

Adult Short Story Second Place

The Fixer

By Carol Solomon

Students often waited in long lines to speak with registrar Louise Krauss. In the fall, stress etched on their faces, procrastinating seniors pleaded for her to rush their school records to meet college application deadlines. And at the end of the admission season, students left out in the cold by their favored colleges sought comfort from the registrar, her round face and sunny smile inviting them to open up. Her talent for repairing their lives traveled beyond the students to their parents, including to Mr. Daniel Lefcowitz, father of Abe Lefcowitz, the most brilliant member of the STEM Magnet at the highest ranked high school in all of Montgomery County. At least, that's what Mr. Lefcowitz asserted about his son when he charged into Louise's office and demanded to know what had happened and how she was going to fix it.

Normally the Guidance Office would be the first stop for frantic parents when their students were locked out of the most competitive colleges. But on this particular Monday, all the counselors were in an emergency meeting regarding their administration of the upcoming Advanced Placement exams and the loss of a nearby church as a testing site because an oak tree had smashed its roof during a wind event yesterday. So it was that Mr. Lefcowitz burst into Louise's tiny closet of an office, waving a fistful of rejection letters and reciting his son's resume: "4.0 unweighted GPA, 1520 on the SAT, countywide finalist for the National Science Talent Competition, state finalist for National History Day, county tennis champion for two consecutive years."

Louise spun her chair so that she could face Mr. Lefcowitz directly and nodded in rhythm to his recitation. She made sure that her eyes engaged his and that her expression suggested genuine concern. She watched Mr. Lefcowitz's face redden and the red soften to pink as he completed the recitation and sank into the armchair next to her desk, burying his face in his hands.

"Mrs. Krauss, I don't know what to do. A brilliant boy and no place to go to college. I knew Harvard was a long-shot, and so were Yale and Princeton, but Tufts? For goodness sakes, Tufts and Penn and Colgate? At least one of them should have accepted Abe. What am I to do?"

If Louise had become callous after 10 years as registrar, she would have heard only the "I" in his question and labeled him a helicopter parent. But she had lost sleep herself over her own daughters' ups and downs and the strains they still felt because of their parents' divorce, amicable though it was. Thus, when Louise thought of the involvement of Mr. Lefcowitz, the word that came to mind was empathy—a natural outgrowth of a parent's love. As he lifted his head and looked at her with misty eyes, Louise passed him a box of tissues, waited for him to blow his nose, then said, "It's horrible, Mr. Lefcowitz. But we can do something."

He sat up straight in his suit and crisp dress shirt. “We can? Of course, we can.” Then he paused and added, “But what?”

“We’ll work three paths and see which yields the best result. Is Abe waitlisted at any of his schools?”

Mr. Lefcowitz nodded. “Tufts, Penn, Colgate.”

“Good. Then I’ll begin by calling the admissions office of one of these schools and offering official testimony on his behalf. Abe will have to pick one because the school will want assurance that Abe will accept if they pluck him from the waitlist. Path two involves my calling other less competitive schools and seeing if they have vacancies. When they hear of Abe’s sterling credentials, they may jump at the chance to capture such a great student. Path three entails Abe finding an interesting internship or travel opportunity for the first semester and calling the waitlist schools to request a second semester admission. Illness and personal issues often send students home midyear, and some schools like to fill those vacancies. Now none of these is an ideal way to begin college, but we’re past ideal at this point. So, go talk with Abe. Tell him to let me know by tomorrow morning what he’d like to do.”

Mr. Lefcowitz flung his arms around her, squeezing her as if their relationship had deep roots. “Mrs. Krauss, you are an absolute angel. I thought it had all been for nothing—those sleepless nights, his weekends researching in the lab when other kids were playing, the nonstop sacrifices of my boy’s life. And for what? Now you are making it happen.” He leaned forward to squeeze her again until she pulled back, her pursed lips and flushed face reminding him that she was, after all, an MCPS employee.

“No promises, Mr. Lefcowitz, only untested possibilities. One way or another, this year or next, Abe will go to college and do just fine.”

