

Case 5



Private Charity¹

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"This is Bill. Can you come see me in my office?"

"How about in 20 minutes?" Her boss's unexpected call caught Melissa Sinclair by surprise, and she hoped to get through the first draft of a quarterly report before taking a break.

"How about *now*?" Bill insisted.

"Okay."

She walked briskly down the hall and into Executive Director Bill Cannon's corner office. He motioned for her to take a seat across from him at his conference table.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, knowing that her health certainly was not what he wanted to talk about.

Lowering his head slightly so he could look over the top of his glasses, Bill peered intently into her eyes. "I need to ask you something. Have you loaned Hao money?"

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The question caught her off guard. Melissa couldn't gauge what was going on. *Am I in trouble here?* Melissa wondered. Hao Tran worked for her, and she worked for Bill, but for a moment she told herself, *That's none of your business. It was a transaction between friends, outside of our work relationship.* But then she thought, *There's no reason not to tell you.*

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Umm, \$500." Melissa searched his face for an expression that might help her guess where this conversation was going.

A FIRST-TIME MANAGEMENT POSITION

Melissa had thoroughly enjoyed almost every aspect of her middle management position over the last three and a half years. She interviewed for the job the same day she defended her master's thesis in December 1979, after a long 5 years of mostly part-time graduate study. She was a little surprised that she got the job. Although she had 10 years of social work experience with her undergraduate degree, all of it was with county DSS agencies. She had only limited experience in actual supervision; she had no experience working with refugees or other international clients of any kind.

It had taken awhile, but Melissa gradually became accustomed to her role as a mid-level manager. At first, when Bill came past her office and announced, "Come on, management team meeting time," she had to remind herself, *Oh yeah, I'm a manger now. He's talking to me.*

THE PROGRAMS AND EMPLOYEES

In January 1980, Melissa was hired to be the first director of the URM—Unaccompanied Refugee Minor—Program at Lutheran Social Services (LSS) in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Through arrangements with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees and the U.S. Department of Naturalization and Immigration, young refugees who had been separated from their parents were arriving from refugee camps in Southeast Asia to be resettled with foster families in the United States. LSS had received a contract from the Iowa Department of Health and Social Services. The contract called for LSS to establish a receiving group home for up to 10 youths who would be assessed and then placed with foster families in four cities across the state.

The majority of their clients would be males in their late teens, mostly Vietnamese or ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, with a handful of Laotians who had fled with other "boat people" to refugee camps in Indonesia. Others had fled overland from Laos to refugee camps in Thailand. Usually their desperate

families had made arrangements for the youth to flee the country, knowing that if they were resettled in America, the rest of the family would be given the opportunity for reunification in America at a later time. After a dangerous, often life-threatening escape experience, these young people had lived in the refugee camps for at least several months waiting to be cleared for resettlement. While in the camps they were screened and treated for chronic and contagious health problems, such as hepatitis B or tuberculosis. Once matched and "assured" by a program in the United States, they were flown first to the west coast and then to their final destination. Generally a public welfare agency assumed legal custody while a VolAg (voluntary agency) provided foster care placement and supervision services.

Melissa's first assignment was to hire the group home staff and a Vietnamese interpreter to work with both the group home and the foster families. For the group home she hired a diverse mix of enthusiastic people who had a broad range of experience working with youths. The group home staff amazed her—dealing masterfully with adolescents who were homesick and in culture shock and who rarely spoke more than a few words of English.

In addition to the group home staff, social workers worked with the foster families. Melissa saw these social workers as totally competent and dedicated. She knew that they gave their home phone numbers to all of the foster families and encouraged them to call at any time. She was very excited about the new group home staff, but she felt her best "catch" was the man she hired to interpret, Hao Tran.

Hao was the core of the program. He had a postsecondary degree in pedagogy, had been a classroom teacher in Vietnam, and had come to the United States in the first wave of refugees when Saigon fell in 1975. He was an interpreter with the welfare department in Cedar Rapids and was delighted to leave it for a new job at LSS. He was a man in his 50s, with graying hair that he dyed solid black. He lived with his wife, who earned some money as a seamstress, but didn't speak much English. "She will make you a beautiful *ao dai*,"² Hao offered Melissa.

