

The Receptionist's Smile

by [Tricia Warren](#) (October 2020)



Couple, Milton Avery, 1963

Though longing to skedaddle, Mira paused at the threshold of the men's waiting room, forearm cradling her clipboard, and read the next name on the list. Obviously printed with care, the letters evoked, from out of the blue really, an antique sense of probity, until, considering the five Reese's mini-cups she'd bought en route to the clinic, she practically swooned. Forgetting probity, she tried to be subtle rummaging

through her bag. "Mr. Curtis?" she called, cheerfully, she hoped, despite finding—so far anyway—no cups. Rifling through pens, toy cars, floss, and other items, she accumulated mostly dust on her fingertips as her eyes, the color of early spring leaves, according to her ex-husband in their ecstatic years, turned pensive. Without chocolate to quell her anxieties, the legal clinic's sorrows and joys drained her by mid-afternoon. Not to mention she needed to pick up her kids shortly.

Yet, for whatever reason, Mr. Curtis was back after visiting the clinic last month. Today he sat beside a man wearing a pewter cross hung round his neck with a leather string, who stopped talking about the hometown Washington Nationals to nudge him. Startled, Mr. Curtis looked up and arose. Cool air, stark light, wafting through a row of high, slatted windows hinged open to expose rails streaked with dirt and the remains of dead bugs perhaps over-dramatized his face. Or so she reasoned, wondering if he could come back next time. A dedicated hiker accustomed to dirt paths, she wasn't vexed by bugs. (DC traffic was her bugaboo.) Rather, she was time-pressed; her kids would be expecting her soon.

Yet Mr. Curtis's calm eyes, his cheekbones, snagged her equanimity. From a chair that might have been bright orange once, he gathered his papers. Put in a trance by his athletic grace, forgetting her Reese's cups, if not her kids, Mira waited, recalling the high school sports he'd played years ago, which he'd detailed only after she asked. And hadn't she asked because he was so unassuming? Still, no wonder Barb, her clinic partner, became annoyed with her sometimes for asking clients irrelevant questions.

"It's nice to see you again," she said as he approached, partly because she meant it but also because she practiced her finest manners at the clinic. For a few moments anyway, she liked to pretend that the world was elegant, or at least decent, and if she glided over that premise with élan, avoiding the icy waters below, the pretense might assume a

certain reality.

“Nice to see you too,” he said pleasantly but vacantly, as if her implicit metaphor was a hoot. Up close she saw frizzy gray hair framing his face, highlighting two half-moons under his eyes, and she was no longer young enough to dismiss his expression as another country, irrelevant to her own trajectory. Though energetic, with agile legs and silvery brown hair that twinkled beneath the fluorescence, she no longer dashed around like she had as a young lawyer. Her physique, her mind, once as efficient as a twin engine, now ran on fuel she’d never dreamt of a decade ago.

And non sequiturs galore: Yesterday, for example, she’d weighed two extra pounds; then a friend contended that if the Meriwether School, which fed into the best colleges, didn’t accept their progeny, their lives would be futile. Happily, though, as Mira clutched her phone, mulling this prognosis, a man in the grocery parking lot, whose T-shirt said *being and aloha*, presented her with a cart. And a tulip! But back home, when an elderly neighbor couldn’t recall the opera they’d attended together, she was reminded that, notwithstanding the aforementioned scenes, a velvet curtain would drop one day before them all.

Or such were her intimations as she led Mr. Curtis past the receptionists’ desks and through a locked door that Twyla, the head receptionist and clinic success story, monitored with vigilance. Almost redundantly, Mira asked how he’d been: fine, how about you, he answered. If Mira recalled correctly, he’d needed help with a landlord. Surely when they got to Barb, she’d know where the matter stood? So that neither she nor Barb, the other lawyer, became overloaded, they alternated cases, she explained to Mr. Curtis. And his had been assigned to Barb. With her most affable expression, she glanced back at him.

He nodded politely; then, in the narrow hallway, they

both pressed against the wall, allowing stragglers from the self-esteem and negativity seminar to pass before they headed toward the “clinic,” an office-sized, windowless room next to a larger room where the seminar was held. It had been a year now since her firm joined the clinic’s list of sponsors, so she knew the drill.

“Make a difference,” the pro bono partner’s email had importuned. While she’d signed up to work the clinic only once a month and only with skepticism, the place often whacked her soul. Today things had been no different, especially after lunch. Hardly had she and Barb finished with Mrs. Atmadja, who was sleeping in her car with a shattered windshield rather than go to a shelter after she’d been assaulted at another—by men, women, and bedbugs—than Mr. Curtis appeared; and someone else was waiting behind him.

