in my mind, I was making it all better for me by imagining myself throwing that big red sofa away and buying a nice, clean new one. Maybe an L-shaped brown microfiber one this time.

I made her a hot cup of tea. After noticing she had no teeth and wondering what in the world could have happened to them, I made her a scrambled egg. While she ate her eggs and talked with John about people they might mutually know, I went upstairs and prepared her a warm bubble bath. I gave her my favorite silk pajamas, clean underwear, a warm fluffy pair of socks, and a thick robe. The pajamas were a gift from my kids. They gave them to me when I was in the hospital for treatment of a bad allergic reaction to a vitamin supplement made from shellfish. I was certain they would understand why I had to give them to Sophie.

While she was in the bathroom having her bath, I made up the big red sofa with our softest six-hundred-thread-count guest sheets, our best pillows, and a warm cotton blanket. I wanted her to feel safe, warm, and comfortable. Whatever the reason for her plight, no one

should be sleeping on the ground in this crazy weather. John thanked me for allowing him to bring her into our home. He gave me a hug and promised me everything would be okay. He sensed my growing discomfort, so he hugged me again. I love that he can sense my feelings.

I wanted to ask her a thousand questions. Do you have a family? Where you ever married? Do you have children? How did you get yourself into this situation? Are you still drinking? That was the big one. That would be bad. I asked her where the woods were located, the ones she had been sleeping in, and she told me they were alongside MacDade Boulevard. MacDade Boulevard is the main thoroughfare connecting a dozen or so small towns in Delaware County, leading to Philadelphia. She also told us that night she was attacked and robbed often.

Talk about a soft target, and for what, a few coins at the most. I felt so sorry for her and such anger for those unknown scumbags that would hurt her. I wanted to know more but decided I would ask her another time. I thought she must be physically and mentally exhausted. I thought she might be embarrassed too. I would be horrified if I found myself with nowhere to go and I had to wear a stranger's underwear, their clothes, and sleep on their sofa. I would also be scared to death if I had no choice but to trust in the sincerity and saneness of strangers. I did not want to think about that stuff anymore that night.

She seemed to trust in John completely. With me, she was completely unsure. She most likely sensed my fear and disapproval. I had the feeling there was so much more to her story. How could there not be more. How do you get to be eighty years old and not have met at least one person that loved or at least cared enough about you to take you in from the cold? What possibly could have happened to her, what sin or crime did she commit that would force her to have no choice in the world but to trust complete strangers over family or friends? Wondering about those possible sins and crimes scared me to my core.

My husband, on the other hand, is the least judgmental person I know. He is trusting to a frustrating fault. I admired his compassion and knew in my heart that keeping her safe and warm on this cold, wet

night was the right thing to do no matter how she came to be in this situation.

Even if it were wrong of me, I could not help wondering why I had to be the one to do *that* right thing on *that* night.

We made sure she had everything she could possibly ever need during the night. I poured a glass of ice water and placed it on the end table beside the red sofa. I put a few magazines on the coffee table. We asked if she would like to watch some TV. She said she would like that. I found an old movie on AMC, *Duel in the Sun*, and I was thrilled to see the light in her eyes.

“I love Joe Cotten,” she said, smiling. “He is my favorite actor.”

I had no idea who Joe Cotten was, but I did notice that Gregory Peck and Lionel Barrymore were in the film. I wished I weren’t so tired. I wouldn’t have minded watching it with her if John would have stayed up to watch it too. Instead, John and I went to bed. I imagined that it must have been a long time since she was able to watch and enjoy a good movie. It felt good to do that for her.

Turning the latch on my bedroom doorknob ever so slowly so she wouldn’t hear the click, I locked our bedroom door and tiptoed over to our bed. Yes, I admit it. I was scared. I had visions of this crazy bag lady stabbing us in our sleep, robbing us, or having her homeless gaggle of friends coming into our house to party through the night. I shuddered at the thought of the endless horrific things they could do to us. I tossed and turned all night. I tried to imagine how anyone could let an eighty-year-old woman become homeless and then reverted to what could she have possibly done to find herself in this situation.