"Doesn't she need a pattern?"

"No, she never needs a pattern. She can measure you and make it. You choose the colors."

Because none of the other staff could speak Vietnamese, and most of the youths were just beginning to learn English, Hao was on call "24/7," for new arrivals, court hearings, registration at school, doctor appointments, transfers to family foster homes, and crises of every kind.

The staff learned that even though most Southeast Asian refugees had experienced significant losses, they were hesitant to discuss their problems

2. This is a traditional Vietnamese outfit.

outside of their own families. Melissa had a visual image—the clients she was used to counseling were like small planes with engine trouble, alternately sputtering and gliding to a rough landing. The Southeast Asians were more like a helicopter with a broken blade—they went as far as they could manage on their own and then suddenly dropped like a stone.

Melissa struggled with getting her social work staff to actively recruit and license foster homes when the client arrivals were largely unpredictable, and the program's contact person in the state office was often impatient with both the slow rate of arrivals and the lack of foster homes. But the URM youths trickled in over the next several months, the staff matched youths with foster homes, and the program slowly grew to capacity, more than 40 youths total.

After less than a year with the URM program, Bill asked Melissa to also serve as manager of the resettlement program for refugee families. Volunteers from sponsoring churches did most of the groundwork with the refugee families—locating housing and household goods, arranging clinic appointments, enrolling the younger ones in schools, and matching the older ones with jobs in the community, and getting everyone to ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. There were no volunteers to interpret, though, so the agency employed three bilingual interpreters—Bin Mey, a Cambodian man; Teng Chu, a Hmong man; and Ly Thanh, a Vietnamese woman—who also filled the role of paraprofessional human service workers. There were no Cambodian or Hmong youths in the URM program, but sometimes Teng Chu, who spoke some Laotian, and Ly Thanh could help out with the youths when Hao needed to be elsewhere.

One of the major highlights of the refugee program was the regular ethnic celebrations. Melissa bragged to her friends that she celebrated at least four or five “new years” every year. The celebrations always included fabulous ethnic clothing and music, and potluck dinners with ground beef and noodle casseroles and JELL-O salads (brought by the sponsoring American families) and delicious, exotic, impossible-to-pronounce dishes that the refugees prepared.

After 3 years, the URM program had begun to slowly wind down. With no new arrivals, LSS closed the group home, laid off several staff, and retained others to work as counselors and case managers for the youths moving into independent living situations. Hao continued in his role as interpreter.

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

Hao bought a new home in a nice westside neighborhood and invited everyone to a housewarming. But all was not well. Soon after the housewarming, one of the program staffers confided in Melissa, “I helped Hao understand the closing process, but I really tried to persuade him not to go through with it. He can't afford this house. Other staff told him the same thing, but he won't listen to us. He's caught up in the American dream, I guess.”

Then one day Hao asked to see Melissa in her office. In a quiet voice he asked, "Mrs. Sinclair, can I borrow some money until payday?"

"How much do you need?"

"Five hundred dollars, just for 2 weeks, or maybe 3 weeks."

"Let me think about it a minute," Melissa hesitated.

Five hundred dollars was a lot of money, even on a middle manager's salary, but just for a few weeks wasn't asking much. Melissa knew she had to be a bit objective about her decision and that her first consideration must be whether she could afford to lose that much if Hao couldn't pay her back. *I don't give much to charity*, she thought. *This could be my charity project. What good is having money if you can't help worthy people in need?* She was surprised, but not shocked, that Hao was asking her for money. After all, they really trusted each other. She knew Hao would use the money for his mortgage or utilities; he didn't have a gambling or drug problem.

"I'll have to take some funds out of my savings, Hao, but I'll do it. I'd like to ask you why you need it, but I guess it's really not my business."

"Thank you," Hao replied. "I promise I will pay you back."

TROUBLE

It was about 10 days after that, on a Thursday afternoon, when Bill called Melissa into his office. "I need to ask you something. Have you loaned Hao money?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Umm, \$500."

"What's going on?" Bill asked.

"Hao bought a new house—I think you knew that—and I guess he's gotten in over his head."

