

CHANGING DIRECTIONS

Anyone who has spent time working in a runaway shelter has stories to tell about the courageous kids who spin through the shelter's revolving doors. What follows are three of a number of mine. (Practicing, The Bear, Zoe's Turn.) I started writing them to answer a personal question: what made a handful of these kids, out of the hundreds I worked with, so particularly special to me? I looked for the answers in them and ultimately saw reflections of me.

By Karen M. Staller

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The instructions had been clear. Take the subway to the 42nd Street/Times Square station, look for 41st and walk west. "Don't worry," I had been warned, "if you feel like you are heading in the wrong direction, you are probably going right."

The journey that landed me at the corner of 42nd and 8th started underground 250 miles upstate in the basement of Cornell University's Law School. It had been a less-than-impressive summer job posting haphazardly thumbtacked to a bulletin board that had caught my attention. The hand written contents of the pink message slip were as incongruous as its presence among the meticulously typed offerings of respectable law firms posted alongside. It read:

Legal-1 internships available!
Runaway youth shelter
New York City
Call!!

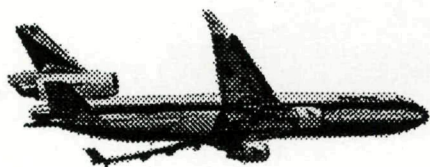
There was a contact person and a phone number. I was transfixed by the quirky little phone message. It must have been posted just for me.

I was a second year law student who had drifted to law school with considerably less focus than my goal-oriented

classmates. It had been my father who first suggested it—years earlier—

over morning coffee during a visit to my parents' home from a distant city where I had been killing time working as the paperback buyer in a bookstore while my husband pursued his career. I was recounting the details of my nightmare—which had been produced by mixing Steven King's latest fiction release with anxiety over whether I had ordered sufficient copies to keep it on the shelves—to the breakfast table contingent when my father rolled his eyes. It was highly unusual. "For Christ's sake, Karen," he began. I sat up; even more unusual was using the Lord's name. "Oh for Christ's sake, Karen," he repeated, "if you are going to lose sleep over work at least do work worth losing sleep over. Why don't you go to law school or something?" It wasn't until several years later—as I supported my husband's progress through Cornell's business school by unloading





considered the wisdom of my father's advice.

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By the start of my second year of school, the only thing I knew with certainty was that my ambivalence in pursuing a legal career surfaced in peculiar episodes of rebelliousness that conflicted with my general tendency toward very proper behavior. Such was the case, when I dutifully joined the swarm of fledgling lawyerettes as they migrated to the local dress store in ritualistic pursuit of the perfect interview suit. The store racks were an ode to blue and black interrupted only by the occasional pinstripe.

I snarled a defiant dare at the chipper sales woman—at a time before flight attendants became gender diverse and better dressed—“I refuse to look like an airline stewardess.” The woman met my challenge with professional good nature. I left with what was probably the only purple suit in a several hundred mile radius.

By the end of my second year the haze of career confusion began to lift following two discoveries. First, there were other skeptics like me. They congregated in an obscure wing of the law school which overlooked an asphalt parking lot, a loading dock, and the school's garbage bins—in direct contrast to the panoramic view of Cayuga Lake offered out of the Law Review windows. It also housed the Legal Aid Clinic. Second, I sensed the law school trek ultimately had something to do with my personal freedom. College commencement had graduated me from dependent daughter to dependent wife. By choice, I had picked a husband who excelled in perpetuating the dependency and, to be fair, I believed I had found true security. However, somewhere during the journey, what had previously passed as caretaking began to feel stifling. I came to experience marriage as a direct assault on my personal autonomy. It suddenly occurred to me that—with the help of a law degree—I might not need a caretaker. In my first-ever truly rebellious

sleeper sofas  
off the back of  
tractor  
trailers—that I  
seriously con-

act of bad behavior, I walked away from the marriage. So when I boarded a Greyhound bus bound for New York City to meet the people at a runaway shelter who had called looking for legal interns, it was with a hunger for freedom, a mere kernel of self confidence, and without the protection of my familiar caretakers.

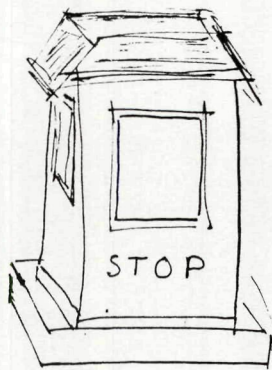
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The crowd exiting the bus joined the mass of humanity in the Port Authority Bus Terminal and swept me through the underground maze up an escalator. It dispersed at the top leaving me disoriented. I instinctively navigated toward the natural light and onto a hot and noisy street corner marked 8th Avenue and 42nd Street. The energy of respectable folks swirled around anything stationary. That included structural impediments, stalled cars, the indigenous drunks, drifters, dealers, pimps, and cops—as well as a small town girl spinning in slow circles soaking it all in. “GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS” flashed in orange neon lights across the street; “LIVE PERFORMANCES” was posted underneath. I stood looking out on a sea of marquees promising stimulating performances of assorted varieties. I suppose typical reactions might have included fear or repulsion I only felt a sudden rush of adrenaline. For the good girl from the small town there was something invigorating about that corner where taboo and danger seemed to abut respectable life.

“LIVE PERFORMANCES”

I found 41st street sandwiched between the two bus terminal buildings. It was a questionable block: overhead bridges rumbled with bus movement and screened out the sunlight. At ground level bus fumes mixed with the smell of urine. The stretch practically broadcast: “You’re-leaving-the-civilized-world.” But I recalled my travel instructions. Since it felt so wrong I assumed I was heading right. With invincible determination, I took the block at an authoritative pace only to find the avenue at the other end even less inviting. A group of denizens were sitting on the sidewalk slouched against the exterior wall of the bus terminal sharing the bottled contents of a brown paper bag. They marked my progress across Ninth Avenue with a series of cat calls and whistles. The next stretch

of walk left all life forms behind. It was bound on one side by a red brick wall topped with barbed wire and on the other by Greyhound buses making subterranean escapes and merging with traffic heading into New Jersey through the Lincoln Tunnel.



In my eagerness to take the wrong direction by storm I walked briskly past the huge U-shaped building twice before noticing it tucked back from the sidewalk. An older man in a blue-gray guard's uniform was leaning out of a small glass sentry booth. He was engaged in a debate with a teenage boy which seemed to be escalating in intensity. Two adolescent girls with a pair of strollers between them were watching from a safe distance. A minuscule tot was curled up asleep in one stroller. The other partially contained a toddler-sized child wearing a NY Mets baseball cap. He was actively engaged in engineering a stroller escape while his mother appeared otherwise distracted. "Stay," she suddenly ordered. The toddler froze mid-maneuver, one leg dangling outside the carriage, apparently trying to gauge the seriousness of the command.

"Yo, man. That ain't fair," said the teenage boy shaking his hand at the guard and shifting his weight back and forth in an impatient dance. "The card ain't right. She said I could come back Friday, man. It izz Fri-day," he said, striking the back of his fingers against his palm and momentarily bouncing in place for emphasis.

The security booth man looked like he had heard it before. "Uh huh, Tyrone. That's not what it says here." He paused to let that sink in and, having noticed me lingering at a respectable distance, addressed me politely. "Can I help you, Miss?" The youth continued to gesticulate in silent anger.

"I have an interview with the Legal Department," I said.

"Just a second, I'll call up." The man picked up a phone in the sentry booth.

"You a lawyer?" The boy, finding himself temporarily without his primary audience, addressed me directly.

"Well, a law student really," I said. "I am

studying to be a lawyer," I added, hearing an unfamiliar tinge of pride creep into my voice.

"I need me a *law*—yer," the kid said, immediately employing my help. "This guy says I can't come back in yet but I ain't got nooo place to go. I need a place to sleep."

"Why can't you go in?" I asked, too naive to realize I was out of my element and already over my head.

"Some bitch gave me a card for doin' nothin'."

"Yeah," said the security guard dropping the phone back into its receiver and re-establishing control. "You were probably doin' nothin'." In fact," he said in mock discovery, "that's exactly what this card says. It says, 'failure to follow plan' That's about the same thing as doin' nothing. And watch your language around the ladies, Tyrone." With his admonition firmly delivered, the security guard turned back to me. "You can wait in A-reception, Miss." Then, without further explanation, he addressed the youth again. "You know the rules, Tyrone."

Although A-reception meant nothing to me, I had received my marching orders and was clearly on my own. I took his hand gesture as a clue and I walked passed the two mothers, the sleeping infant, the foiled escape artist who had settled back into his stroller but continued to fidget, and toward a set of doors.

