

Say Something

Hello, is anyone there?

I'm Clarisse and I am—was, a crisis call operator and police dispatcher.

I just wanted to help people. That's all I've ever wanted to do. Even when I was little—I was the one who ran to get the nurse when someone fell on the playground. I always wanted to help people get help. But I'm just so squeamish that I couldn't be a nurse or firefighter or police officer. I could never be the one who saved them. But I could be the one who got help.

I ran two miles to find help for dad when he broke his leg on a hike. I called half the phone book when a little girl down the block from us went missing. Every accident I saw on the highway, I called in. I know a lot of people think that's nosy or not my problem, but we read this article on the bystander effect in psychology and it really messed me up. If I couldn't be a first responder, then I would be a first bystander.

But then I found a job at a crisis call line. Then police dispatch. I was the one who could bring help to anyone who needed it. I could call in reinforcements, make sure people got the help they needed.

It's a hard job. Definitely nerve wracking. And you know, people told me that. They warned me. They said something like, kids who love animals have a hard time being veterinarians because they have to administer shots and put animals down. They wanted me to connect the dots that loving people can be hard as a crisis call operator.

Hello, what's your emergency? What are they doing? Are they in your yard? No, ma'am, it is legal for children to play in that park, it's open to the public. I'm afraid that does not constitute an emergency. We have a patrol car in the area, and they will be passing through on their rounds shortly. Alright ma'am. Have a nice day.

It didn't always feel like I was helping.

Hello, how may I help you? Of course, I understand, exams are very stressful. What's your name? Jill? Don't worry Jill, it will all be ok. Would you like to talk about what your feeling? Go right ahead, I'm here as long as you need me.

But it did feel like I was needed.

Hello, how can I help you? Hello?

Maybe it was a wrong number.

Hello, what's your emergency? Wreck on 1-80, do you know around which exit? Ok, is anyone injured? That's good. Yes sir, I'll send a dispatch right away.

Everyone warned me about my first "call." It never comes when you expect it.

Hello, what's—ma'am are you ok? What's wrong? Where's the blood coming from? Can you tell me your location? Ma'am? Ma'am! Who's coming, do you know who he is? Please, tell me your address so I can send a—Hello, ma'am? Are you there? Can you get away? Do you see any doors or windows? We're tracing your location, I just need you to stay on the line a little longer—hello? Hello?

Hello, how can I... sir it's going to be ok. What's your name? Andy, I know how dark it can seem, but there's always hope, you don't need... can you tell me where you are—no! no, it's ok, just tell me what's going through your head, I'm hear to listen. There are plenty of reasons to live, there are people who love you and—let me get my supervisor—No! No, I'm not leaving you, I'm right here! I promise, I'm staying right here so why don't we just talk—Andy? Andy! Please say something.

You can't save them all. They would say. Sometimes it's already too late. But that never made it easier.

Hello, what's your emergency? What's your emergency? Were you in an accident? I'm sending dispatch now, can you tell me your location? Ok, first responders are on their way, just hang on a little longer sir. Sir, you need to stay conscious. They are fifteen minutes away from your location. I know it hurts, but you need to stay awake, keep talking to me. Sir, say something, say anything, just stay awake. Sir? Sir!

I never got to hear the end of their stories. I never knew if they were safe now or...

Hello, what's your emergency? Who's hitting her? Your father? What's your name? Holly, ok, I'm going to send someone over, can you tell me where you live? You don't know the address. It's ok, um, do you live near any parks or—Holly, are you ok? He has a gun? Ok, Holly I need you to find somewhere safe to hide. I know your scared, but you have to hide, I'm right here. I'm tracking your location and a police officer will be there soon. Don't hang up the phone—Holly are you still there? Hello?

The worst ones were the ones that hung up.

Hello, how may I help you? Hello? Is anyone—

It could have been a wrong number, but it never felt like a wrong number.

I would come home, my throat raw from talking, and talking, but I couldn't stop. If I stopped talking, someone could die!

Every time the phone rang was like a gunshot down my spine. I didn't know if it would be an accident, or abuse, or attack, or... even when I was home, any phone ringing sent me into a tailspin of anxiety and nerves and just stirred my deepest fear:

That one day I would recognize the voice on the other end of the phone.

That it would be my husband in a ditch on the side of the road. Or my sister with a knife in her stomach. And that I had no control over what happened. I couldn't help them. I could only sit and listen and hope that someone else would get there in time. And—

[the phone rings]

Hello? Hello! Please say something!

It was a wrong number. It had to be a wrong number.