

## 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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blanket. As she stood, I turned on the desk lamp. She looked sleepily at me, blinking and rubbing her eyes.

"Um, hi, Mylien. I'm Lee, the hall director. I'm sorry if I startled you, but you were supposed to be out of the hall at five. How come you're still here?" She made no reply. I stepped closer in the dim light, and looked carefully at her face. She didn't appear to be drunk, or stoned, or ill. She regarded me for a moment, and finally spoke.

"I'm not to be here?"

"No," I said. "Winter break has started. Everyone else has left. Is someone coming to pick you up?" She didn't respond. "Mylien," I continued, "did you call someone to come get you? Is your family coming?"

Her silence continued. My nervous chatter did too. "It's time for your break. Everyone has left. You need to leave, too." She said nothing. I was stymied. I had worked for a mental health center before coming to this campus, had seen my share of catatonic and nonresponsive people, but generally they weren't found in a room in a residence hall at an elite college. I asked once again, "Is anyone coming to get you?"

"No," she finally said. "I did not call." I was thrilled with the fact of the response, not thrilled with the response itself.

"Where do you live?" I asked, hoping she was not going to tell me California.

"Hartford." Okay, I thought. This is manageable. Hartford is only two hours away. We can call her family and they can come get her and she'll be gone tonight, I thought, with a coldness that surprised me, and I can go back to my quiet vacation. 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.

"Why don't you come down to my apartment and we can call them and tell them to come get you?"

"I cannot," she said, with startling finality. She turned her back to me, and laid down on the bare floor, pulling her blanket around her.

My mental health training had taught me a lot, but

nothing more than this one thing: don't do something alone if there's help available. I told her I would be back, lightly touching her shoulder, and returned to my apartment where I called the staff counselor assigned to Campbell. She agreed to come right over and asked me to call security and get a home phone number for Mylien.

Janet arrived. I had the number. Janet asked to speak with Mylien. I walked her up to the room, where Mylien had returned to the floor. I introduced Janet, but Mylien didn't get up. Janet and I exchanged glances. "I'll meet you downstairs," she said quietly.

Twenty minutes later Janet came to my door. "Go ahead and call them. I'll go back up and help her pack."

I called the number and asked for Mylien's parents.

The voice was a young male, perhaps in his early twenties. He explained that Mylien's mother did not live there, that I had called her aunt and uncle, and he was their son.

I asked for Mylien's mother's number. He said she didn't have a phone, and she did not speak English. I explained that someone needed to come get Mylien. He said his parents would be home shortly and he would talk with them. I gave him my number and asked him to have them call me.

I clipped the cordless phone to my belt and went back upstairs, where Mylien was moving at an almost imperceptible pace. Janet was holding open a suitcase on the bed, and Mylien was placing in it one item at a time. "Mylien, I talked with your cousin. Your aunt and uncle will be calling soon." She made no indication of having heard me.

The phone on my hip beeped. I answered it and on the other end was a near-hysterical woman whose English was almost impossible to understand. I did hear her say they were coming to get Mylien right away, which was all I wanted to hear at that point. "Mylien," I said, "that was your aunt. They are coming to get you." She did not respond.

Janet signaled me to follow her into the hallway. "I'm not sure what's going on here, but she's obviously in very bad shape. She seems to have no concept of

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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

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home. We would be killed because of my father's actions." They had come to Hartford, where his father's brother and family lived.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "My mother says Mylien cannot be sick. She needs to stay here and graduate so she can become a doctor. Then she'll make enough money so the rest of us can go to college."

"Maybe that can happen," I said. "But not right now. She needs to get help so she can get better."

"My mother says no."

"How about you? Can you help your sister get to a doctor?"

"Me?" He looked slightly panicked. "No. I've got exams next week. I've got to study." His tone was an emphatic one, signaling a sea change in his attitude. The young, polite, frightened boy was suddenly a determined, focused, and self-centered adolescent, apparently on a mission as crucial as his sister's. As he left my apartment I wondered if he would be more successful.

Mylien and her family departed soon after, thanking me repeatedly on their way out. Well, Mylien didn't. She said nothing as she walked past me in the lobby and into the night. I thought of the philosopher Eric Hoffer's observation that there is no loneliness greater than the loneliness of a failure, that the failure is a stranger in his own house—or her house, in Hartford, two long hours of interstate away.

The next day I reported the night's events to Janet, telling her I was unsuccessful in getting her a name or place to call in Hartford. I also stopped at the office of Mylien's class dean. She listened carefully to my story about the previous night's activities.

"We should have known this would happen.

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.

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