"You want a sandwich, Tyrone?" I heard the guard say as I moved on.

"Watcha got? Peanut butter or that nasty mystery meat?" Tyrone sounded momentarily distracted.

"That's baloney, Tyrone," one of the girls interceded.

"What? You a food critic now?" The guard teased. "Don't matter," he said quickly, "I think we got peanut butter somewhere. Hold on, let me look." He searched as I pushed through a set of glass doors and into a world that would change my life forever.

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Under 21/New York is a subsidiary of Covenant House, the largest runaway and homeless youth shelter in the United States. It

provides round-the-clock food, clothing, and shelter for runaway and homeless youth as well as a range of professional services including social work, medical, legal, pastoral, mental health, education, and vocational counseling. I arrived as a legal intern, later returned to head the agency's Legal Department and left on a journey through the doctoral program at Columbia University's School of Social Work.

Anyone who has spent time working in a runaway shelter has stories to tell about the courageous kids who spin through the shelter's revolving doors. What follows are three of mine. I started writing them to answer a personal question: what made a handful of these kids, out of the hundreds I worked with, so particularly special to me? I looked for the answers in them and ultimately saw reflections of me.

It took me years to understand that when I stepped off that Greyhound in the Port Authority, I was as much a runaway as the kids I am about to introduce to you. We all mixed escape with a search for love, freedom, and independence. For all of us, Under 21 was a juncture: a temporary weigh station for transients. It was a place to assess where we stood and where we wanted to go. It was a place to change directions. The kids changed my direction and my life. Sadly, but typically, I will never really know if I changed any of theirs.

What separates me from them is education, resources, opportunity, and family support. It is a list of things that most street kids noticeably lack. Given that, I've struggled—both intellectually and practically—with how best to help a kid seemingly headed in the wrong direction get diverted right. It is a question that haunts me but it is also a question that this dutiful and grateful daughter asks because I heeded my father's advice. I found work worth losing sleep over.

## PRACTICING

"I just want my typewriter back," Dorothy explained patiently. "I can't practice without my typewriter. I've tried in my head but I can't. It's too



hard."

I looked at the pretty Jamaican teenager across my desk. She sat stiffly, with her shoulders back and her chin high, like a first-time job applicant trying to make a good impression. Her jaw was set rigid with determination but she clutch-ed and unclutched a cheap leather hand bag that rested across her lap betraying her nervous agitation.

"Where is your typewriter, Dorothy?" I asked.

"Mrs. Jirmenez has it. She won't give it back."

I sighed. I occasionally suffered from the insecurity of suspecting I didn't practice "real" law. My measure wasn't based on my classmates' Wall Street salaries—after all my personal freedom wasn't for sale—but rather on the increased likelihood that they had clients who could identify a legal problem without a protracted game of 20 questions.

"Who, Dorothy," I sighed again, "is Mrs. Jirmenez?"

"Mrs. Jirmenez is my landlady. Well, she was my landlady, but she said I had to leave. She shouldn't have kept my typewriter, though."

"She made you leave? Why, Dorothy?" I excitedly seized hold of the suggestion of a legal issue. New York City has a highly regulated rental market. Landladies can't just make tenants leave without obtaining a warrant of eviction from a civil court housing judge first. Here was a *real* legal problem.

"The apartment was too crowded. She can have my other stuff but I want my typewriter back." Her eyes flashed fire.

She was adamant. I considered this unfortunate. After all, I knew exactly what to do with malfeasant landladies. Their bad behavior triggered a host of legal responses within my professional repertoire. I had spent three years litigating landlord-tenant cases. I just wasn't at all sure how to handle an interpersonal dispute over a Smith Corona. Besides I didn't really think it was a lawyer's job. I could send her back to her social worker.

"What if I talked to her?" I asked, suggesting the obvious. I figured an attempt at negotiation might get me out of further

responsibility for this problem. I could move on to the more pressing items on my daily agenda.

"I don't think so." She shook her head skeptically. "I mean," she added quickly, "she can be really stubborn."

"Well, I suppose we could try small claims court," I suggested reluctantly. It was the only legal recourse I could think of although the idea made me cringe. There were lots of practical problems associated with small claims court. I envisioned the endless wasted hours which could result from the landlady's indifference. Say she didn't show up on the first court date. We would wait around for hours and then inevitably be ordered to return again for a second time in order to preserve the claim. Even if the landlady eventually appeared *and* we won on paper, how was I going to enforce the order? Obtaining the right to the typewriter was different from obtaining actual possession. This had all the markings of a fruitless endeavor. At a crisis shelter, time invested in one case is rewarded with an accumulating pile of others back at the office. I liked this client. I wanted to help her but . . .

"Do you think small claims court is the best?" she asked anxiously. "The police officer said to go to the dispute resolution center in the Bronx."

I felt my jaw unceremoniously drop. open. "You went to the police?" I asked, in awe. Approaching the police with information about a homicide or robbery was one thing, but with a tale about a wayward landlady and an old typewriter? I admired her chutzpah. It was more than I could have mustered at her age.

Dorothy began an earnest search through her cheap leather handbag. She finally surfaced a vinyl wallet. She pulled out a neatly folded slip of paper. "The officer at the desk, told me to go to this room in the courthouse," she said, handing me the paper.

"Wow, good for you, Dorothy. I am impressed." I usually delegated this kind of preliminary information gathering to my clients. I often felt guilty about it—like I was dumping the problem back on them—but it served as a resource conservation measure. I figured the

ones who returned were the ones who really wanted help. I had never had a client arrive so well prepared before. I really was impressed. I offered the obvious next step. "So I guess you could go to this room and get the papers we need to file."

"Oh, I already did that." She said politely.

I pushed my chair back from the desk.

"What the heck do you need me for, Dorothy?" I asked. "It sounds like you are doing just fine on your own." My role was superfluous.

"I want to make sure I get my typewriter back, so I need a lawyer." Her deep brown eyes projected a look of great faith. "I have to go back to court next Tuesday."

My stomach tightened. It was an involuntary response to my own conflict. She didn't need me to win or lose this case. She could do this on her own. If I helped her and we lost—a likely outcome in my mind—it was going to be my fault. I could think of a half dozen legitimate-sounding reasons to justify turning down the case. The real one would be about my own fear of failing and of disappointing her.

"Well, I could to go to court with you, Dorothy," I said hesitantly, "but I don't want you to be too disappointed if we don't get the typewriter back, OK? Maybe we could get you another one, if worse came to worse," I suggested tentatively.

"I have to have that one," she said, her eyebrows knotting in concern.

"Why is it so important, Dorothy?"

"I brought it with me from Jamaica. It was my mother's. I am learning to type—I was practicing every day—so I can get a good job. I want to be a secretary."

I thought about a gold pocket watch hanging under a glass dome in my apartment. It was the same gold pocket watch my Irish Great-Grandfather had used to keep the Erie Railroad running on schedule. It had been more than a simple tool of an immigrant's trade; it had been his partner in success. "Time," my mother said when she handed it to me, "was so very important to him." I suddenly sensed the importance of Dorothy's typewriter. It linked her past with her



future. It was to be her partner in this success. It was a gift from her mother.

Dorothy was an "illegal immigrant" or, as immigration lawyers prefer, an "undocumented alien." Either way, she was currently in the United States without the express permission of the U. S. government. She had arrived legitimately enough with a standard three-month visitor's visa, but that visa had expired a year and a half ago. Her continued presence on U.S. soil made her an unwelcome visitor. Dorothy, however, had dreamed of working hard and making her way in this land of opportunity. She wanted a different life than her mother's in Jamaica. I understood the philosophical underpinnings of national immigration policy, but I hated it when policy conflicted so dramatically with the simple aspirations on which this country was built. Dorothy's dreams were the same as my great-grandfather's.

I was suddenly grateful for the luxury of my job in a privately funded agency. This was a case that wouldn't survive intake in any other law office in the city. Not only was the subject matter too inconsequential for "adult" law offices, but federal funding restrictions prohibited Legal Aid or Legal Services attorneys from representing illegal immigrants. At Under 21 I had the freedom to determine what factors to use in making any intake call.

"OK, Dorothy, I'll go with you on Tuesday."

"You'll be my lawyer?" she asked earnestly.

"I'll be your lawyer," I assured her.

"And you'll get my typewriter back?" She wanted a guarantee.

"I'll do the best I can," I said with considerably more confidence than I felt.

