

Crisis Workers in Crisis

By Laura Ruby

“You are my patient, so I cannot find you attractive, yes? That is the law,” the doctor said, cradling Mya’s head between brown and spatulate hands. “Has anyone ever told you look like a movie star?”

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The car accident occurred on the corner of Houston and Hudson, right as they were turning right. A green sedan driven by a frazzled woman — who later claimed that her dog had stepped on the gas pedal — broadsided them, folded their car around hers like a wretched metal bra over the grille. Mya, despite her seatbelt, was thrown sideways, her head snapping to the right as her body snapped left.

“Never did have that right-left thing figured out,” she said. “I still have to look at my hands to see which is which.”

The doctor, whose name was Dr. Papa, prodded the back of her neck. “You should be very quiet.”

“I have a headache,” she said. “But that’s nothing unusual. I get headaches all the time. Headaches are no big deal.”

“If we were family, or your boyfriend, and I knew this about you, these headaches, I wouldn’t make you have the CAT scan. But I am not your family. Is there something going on with you? Your family?”

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Mya was Assistant Director at a 24-hour suicide hotline. She and her co-workers, Theresa and Abbott, had been driving back from a workshop they ran for counselors and social workers entitled, “When Helping Hurts: Crisis Workers in Crisis.”

“I didn’t see you! I didn’t see you at all!” the frazzled woman babbled at Abbott’s hindquarters as he crawled into the car to find out how badly Mya had been injured. “It’s all Freud’s fault,” she said.

“Freud?” barked Theresa, still reeling from the workshop and ready to spar with anyone, anytime. The seminar had not been as successful as they had hoped, the trainees alternately sleepy and sarcastic.

“Freud. My dog,” said the woman, lifting a pink leash at the end of which was a very large, shaggy dog of unidentifiable lineage. It was wearing a plaid vest and little red boots.

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The ambulance got there within a half-hour, lightening speed for Manhattan. Sturdy looking men and women with clear, scrubbed skin and low centers of gravity squatted beside the open car doors, felt Mya up in a vaguely medical way. They asked questions in soothing tones, wandered off on their sturdy legs. It was peculiar to Mya that everything seemed to move so slowly, the EMTs, the cars drifting by, her own eyes as they scanned the scene. Despite the hot and wrenching pain in her neck and back, Mya got bored. At least, she thought it was boredom.

“For some people, crisis is constant,” she told one of the EMTs, a blond boy barely twenty-one. “Some people feel better, more alive and purposeful, when they are in crisis. Without one they wouldn’t know what to do.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He seemed to be poking her for poking’s sake, the way a child pesters a rabbit or a bug just to see what it will do.

“Thing is, you can’t ever know what’s going on with them. You can’t tell from their voices. Some sound like robots, some scream like banshees. Who knows who’s worse off? That’s what we were trying to teach those caseworkers at the seminar today. You just can’t assume anything.”

The boy nodded and pinched the big toe on her left foot. “What about this? Does this hurt?”

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They had been planning the seminar for months, working late into the night after their hotline shifts. They worked so long and so hard that they got exhausted, then got accustomed to being exhausted, then grew proud of the exhaustion. They wore their dark circles and fuzzy thinking like badges.

Usually, their seminars were sold out, therapists and graduate students eating up the scathing lectures, the brutal role plays. But *that* group, the group before the accident, had not responded, not even when Theresa, planted in the audience, called Abbott’s theories half-baked and Abbott himself a crackpot. They were like cats, the audience, half-lidded and twitchy-tailed. Abbott, Mya and Theresa had done their best to empower them through stress. Simulate the crisis experience, generate creativity.

But like cats, they yawned and scratched their ears.

Later, finally strapped to a gurney, Mya looked up at Theresa and Abbot. “Jesus,” she said, “those people weren’t just burned out. They were *carbon*. We should have put the lot of them in the car, careened around the city for a while. Let them meet up with Ms. Lead Foot and her sidekick, Freud.”

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They wheeled Mya into an examination “room,” a bed surrounded by a pink curtain, behind which Abbott and Theresa hovered, their willowy shadows like characters out of Munch. The doctor’s hands were so dry and smooth and soothing, Mya felt herself becoming sleepy.