Instantly when they turned in to the office, however, Barb stood up, ready to go. “Mr. Curtis,” she said, her skirt flouncing around her knees, displaying her youthful verve. “I’m glad you came—I couldn’t reach you for days.” And Mira relaxed. Perhaps this was just a minor mix-up, and she could focus on where Mrs. Atmadja might live. Later she’d call shelters, then tomorrow be ensconced in her office, grabbing a cheese Danish from a conference room, wearing classical clothes, slacks or a skirt with one pleat. What troubled her though was Mrs. Atmadja’s hint that Mira might offer a spare room in her home. Of course Mira had demurred.

“I just need a little more information from you,” Barb said, handling Mr. Curtis’s matter adroitly as she handled all her cases.

Mr. Curtis sat down. “Oh, well—my phone ran out of minutes. And since the last time I was here, my son was shot.”

Anxiously touching the cool metal of her chair, Mira watched him fold his arms across his chest. “Pardon?” she

interjected, suddenly aware of how sharp her consonants sounded—like elbows, or scissors.

“My son got shot,” he said. Under his freshly laundered, plaid flannel shirt, his biceps tensed up. The turquoise in the plaid was faded and suited his eyes. “Shot from behind,” he added in a distant tone, like he was referring to someone halfway across the planet.

“When?”

“Daytime, eleven a.m. Week ago. Didn’t you hear it on the news?” His voice crackled, edging closer to the event, maybe as close as a TV news announcer. “In broad daylight, ‘someone’s been killed on Georgia Avenue,’” he quoted in a high, hoarse whisper. “I heard it; then Ellyn called and said, ‘Daddy, that’s Jevonne on the news. Get to the hospital.’ So I get to the hospital, and have to identify my son that day.”

As his words ran almost musically up and down a scale, Mira stared at her ankles, then at the impervious tan walls, which appeared to undulate and then scream. Not long ago her children, anxious about bacteria they’d studied in school, had instructed her never to touch them. It was an odd thing to recall, but her synapses seemed to be fraying.

“You might get tuberculosis,” Sam had said.

“Tuberculosis doesn’t just sit there on the wall,” Jaime scoffed.

“Then where does it float to?”

“You get TB from breathing.”

“Then what are you supposed to do—stop breathing?”

Mira looked at Mr. Curtis. If the shooting wasn’t his reason for visiting the legal clinic—he needed help with his credit report and a prospective landlord—the details, as he

retold them, nonetheless bled softly onto the papers he spread around the table. The shooter was in jail, he said, opening a document that had been folded and unfolded repeatedly. The shooter had shot his 27-year-old son in the neck. As of Monday, his son was in the ground. Mr. Curtis rubbed his fingers over the creases, and they all studied his financial papers.

Finally, Mira peered at his cheekbones, at the symmetrical lines on his face, and said, "I'm just-very sorry." Which sounded ludicrous.

"When did they get the guy?" Barb asked.

"Yeah, later in the day. He-my son-called him hot-that means a snitch, when they were in jail together. They both in jail for selling dope. So the guy shot him, middle of the day. Police picked him up afterward at Burger Knows. At the funeral-my son has kids, okay? Two with his girlfriend, plus a stepson. The younger daughter-she more upset than the others-kept calling his cell phone number, saying, 'He'll answer.'" Mr. Curtis cupped his palm up to his ear to demonstrate someone holding a phone. "And my wife-I mean my ex-wife-went over to his apartment later to get his car."

"His car?" Barb asked, wrinkling her brows, while Mira marveled at her grasp of material sequences. Not unlike a boardwalk running through an old-growth forest Mira and the kids had followed one Sunday after the divorce, Barb's logic was impeccable. It made life seem coherent.

"The girlfriend lives there too-at the apartment?" She was asking.

"Yep. Also, my ex-wife be asking about the money."

"The money?"

"He got some money lying around."

"She doesn't want her grandkids to have it?"

"*She* wants to have it. I told him to quit selling; I got him work as a siding apprentice, but he quit showing up. He made more money selling." With every phrase his mouth opened wider, finally exposing a toothless gap acquired since his last session at the clinic. Consequently, when he slipped into the present tense, the abyss seemed to be talking. "Course he doesn't want to be no school custodian like me. He can *buy* people things."

"Aren't you cutting your hours now? I think that was one thing the landlord—or company, rather—was concerned about," Barb said, deftly returning to the subject at hand.

"Yep, started last month. I tell you what," he said. "I'm not religious, but—"

Despite the circumstances, Mira smirked. Nor was she, she might have said, but that would be gauche. Her former husband was quite religious, if religious meant flaunting one's political views. In fact that was why she'd almost declined to work at the clinic: She was worried that, like him, she'd end up chiding people about "the poor," as if random individuals with one common trait were paper dolls cut identically.