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It was 8:05 Tuesday morning. I waved a hello as I whizzed by Charles, the kindly, fatherly gatekeeper, who had early morning sentry duty outside the building.

"Hey, Kar," he yelled after me, "there's a young lady been waitin' on you in 'A' since 7:00 this morning."

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned to face him. "Since 7:00, Charles?" I asked

incredulously.

"Yea, since right after breakfast. Said she had an appointment with you and that you are gonna be gettin' her typewriter back."

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks, Charles." Dorothy's eagerness bore a direct inverse relationship to my confidence in this matter.

"I know you can do it, Kar," he called after me.

I walked into A-reception. Dorothy was sitting primly in the corner chair wearing a slightly matronly suit that she had undoubtedly dug up in the Agency's "clothing room" specifically for this occasion. She clutched her purse on her lap.

"Good morning, Dorothy," I chirped, as best I could, before my usual infusion of caffeine. "I hear you've been here a while."

"I didn't want to miss you. Shall we go now?"

"OK," I said reluctantly, abandoning my unspoken plan of grabbing coffee before the trek. Her anxiety trumped my caffeine addiction. "Let's roll."

We exited the subway in the Bronx with plenty of time to spare. I offered her breakfast at McDonald's, but Dorothy declined, marching briskly up the hill toward the courthouse instead. I would have insisted on my coffee if I didn't sympathize with her need to get there. Waiting for a case to get called inside a court house is qualitatively different from killing time outside one even if the actual number of passing minutes are the same. For me, crossing the courthouse threshold usually produced a surreal state of welcome relief and heightened anxiety. It was like preparing for a final exam and finally walking into the exam room. Surprisingly, I felt completely relaxed this morning. Probably because I was so sure Dorothy's landlady wasn't going to show up.

We followed signs to the mediation area. It was strewn with decrepit, orange plastic chairs that reminded me of my high school cafeteria. They were tacky. Real justice, I thought disparagingly, was dispensed in the midst of mahogany, not orange plastic.

I settled in for a long wait with Dorothy perched beside me. "Want a section of the

paper?" I asked, waving *The New York Times* in front of her.

"No thanks. I need to look for Mrs. Jirmenez."

"It's really early, Dorothy," I warned, continuing to harbor my private apprehensions about the likelihood of her appearance.

"That's O.K.," she said, surveying the empty space from the edge of her chair.

I was well into the local news when Dorothy suddenly leaned over me and, without decorum, grabbed my arm. "There she is," she said in an excited whisper.

"Who?" I asked.

"Mrs. Jirmenez," she said impatiently.

"Your landlady?"

"Yes, Mrs. Jirmenez, she's the one in the red."

"Let's go check in with the clerk. We'll tell him we are all here," I suggested.

Dorothy and I picked up our belongings and trudged over to the clerk. The balding man looked worn around the edges. He peeked up at us over the rim of heavy eye glasses. He didn't actually raise his head, and his hands remained frozen, mid-shuffle, in the stack of papers he had been sifting through. He sat poised to dismiss us without further notice.

"Hi, I am Dorothy," she greeted him cheerfully. "I am here for this case," she said pointing to the documents she had filed the week before. "That's my landlady, Mrs. Jirmenez over there," indicating the woman in red. "And this," she said waving proudly in my direction, "is my lawyer." I nodded in polite acknowledgment.

The clerk, who had been taking the introductions in stride, suddenly looked up. "Your lawyer?" he growled raising an eyebrow. "No lawyers allowed."

"Excuse me sir." I stepped in. "I represent. . ."

"You heard me, Counselor, no lawyers."

"I don't understand." I stammered. I was surprised by his animosity.

"You don't understand?" he said, warming up to the exchange. "You can't go in—just the two parties. See, it's a mediation, between two parties, get it? No lawyers."

He was treating me like a two-year-old

and I was embarrassed at the verbal thrashing I'd just received in front of my client. On the other hand, I appreciated the enormity of the snag. Court clerks have infinite power which is derived, in part, from their absolute discretion in the operation of things within their domain. There was an art to getting a clerk to lean in your favor. I had the housing court clerks wrapped around my little finger. This guy was new to me. I briefly considered my options. Anger sometimes felt good and it usually temporarily impressed the client, but it hardly ever produced successful results. I settled on compassion instead.

"She's only 17. Couldn't I go in with her, as a friend?" I pleaded.

"No friends either," he snarled, returning to his mountain of papers using complete inattention to summarily dismiss us.

I don't consider myself a quitter, in general, but the combination of his surliness and my insecurity in this unfamiliar setting convinced me the most realistic strategy was to cut our losses through retreat. "Dorothy," I said as we withdrew to our corner "this is actually good." She looked forlorn. I pulled a yellow legal pad and a ball point pen out of my bag in preparation for the next round. A tear welled up in the corner of her eye. I felt an empathetic pang. I knew she felt abandoned and that never feels good.

"Listen to me, Dorothy. You have been your best advocate all along. You're smart and persuasive. You know what you want and you know what is fair. You just have to say those things to the mediator, the same way you have been saying them to me all along." She looked skeptical.

"Sometimes, Dorothy," I continued, "people do a lot better without lawyers. Lawyers just get everyone all worked up. You're going to be better off if you just tell your story to the mediator. Really, you are." I believed that.

"What if Mrs. Jirmenez lies?" She wiped away a tear. She was with me so far.

"People lie to mediators all the time. If you stay in control and present yourself as rationally as you always do, the mediator will believe you. Here," I said handing her the pad, "we are going to write down your arguments so you don't forget what you want to say."

I put aside all notions of lawyering and began to teach. We spent the next hour in a crash course on advocacy techniques. We listed the things she wanted to say. She practiced how to say them. Resolve began to enter Dorothy's voice as we anticipated what Mrs. Jirmenez would say and she practiced how to respond. We moved on to consider what the mediator might say.

"Let's go," called the clerk called suddenly. A new wave of panic swept across her face.

"You can do it," I reassured her. I knew she could if she just believed in herself.

Dorothy and Mrs. Jirmenez disappeared behind a closed door. I waited. I paced. I waited some more. I began to sympathize with expectant fathers of yesteryear. I felt responsible and helpless at the same time. Finally the door swung open. Mrs. Jirmenez walked briskly out. Dorothy followed primly in her wake.

"What happened?" I could hardly contain myself. "Tell me what happened," I begged.

"She's giving me my typewriter back. I get to pick it up on Thursday morning" she said calmly.

"Yes!" I shouted with unrestrained glee, throwing my hand up in the air for a high five.

Dorothy's reserve began to erode as her hand rose to meet mine. She grinned. "I really did good," she praised herself. "I said every thing I wanted to say."

I basked in the moment. It wasn't very often that my clients recognized their strengths.

Dorothy practically floated back down the hill toward the subway. She was chattering through the details of the morning, when she stopped abruptly before a Korean grocer. "Don't you just love mangos?" she asked, looking an outdoor bin overflowing with the yellowish-red fruit.

I hesitated. "Actually, I've never had a mango," I said. I grew up in central New York. I could distinguish a Rome from a Cortland apple on sight, but what did I know about exotic tropical fruit?

"You've never had a mango?" she asked in disbelief. "Never? In my country, in Jamaica, you get the best mangos. They remind me of home."

She suddenly turned her back to me and began to work her way through the pile of mangos. She picked them up, one at a time, testing for firmness, color, and smell, and rejecting each in turn by balancing it precariously at the back of the pile. She had rearranged the contour of mound when finally, she paused over one. She cradled it in her hands. "This one," she whispered, "this one is perfect."

"Let me see," I said, taking the ripe fruit from her.

She pulled out her wallet. "I am getting it for you. To thank you for getting my typewriter back."

"No, no no," I said. "I can't let you do that. Besides, I didn't do anything." I was trained to be wary about gifts from clients although, truthfully, the real source of my discomfort came from her genuine willingness to give me credit for the day's events.

She took the mango out of my hand and opened her wallet. It contained two, one dollar bills. The mango cost .89. She pulled out a dollar.

"Well, wait, Dorothy let me pay for it. After all, you did all the work picking out the right one." I couldn't let her sacrifice half of her total savings to celebrate her own achievement. After a slight struggle she relented. The grocer placed the precious mango in a brown paper bag and we headed for the subway.

Back in my office we scrounged up a knife and some napkins. "Let me show you," she said, taking the fruit and the knife from me. With deft and practiced precision she began extracting the pulpy aromatic fruit from its rubbery skin. I was mesmerized by the joy and confidence with which she attacked her task. It was one—of many—skills she had carried with her from Jamaica. We savored the celebration until it was time for both of us to move on to other things. She left promising to call after she retrieved her typewriter.