“Who is her next of kin?” The doctor shouted through the curtain, as if it was something more than a curtain. A pane of glass. Brick.

“What?” said Mya, “so now I’m dying?”

“No, no,” said the doctor. “You are very much alive. But perhaps it is a good idea if we call your loved ones and tell them that, yes?”

“Oh,” she said, wondering which loved one she should direct them to call. She imagined her parents in Phoenix, in their white pantsuits and soft-soled walking shoes, her brother and his boyfriend on vacation in the Keys. She imagined each of them turning towards the phone, considering, measuring the weight of the rings, waiting for the click of the answering machine. All going back to their martinis, the complicated rituals of couplehood.

Mya squeezed her eyes shut. “I think I need to throw up.”

The doctor rushed off, to find a basin perhaps, or smoke a cigarette, while Theresa and Abbott parted the pink curtain, took a turn holding her head.

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Time slowed again, and Mya surveyed her surroundings with a little more interest: the buzzing fluorescent lights, the pockmarked ceiling tiles, the tinny, inside smells of the other patients. It occurred to her that this was the most appropriate place for her, for the three of them, to be, and not just because of the accident. They were riddled, collectively, with disease. Abbott's father was hit in the stomach with cancer, and was slowly — resentfully, Abbott said — wasting away. Theresa's ex had endocarditis caused by runaway tooth decay. And Mya? Just weeks before, her roommate had moved out while Mya was working the midnight shift at the hotline, taking Mya's TV, VCR, computer, stereo and her collection of thrift store cocktail dresses with her. The landlord found out, and was making noise about eviction so that he could jack up the rent. Her boyfriend Robert's best friend was a 44-year-old prostitute named Louise.

Certainly, she told herself, and everyone else, all this was evidence of some type of disease, wasn't it?

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Abbott's face loomed over hers, his oversized features comical and endearing. "Don't worry about it, Mya. Don't worry about anything right now." He helped her wipe her face with the scratchy hospital sheet.

"I think," she said to Abbott, to Theresa, unable to even lift her hand to shield them from her sour breath, "I'm just a little dizzy, that's all. Nothing to have a cow over."

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The hospital staff admitted her for observation despite her protests, pointing out — with a hint of satisfaction, a shade of schadenfreude, Mya thought — the fact that she had thrown up four times in two hours and couldn't seem to walk unassisted.

Settled in her mechanized hospital bed, with Abbott sent off to her apartment to fetch her underwear, Mya wondered if this was all her fault, some bit of Divine payback because she had, for the first time in her life, two men at once, a little call-waiting thrill. Robert, the muralist and friend-to-prostitutes, and Damon, the gentle dentist, a self-professed expert in pain management. She was simply making up for lost time, she said, her early twenties for example, when sex seemed messy and humiliating and impossible and love was something of little modern relevance, something ascribable only to Jane Austen and a few editors at women's magazines.

Damon had gasped the first time he unbuttoned her blouse. Gasp! Heady with pleasure and astonishment, the power of blouses opening and closing, she could not say no when Robert approached her a few months later at a gallery opening, eyes frank and appraising. And then she could not choose, teetering between Robert's seductive unavailability and Damon's persistent affections, their sharp intakes of breath at the purr of a zipper. She wanted to

hear gasping every hour of every day and then some. Who could blame her?
Who would begrudge her this wild sweetness?

“You,” Robert said once while painting her back with chocolate sauce,
“have a desperate need to be admired.”

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Theresa called Damon from Mya’s room, but got Damon’s service instead.
He was in Brooklyn dealing with a dental emergency.

“A *dental* emergency?” Mya imagined dispirited gums, angry eyeteeth,
morose molars.

It was Damon who had performed the preliminary dental work on
Theresa’s ex-boyfriend, an Egyptian chef whom she called Hab, though his name
was something else entirely, something unpronounceable, Theresa said, so
guttural and full in the mouth it felt too sexual to say out loud. After the dental
work Hab had developed a ferocious infection in a valve in his heart. Hab
blamed Damon, and subsequently Mya, but it was for Theresa he had saved his
most special rage, his quietest, most Egyptian rage. When Theresa would visit
him in the hospital, he, thirty-three years old, chest ripped open and stitched back
together like a cadaver, would stare with his dark eyes, and refuse to say a word.
“He was like the Sphinx. Everything about him said that he intended to go on
forever without me.”