But they weren't, she'd gloated last time after he'd taken the kids and stepped inside to say hello. Not long after sliding a plate of Stilton and crackers on the table, she'd found herself describing the sparkly mascara worn by a lady just released from Delaware's penitentiary, the golden bracelets etched with hieroglyphs dangling from her wrists, plus her tale about a movie star's estate owing her money. During their chat, Mira said, her pity had flipped into respect for the woman's joie de vivre. Recounting all this, moreover, she became conscious of Henry gazing at her like he used to. It didn't matter whether the woman's story was true,

she beamed, spreading honey mustard on a cracker. With her existential yearning, the woman transcended the usual op-ed rhetoric about "poverty," yes? By this Mira meant Henry's rhetoric, but he usually tolerated her jabs. She paused, chewing, as the mustard's tartness filled her nostrils.

Less of an enigma, she continued after swallowing, was a client with three kids who worked three jobs until being fired from the one that offered a pension. She glanced at Henry, hoping he could explain. But after dabbing his lips with a napkin, Henry turned his lissome thighs in that diagonal way which once had seemed quite civilized, looked around, and asked if Mira might get a piano, at least for the kids?

"Like I say, I've never been religious," Mr. Curtis said. "But I worry the end is near. It's coming. Things are—" Gulping, he shook his head and opened the cave of his mouth, which, not unlike the room, seemed to engulf them all. But then as if long ago he'd mastered self-discipline, he turned practical. "Anyway. You learn anything else about the landlord's concerns?"

"Not completely; I tried calling you several times." Even in the most traumatic situations, Barb was careful to show due diligence.

"Like I said, for several days my phone was off."

"Well, you don't owe anything on your last water bill; I learned that much."

"But what about my credit record? How come it's messed up?"

"Not sure; I need to make another call," Barb said. "But these documents will help. Is there anything else we can do for you today?"

“Noth—I don’t know,” he said but drifted off. The air shifted and an ineffable sensation filled the room, billowing over the gray chairs, the desk, and up the tan walls, like a presence that might be chased but never caught. If, according to the riddles and equations proffered in Sam’s physical science text, the phenomenon was reducible to a material cause, no such cause seemed plausible now. Neither riddles nor equations could serve as more than fillers. And none were offered. All surfaces remained undisturbed. No one shouted, not even Mr. Curtis. When Mira escorted him out in a timely fashion and shook his hand, their good-byes were cordial, like they’d just signed a contract. Plus, the receptionist, Twyla, whose title belied her manifold skills, offered them both a nice smile.

In a blur Mira checked the men’s waiting room to confirm that no one else had arrived. Vaguely she nodded at the man wearing the pewter cross. “You waiting for a social worker?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, gaping with an intensity she hadn’t seen on anyone’s face since college.

Too benumbed for any repartee, Mira glanced outside. Through the glass door she saw no trace of Mr. Curtis, just a few people on the street waiting for dinnertime. Beneath her hairline she rubbed the back of her neck, which was sore, imagining a hole in her brain the size of a construction site, like the one outside her condo. But conjuring her suburban Virginia neighborhood, with its palatial gourmet shops, excellent vet, and shady park dappled with red maples, felt absurd. As did fussing over her own perforated head instead of Mr. Curtis’s.

Moreover, her next client was plunking a cane onto the floor and shuffling out of the women’s waiting room. The clinic’s rhythms never ceased. “I’m sorry you’ve been waiting so long,” she said, scrambling over to greet the woman. Then

added, as they drew closer, "I'm Mira," and shook her hand. "Can you tell me your name?"

Possibly exhausted by her wait, the woman looked up impassively. "Fowler; my name is Jane Fowler," she said, poking a shaky forefinger at the final name scrawled on the list. "My bus ride over was horrific."

Like sunflowers, the faces of two other women sitting behind the glass divider were riveted on them. Someone had been called at last, if only by a lawyer. And they were speaking, in a conversation of sorts.

Mira avoided glancing back at them, especially the woman clutching a red bag to her chest, looking distraught. Mostly the clinic was clean, if dated, but dust was gathering near the woman's feet resting firmly on the stained green tiles. Hopefully a social worker would emerge soon; but the legal clinic had now stayed open past closing. If she didn't leave soon, she'd be late for her kids. Nonetheless, trying to be as gallant as a superb dance partner she'd foolishly taken for granted in college (why hadn't she married *him?*), she gestured at the space before her, inviting Ms. Fowler through the locked door. "So your ride wasn't pleasant?"

