

Excerpt from Chapter 1, “The Ascendance of Consequential Strangers”

On this shrunken globe, men can no longer live as strangers.”

– Adlai E. Stevenson

...As human beings, we harbor an innate desire to connect to others who make us feel safe. We seek ways to feel surrounded by people who are familiar. Many anchored relationships are touchstones of our daily or weekly routines. We unconsciously anticipate their presence, so much so that not seeing them or encountering them in a different place can be jarring. You run into your mechanic and his family at the mall and initially experience that frustrating where-do-I-know-him-from feeling. Suddenly, you recall him in grease-stained overalls at his body shop, and you remember how he came to your aid a few months earlier when your car wouldn't start.

Each of the decisions we make—where we live and work, what we buy, what we do in our spare time, how we commune with a Higher Power (or not)—can thrust us into a whole new cluster of consequential strangers. Say you get a dog for the first time. You suddenly notice neighbors who have dogs, too. Depending on where you live, you begin to frequent the beach, the dog park, or “the path,” as it's known in Northampton. You know that most mornings at around 8:15, you'll see the older woman with the porkpie hat, the three women with their three quintessentially country dogs (a Lab, a golden retriever, an English setter), and the trim, long-legged runner whose yellow and black labs tear through the forest alongside him. You often know the dogs' names but not the owners'. After weeks or months of passing each other almost every day, you might finally look in the dog's direction and say, “I know this is Max, but I'm embarrassed to admit I don't know your name.” You introduce yourselves, perhaps walk part of the way with one another, but there's usually no reason to exchange emails. This relationship is of the path. Most of your conversation is about the dogs (“Did Bogey get bigger?” “I love his haircut”) but occasionally you'll discuss something that's bothering you that you haven't shared with anyone else. And, to your surprise, she'll offer a suggestion you've never considered. Although most of these “dog people” will forever remain in consequential stranger territory, they can be a surprising source of solace, especially when your dog is sick or dies. Unknowing (and probably pet-less) close friends might say, “Don't worry. You'll get another one,” but you can count on your dog-walk comrades to truly understand.