After Hab got out of the hospital, he shipped Theresa all her belongings in a box, including a pack of gum with two sticks missing.

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Damon had been stricken. Didn't want the blame, but where else to put it? Hab had been terrified of the dental instruments, of the probes and the scrapers and the little sharp-edged squares of cardboard he was forced to bite down upon for the x-rays. "I told him everything was going to be fine. How could I have known?"

"You couldn't," Mya told him. "No one ever knows."

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Mya recited Robert's number, watched as Theresa punched it in, knew from Theresa's face that there was nobody home.

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She decided she didn't like the nurses much, with their brisk efficiency and practiced, or was it practical? warmth, but she did like the candy-strippers. Mya's first volunteer job was in a hospital, and though she had been promised that she could refuse any job too personal or excretory, she had been shamed into

helping some of the aids care for the older patients after particularly explosive bowel movements. She felt kindly towards these candy-strippers, their stupid outfits, their earnest faces.

“Some people call up the hotline and say their appliances are talking to them. I mean, maybe they’re crazy, maybe they’re not. Perhaps they’re from another country and they’re just trying to tell you that they have a new idea, as in, ‘this song really speaks to me.’”

“Yeah, I think I’ve maybe said stuff like that,” said the candy-striper, whose name was Kimmy or Kinsey. Or maybe it was Koko, like the gorilla that knew sign language. Kimmy was pouring her a glass of water from the pitcher on the nightstand. For this act alone Mya thought her a study in altruism.

“Why not ask, ‘What’s the TV say?’ Don’t have an opinion, don’t make a comparison. None of this ‘you crazy, me sane,’ stuff. We all have to remember that we are not that different from people who talk to their appliances, not that different at all.”

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Theresa had left a message with Damon’s service, and he showed up at 8:00 am every morning with an armful of daisies, his favorite flower, and magazines he had pilfered from his own waiting room. Somebody had cut people’s faces out of the ads in the magazines.

Mya tried to call Robert from the hospital phone when Damon went to the coffee shop for lunch. She'd had it up to here with Damon's sweet minty breath, strong teeth and gentle dentist ways, she wanted Robert to dash into the hospital, splattered with paint, or at least with bits of food from the Mexican restaurant where he washed dishes. She wanted him to insist on sleeping in the hospital bed with her, wanted the orderlies to be forced to burst in and drag him out by his limbs. Or maybe she wanted Damon to burst in and drag him out by his limbs. Maybe she wanted Damon to say something that wasn't sweet and nice and shiny as a spit-polished apple. There were things she needed, things she needed to say. For example, that she always felt that Damon should be named Robert, and Robert should be named Damon.

"Oh, Damon," she said.

His breath, suddenly, on her cheek. "What is it, honey?"

"Why is everything about what it isn't?"

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She hated the TV. She hated her thieving roommate. She hated all the medical tests, the constant pleas for blood. She hated her back and her neck and all her other bones. They were all too hard, these bones. They didn't bend, they didn't allow for accidents. There was no give in bones anywhere.

She hated being so parched that she couldn't even swallow her water.

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Mya attacked the channel changer and the screen flashed flashy women from the daytime soaps, where, in towns called Sunshine Beach and Pine Valley, everyone was having an affair with everyone else. Theresa sat in the chair in the corner, leafing through all those magazines with the faces cut out.

An affair with Theresa. Now what would that be like? Theresa, who informed Mya before meetings, “When I go to a meeting I like to take a pen and a pad of paper. I like to use the pen and jot down some notes.” Theresa would nod as she gave these little instructions. “Before I come to work, I like to pack a light lunch. This way, I save money, and I can work while I eat. I also like to pack a piece of fruit for the afternoon. Blood sugar.”

Mya, dazzled by Theresa’s ballet dancer’s neck and witty shoes, hadn’t given a thought to the fact that Theresa would stay at the hotline long after Abbott and Mya left, shuffling and reshuffling the volunteers on the schedule, crunching numbers, checking supplies and God knows what else.