“That’s all I wanted, Mrs. Krauss. Hope.”

As the father turned and left, his aftershave lingered in the room—crisp, bursting with energy—like Mr. Lefcowitz himself.

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Tuesday Louise arrived at school with a sleep-deprivation hangover following late-night fretting about her oldest daughter Samantha’s low history grade and what Sammi saw as its potential impact on her GPA and as a result, on her entire future. The pile of updated-transcript requests on Louise’s desk had exploded over the past week, and her email was clogged with urgent messages from the Head of Guidance about Louise’s responsibilities as a result of the revised Advanced Placement testing plans. As her head throbbed, Louise could tell that most of today would be devoted to drudgery.

It was a relief when midmorning, the main office called her to pick up a delivery. She entered the office, expecting a box of forms from Advanced Placement, only to discover the main office

staff encircling a huge spray of hydrangeas, calla lilies and hot pink roses. "For you," the business manager, Ricki, announced.

It wasn't her birthday, and her ex hadn't done anything that required a lavish apology. Besides, Mike had never thought in terms of floral tributes, not even on Valentine's Day when they were first married.

"Open the card," Ricki insisted. "We all want to know who sent such lovely flowers."

Louise hesitated, then slipped a slender card from its envelope and read: "Many thanks, Dan Lefcowitz."

"Who is this Dan Lefcowitz? Where did you meet him?" demanded Ricki, who as her best friend knew there had been no man in Louise's life since Mike.

"Stop imagining things. Just a grateful parent."

As she walked down the crowded hallways enjoying the admiring glances of teachers and students, the flowers felt like a validation of her ability to make things right. In her office, she perched the flowers on the metal filing cabinet where no careless student could knock them over. She wondered what sort of man sent such an opulent display to a school employee, someone he scarcely knew. Nevertheless, the generosity of his spirit hovered over the office, lifted her headache, and made her transcript work less onerous. She thought of the living being behind each transcript request, the hopes and dreams of each student, the nervousness as the student crossed the graduation stage in June, unfettered from school rules and parental control, pretending to know what to do next. With each thud of the school seal, she stamped her best wishes on the transcript.

During lunch, the line of students moved slowly through her office, each crisis deserving its telling before Louise could document the required action and administer a dose of compassion. But when the bell rang for fifth period, Louise realized she had not seen one important face, the face that should have been at the front of the line, the face behind the bouquet, the face of star student Abe Lefcowitz.

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At 2 p.m., near the end of the school day, Mr. Lefcowitz called to ask what Abe had decided to do and how he could help.

"No sign of him," Louise said. "Not even a note on my front door when I went to the Main Office to pick up a lovely bouquet, which by the way is deeply appreciated, Mr. Lefcowitz. I was a bit surprised. Both by the beautiful flowers you sent and by Abe's no-show."

"And you didn't call him down?" Mr. Lefcowitz demanded.

"I was giving him a chance to come on his own."

“I’m going to text him immediately to see what happened.”

“If you don’t mind a suggestion, Mr. Lefcowitz, maybe a face-to-face chat would be better.” The pause on the other end of the line made her think that she had overstepped her bounds. “But you’re the father. You know your son far better than I do.”

Dan cleared his throat, then softly added, “I thought I did, Mrs. Krauss.”

She wanted to reach across the phone line and pat his hand or nod with understanding. She yearned to tell him, “They’re all inscrutable—all the kids. Especially when they’re in high school. Like my daughter.” But she had said more than enough.

Even after the conversation ended, Dan and his sadness lingered. She imagined him at a large wooden desk in a richly paneled office, his face drooping atop his stiff collar and his Windsor-knot tie. He had everything. And yet. . . whoever really knew what was going on in a child’s mind? She could see Dan in a meeting with his assistant, likely the person who had actually ordered the bouquet, as he doodled the names of Tufts, Penn and Colgate on his legal pad. Later he would drive home thinking of Abe and how to start the conversation at dinner, served in the dining room by Mrs. Lefcowitz—though Louise couldn’t recall Dan ever mentioning Abe’s mother.