"No, it was not. But regarding the wait: I understand—life often presents nuances," Ms. Fowler said, her syntax charming, even a little formal.

Otherwise she was quiet as they walked down the hall. Whereas most clients exuded a certain demeanor at first, Ms. Fowler was perplexing. Her pale, pudgy visage, nearly invisible brows, wrinkles going everywhere and nowhere, conveyed neither resentment nor martyrdom, really no expression at all, aside from relief that she'd been pulled from the waiting room. But possibly Mira was accustomed to her own milieu. Take, for example, an encounter with Sam's basketball coach, who had summoned her recently for a chat.

On his white leather office couch, they'd sat down, exchanging quick pleasantries before getting down to business. "The Jaguars are likely to make the playoffs this year," he'd said, leaning forward, clasping his hands, "so we're at a tipping point. Let me put it this way: I'm a student of behavior—worked twenty years at a Fortune 500 company, traveled everywhere." A world-weary expression on his face, he stared off into the philosophical distance while Mira nodded, taking in his digital photos, his celebrity hobnobbing. "Invariably I spot personality types." He chuckled, shifting his weight; the couch squeaked. "And I don't see Sam wanting to crush the Titans in the playoffs." He pivoted to face her; a whiff of aftershave dispersed and then dissipated. Apparently, he was prodding her to prod Sam to "be more aggressive with the ball." She'd been summoned for a transaction, not a conversation.

And that's how it often was in her milieu. Jostling aside those who didn't conform, people competed frantically, expressing themselves with an abundance of photos and noisy attainments while their genuine feelings lay shriveled inside like old pecans dried up in shells. Her pro bono clients, in contrast, were less prone to cliché. Rarely did they mouth platitudes. Quite often they expressed thwarted goals or half-articulated angst, but rarely in a mawkish way.

With Ms. Fowler traipsing beside her, Mira rounded the corner before they halted together in the clinic doorway. "Ms. Fowler, this is my colleague, Barbara," she said, as Barb assumed her professional mien.

"Barb Seravelli. How are you?" Barb said while Mira adjusted her pockets.

"Fine. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I'm sorry you had to wait," Barb said, with her usual aplomb. Almost simultaneously Mira asked, "Won't you have a

seat?" And suddenly, perhaps inspired by Barb's dignified manner, Ms. Fowler was transformed. She rushed through their seating arrangements and other niceties, pulled papers from a file, and turned grave, as if she were in a court of law on TV. Then turning ponderously she handed Mira a file. "May I ask you to copy these papers that are relevant to my case?" While Barb requested a birth date and Social Security number, Mira thus wandered down the hallway, trailed by echoing numbers. As those faded, stray phrases of Mr. Curtis's swirled in her head.

By the time she reached the copy room, it didn't matter that the machine was inert, rectangular, and grayer than the hallway. Just to gain a little serenity, she embraced the thing. Then, per the instructions, she aligned the first ragged page with the appropriate ridges, closing the flap to avoid the glare. The process—something she never did at her real job—left a dry, rubbery feeling on her fingertips. But it was tangible, like wiping her kitchen counter clean. It made her feel whole.

Until, that is, she pressed "print" and heard Mr. Curtis say again, as the machine paused, coughed, and released one perfect specimen after another, "Since the last time I was here, my son was shot." Aiming for repose, she focused on the machine, whose low, humming music soothed her. She pictured Twyla smiling as Mr. Curtis left. Was Twyla implying that everything would be okay?

Perhaps, but no hum, no smile could restrain the phantasmagoria that ensued. With the final pages emerging, rather than boilerplate legal terms, a flurry of religious imagery—the usual crosses, but also monastic robes, Korans, bearded messiahs, Buddhas, Stars of David, trumpets, even shafts of light in Technicolor—appeared to cover them. To use Sam's favorite expression, perhaps she was one egg short of a dozen?

Trying to be sensible, she marched back to the office and sat down in a swivel chair across from Barb and Ms. Fowler. "Hi, again," she said while skimming the documents, which were sharp-edged and warm in her palms: first Ms. Fowler's subsidized apartment bylaws, covering guests, infestations, and bombs, then a clinic doctor's prescription for antianxiety meds. Mercifully, the images faded.

"Okay, shall we begin?" Barb asked, with poise and calm.

Rather grandly Ms. Fowler gazed at the shabby walls, the cheap desk whose edges were peeling, and the flimsy door. Suddenly delicate, she placed her hands in her lap. "May we have some privacy?" she asked, lips twisting mischievously. Not until the door was shut, not until a few moments had passed, when certain of their full attention, did she begin. Like a queen posing for a portrait, she granted them a regal stare and said, "My downstairs neighbor—apartment 303—will *not* turn down his television."

