FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Two women, a student and a residence hall director, find themselves alone together one night, confronting their failures.

By Lee Burdette Williams

Winter break had finally begun. Just a few hours earlier, with a little encouragement from me, the last students had finished packing and left, leaving me alone in Campbell, a residence hall at the small New England women’s college where I served as a hall director. I was looking forward to the peaceful quiet of a long break and took my time over dinner, wanting to savor the first hour that followed the frenetic departure of the 140 women who lived in the hall. My husband had said he’d be late coming home, so for the first time since August, I was alone.

I finished dinner and left my apartment, my master keys in my hand. The task was simple: open each door and make sure the room was vacant. Because I had been walking the halls all day, assuring myself that students were making progress toward their 5:00 P.M. departure, I knew no one was left. At least I thought I knew.

I went door to door, opening each, flicking on the light, quickly glancing around, and leaving. The resident assistants (RA’s) had checked the rooms more carefully for the errant appliance, open window, or small and illegal pet. I was just doing the quick close.

After about a half hour I reached the third floor. I turned the key and opened the door to a single room and was immediately overcome by an incredible stench. In the darkness I made out the shape of a person, covered by a blanket, lying on the bare tile floor beneath the window. Rather than turn on the light, I quickly closed the door, panic rising in my chest. “Okay. Be calm. You have a dead person in there. What to do, what to do? Get help. Call someone.” I started to turn to walk down the hall, then thought maybe I should check and make sure the person was actually dead. At that moment I looked at the name tag on the door. The student’s name was Mylien, I didn’t know her. Even in a hall as small as Campbell there were always a few students who were diligent in their anonymity. She was one of them. All I knew about her was what her RA had told me: she was quiet, Vietnamese, and had returned after a year’s leave from the college. Her RA had mentioned her only a couple of times throughout the semester, saying that Mylien rarely left her room in the evening when students were around. I had never seen her at a hall activity or in the Campbell dining room. I had quizzed her RA on the correct pronunciation of her name but had never had occasion to use it.

My limited knowledge of Mylien rushed through my mind as I reached for the doorknob. I opened the door and the figure on the floor stirred beneath the

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28
ABOUT CAMPUS / NOVEMBER - DECEMBER, 1997
Although this was not the first troubled student I had encountered, there was a depth to Mylien’s apparent sadness that I found almost suffocating. I wanted to quickly place some distance between myself and that sadness.
reality, of winter break, of classes ending, of anything. She can’t remember when she last ate, and it’s obvious she hasn’t bathed in a while. I don’t think she’s at risk to harm herself right now, so I’m going to leave, but when the family gets here, see if you can get the name of a family physician in Hartford so I can refer her for help. She’s in no shape to be in school. Has she been like this long?”

I looked away, embarrassed at having to admit that this student, my responsibility, was almost as unknown to me as a stranger. “Her RA didn’t mention any problems, and I haven’t had any reason to be checking on her. I’ve not gotten any calls from her professors, or her dean.” The college’s incredibly maternalistic structure seemed to have failed, and I was obviously one of the weak links. To her credit, Janet graciously excused my ignorance.

“You can’t know what’s going on in every room. Even the RA might miss something, if the student isn’t causing a commotion.” We both glanced toward the door. The thought of Mylien, who was barely moving as she attempted to pack, causing a commotion seemed ludicrous.

Janet left, and after checking to see that the packing was continuing, I returned to my apartment. I warmed some leftover stir-fry and put it in a bowl. Along with some iced tea I carried it upstairs to Mylien. “If you want to take a break, I brought you something to eat.” She quickly took the bowl and glass from me and sat at her desk. The food was gone in less than a minute. “I guess you were hungry.” She turned to me and smiled slightly. It was the first evidence of emotion I had seen. I gently prodded her with other questions. What’s your major? What classes were you taking this semester? Do you have brothers and sisters? Gradually, she began to talk, and in halting English told me about her semester. As best as I could gather, she had ceased attending her classes during the final third of the semester. The math, she said, was too hard. I asked if she had approached her professors for assistance. She stared distractedly at the top of her textbook in reply.

She would not talk about her family. Several times I caught her glancing anxiously at the clock. Seven P.M., 7:30, 8:15. Time was speeding by for her, dragging for me. Around 8:30 I told her I was going downstairs to wait for her family, who would be unable to get into the locked hall. I asked if she would be okay. She nodded slightly and I left.

Just before 9:00, a car pulled up outside the front door. I opened the door and held it as three adults and a young boy entered. Two of the adults introduced themselves as Mylien’s aunt and uncle. The other woman, I learned from them, was her mother. She spoke no English at all. Her young son, who I guessed was around thirteen, stood at her side and translated for us. “Mylien appears to be quite ill,” I told her. “Not physically, but she is very troubled and sad and needs to see a doctor when you bring her home.” His translation elicited a wave of her hand and a vigorous shake of her head. She said something to him.

“My mother says she is fine, that she gets sad sometimes, but she is okay.”

“She’s not okay,” I told him. “Do you have a doctor at home?” He turned to her and spoke.

Another wave, another shake. “My mother says no.”

I escorted all of them up to Mylien’s room. Before we entered I turned to the boy. “Please tell your mother that Mylien needs to pack all her things. I don’t think she’ll be returning after break.” The aunt and uncle nodded in the mother’s place and asked if I had boxes. I went in search of them, knowing I wouldn’t need many in which to fit Mylien’s meager belongings. All of her clothes fit in one suitcase, and she had none of the seemingly requisite equipment—stereo, tv, refrigerator—that her hallmates had. I left the boxes with them and returned to my apartment. It was around 11:00 P.M. when I heard a knock on my door. I opened it to find the young boy, alone. “May I speak with you?” he asked, in such a polite tone of voice I almost winced.

“Of course. Come in.” We sat facing each other on the couch. “You know your sister is very sick and needs to get help at home, right?”

“I understand what you’re saying. But my mother doesn’t.” I asked why, and he began the story of his family’s arrival in Hartford. His father, he said, had been a political prisoner in Vietnam and had been killed in prison. He and his mother, Mylien, and two younger siblings had been “boat people,” driven to America by desperate poverty and fear. “We cannot return to our
Mylien was here as a first-year, but couldn't keep up academically. Her language skills were too poor. So we gave her a leave of absence, and she enrolled at a local college in Connecticut. Her grades were acceptable enough to warrant readmitting her. But I guess it was a mistake on our part.

"Why did we admit her in the first place if her English was so poor?" I tried to imagine Mylien with two fewer years of experience with English than she had demonstrated the previous night, struggling to master the difficulties of the college's intense premed curriculum.

"Sometimes we take a chance. Sometimes these women want it so badly they exceed through sheer force of will. I guess someone thought she might be one of those. I might have thought that myself, and given her the benefit of the doubt. What's hard to understand from where I sit is how we all missed this going on—me, her professors, classmates, you, her RA. Not many fall through our net, but I guess this one did."

I thought silently about her brother's words, his matter-of-fact attitude about his family's reliance on his sister's anticipated success. I tried to imagine the pressure she felt. "I guess some students work really hard to fall through that net. Maybe it's their only escape." Then again, maybe I was just rationalizing my own failure. The dean shrugged and shuffled some papers, my signal to depart. That night I finally had my empty hall. I finally had my silence. But instead of soothing me, it hummed noisily, like an old generator, keeping me awake as I stared out the window. I couldn't wait for my students to return.