It was only after she left that I realized how deeply challenged I had been by her deceptively simple case. She had shamed me into realizing that my initial dismal case assessment was the product of substituting my judgment for her knowledge of her landlady. Perhaps even worse for my professional ego was the fact that my error

was a natural outgrowth of what I had learned practicing law. Legal success is so defined by winning that I had easily substituted winning physical possession of the typewriter with the importance of seeking justice. It was a profoundly troubling substitution to me.

My best work of the day, I thought bitterly, had consisted of not practicing law at all and that notion resurrected my insecurities about whether I was a "real" lawyer or not. I pulled out *Black's Law Dictionary*, the profession's most trusted lexicon, and flipped through the pages until I located "counselor-at-law." It said: *attorney. . . Member of the legal profession who gives legal advice.* So I paged backward to attorney and found a different definition: *an agent . . . appointed to act in the place or stead of another.* There was no mention of giving counsel or advice.

The two entries helped resolve some of the struggle Dorothy had agitated. I was socialized into a profession that had once primarily defined itself as an association of counselors but now was a profession of agents for others. I wondered what historic trend explained a movement from advice-givers to agents but I suspected it has something to do with the financial rewards attached to being hired hitmen. Perhaps, by substituting counsel for agency for Dorothy, I hadn't drifted away from my core professional responsibilities but had moved closer to the profession's roots. If so, it was a day's work to be proud of after all.

THE BEAR

The Bear fit snugly between the wooden arms of a hand-me-down chair which had been donated by a local law firm. I had created him, on my mother's portable Singer, one Christmas vacation as I restlessly waited for the new college term to begin. It had taken repeated treks to the local Woolworth's to accumulate sufficient quantities of foam stuffing to bring his brown furry shell to life. In the end, he was huge and almost circular, his paws gently sloping forward

in a permanent embrace around his well rounded belly.

The Bear had a snout by design, and two soulful brown glass eyes—but the vacation days evaporated before I had time to embroider his nose and mouth. I felt guilty about that. The character of a stuffed animal always emerges while affixing its features. It's a natural birthing process and no amount of fussing with stainless steel pins beforehand can control it. This poor bear, however, never stood a chance. In spite of his facial handicap, The Bear projected an oddly calm and non judgmental aura as he presided over the affairs of my office.

The Bear's original arrival served the dual purpose of relieving clutter from my cramped studio apartment and providing office decor, but he quickly assumed a more important role. He absorbed the emotions of others. Angry teenage boys punched him; needy teenage mothers; lovingly stroked him; fretting toddlers eyed him in wondrous suspicion from a safe distance. Through it all The Bear sat patiently on his leather throne, ready to accommodate the needs of any child.

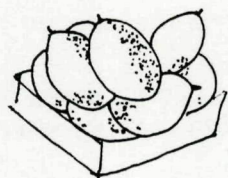
I heard the phone ringing through the office door as I fumbled for my keys. I dreaded days that started like this. Reshuffling priorities on a moment's notice had become second nature to me even so, it was a bad sign when the demands began before getting through the door. It meant you were behind before you even started.

"Legal Department," I said, grabbing the phone receiver while shedding my outer winter layers onto a chair next to the desk.

"Karen, is that you?"

"Yea, Denise?" Denise worked on the younger boys floor. It was a tough crowd: 12 - to -16 year old adolescent boys who were old enough to be arrogant, but not old enough to have much practical sense. Denise could handle them though. She was capable of both compassion and command. I always thought she was particularly effective in Spanish. Either it rolled off her tongue with soothing tenderness or it barked orders that few would dare to ignore, whether they understood the language or not. I loved watching her with the kids.

Denise had been at the agency longer than



forever and she knew the street, and its children, better than most. She was a social worker by instinct and experience but not formal education. I didn't know her personal history, but I suspected she had gained some knowledge from first-hand exper-



ience. I had long ago learned to assess the quality of the worker making a call to my office. It saved time and energy. Denise was among the best. There were two things for certain about a phone call from her: the question would be good, and the dialogue would be tough. I knew she always dealt with the easy and the routine on her own.

"It didn't sound like you Karen. Do you have a minute?" she asked. "It's important," she added quickly, eliminating those crucial seconds which would have allowed me to consider my response. I would have been tempted to call her back after grabbing my coffee.

"Sure, Denise, what can I do for you?"

"I've got this nine year old over here. Well, actually, he's in Medical right now. He came in this morning about 1 am. He's been hit. We really think he should talk to you."

"Have you called it in?" I asked the routine question. We were mandated reporters, of course, so our suspicions of abuse or neglect had to be deposited with the State Central Registry. The State referred case to the local protective services agency. In recent history, it had been known as CWA (Child Welfare Administration); SSC (Special Services for Children), and before that BCW (Bureau of Child Welfare). Today it is ACS (Administration for Children's Services). Each name embodied new hope for greater child safety but it remains the same old agency. The greatest benefit in the constant reshuffling was that it provided an informal assessment tool. Listening to a family refer to its workers revealed how long they had been in the system. It was the child welfare equivalent of a fossil record.

"I'll call it in right after he sees medical."

Denise knew the score. The abuse hotline operators, in general, were a jaded lot and convincing them to take a report could be dicey business. You had about 120 seconds to bring the child's pain to life over the phone line. Doctors, and their reports, added instant credibility.

"OK bring him over when you can, Denise. I should be here all morning," I said, sinking into my office chair for the first time. "See you later." I started to hang up.

"Karen?"

"Yea, Denise."

"He's really scared," she said, starting to hang up. I was startled. It wasn't the kind of information Denise usually provided. She usually kept her interpretations separate from the information she passed on as referral facts. I liked that about her. There were other workers who were all emotion and no facts. I ended up judging their credibility as much as the kids.

"Denise?" I said, catching her on the line before she deposited the receiver.

"Yea, Karen."

"Does he have a name?" I was struck by how easily our conversation focused on the problem without even mentioning the child's name.

"Oh sure," she chuckled, "It's Warren."

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There was a knock on the office door. Denise cheerfully greeted me. Beside her was a boy, so small his head didn't even reach as high as Denise's short shoulders. I winced. It was so easy, over the telephone, to forget the essence of our work's raw material and I was momentarily struck by a simple truth: nine-year-olds don't belong at runaway shelters. I felt a wave of maternalism sweep over me. I wanted to take him home.

"Warren, this is the lawyer. She wants to help you." Denise launched into transitional introductions.

"Thanks, Denise," I said when she finished. "We'll be fine now. Have a seat Warren." I beckoned him into the office.

For me, seat selection was an assessment tool of sorts. There were four or five available

chairs arranged in their natural state of scatter in my office. Warren took one against the wall, sheltered and removed from the open space of the room. He hoisted himself up and slid back into it. His legs didn't reach the ground. The seat I chose was in calculated response. Sitting behind a desk would be wrong in this *pas de deux*. I pulled up a chair on the same side of the desk and estimated what I thought was a safe but intimate distance.

"Hi Warren, I am Karen. How are you?" I asked quietly, instinctively matching the tone he set.

He didn't respond. The oversized conference chair engulfed him. His eyes focused on the clasped hands in his lap. It was as if all his energy was sucked inward.

I tried every strategy I knew for winning over frightened children but my gentle probes on innocuous subjects continued to be met with resounding silence. After 15 minutes I was frustrated and ready to quit. I felt like a failure for not gaining his trust. On the other hand, I figured it wasn't that important for him to speak to me. There were many others—social workers, case workers, doctors, lawyers, judges—inside and outside the shelter who would need to hear his story because they would become active participants in shaping his future. As I saw it, my role was to act as a buffer for him in dealing with all those adult professionals around him. I wished I could convince him that trusting me might be worth it but then, I never could be sure it was.

I glanced around the office in search of some relief. "Hey, Warren, do you want to look at my toys?" I asked with forced enthusiasm. I walked over to the bookshelf which housed a large wicker basket filled to the brim with assorted goodies. Kermit the Frog hung off the handle. Warren glanced fleetingly at the basket as I set it down beside him. Then there was a second furtive glance. It was directed, not at the basket, but at something behind me. I slowly turned in search of the intrigue.

The answer was immediately obvious. The Bear. I walked over and grabbed the creature around his waist. "Here you go," I said, sliding The Bear onto his lap. He disappeared behind it.

"Hey where did ya go Warren?" I teased.