Instantly, given the anticlimactic facts, Mira pictured, in lieu of Ms. Fowler, Jaime and Sam. Only once before had she been late picking them up, when a motorcade rerouted her. Now the obstacles between herself and them seemed interminable. Not today would she savor her usual landmarks—she'd need to whiz past Duke Ellington sitting beneath his musical cleft, maneuver around Howard U; then head toward Chinatown, where John Wilkes Booth plotted, or ease through pockmarked streets that bore traces of the 1968 riots, except for the condos ascending skyward, carrying property taxes with them. Either way, a left turn would oblige her eventually with beech trees and oaks, and closer to the school, a handsome, shady enclave of gardens and gracious homes, all of which belied the historical scars she'd traversed that still festered, though not necessarily in the expected ways.

At present, her main impediment was the glint of joy in Ms. Fowler's eyes. Having removed her jacket, she looked quite content, perched on the wooden chair in her olive Abercrombie and Fitch sweatshirt, choosing words no doubt stacked like piles of dated newspapers inside her brain: supercilious, splendid, troglodyte, and missive, describing, respectively, the neighbor's attitude toward her, their Connecticut Avenue neighborhood, her name for him, and her preferred mode of communication. Apparently she was educated, whatever that meant, and wished to convey this to others.

"Have you *notified* your neighbor that his TV is loud?" Barb asked while Mira admired the flare of Barb's skirt, then her striped tights and Australian boots. Did Barb know that this phase—when one had time to coordinate colors, to attend dance class—was fleeting? (Although possibly this question revealed a kind of envy: the same envy Mira had detected in the middle-aged when *she* was twenty-nine.)

"Frankly, I've notified him thrice that his volume is turned too high. His TV is on all day. Until two a.m. it's on."

"Then he turns it off?" Barb asked, easing into her metronome voice, watching the time too.

"Then he turns it off. But then *I* can't fall asleep."

With her kindness, her patience ebbing, Mira cupped her jaw in her palms as if to hold up a mask that was slipping. Maybe she was a fraud? Otherwise known as "impostor syndrome," the notion had been employed twenty years earlier to describe those who veered from her firm's partnership track. When women, especially, questioned that track, they were considered "self-destructive." In fact, the moment anyone veered from any conventional path, labels flew, as if from a fantastical hat sitting in a college lab or a managing partner's desk drawer. If, for the first time, Mira rejected the once-sacred labels,

doing so seemed fraught with another danger, one hinted at but unnamed by the cacophony. What to do! Again she peered into Ms. Fowler's eager face, saw her blind alleys and dead ends, saw her exhausting herself in a maze, and sat back, flummoxed. Had the warnings pertained to becoming "invisible," or in other words older like Ms. Fowler, who no longer seemed to care about labels?

"That's awful. Nothing more sacred than sleep," she said, to conceal her deliberations. If she didn't leave soon, her children would be taken downstairs to the after-school FunTech. Once Mira arrived, Kyle, the assistant teacher, would glower at her while intoning about "middle school studentship" and "teamwork" to Jaime and Sam, who would nod soporifically, dragging their backpacks behind them.

Nowhere in those backpacks would there be any hint of the clinic's crazy math: its farrago of concern, indifference, willy-nilly resources, ennui, dubious cures for addiction, and so on. Nor any equation for measuring someone's facial expression that vanished before anyone noticed, much less the underlying spirit that sagged with low-grade yearning for which clinic psychiatrists prescribed, within fifteen-minute windows, ample medication.

But where else might anxiety go? Nights when she was beseeched for homework assistance, Mira found hints there. Stumped on a recent evening by linear equations, she'd switched to a fill-in-the-blank whose answer was "dark matter" and paused because the clue—that, along with dark energy, it made up over 90 percent of the universe's matter, which was unseen—unsettled her. "Dark matter can only be detected by its gravitational effects," Jaime shrugged. Now Mira wondered if her daughter inadvertently had explained unseen phenomena, people, trees, etcetera, absorbing unseen pain. But how did such a loopy insight, plus its corollary—that those in her milieu, for all their so-called intelligence, often tottered away from mysteries flecking the very air they breathed—help

anyone?

As if to confront her own gravity, Ms. Fowler rearranged herself, which involved shifting a mound of flesh, thus inducing Mira to leap halfway out of her own chair. Perhaps now they could all go? "Thank you!" Ms. Fowler said and sank back down with a thud. "That's my point. It's so loud I'm unable to concentrate during the day. All the loquacious voices blaring on *Ultimate Courtroom*, *XYZ News*, *Dancing with the Stars*, NFL; so you can't—I don't know—can't read, can't brush your teeth, can't—"

"It's like a Zen state that you need?" Mira asked with recognition, sitting back down.

