

## Finding Family by Carol Goodman

In the fall of 2016 I was teaching at SUNY New Paltz when a student came to my office to explain why she was behind in her work. I'd heard a lot of excuses in my years of teaching, but nothing quite like this. My student had fled an abusive marriage in the city and was living under an assumed name upstate with her two young children. She was struggling to make ends meet while also dealing with the post-traumatic stress of surviving domestic abuse. Of course I gave her an extension and asked what else I could do. She said that it had been helpful just to talk to me.

That didn't really seem like enough, though. I wanted to help her more, but I didn't know how. I asked some of my colleagues, and the English department secretary told me that there was a place called Family of Woodstock that gave assistance and counseling to survivors of domestic abuse. I looked up the organization and was impressed to learn of all the services they provided—from food pantries to domestic violence shelters to a crisis hotline. I was happy to have such a resource to tell my student about.

She'd beat me to it. The next time I spoke to her she told me someone else had told her about Family. She'd gone to their New Paltz branch and received help in obtaining Section 8 housing and finding a job. She was hopeful and optimistic. The people at Family had been wonderful.

I was hopeful for my student, too, and made a mental note to check out Family at the end of the semester. Maybe I could volunteer for them. Listening to my student had struck a chord with me. Domestic abuse had been an issue in my own life. Years before,

when I fled an abusive marriage, I had been fortunate enough to have family to go to—but I was well aware that many women did not have that resource. How wonderful that there was a place like Family for those women and children—and for men, too. I told myself I should volunteer there—someday—when I had time.

I also thought, as I do whenever something truly touches me, that I might write something about a woman fleeing an abusive relationship, who calls a crisis hotline. I began imagining a woman and a child on a bus driving through the snowy Catskills and another woman in an old house getting a call in the night. I started making notes for the book that would become *The Night Visitors*.

I'm not sure how long it would have taken me to volunteer at Family under normal circumstances. I was indeed busy, teaching three college classes, working on a new book, editing the previous book. But then something very *abnormal* happened: the 2016 election. When I awoke on November 9, 2016 I thought about how much more vulnerable so many people were about to become: immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ people, women. I wanted to do *something*. Which is when I remembered my intention to someday volunteer for Family. Maybe that someday had arrived. I could at least call and set the process in motion.

So I did. I called the hotline and a volunteer told me I could come in and fill out an application for hotline training. The next session began in February. I told the volunteer that I'd fill out an application, but she must have picked up something in my voice, because she told me to hold on. When she came back she asked, "What are you doing right now?"

"Sitting here feeling crappy," I told her.

“Do you want to come in and help with a mailing?” she asked.

I told her I’d be right over.

I spent that day sealing newsletters with round stickers and chatting with a couple of lovely women. We didn’t talk about the election because, as I was to learn, we don’t talk politics at Family because we serve everyone no matter what their political leanings. I watched volunteers bag up food from the food pantry and answer phone calls from strangers all across the country. Family is the oldest continuously running crisis hotline in the country and they handle all kinds of problems: their motto is “Any Problem Under the Sun.” I signed myself and my daughter up to help serve food at Family’s annual Thanksgiving dinner and I registered for the hotline training, wondering how in the world I was going to fit that into my busy schedule, but determined to do so.

In the months between that day and when I began volunteer training I started *The Night Visitors*; by the time I began my shifts on the hotline I had finished most of the book. It may seem surprising that I wrote most of the book before I began working at Family, but I’m glad I did. The first thing I learned in my training is that everything you hear at Family, on the phone or in the building, and any personal confidences shared during training, are completely confidential. I know that I never used anything that I heard at Family in this book because I’d written most of it before I started there. I did ask in my training if I could share procedural methods from the training and was told I could. So I was able to give my character Mattie some of the techniques I learned in training. Mattie knows how to brace her body for a physical blow and how to ask someone if they’re thinking about suicide. I also learned, though, that much of what Mattie does

goes against procedure, but by then I knew Mattie was the kind of woman who might throw out the rules when she had to.

The people I have met at Family inform the spirit of this book. Their dedication, selflessness, good humor, and kindness never cease to amaze me. They have given me hope in a year that seemed at times bleak and hopeless. When it seemed that the selfish and opportunistic had gained sway in the country, Family taught me that there are kindly ones willing to help the vulnerable, and that family is not determined by biology—it's what we make from the people we help and are helped by. And in the end, that's what I wanted for my characters, Mattie, Alice and Oren—to find their family of choice.