"I am a bear," he said, his first words muffled by the fuzzy fabric and ten pounds of stuffing. Lawyers aren't routinely trained in the art of play therapy, so I was genuinely surprised with what followed.

"What's The Bear got to say?" I asked playfully.

Remarkably, to me, it all spilled out—filtered through the back of a bear. How he had been home last night and how his mother had been drinking, again. How she always got mad at him when she drank—he didn't know why. How she had taken out an electrical cord and hit him—it didn't really hurt as much as usual, but he just got so mad about it. How when his mother fell asleep, he had snuck out of the house. He didn't know where he was going to go—just out. He met some older boys. They were hanging out on the street. They asked him what he was doing because, after all, it was past midnight and he was all by himself. The boys warned him about the dangers of their Brooklyn neighborhood at night and suggested he return home. He refused. So the boys told him he should go to the runaway shelter. They took him to the subway station and showed him how to hop the turnstile, avoiding the fare that he didn't have the money to pay. They told him to get off at 42nd street and to ask a cop where to go. Don't ask just anyone, they repeatedly

warned, ask a cop. That's what he did. Here he was. Did he have to go home? Was he in trouble?

"You can stay here, for now, Mr. Bear," I said gently, "and you're not in trouble." I was overcome by a passionate desire to make things right and safe for him. I was struck by both his vulnerability and his strength.

A small face peer out from behind the bear. "Are you sure?"

We're going to do everything we can to keep you safe, Warren," I said. "How 'bout I take you back to the floor now? You've been a very brave guy." I was proud of him. Not for telling me his story but for his courage in doing so and



for all the courageous decisions he had made en route to my office.

"OK," he said, sliding off the chair, still grasping as much of the bear as his arms could manage. I stifled a laugh. His attempts to control The Bear's enormous bulk were comical. Yet he seemed determined not to let go.

"Warren." I said, "Do you want to borrow the bear for a while? You can take it to your room and talk to him when you want." The Bear hadn't been out of the office since he had originally arrived, but it occurred to me Warren had found some security in it that went beyond facilitating his tale.

He smiled. His face shone with a mixture of relief and excitement. Silently, he began to drag The Bear, by the paw, toward the door. He stopped suddenly and turned around. "What's his name?" he asked.

"His name?" I was surprised. Dozens of kids had played with that bear. I couldn't remember being asked his name before. "Gee we always just called him The Bear." I paused thoughtfully, "how 'bout you think of a name for him and we'll talk about it later."

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A week later, I got another phone call from Denise.

"Karen," she sounded panicked, "I need your help right now."

I was used to workers insisting on immediate attention. Crisis can be contagious; workers catch it from kids and it is capable of clouding better judgments. I usually had the distance—created by being a department removed from the primary action—necessary to help talk workers out of their own crisis so they could get to the kid's. But this was Denise; she never needed that kind of help. I sensed trouble.

"What's wrong, Denise?"

"CWA is on the way to pick up Warren. The worker is taking him home." If CWA was intending to pick up Warren at this stage, it meant they had simply closed out the case.

"Home, Denise? Did you tell them about the medical records? Those records seemed to warrant at least some investigation. Children don't get welts on their backs without help."

"Of course," she responded with irritation. "We told the worker about medical, we told him the kid was wondering around Times Square, alone, at 2 am, we told him all that." She snapped, "he hasn't even interviewed Warren. They just want to take him home." I felt properly scolded.

Denise wouldn't have bothered me, nor would she have reached the point of irritation, if she hadn't already tried to calmly work through the facts with the CWA worker. I suddenly felt guilty. She was having to do battle with me, too, and I was on her side.



"Did they do any investigation at all?" I asked, knowing that Denise had already let me know that their investigation was inadequate but still needing to know what they had done.

"Oh yes, very thorough." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "They talked to his mother, in front of his brothers and sisters. She denied ever hitting Warren." Denise, ever the child advocate, couldn't resist her last bit of information. "The worker says Mom is a very nice lady."

"They didn't talk to Warren at all?" Now I was getting agitated.

"Never."

"They never asked to see our medical records?"

"No."

"OK, Denise, call me when the worker gets here. You know, I really can't believe this is going to be a problem," I added. "We just have to explain the situation to the guy." I meant to provide optimistic reassurance but it fell flat.

"Uh hu," said Denise, with a kindly tolerance that barely masked her doubt.

I felt my own mounting anxiety. Denise—a worker whose judgment I trusted—had sent me plenty of unspoken warnings about her assessment of the unfolding crisis even though she had provided only the essential facts. I

heeded her warning by crossing the hall to our minimally equipped law library where I pulled a copy of the Family Court Act off the shelf. I was pretty sure an interested party, like a runaway shelter, could by-pass CWA's authority and bring an abuse or neglect proceeding directly to court when necessary. It was something new. I had never done it and, from the limited research possible in our library, it didn't look like any other agency had tried before either.

The phone rang again. I jumped.

"He's here," Denise said, not bothering to identify herself. The presumption was that this was the case of the moment. "He's mad that Warren's bags aren't packed." I took her description of his attitude as supporting evidence of Denise's original assessment. We were in for a tussle.

"Where's Warren?"

"He's in school right now. We told him he might have to leave though."

"Leave him where he is for now." In that second, I instinctively substituted the agency for child as client. It was not an insignificant substitution. Attorneys, after all, are the agents of clients. Clients should be kept informed along the way. They should direct the work of their attorneys. Yet I was barely aware of doing it. Sheltering Warren from the swirl of activity around him seemed like what I was supposed to do on behalf of the agency.

I trotted down six flights of stairs to the ground floor. It was always faster than the elevator and besides it got my blood pumping. I paused at the bottom to take a breath and straighten my blouse before pushing my way through the door to the reception area. Karen, receptionist extraordinaire, caught my eye and nodded her head almost imperceptibly toward a young man, who was uncomfortably perched on a chair in the corner.

"Hi, my name is Karen Staller," I said approaching him, my hand outstretched.

He rose from his seat. "I am here for Warren," he said, ignoring my extended hand. "I understand that there is some problem." He was clearly agitated.

"Well it's just that we're a little concerned about Warren going ..."

He interrupted me before I could finish my sentence. "You don't have any authority to hold him. You can't hold him. Its time for him to go home. We have finished our investigation."

"I'm sure if you talked to Warren first..."

I started to say.

"Don't tell me how to do my job. Are you turning him over or not?" he demanded.

I was taken a little off guard. "No," I said cautiously, "It's just that we are worried about..." I started to backtrack.

"No?" he lowered his eyebrow authoritatively.

I wondered if he was always so adversarial. I faltered briefly, wondering about the source of his adamant position. Did he really believe Warren should go home? Or was he playing out some angry vendetta against us? I remembered our medical records.

"No," I said again, this time with a little more confidence. I could sense people behind me slowing their pace as they moved through the waiting area. A crowd was beginning to gather at a respectful distance.

"You can't do that. This is illegal." He looked at me directly.

"I believe it's not." I said, meeting his stare. I had made a pledge of protection to a nine-year-old, and the agency's position was being threatened.

"I'll have to call the police," he said angrily.

"Do what you need to do." Anger at his unreasonableness edged into my voice.

I wasn't about to be bullied by him or the police. Nevertheless in contrast to my relatively calm appearance, I didn't like the sound of the police getting involved. It made me nervous. Testing new legal theory in the safety of a courtroom where the rules of the game are eminently clear was one thing—testing it in the reception area of a runaway shelter with police officers as arbitrators was another. It foreshadowed disaster. To make matters worse, there was agency precedent for such a showdown. Popular folklore glorified a brave staff member who, once upon a time, had been dragged from the agency in handcuffs by the police for upholding a child's confidentiality rights by

refusing to confirm or deny the youth's participation in the program. Although the staff member had become a legend, I always secretly wondered why the police wanted the kid so badly. Nevertheless the story was recounted proudly, as evidence of true dedication, to every fresh batch of new hires. The tale's conclusion involved a formal apology issued by the Police Department. The apology came only after the staff member had spent several hours in a holding cell. In spite of the potential glory, I wasn't eager to inhabit—even temporarily—a jail cell.

The CWA worker turned on his heels. "You'll hear from us," he said as walked briskly to the door.

"Buzz me through, Karena," I said, indicating the locked door that separated the waiting area from the rest of the facility. I took the six flights of steps back up to my office two at a time, wondering how long it would be before the police arrived. The closest precinct was only minutes away. My heart was pounding by the time I reached the landing. I felt that nervous tension that accelerates time. I knew its danger. I forced myself to pause before opening the stairwell fire door. I needed to slow time down before it hurled me into crisis and clouded my thinking. It was a role I performed for others every day; it took a more concerted effort to do it for myself.