"Yes!" Ms. Fowler said, pushing her lips out sensuously, as if in response to an exasperating lover. "And he needs—"

"Noise?"

"He wants voices all the time!" Dramatically she gazed around. "Well, I did make a few calls," she said, like a harried member of a corporate board. "Department of Mental Health, manager's office, and discovered there *are* steps I can take. Which is comforting. I know I can do that. Yet there would be consequences for Mr. *Tibbs*," she said, evidently titillated by her newfound bureaucratic savvy. "He could be evicted."

"Well! Okay," Mira said, wiping her hands on her slacks and rearranging the wrinkled fabric around her waist that could be mistaken for stomach fat. Privately she recoiled from Ms. Fowler's sensibility. And maybe her own: Was she expecting Ms. Fowler to be docile, noble, vanity-free rather than petty and power-hungry? Before now the only pro bono client she'd disliked was the guy who addressed her on voicemail as "Myra, Myrtle, or whatever the *hell* your name is." Maybe not liking Ms. Fowler was a breakthrough: She could

dislike her the way she disliked Rex Malcolm at work, who reveled in others' setbacks. "Hmm, you seem smart, articulate. Maybe you could visit the zoo during the day while the weather's nice?" she asked in the flippant tone she used with Rex.

"I'm of two minds about the zoo," Ms. Fowler said, and Mira's heart groaned. Two minds meant two dissertation-size opinions. "Because on the one hand, I adore animals. Grew up around them."

"On a farm?" Mira asked, even as Barb sighed.

"No, I did not grow up *on* a farm. But I grew up *near* farms. I have a definite set of opinions about animals." Feeling constrained by Barb's potent gaze, Mira nodded tepidly. If Barb resented her digressions, frankly, not even she wished to prolong this chat, although farms delighted her. How she longed to be in a meadow now, petting goats or collecting strawberries with her kids! Instead she glanced at Barb, whose expression had congealed into a blend of impatience and fading amiability.

As if in reproach for their haste, Ms. Fowler's cane slid diagonally against the door. To leave the room now, they'd need to extricate it from the doorframe. "And *food*. In my view, my mother served too many cream pies. So of *course* I'm diabetic."

As Ms. Fowler heaved and rearranged herself again, looking like she was waiting to be served a nice cup of tea, Mira squirmed. Would it be rude simply to arise, to indicate time was up? Outside she could check emails, locate her chocolates, and zoom away. Only that would be flouting the advice she'd given Jaime and Sam last weekend, to "reach beyond themselves, beyond the triviality of social media and gadgets." Afterward Sam had milled humorously around the condo, chanting, "I shall not be trivial, I shall not—"

“I’ve thought carefully about whom to turn this case over to. To mental health, to DC Housing, to the residents’ advisory board, but I thought, no, it should go to you, the Lawyers’ Council on Homelessness,” Ms. Fowler said. “As a Section 8 tenant, I’ve worked with LCH for years, and I happen to know Greg, whose work is superb.”

Not accustomed to accolades trumpeting their way, Mira and Barb exchanged wary glances. Then a stunned silence. Because Ms. Fowler knew the legal clinic’s director, Greg, they were trapped inside her every nuance until she released them, which turned out to be fifteen minutes later. But that was for now. In the ensuing weeks they’d be fielding emails about her dilemma, plus belaboring whether to begin eviction proceedings against Mr. Tibbs. Not unlike some of Mira’s acquaintances, Ms. Fowler knew how to exert both subtle and overt forms of pressure, and might garner more attention than Mr. Curtis, although her matter, in comparison, was a trifle. An eerie notion thus flitted through Mira’s mind: Were she and Barb encouraging clients to emulate the likes of Sam’s coach or, God forbid, Rex Malcolm?

Trying to conceal her relief that the session was at least over, she escorted Ms. Fowler past Twyla’s desk and held the front door open. “We’ll be in touch soon,” she said remorsefully, helping Ms. Fowler down the stairs before scurrying back to collect her keys and help Barb. But already Barb was twirling out of the office, her skirt flaring ballerina-style, clutching an array of bags and keys. “Voilà,” she said, handing Mira’s items over.

“Thanks! I was gonna help with the files.” They were both almost buoyant now, striding beside the gray walls and past a single poster that said JUST DO IT hanging lopsided in a tarnished metal frame.

“Already put them away.”

"Oh, thanks."

"You picking up kids? I gotta go too, back to work. Kind of an odd day though."

"Yep. Mr. Curtis's son." Mira looked at Barb, almost beseeching her for solace.