The truth is, I wanted her and the sting of the slap-in-the-face reality of her situation to go away. I felt guilty that I felt that way.

I rolled over and flipped my pillow again, hoping to find a small patch of cold on the other side. Memories flooded my mind. I had a history with homeless people, and it was not always good. I took in a homeless woman with a six-week-old infant when I was a young, divorced mom. My kids and I fell in love with the baby. Danielle lived with us whenever her mother was in prison, which was several times over an eight-year period. The mother emotionally blackmailed and sometimes even terrorized my family for years. A priest told me that

sometimes we must make the choice to hurt one to save many others. I hated the sound of that advice. We did not want to, but we sent that little girl to live with her father and her older sister in Minnesota. It wasn't fair of us to keep her from knowing her family. Our hearts are still broken.

I took in a young man that worked for me when I managed a Pizza Hut restaurant. He was a homeless drifter, a musician. I found out he smoked pot in front of my young daughters and their friends. I was horrified, hurt, and furious. Another time, I took in a childhood friend of my sister's. The woman had two young children, and they were living in an abusive situation. Her husband had no idea I existed, so they would be safe and able to get a head start on a new life. It was a struggle for her and her children. I admired her for finding the strength to leave him and for loving her children so much that she gave up everything to keep them safe. I was thrilled when she moved on, fell in love, and remarried a gentler man.

Not that I regretted helping any of those people, but now that I am older and look back, I realize what dangerous situations I put my family, my own children, in at times. That woman's abusive husband could have found her at my house and killed us all. That little girl's mother was jailed several times for terroristic threats. I shudder when I imagine what could have happened. I do not mean to be over dramatic, but if you watch the Lifetime Movie Network you know it can and unfortunately does happen when you least expect it.

Constantly I ask myself if the fear I developed with age is a good-enough reason to do nothing. Of course, the answer is no. It is not a good reason. Eliminating the fear and replacing it with knowledge is a good start. It is always easier to open a door if you have a reasonable expectation of what is waiting for you on the other side of that door.

I flipped my pillow again and rolled onto my side. Why didn't I leave some cookies, crackers, or chips out for Sophie? I wondered if she was still hungry. There was no chance I was going downstairs to find out. John was sound asleep.

What do you do in those situations where there is no way to know what is behind that door? You can choose to stay stuck, or you can dig deep for the faith and courage to open that door. I would rather have

stayed stuck in my safe, comfortable world that night, secure in the fact that I had done enough good deeds in this lifetime. On that night, however John needed me to walk through that door with him.

He was grieving the loss of his mother. She passed away six months prior to him finding Sophie on that sidewalk. John and I met and married shortly before his mother became ill. Kathleen was the first elderly person I ever lived with, and the first elderly person I ever provided with hands-on care. Honestly, ever since I was a small child, I was afraid of older people. We had a few cranky neighbors when I was a kid. Older kids terrified us younger ones with stories of creepy elderly neighbors that captured children and kept them chained in their smelly basements.

While growing up in the Somerton section of Northeast Philadelphia, my grandmother lived just a few blocks from our house. We saw her every day and I adored her, except for when she was yelling at my grandfather. As I got older, I would drive her to doctor appointments, take her to the grocery store, clean for her, or just sit and visit. Back then, she never seemed old to me. When my younger brother was murdered, my grandmother started to look tired to me. The grief sapped her energy and her health. When she did become sick, she went downhill and passed away quickly. My grandfather got sick years before and took his own life before he had the chance to grow old.

For the first time in our young marriage, John and I were living alone. We were just getting used to our newly found freedom. We discussed traveling, home renovation projects, and retiring at the seashore. We discovered our living room. For two years, the room was a campground for John's sisters and nieces who thankfully were there to help care for his mother. That is the way it is supposed to be. Families are supposed to come together and come up with a workable solution to provide care for their elderly loved ones. It is one of those times in life that you must put your own needs and feelings aside and work as a team, a family unit.