I pushed through the door ready for battle. I summoned the troops: attorneys, paralegals, and a secretary, and enlisted everyone's immediate support to the war effort. Some scurried off in search of affidavit information, others to get medical records. The Secretary began typing blue backs with the case caption. I worried about the time it would take to pull the papers together not just in terms of the legal drafting, but the mechanical production—like finding a working Xerox machine—could be a problem.

The phone rang an hour later cutting through my intense concentration. I paused in suspense. Nancy, my secretary, buzzed over the intercom.

"Karen, there is a Mr. O'Halloran on the phone. Says he is the head of the Office of Legal Affairs for the City." I breathed a sigh of relief. One of my own kind. No cops, just a lawyer who

I had gone head-to-head with in Family Court before.

The case was resolved in four telephone calls which took place over the next hour. Warren stayed with us.

I had never seen a case reach the top of the chain of command so quickly. I suspect CWA didn't want to be a potential target for the evening news any more than I wanted to be its subject. I hoped I had done the right thing. I wanted Warren to have a home more than anything. I was just confused about how to best ensure that. I wondered if CWA got scared off or whether it actually had done a more thorough review.

I worried about the potential for creating chaos. CWA and Under 21 are both agencies dedicated to protecting children. We both want children to be safe. We both want them to be home if possible. How had this turned into a battle between Warren, Denise, me, and Under 21 and Warren's mother, his case worker, and CWA with police officers and family court judges on standby? I wondered how smaller child care facilities in the State—those without an attorney on the premises—would have handled this matter. Understandably, many might have handed the child over to CWA in the first place. Would that have been right or better?

Representing children at runaway shelters is tricky business. Their decisions and actions are almost always in conflict with their caretakers. In general, the agency throws its weight behind the child's decision. It is the easiest thing to do. The more perplexing question is whether it is always the right thing to do. I found it troubling that children set the wheels turning. Certainly, in a more perfect world, Warren shouldn't have had to wander into Times Square before adults took notice of his situation. On the other hand, what about the other kids—recidivists or those who ran from CWA placements—who set system chaos in motion? I worried about my role in the mix.

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Denise called to let me know that Warren was happily settled in a more permanent group home, surrounded by kids his own age.

"That's great, Denise," I said and started to hang up, but remembered one piece of

unfinished business. "Denise, do you have my bear?"

"Oh yea, of course, Karen I locked him in my office so he would be safe," she said. "I have to come over to your part of the building tomorrow, I'll drop him off."

"Thanks, Denise."

Tomorrow came and went, as did the next several weeks. I kept reminding Denise about the bear. She kept not remembering him. It finally occurred to me that there was some passive resistance, as my social worker colleagues would call it, going on. One day when my secretary was heading over to the younger boys floor, I asked her to pick up The Bear.

"Karen," said Nancy poking her head through my office door ten minutes later, "look who's back!" She kicked the door open with her foot and entered my office, her arms wrapped around the belly of The Bear.

"Yippee," I cried, getting up from the desk to help her.

"There's just one little problem," said Nancy. "See." She let The Bear slip forward by the paw so the back of him faced me. In very large childish letters, stenciled in blue ink across the back of The Bear, was the name "Warren." The letters had been traced and retraced until they had worn away the fur and taken on a permanence that would never be erased.

My initial dismay was quickly replaced with acceptance. The Bear now had both a name and an identity. It was Warren. Like his namesake, Warrenbear would carry the scar of his encounter. That couldn't be changed. Yet he had also served a purpose. Somewhere, amidst the stuffing, floated the painful whispered confessions of a child. Warrenbear had locked them behind an expressionless face, so that Warrenchild could be temporarily safe and freed of them. At its best, it was what a short-term crisis shelter was all about.

## ZOE'S TURN

"She's... she's, you know..." The worker at the other end of the phone line struggled to find the right adjective. "I know!" she said

suddenly gaining confidence. "She's fragile. Yeah, that's it." She seized on the word, "She's very, very fragile."

They were all fragile but since vulnerability was a liability on the street, fragility routinely came encased in tough outer coatings. Girls were especially defended. I wondered what made this one's fragility so transparent.

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"Your client's here, Karen," my secretary announced. "This is Zoe." She waved in the direction of a blonde waif standing just beyond my office threshold.

"Come on in and have a seat," I called out cheerfully from across my office. Zoe silently accepted my invitation by sliding into a chair alongside my desk. I felt my own spirits plummet in response to something unspoken. Zoe was ethereal. Blue veins pumping under her translucent skin and bruise marks were the only signs of life on this side of the bright lights. I had the uncomfortable sensation I had already committed an error. I count on a child's energy to set my interview tone, but my initial cheer was already badly off pitch.

My name is Karen," I said quietly, changing tones. "I am an attorney. I am here to help—if there is something I can do for you—but, ah, I am afraid your floor counselor didn't tell me why she was sending you over." I felt an inexplicable need to apologize although I wasn't sure why. Zoe had



been referred to me without the usual infusion of worker-provided information. I had assumed it was because the worker felt secure that Zoe could tell her own story, but I now sensed there was something more to it than that. I felt like every word I uttered violated her sanctity.

Zoe reached out and stroked the stuffed bear in the adjacent chair. "Mind if I smoke?" she asked, mesmerized by the bear's fur.

I handed her an empty Diet Coke can in answer. I knew I wasn't in a position to moralize. I sensed she was claiming a right. I could honor

it or not as long as I was willing to accept her consequences. I watched her pull a slightly bent cigarette from her pocket. She stuck it into her mouth unlit and continued to fish around in her pocket. "Here, I have this," she mumbled, producing my reward—a folded slip of paper—from the same source. It had loose tobacco clinging to it.

She lit her cigarette while I glanced at the paper scrap. *This* turned out to be a summons for solicitation. The cops conducted sporadic sweeps of the West Side strolls. They hated wasting time on such nonsense, but it kept neighborhood block associations happy. Most of the ladies had already served their jail time before getting to court, so judges just set them free. All things considered it seemed like a fairly painless legal process to me.

"Spend some time in jail, Zoe?" I asked.

"Not yet," she took a drag on the cigarette and slowly released the smoke out of the side of her mouth. "Cops brought me here," she said on the exhale. It was clear that the cops thought she was better off doing time with us than in their jail. What was unclear was whether she wanted to be here. Crisis shelters are voluntary. She could walk out the door any time. She had reversed our roles completely and it stirred an uncomfortable sensation in me. Zoe was testing us out, testing me out. I was painfully aware that my words and actions might matter but I had no control over her final choice. I felt unusually helpless.

Zoe slowly rotated the cigarette around her fingers, completely transfixed by the wisp of smoke she was tracing in the air. The cigarette seemed like an extension of her being. There was both a presence and an absence to Zoe like the wisps of smoke dispersing in the air. It was a dichotomy I thought I recognized, being here while being distant often accompanied survivors.

"Do you want to be here, Zoe?" I asked gently probing. Experience had taught me that her answer could confirm or dispel my growing fears. I'd learned to trust my instincts in deciphering the cryptic code spoken by street kids long ago.

"Don't know," she said absently, continuing to watch the smoke trail.

I felt the kick of an adrenaline rush. I understood we were talking about something more than her presence in the shelter. She was in danger. It wasn't just the danger that lurked outside the shelter walls and came packaged as identifiable bad guys. It was much more insidious than that. I'd spent too much time in psych wards and hospital emergency rooms holding the hand of kids who had attempted suicide to ignore the warning.

I'd hit the core fragility her worker described on the phone. Everything hung in a precarious balance. Zoe wasn't sure if she wanted to be in or out. Shelter or street. Life or death. It was the pull of extremes. It was a battle for her being and I mostly felt fear. It wasn't only because the stakes had escalated. Nor was it just Zoe's safety I worried about. Deeply touching, very vulnerable but terribly troubled kids had brought sadness and pain into my life before. I had buried two and helplessly watched others disintegrate in slow motion. I knew that once they engaged you, no amount of professionally imposed distance ever really protects your heart. I feared Zoe was in the high stakes, high risk class. She had already made great progress down a treacherous path of self-destruction. I worried about me as much as her.

I wasn't alone. All her counselors worried. Staff watched the nuances of her behavior for weeks. She could be in or out, depending on the prevailing winds. There was always the lure of the street to draw her away. In the end, Zoe was as bound to us by at least as much fear and confusion as we felt for her. Her story emerged along the way.