"We can divvy the cases later," Barb said, either missing her look or choosing to.

"Okay."

"Ms. Fowler sounded kind of autistic, with her odd vocabulary."

"Autistic?"

"Sure," Barb quipped as if the issue was settled. But to Mira, Ms. Fowler's posturing wasn't unlike the mask she'd plastered on her own face in law school and forgotten to remove subsequently. "Anyway, that's an issue for Mental Health. Not us. I don't expect clients to awaken my soul; I solve legal problems."

Mira rubbed her eyebrows, as she often did when nervous. Had Barb just clarified the difference in their perspectives? No doubt later, between talking to Jaime and Sam and answering emails, she'd think of Mr. Curtis or fret about Mrs. Atmadja refusing to stay in a shelter. Perhaps in a fog she'd go downstairs to collect her mail and encounter Lew, the building manager, who lately was snubbing her because a prominent resident, before whom Lew always genuflected, had noticed a sandbox odor wafting from Mira's condo. Consequently, Lew had threatened board action against Mira's offending cat, revealing more similarities between her world and that of her pro bono clients than she cared to acknowledge.

Not to mention, as she imagined the cat gracing her

yellow sofa cushion and Lew's implicit threat, her den, balcony, vestibule, and kitchen with its robust fridge popped up in her mind like a replica of Ms. Fowler's inner maze. Quite literally in fact, the souls at her condo lived in isolation. Hallways led to other hallways, which in turn featured private elevators for the most expensive units, and for all residents, thick walls to shield them from natural disasters, life's vicissitudes, excessive noise, Mr. Curtis's desolation, even cat odors. And Lew, the walls' scowling impresario, running the place like his dad, a Deputy Chief of Staff ran a senator's office downtown, could decide whether her kids remained or no. Given the housing crunch, her unit would sell in no time. She'd need to buy something pricier.

"Get a grip," she said, uttering her college roommate's mantra. Thankfully no one heard, neither a man who smelled of beer and dirty clothes nearby, nor the man with the pewter cross, leaving now. Barb was in front of her, texting. Then Mira's phone dinged—Mrs. Atmadja, texting, "Have u decided I can stay with u?"

Nervously tousling her hair, Mira heard her children's voices rising and falling when they arrived home late in the day. In that context Mrs. Atmadja's proposal seemed ludicrous; and yet if *her* life felt precarious, how did Mrs. Atmadja's feel? Still, she couldn't imagine proposing such an idea to Jaime and Sam.

In fact, she rarely divulged clinic day's aftereffects at all, unless they noticed her silences, which she'd explain by sanitizing facts and contrasting shelters with their condo. How fortunate they were, et cetera, but without the guilt or worry. Though last time, not buying her fake cheer, Sam had asked, "Why do people enjoy feeling sorry for poor people?"

It wasn't an unfair question. But dreading the onslaught, not to mention texting Mrs. Atmadja, she tried to catch up to Barb, to ask how *she* parried the phantoms. Was Sam

on to something? Did listening to clients while being able to escape afterward distort the whole enterprise, and did interpreting their stories, even with Barb, distort them further? Perhaps any mode other than sharing the original experience—or at least inviting Mrs. Atmadja to stay with them temporarily—was a betrayal. And wasn't Ms. Fowler's language simply an attempt to dress up the day? Maybe she could ask Barb one of those questions, in any event.

Only not this afternoon: Barb was slipping through the glass doors. An email would elicit no more than an oblique response. Barb was busy and engaged; she volunteered elsewhere and worked full time at the FDA. She was a good lawyer, a good citizen, much better than Mira at her age. Out on the sidewalk now, her short hair flirting with the afternoon's glare as she spun around and waved, she already seemed to inhabit another reality.

Watching her cross the street, moreover, Mira found herself surrounded by a crush of bodies all gathered around Twyla, signing in for a support group. Her path was blocked; there was no catching up. With her sharp wave, perhaps Barb was agreeing that ruminating was unethical. Or was that what troubled Mira: She couldn't explain to anyone, much less Mrs. Atmadja, why she went to bed at night under a mound of covers while others went to bed with bugs, or a shattered windshield, or not at all. But it was hard to think: Someone was jostling her, trying to get by.

Somewhat irritated, she turned around. It was the woman with the red bag from the waiting room, trailing a social worker, saying, "Ms. Chavez!" Several feet in front of them, Ms. Chavez, beautiful and bedraggled in an old jersey print dress, could be seen veering around the support group members, probably heading toward a locked door marked STAFF ONLY.