She changed the channel on the TV to a cooking show whose guest was a former newscaster plugging her new children’s book, gave the matter some thought: the hotline was a non-profit; there were *never* enough numbers to be crunched. And supplies. Was Theresa holed up in that badly decorated office counting the pens and bottles of corrective fluid over and over again? Where was the rest the rest of Theresa’s life? Where were her friends?

“I don’t like to watch those kind of shows,” Theresa said, throwing the tattered magazine to the floor.

“I’m not really watching it. I’m watching it go by. See?” Mya said, stroking the channel arrow like someone sending a message in Morse.

Theresa stood. “Can I get you anything?”

“Robert.”

“Robert. What’s wrong with Damon?”

“I can’t explain it. I can’t have one without the other.”

Theresa was annoyed, though that was nothing unusual. “There’s something wrong with you.”

“That’s why I’m in the hospital.”

“And that’s why I’m going for a Coke.”

After Theresa left, Mya turned off the TV, considered the ceiling, considered Theresa, Abbott. And what *about* Abbott, calling Mya’s room every day, letting her know how much the volunteers missed her and her “leadership?” Her boss was a decorated person, bedecked with accolades from universities and governments, words of worship and praise from coworkers and clients. And yet, he was 48 years old and lived with his parents, still promising his girlfriend of 16 years that they would get married and move to Connecticut, they would, just as soon as things calmed down a little.

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Her third day in the hospital and she missed the hotline callers. She missed listening without memory, without desire, without intention. She missed the thrill of the first words, the unfolding of the mystery that was each person's story.

"I did it. I just swallowed a bunch of pills."

"OK. What kind of pills?"

"Vitamins. Oh, and some Percodan."

"What made you swallow those pills today?"

"I was thinking about swallowing them yesterday, but then I decided to watch that movie that was on. It was a good movie."

"So what was different about today?"

"Today? Well, today's Tuesday."

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Most of all, she missed their terrible, terrible pain, so much larger than her own.

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The staff was alarmed. Mya had taken to crying a bit. Well, more than a bit. Sobbing was more like it. She sobbed all day and into the night, and was still going through the motions the next morning, though she seemed to have run

out of discretionary fluids. The doctors wanted to send a psychologist, a counselor. “I don’t want to see a counselor,” Mya said, disgusted. The language of psychology didn’t have room for crises, she said. Labels and diagnoses were ways of backing away from crises, keeping the professional safe. She wanted a little comfort, not an *intervention*. “Bring me a teddy bear,” she sobbed fluidlessly. “Or at least an extra pillow.”

The counselor’s name was Dennis, a terrible name for anyone, especially for a counselor. He had shiny eyes and dark hair so clotted with some sticky looking hair preparation that she was sure he could snatch thousands of insects from the air with one brisk walk down the block. Dennis asked how she was feeling.

She wiped at her dry eyes with the back of her hands, pretended to pick something from between her teeth. “The TV is speaking to me.”

“Hmm,” he said, paused to scribble something in a tiny notebook. “What does it say?”

She stopped picking. “You’re kidding, right?”

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After four days, Robert finally made it to the hospital. Damon was sitting next to the bed, his head resting on Mya’s belly as Mya slurped at a large cup of water. She couldn’t get enough water.

Damon lifted his head and Robert took a step back, two toms, Mya the tree upon which they sharpened their claws.

“It’s about time you showed up,” Mya said.

“I had a commission at a Boy’s Club downtown. I’ve been painting day and night. I just got your messages.” He ran a claw through his artfully dirty hair. “You don’t look that bad.”

Damon was staring at her, disturbed. Angry Puppy Man. She sighed. “Damon, this is Robert. Robert, Damon.”

“Hello,” Damon said, accent on the “hell.” Robert nodded, blinking.

Mya scratched at her belly. What had she expected, anyway? After her breakup with Hab, Theresa read a book on sex hormones, a book she then lent to Mya. It seemed that women, in their estrogen-soaked teens and twenties, yearned for penetration, that full-body hug. It was only in their thirties that the tiny concentration of testosterone in their blood kicked up its heels and demanded something more than a pat on the head, a cluck under the chin, a simple game of hide the salami.

So she had hormones like everybody else. This was news?