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Zoe had come from somewhere south. She was only 16. But 16 was old enough to realize that she had put up with a drunken and sexually abusive stepfather for a decade too long. She summoned up the courage to run and thought she had escaped. Maybe she had, or at least she had until she got a first hand look at the seamier side of New York City.

Zoe's descent from Purgatory to Hell began on a Greyhound bus docked at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. It doesn't take long for a confused and frightened china doll wandering

aimlessly around Times Square to get snatched up. Fund-raising brochures from Social Service agencies report it's a race against time. The race is between good-guy-outreach-workers and bad-guy-molesters, pimps, and child pornographers. The trophy is the kid but the competition is not clean. Runaways look for escape and for some way to fill a void. Their predators promise love, adoration, and special status. There is no truth-in-advertising in their business. They are peddling fantasies while the competition offers baloney and mustard on Wonder Bread and safe transport back to the home they had fled.

The man who picked Zoe up was, by her standard, to die for: tall, muscular, and handsome with an easy smile and a lot of gold. He knew how to dress and he knew how to make a lady feel loved. His name was Leo. It was hard for Zoe to mask her awe. The honeymoon period was heavenly—nice restaurants, a beautiful hotel room, and lots of quality time with Leo.

That changed the day he told her she needed to earn her keep. "Gotta work for your living," he said. "Gotta earn your keep." That was the night Zoe learned she had been hired for a job for which she hadn't applied but now found herself bound, irrevocably, by some contractual street clause. It was also the night she learned about the others.

Zoe saw the comparison. It was confusing, though. They were date stamped well past expiration. They wore too-dark shades of pancake carefully selected to cover the yellowing bruises left like calling cards by passing strangers. They painted on scarlet smiles designed to cover withered spirits. They were saturated with surface grime that had seeped soul deep. Zoe, on the other hand, was young and pretty. Men paid top dollar for her fresh baby-doll appearance. That made her special to Leo. She had a hard time sorting out Leo's true love from his business investment.

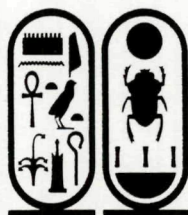
Zoe really didn't like the work, she reported matter-of-factly. It was the constant fear, more than anything else, that she found unsettling. The customers were so unpredictable. She worried with every new encounter if she would live to tell the tale. She and her "sisters"

swapped stories of the abusive ones like combat veterans.

One day Zoe decided she saw her future too clearly in the eyes of her colleagues. In a second great gulp of courage she ran again. She didn't get far. Maybe it was down the hall or around the block. Maybe she was gone for minutes or for weeks. I wasn't even clear whether she had been hunted down or whether she had been drawn back by the fantasy of true love. It didn't matter. What did matter was she had breached the faith. She had clearly, and irrevocably, established her untrustworthiness. "Things," Leo warned her, "are gonna have to change now."

Change involved being handcuffed to a bed frame until she came to her senses and realized how much she loved him. Ultimately he won her over with his professions of true love and she came to understand he needed her to work.

It was only fair. So Zoe earned her keep, until the day the police picked her up and deposited her at the runaway shelter. Leo, she assured me, would beat the shit out of her if he ever found her. "But then," she asked me on more than one occasion, "what's the worst he can do to me? Kill me?"



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In an attempt to limit temptation and under the guise of safety concerns, staff restricted Zoe to the shelter compound. Her confinement made her restless. It also provided little time for her to do any-thing but dwell on the past or wonder about the future.

Zoe's restlessness propelled her into my office more frequently than legally necessary. On her bad days—those that dredged up the past—she talked about "The Life." On these days I learned the most, and felt guilty. I knew I was benefiting from her personal pain. She became my Calliope on a guided tour for which there are no supplemental textbooks. It was a man-dominated world of violence and abuse. I was both fascinated and repulsed by her vivid, verbal

portraits of the flourishing subculture where sex is for sale. It was the same magnetic field I'd experienced when I first stepped out of the Port Authority Bus Terminal years before. The difference was in the directions Zoe and I took out the door. I head-ed right for shelter. She was sucked into the street.

Her stories enticed me to concentrate on the faces of the men who came and went from the porn theaters and peep shows on 42nd Street instead of doing them the favor of glancing discretely away. I stared at them looking for distinguishing features: something that marked them as consumers of this brutal and degrading stuff. I discovered none. That's when my anger finally overtook fascination. They looked like fathers, husbands, brothers, and lovers. They were lawyers, doctors, brokers, and real estate agents. They were young, middle-aged and old. They were white, black, and other. And, in my anger, I held them each individually responsible for Zoe.

In those moments, I tried to convince her to press charges against Leo. I asked her to talk to friends of mine—law enforcement agents—with whom I worked all the time. I came to realize that asking that by taking Leo on the legal system would be my way of cleansing him from my system, not hers. It was asking too much of her to face him as an adversary. I respected that.

Instead, she focused on the solicitation summons. It had a magnetic hold on Zoe. In her private war for freedom, it was an identification card that tethered her to her past. It served to remind her who she had been and it challenged the notion of who she was becoming. The act of prostituting was so intrinsically interwoven with the label of prostitute that she had trouble sorting out who she was from what she did. From her vantage point, the act and the actress both deserved the full weight of societal scorn.

Throughout her struggle, I watched with fascination and pride as, second by second, hour by hour, she hung in there. She connected with counselors she liked. She found other girls she liked. She felt less and less like leaving. One day she began talking about Leo in the past tense. She talked about the future. The staff found a relative, an aunt who lived near—but not too near—her parents' home. The aunt was happy to take her

in. In the end, after all the arrangements were made and Zoe seemed committed to her new path, she remained in New York only to answer a solicitation charge.

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The day finally arrived. Zoe and I traveled by subway to Court. She was quieter than she had been in a long time. I figured she was distracted by her own private musings. In hindsight I was wrong. She wasn't musing; she had begun a descent into a personal space she hadn't occupied in a while.

The court room was filled when we arrived. I was instantly struck by its unsavory atmosphere. I'd spent years in housing court—a 'snake pit' as a client had once described it—where your initial sensation was of lawyers and landlords in pinstripes preparing for battle. This room felt dirty. It was packed with middle-aged men in greasy parkas waiting to be judged.

Zoe walked two rows deep into the ten-row courtroom. She sank onto the hard wooden pew. I hesitated momentarily, surveying the 8 rows in front of us. I considered prodding her forward. I recognized the trade off. You had to make the stroll forward sooner or later. Right now, the center aisle was congested. The commotion served as cover. Later, in a hushed courtroom the same thoroughfare would become a solitary runway before an unseemly audience which I sensed was only once removed from 42nd Street. I looked at Zoe, she seemed immobilized. I easily capitulated. Sliding in next to her, I needed to begin my own withdrawal. For me, before every court appearance, there was a moment when my sight shifted from client to adversary. I mentally rehearsed my opening words as the courtroom was called to order and the wheels of justice began to turn.

"People v. Lapin," the court officer bellowed suddenly, startling both of us. It was our turn.

"Come on, Zoe, follow me," I said gently. I rose, instantly feeling the uncomfortable sensation of being watched, and walked toward the front of the court room. I resisted the urge to turn around and look at Zoe. Our dignity rested, in part, on the ceremony of this procession. It was a show of confidence. I knew—in this mostly

male environment—that there was no room for maternalism. I felt her presence, though. She clung, like a shadow, at my heels. I stopped at the appropriate spot and waited for Zoe to draw up alongside me. I took a deep breath, estimating the expanse of space between me and the Judge. I needed to gauge my minimum voice volume. I hated broadcasting Zoe's story. It wasn't that I felt shame for her. In fact, I was very proud of her. I felt protective. The audience behind me had no business passing judgment.

"Your Honor." I plunged in and explained her past and present circumstances. The Judge listened with uncommon patience. He ruled with a sudden authoritative swing of his gavel, "Dismissed." He then did something extraordinary. He broke the rhythm and the routine of the process by leaning forward in a gesture embodying as much intimacy as the surroundings permitted. "Young lady," he said, altering the tone he had used to commandeer his way through the morning docket, "Good luck to you." It was gone in a blink. He signaled to the court officer who had been heralding in the day's cases.

"Thank you, Your Honor," I said gratefully. But his energies were already absorbed by the complex web of someone else's life. I looked at Zoe. She remained transfixed by some invisible vision. I walked toward the back of the court room pausing, at the door, long enough to make sure she was in tow but eager to get out of the courtroom.

I shoved open the heavy swinging door and instantly felt the wave of relief of being done with the process, out of the rarefied courtroom air and back in the world where a vibrant, colorful, noisy swell of humanity jostled its way through the corridor.