Passing Ms. Chavez's office earlier, Mira had spotted a ragged poster of Matisse's *Dance*: everyone naked and dancing,

holding hands joyfully. What a lovely, colorful image, she'd thought, but that was just after she'd come inside, still enchanted by autumn leaves twisting on the branches of a lone maple grazing the clinic's edifice.

Under the maple's spell, how easy to imagine a current flowing through the dancers, possibly transmitting whatever one experienced to the others, even divvying resources—water, air, food, et cetera—accordingly. Perhaps the air thus refined burst into music, inspiring everyone to dance? Maybe when she hung the poster, Ms. Chavez hoped to change the world. Only now Mira remembered something: Several years ago she'd heard a curator explain that the painting was a draft for a subsequent, more ambiguous *Dance*, which hung in the Hermitage. To certain details of that version—the spaces between hands, the muscularity of the figures—he'd pointed, asking if they didn't convey, along with joy, a foreboding about groups. Or incessant desire? Maybe Ms. Chavez was weary and had hung that version on her wall.

Either way, Mira's speculations were jolted by the sharp, atonal sound of a string instrument crashing onto the floor and nicking her toe. Nearby, a lanky man with a beatific smile, wearing an oversized cashmere coat no doubt tossed into a Goodwill bin by a lawyer or lobbyist, apologized, rescued his guitar, then pulled a wondrous melody—of ambiguity, the sweet, sweaty present, and other existential predicaments—from strings and air. Perhaps it was middle-aged compromise masquerading as wisdom, but the melody beguiled and countered any notion that she knew how to remake the world. Were zigzagged hints all she had?

Either way, if one hint was her newfound musical ear, yet another, conveniently enough, pertained to Mrs. Atmadja. No longer being a homeowner, Mira hadn't any extra space. Evenings at the condo after her kids fell asleep, she lay down on her yellow chintz sofa, and was selfish enough to relish that pastime. Whether perusing that history of the periodic

table she never seemed to finish or Internet junk, she didn't want an audience.

If sometimes she imagined a finer path she and her kids might forge, outside the thicket of bargains securing their present lives, she hadn't found it yet. But facial crevices, unfocused eyes, nonetheless were coaxing her out of her plush office, away from labels, masks, and tweaking Henry, down toward the clinic. Once a month, maybe twice, not to find roommates, nor to supplicate colleagues (really, why presume to make a difference?), but because, to filch a phrase from her dad's mountain-climber idol, it was here. As was life, which in her own fashion she'd avoided, maybe like Mr. Curtis's son. Or so she fathomed as she stood still, listening to the guitarist's rhythms, sensing the whole, vibrating mess of things courtesy of a few transcendent chords and the homemade physics her clients imparted.

Ahead of them both, however, the woman with the red bag, pulling out her phone, pressing "video," had loftier ideas. Her timing was perfect: Ms. Chavez had reappeared, and turning around to glimpse her pursuer, a swirl of empathy flashed over her visage but also, most likely, fear—that humanity might consume her, like humanity consumed air and water and so much else with abandon. Yet the woman persisted.

"I've got you on camera, honey. Got you. Soon as you get me a place to live, I'll be picking my kids up from my mom's and move in, *preferably* to Friendship Place. Pronto! Government keeps talking about going to Mars. Think we need to go to MARS when I and my kids got no place to live?" Flickering and casting odd shapes onto the reception area and onto the ill-fitting jackets of passersby, her phone no doubt captured, aside from shoulders and talk of self-esteem, the woman's fingernails painted with moons and stars, and finally the STAFF ONLY door slamming shut. If the guitarist was still playing, no one could hear.

“Ma’am?” said the unflappable Twyla, whose perspicacious eyes had beheld a thousand dreams broken and sometimes remade, and whose surfaces the woman also filmed.

“That social worker was rude!”

“You gotta pull yourself together.”

“RUDE, baby! So don’t you be rude too!”

Outside the hush startled, though once Mira grew accustomed to it, she heard faraway traffic and a bird singing. She didn’t know what kind of bird, but it sang like she’d never heard a bird sing before. With perfect efficiency her car bleeped, her lights flickered. For that bit of worldly order she was grateful.

Perhaps for dinner they would get hamburgers and shakes? It was time to reenter the world up the road, the literal one Ms. Fowler had discovered, where the imperious noises of cars and gadgets prevailed, but complaint-making, maneuvering, and subtle extortions worked too. As an antidote, Mira thought of milkshakes, the souls she’d encountered—if only indirectly in the case of Mr. Curtis’s son—and the soft, bony fingers her children would offer when they all headed home in traffic, news whispering as they munched the Reese’s cups whose golden wrappers shone on the dashboard thanks to a gaudy light peculiar to October afternoons in Washington DC.

[«Previous Article Table of Contents Next Article»](#)

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