Out of curiosity, Louise pulled up Abe’s student records. No siblings. No emergency number except Dan’s. There would be just two at the table—Dan and Abe—and likely some carryout food on paper plates. No one else to help monitor and steer the conversation. She checked Abe’s schedule, noted that he was in computer programming class, and jotted down the room number. It was time to play backup.

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Louise didn’t remember what Abe looked like—it had been months since he had submitted his application packets—but she was expecting a tall boy, like his father, dressed in preppy clothes that signaled where he had come from and where he was headed. The short, slim boy with an explosion of freckles over a pale face caught her off guard, as did his athletic pants and rumpled t-shirt.

“You sent for me?” he said with coiled stillness.

“Abe Lefcowitz?”

“That’s who they say I am.”

“Hi, Abe. Come on in. Have a seat. I’m Mrs. Krauss.”

“So your name plate tells me.” He sat in the same chair Dan had sat in, but unlike his father whose body had folded over in grief, Abe pitched his body forward and claimed her desk with

his elbows. He stared at Louise, as she in turn studied the boy and his whole affect before deciding how to say what needed to be said.

“Do you know why I’ve called you down?”

“I can guess.”

“Well, guess.”

Abe pointed at the bouquet. “Mr. Daniel Lefcowitz,” he said. “He loves to send flowers to people he thinks can help me.”

“Did he tell you about our conversation yesterday?”

“At least 10 times.”

“And how are you feeling about that?”

“What’s done is done. The colleges have made up their minds. I’m not the right fit for them. I’m done playing the college game. At least for now.” He slipped out his vibrating cell phone, which should have been turned off per school rules, and appeared to read a text. “Ah, it’s him. *Go see Mrs. Krauss. Now.*” Abe returned the phone to his pocket and began tapping the desk with his thumbs as if he were texting, maybe what he wanted to say to his father, maybe what he was thinking.

“I want to help you, Abe, but only if you want my help.”

“I don’t need help, Mrs. Krauss. I’m managing just fine.” His thumb movement continued rhythmically on the edge of Louise’s desk.

“Your father cares very much about you.”

“True.”

“You’ve worked very hard to get to this moment, and you’ve had spectacular success along the way.”

“Spectacular is a bit overstated, don’t you think?”

“Then let’s call it *significant success.*”

“Call it what you like. The college season’s over. The results are in. Look, Mrs. Krauss, the buses will be coming soon. If you’ve got a point to make, maybe now’s the time to make it.”

His arrogance and nonstop tapping suggested swirling currents beneath the studied indifference of his clothes. Louise could tell he was a master at controlling the situation not unlike his father, though they appeared to be steering in different directions. He was rushing the pace of the conversation, hoping to throw her off balance, pushing for a quick escape from an uncomfortable reality.

“Have a chocolate.” She tossed a Hershey’s kiss in his direction, then watched him reflexively remove the foil and pop the candy into his mouth. She tossed another, then smiled. The thumb tapping stopped as his body partly uncoiled into the chair. Now, now is the time to speak, she thought.

“You still have choices to make, Abe, and good colleges that will find a place for you, and a good future around the corner. I’ll be glad to work with you to help make that happen this year, but I need your permission.”

“Hey, Mrs. Krauss, I can see you’re a nice lady, a caring lady, but I fixed it this way.”

“You fixed what?”

“The admissions. I fixed it so I wouldn’t be accepted. I wrote a college essay that I knew would doom me.”

She said nothing, letting the sound of his confession echo in the office and rebound off the metal file cabinet with the floral offering.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he said.

“Try me.”

“He wanted me to go so badly, but his business is struggling. I saw the unpaid bills on his nightstand—for the nursing home where my mom is, for the mortgage, for the electricity, for the car, for the credit card bills filled with charges for clothing and food and. . . flowers. If I got into one of those schools, he’d do whatever he had to do to send me—lose the house, his business. Now’s not the time for me to go to college, but I knew he wouldn’t listen. So I sabotaged the applications. I made the decision irrevocable. And now you’re trying to undo it.”