I enjoyed the chaos of so many people coming in and out of the house. That was what I was used too. The situation helped me to be less homesick. When we married, I moved into his home. He lived in another county, on the other side of Philadelphia. I was used to seeing

my kids and grandkids every single day. When the house was quiet, I missed them terribly.

What a long night that first night with Sophie turned out to be. As I walked downstairs in the morning, I wished it had all been a long dream. There was no such luck. She was sitting on the end of the big red sofa. She was awake and was as real as my freezing feet on the cold floor. She was dressed in her own dirty old clothes. Those ripped plastic grocery bags that were full of I have no idea what were at her feet. We originally thought they held some sort of groceries, but, no, they did not hold groceries. She clutched a filthy, overstuffed pocketbook with a broken strap to her chest. Her head was down; she was staring at the floor. She looked so fragile. I noticed the pajamas, underwear, and those fluffy socks I gave her folded neatly beside her. My first thought was, not believing she put her dirty underwear back on her nice, clean body. I cringed. My second thought was, she must have been a beautiful woman. Her hair was pure white, not at all that dingy gray most of us are stuck with. It was so long and wavy. Most of the older women that I knew wore their hair short. I wondered if she ever colored it. It was so beautiful this morning compared to the filthy, stringy mess it had been last night before her bath.

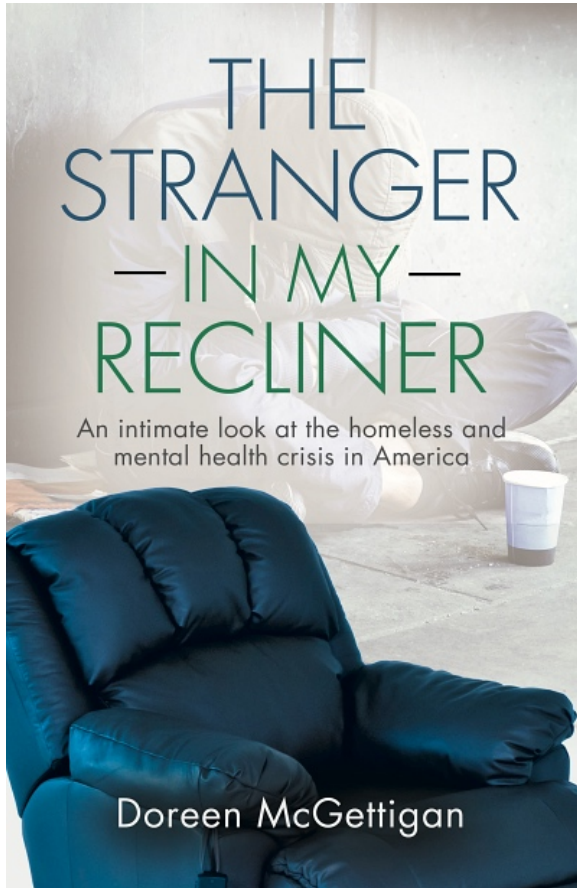
John and I were both working from 9:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. I wanted to tell her it was okay to stay here in our nice warm house for the day. I also did not want to tell her she could stay here in our nice, clean warm house. It was possible she could completely clean out our house in twelve hours and God forbid, let all kinds of other “scary” people know where we live. Again, I felt guilty for feeling and thinking that way, but it is what I thought. Sort of the same way I always felt guilty for being afraid to be in an elevator alone with a stranger or when someone follows me too close in a parking lot or on a sidewalk at night. It is an instinct, that *uh-oh* warning feeling most women are blessed with. I don’t understand why we are always apologizing for it.

I made her a cup of hot tea and some instant apples and cinnamon oatmeal for breakfast. Oatmeal is not one of my favorites, but I love the way the flavored one’s smell. She seemed thrilled when I handed



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her a banana. It didn't seem like the right time to ask where her teeth were. I hoped I never had the opportunity to ask.



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