"Zoe," I said, finally noticing what I should have seen earlier, "Are you OK?"

"When do I go to jail?" she asked in a whisper.

"What?" I asked, in disbelief. I was surprised by the question. It was only in the asking that I realized how much I had missed. I was so busy trying to protect Zoe from bad outcomes, I had failed to protect her from the

torments of the process. I missed the extent she had lived in fear of judgment and I wondered if I could have spared her this worry.

"When do I have to go to jail?" she clung to the question.

"Zoe," I said slowly, trying to catch her eye so our minds could meet. "Zoe, the judge dismissed the case."

"So when do I have to go to jail?" She repeated the question a third time.

"Zoe, the case was dismissed. The judge threw it out."

"What do you mean threw it out?"

"He threw it out. It's gone." I struggled for another, clearer way of explaining how in three seconds of discretion the Judge had lifted the concrete reminder of her past from her shoulders.

"Gone," she echoed my last word.

"Gone. Like it never even existed," I affirmed.

A shudder rocked her tiny frame like an electric volt. She understood. It was only in that instant that I realized the extent to which she had been prepared to punish herself for the life she had left. It was far more harsh a punishment than the justice system disbursed.

"Really, gone?" she whispered.

"Really gone," I said with authority meant to reassure her.

I thought about the Judge's simple and routine act of discretion and I wondered at what moment he had decided to exercise it. Intentionally or not, he had

paved the way for her psychological cleansing by using his legal discretion. I sometimes worried about missing those cues myself. I made discretionary judgment calls all the time. I lost sleep over the ones I might have called wrong.

Zoe's sudden smile brought me back to her moment. It was refreshing, like a storm clearing. She finally looked as young as 16.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get out of here."

"Can we celebrate?" she asked, galloping alongside me.

"I think that might be appropriate, I said.

"Do you have something special in mind?"

"Can we get something to eat?" she asked

## "People v. Lapin"

with excitement. Apparently her senses had been resurrected.

In a city which has one of the highest per capita eateries in the world, I couldn't resist teasing, "We might be able to find a place to eat *somewhere* in this City. What do you want?" In NYC it was never a question of whether to eat; it was a question of what—Ethiopian, Thai, Mexican, Chinese, French, seafood, steak. . . The list was endless.

"A cheeseburger and french fries," she paused briefly and chewed on her lower lip in serious consideration "and a chocolate milkshake." I felt the sudden rush of joy in a teenage celebration.

"I know just the place." I said eagerly. I led the way to a greasy spoon on Centre Street. The diner produced the stuff hamburger dreams are made of: thick oozing burgers accompanied by plateloads of steaming french fries—puffy crisp on the outside and soft on the inside—and tumblers of chocolate shakes with the spillover arriving in icy frappe pans. We slid into the only booth where the red vinyl seats weren't repaired with duct tape and ordered two of everything.

In contrast to the silent intensity of the morning, lunch talk was abundant and mundane. The babble even-tually moved from the relative merits of glass versus squeeze bottles of ketchup to the wonderment of the city just outside the door.

"That's why I came to New York in the first place," she said through a french fry, "you know, to see the city and everything. It seemed so exciting." Zoe shrugged and tossed another fry into her mouth. "I never got out of Times Square though. I never really saw any of New York. Now I guess I just want to go home."

"To get out of here?" I tested for her fears about the future and wondered what she thought about the approaching transition. I suspected that even familiar ground was going to look different after her brief, but intense, New York moment. That kind of discussion was not to be had. She was too swept up with relief and it was neither my job nor the time to divert her attention to more dangerous emotional territory.

"Yea, I can come back some other time." she said simply. "I can come back to see some of the stuff I wanted to see." I could relate the draw

of the city. I had been drawn to it also, but under safer circumstances. "What stuff did you want to see, Zoe?" I asked. I was curious about what she thought would draw her back to a city that had caused her such trauma.

"Oh, I don't know. The Empire State building and..." she paused. "You know what I *really* wanted to see?" she asked excitedly.

"What did you *really* want to see, Zoe?" I asked relieved, at some level, that she had identified the attractions of a tourist and not those of a wayward wanderer.

"Chinatown," she said matter of factly. "I don't know why. Just Chinatown." She dunk a french fry into a glob of ketchup for emphasis. "I never saw anything 'xcept Times Square, though."

"Ahh," I said letting further discussion go. "Maybe we should get the check. Unless you want some more french fries."

She laughed. "I think I am full," she said leaning back from the table.

"Small wonder." Zoe was half my size but had kept pace bite for bite throughout lunch. I was stuffed, and surveying the sea of empty serving dishes was making me nauseated. "Let's get out of here and walk off some lunch before getting on the train," I suggested.

"OK," she agreed.

I steered her north, past the court houses, and up Centre Street. We traveled about four blocks when Zoe stopped abruptly. She turned around slowly taking in her surroundings. "Hey," she said with sudden excited realization. "This is Chinatown."

"Yup," I said, secretly delighted with myself for having maneuvered such a simple surprise. "I've got to get back to work soon but we can swing through."

She could hardly contain her excitement. We moved from store window to store window and her question at each was as repetitive as the merchandise inside. "Can we go in for a second?"

My view of Chinatown had been dulled by many previous tours but her excitement was contagious. It triggered memories of how stimulating wandering the streets had been when I first arrived in New York. I found myself, with her as my guide, swept up in marveling over everything: kimonos, firecrackers, rice candy,

Chinese yo-yos, dried seaweed, jade earrings, salted fish, and Peking duck carcasses. When we had exhausted every side street and seen every existing item at least four times, I glanced at my watch and felt a sudden pang of guilt. I could hear my world of responsibility calling. I had abandoned my staff for hours. In a department of six, the absence of one is always felt.

"Enough?" I asked.

"Enough," she conceded.

We found the subway entrance and headed back uptown to our respective work. As difficult as mine could be, I knew it was nothing compared to the one Zoe was facing. She was headed toward an arduous life-long journey of sorting out the pieces. It seemed time to close out the morning before moving on.

"Zoe," I said as the train jolted its way home. "Did you hear what the Judge said to you today in court?"

"What Jud. . . " she started to ask and then laughed, catching herself and realizing that she had been before a Judge only hours earlier. She suddenly got serious. She chewed her lower lip and pondered my question. "No," she said finally. "No, I don't know what he said." She paused in reflection. "What *did* he say?"

"Oh nothing too much really," I said, "except he wished you good luck." I paused before continuing. "It's just that I think he really meant it, Zoe. We all mean it, you know. We all wish you good luck."

Tears welled up in Zoe's eyes as she absorbed my words. I continued. "We all work with a lot of kids, Zoe. We always hope the best for them. But there aren't that many who seem so determined to both face up to the past and to move

on. They are difficult tasks," I said, pausing again to see if I was making sense.

She nodded slightly.

"It's not going to be easy. In fact, it's probably going to get a lot harder, before it gets easier, but, "Good luck, Zoe." She nodded her thanks.

In that moment I saw her again for the first time. She still seemed outwardly frail. She reminded me of fine porcelain—beautiful, delicate, transparent, and easily damaged. I worried whether the feisty, tenuous strength that had carried her to this moment would sustain her and wondered what danger lurked for Zoe among those who might not fully understand her NYC experience. What would happen, I thought, once she left my sight?

I knew those were dangerous thoughts. My job, along with that of my colleagues at the shelter, was to send kids home safely yet most of us harbored the arrogant notion that somehow we could do better—we understood better, we cared more—than everyone else in a kid's life. I knew I shared this overblown sense of self-importance with many of my crisis shelter colleagues. It was a double-edged sword. It is what kept you in the work but it could also interfere. You had to not forget that success and failure came from within them. We were just the sideline cheerleaders; they were in the competition. Zoe had played an enormously courageous game. There was no reason to doubt her.

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One morning I found Zoe's name on the discharge list. I called her floor counselor who turned out to be the last remaining trace of her NYC existence. Zoe had left, I was told, on an early morning Greyhound bound for a new destination. The worker reported she had been excited. I never heard from Zoe again. I was sorry she hadn't said good-bye. I was even hurt a little bit. In moments of self-centered absorption, I wondered if she made a bigger impression on me than I on her. There are a number of creative ways to interpret no information. In the final assessment, however, I reasoned it had more to do with our perspectives. If I had been useful to her it was because I helped her close out a chapter and to look ahead. I hoped she had left New York behind. She, on the other hand, forced me to look back. I learned something about a path that might have been. □



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