“Look, I’m getting tired. Why don’t you guys go to the coffee shop and get yourselves a couple of sandwiches.”

Damon touched her face proprietarily. “That’s OK, honey. We’re OK.”

She felt sick and ashamed and not enough of either. She felt like Dennis the counselor had whipped the sheets from the bed and rubbed his slick, goopy

head up and down her stunned and aching body, sliming her, crowing “What does the TV say, *now*, Mya? How about *now*?”

She swatted Damon’s hand away. “I mean it.”

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She had stopped vomiting. She could make it down the hallway without leaning on the walls or on Abbott’s shoulder. She didn’t know exactly when the crisis was over, all of a sudden it dawned on her that it had ceased to be a crisis, and she had missed it. How was that? She recognized it in some of her callers. They called and called, then, it seemed, for no reason — no new medications, no new treatments — they lost their conviction. “I wanted to do myself in. But I’m too fucking tired. Does that make any sense?”

“Are you tired?” asked the doctor. His fingers brushed her cheek, then her neck. “Give in to it. Don’t hold back anything.” These fingers fluttered across her left breast, barely touching, as if he was strumming her aura.

That was when she noticed his name plate.

“Your name is *Feroz* Papa?”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s Indian.”

“Did you know that in Spanish, your name means ferocious potato?”

His fingers stopped strumming. “Why do say such a thing?”

“You know, I think my head’s feeling a lot better now. When do I get out of here?”

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She didn't tell Damon or Robert or Abbott or Theresa about her release, but she did tell Kimmy the candy-striper, who called her a cab, brought her down to the hospital lobby in a wheelchair. It was summertime in Manhattan, and the air coming through the car window was so sweet with human musk, bus exhaust and the spices of a zillion restaurants, she told the silent cabbie to pull over so that she could walk the rest of the way. She felt a strange weightlessness as she hobbled — like an old woman, or a baby — back to the tiny apartment on Prince, still hers for the moment. She stepped inside, locked the door. She made her way to her bed, slid into it, pulled up the sheet and fell asleep, a joey in a pouch, new and safe even as the whole world bounced along on its floppy, oversized feet.

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She was out of work for a grand total of twenty-two days. The pain in her neck and back soon settled into its own low hum, a murmur, shifting and sighing as if it was alive, some other species with which she lived in disconcerting symbiosis. She answered the calls with a renewed vigor. *And what else did the TV say?*

At first, Abbott and Theresa were glad to have her back. Glad to see that she had finally been forced to get some rest, glad to see that she was handling everything so well, that she was taking such good care of herself.

A month later, they wanted to know when and why she had starting turning off her beeper after hours. What if they had a question? What if there was an emergency? They wanted to know why she went out for lunch, and how they were going to plan the next seminar if she insisted on going home at 6:00 p.m. every day.

She said, "We need lives. No one should be proud to be exhausted. The callers aren't proud. Jesus, they're tired." And then she said, "A job is never just a job if love is the agenda."

"Mya," said Abbott, "are *you* tired? Do you need a little more time off? How about taking the afternoon?"

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The hotline's annual summer barbecue in Central Park. Mya stationed her Wonder Woman beach towel on the stiff grass where most of the hotline's 40-some volunteers lolled towel-less, saw that Abbott and Theresa were sharing a single woolen blanket, passing an apple back and forth. *I like to pack a piece of fruit for the afternoon. Blood sugar.*

Abbott and Theresa greeted her stiffly, with guarded, wounded expressions, like the parents of a wayward teenager, parents who had just taped

a copy of the Serenity Prayer to the fridge for the first time. Mya wondered if she would have to leave, find other callers, another calling. Perhaps she could become a candy-striper.

Abbott pulled a bottle of red wine and some plastic cups from a fraying picnic basket. “Would you like a glass of wine, Mya?”

Mya tilted her can of ginger ale, a mock toast. “No, Abbott. I can’t. I’m still on some medication. For the pain.”

The wounded expression fell away and underneath it was shock, then sympathy, then relief. “Oh, yes. For the *pain*. Of course. Say no more.” Abbott said, and, as she watched, turned into a smiling dog scratching, a camel spitting into the wind, a possum shying away from the light.