Ah, Louise thought, Abe was just a child, who despite his brilliance and his efforts at control, had self-destructed in order to be his father’s savior. Now his rash actions had made the task of righting his life so much harder. What ugly things had he written in the essays to seal his fate? There would be so many more hoops to jump through to reopen the doors to college—not just for now, but for next year or the year after that, explanations he would have to address in future essays, additional letters from counselors, teachers, herself, Dan. Dan who was waiting to hear Abe’s decision, eager to get started, still married to a dream that Abe had deliberately shredded.

“You owe it to your father to tell him.”

“It’s better for him to think crazy things just happened during the admissions process. He would be upset that I worried about his money. I can just tell him I need some time off to work, to clear my head about the rejections before trying again.”

Louise wondered if Dan had truly been oblivious to Abe’s ambivalence about the applications to these elite colleges or if he had ignored the signs, afraid to press for answers in case his questions pushed his son away or revealed something he didn’t want to know about his son’s life. Like she hadn’t pressed Sammi about the razor when it slid from her backpack with her failing history test.

“Gotta go,” Abe announced as the bell rang. “And don’t forget to keep quiet about this. I’ll tell the story in my own way.” Before Louise could prod him to reconsider, he was racing down the hall with the frenetic throngs. She knew the phone would soon ring, and it would be Dan, the urgency in his voice intensified by his son’s inaction. He would demand to know what Abe had said, what Louise and Abe had concluded, what would happen today and tomorrow and the day after that, how certain she was that the situation could be fixed, confirmation that life would go on as planned. She could encourage them to talk—set up an appointment with the counselor or an outside professional, but she couldn’t tell Abe’s story. Abe was right—it was his story to tell. What would Dan do in the face of his son’s refusal to follow path B? And Abe, who thought he was being so clever by gaming the system, how would he feel when he realized he had actually made his father’s life worse?

But Louise couldn’t forget the image of the coiled boy who had entered her office and drummed incessantly on her desk. Something in that image suggested that the lie Abe had prepared for Dan’s consumption was actually the truth, that Abe’s self-sabotage had not been to protect Dan, that Abe had been tightly wound for so long that he was unraveling and needed time to breathe. So he had lied to himself and to Louise about his motivation for self-sabotage. What a complicated mess, Louise thought.

Her head began to throb again, a vise squeezing her forehead until the pain radiated to the back of her head, pinching the base of her neck. She no longer saw Abe. Instead, she saw Sammi pulling her history test from her backpack and her eyes filling with fear as a sliver of metal fell to the floor. Sammi retrieving the razor and announcing, “For an art project.” Sammi tucking it into the backpack and pulling down the left sleeve of her hoodie. Sammi crying, “I failed my history exam. It will destroy my GPA forever.” Louise wrapping her arms around Sammi, telling her no one’s future was destroyed by one test. Sammi retreating to her bedroom with her backpack. Louise knocking on the door before bedtime and asking Sammi if everything was okay. Sammi insisting, “It’s fine, Mom.” Louise tossing and turning in bed, then rising for work, assuming that Sammi would be just fine, that the bumps of the past few months were just bumps, that she would surely know if Sammi were floundering.

She hadn't asked about the razor or confiscated it. She hadn't insisted that Sammi roll up her sleeves.

The phone rang. It was Mr. Lefcowitz, pleading in desperation, "I don't understand what's happening. What am I to do?"—a question she could no longer answer with assurance. She flipped the school phone to speaker and took out her cell phone. *Coming home early*, she texted Sammi. *Let's talk*.

Mr. Lefcowitz's voice filled the room, "Mrs. Krauss, are you there?" But she was somewhere else.

She imagined herself dashing into her house, calling, "Sammi, I'm home," hurrying upstairs to the purple room with the lavender duvet and the picture of Katy Perry. She was hugging Sammi, and then casually pushing up the sleeves of her daughter's hoodie and massaging her wrists, probing for scars—puffy or thin, solo or clustered, old or fresh. All the while praying and waiting for when Sammi wasn't looking and she could drop her eyes to Sammi's wrists and see what had to be the truth. The dewy skin of her daughter, unblemished but for a dark freckle on the inside of her left wrist.