Bill shifted his gaze for a moment, then looked her straight in the eyes again. "Did you know he also has borrowed money from four or five other refugee program employees?"

Surprised, Melissa said, "No, no, I didn't know that." Immediately, she thought, *Uh oh. This is trouble. This is more than a loan between two friends.*

"Are you going to do something about it?"

Melissa knew that "No" was not an acceptable response. Melissa respected Bill and his administrative abilities. His background was in business rather than social work, but he had a strong commitment to human services. Melissa liked the way he said he wanted to hear the "bad news" as well as the "good news." His management style was not to rescue employees when things got sticky, but insist that they take care of their responsibilities. He didn't tell people how to do their jobs.

"Yes." Melissa paused, thoughtfully, "I'm not sure just what, but yes, I will."

LIKE A STONE

Friday morning, Melissa caught Hao before he left the office for his first appointment with one of the URM youths. "Hao, I found out you've been borrowing money from a number of people. I'm not concerned about the money I gave you, but I'm concerned that you're in over your head, and you need someone to help you get control of your financial situation. I'd like you to see someone at the Consumer Credit Counseling program at the United Way office. I know the director, Margo Rock. She'll take good care of you. The consumer credit counselor can talk to your creditors and work out payment arrangements that you can manage. Does this sound okay with you?"

Hao nodded silently.

"I don't need to know what you talk about or what you decide to do," Melissa continued. "I just want to know that you're actually attending sessions there."

"Yes, fine, I'll go." Hao appeared docile, with no affect. He seemed neither ashamed nor resistant, but he also did not seem eager to seek out the help.

"Good. I'll call Margo now and tell her I'm sending over a very special person—one of my best employees."

Hao left quickly and quietly.

Melissa felt relieved. *Hao is going to get help, good help. The staff at the Consumer Credit Counseling program are excellent.*

The following Tuesday afternoon, Melissa's secretary buzzed Melissa in her office. "It's Margo Rock. She needs to talk to you right now."

"Hi, Margo. What's up?"

"Your employee, Hao, is here."

"Good."

"No, not good. The counselor said she can't work with him—he's suicidal. She persuaded him to agree to a 'no suicide' contract but only for 24 hours, until he can see you tomorrow. Can I tell him you'll talk to him tomorrow?"

"Sure." Melissa's thoughts raced. "Tell him I'll be in my office all day." Hanging up the phone, Melissa's heart sank. She had hoped the counseling would be a turning point and would get Hao back on track with his finances. *He must be in worse shape than I thought. It sounds like he's coming apart at the seams.*

Melissa thought about how to handle the next day's meeting with Hao. Melissa reflected on what she'd learned in class about suicide. She knew the bottom line game plan was a "no suicide" contract. She hoped that the consumer credit counselor had misread Hao or overreacted; after all, they were financial counselors, not psychotherapists.

Hao appeared at her office door at mid-morning Wednesday.

"Come in."

Hao took a seat across from Melissa's desk.

She looked at him earnestly. "Hao, Margo tells me you're thinking of killing yourself. You know I can't let that happen. Are you really feeling that bad?"

They talked a long time. Melissa tried to get Hao to put his present troubles into perspective. She knew that all refugees had lost a lot: homeland, relatives, career, credentials, culture, and language. They certainly had good reason to be grief stricken. But Hao had come a long way since he left Vietnam. "Look at all you've been through. You lost everything when you had to flee your homeland. You started from scratch here. That must have been really hard but you managed it."

"It was manageable. I was coping," Hao responded. "Except when they killed my son."

Surprised that she had never heard this before, Melissa probed, "They killed your son?"

"The Communist troops took my village and they shot him. Killed him." Without expressing any emotion, Hao's continued. "They left his body in the street. I couldn't leave my house or I would have been shot, too. His body was there in the street for 3 days. Three days. I couldn't do anything."

Melissa pictured a muddy street in a small Vietnamese village and she could feel her eyes tearing up as Hao spoke. But his face showed no emotion. *How can he just sit there like that?* she wondered.

After more conversation, Melissa tried to gauge Hao's risk of suicide. "Do you have a plan about how you would kill yourself?"

"I have a gun, a hunting rifle."

"I don't want you to kill yourself. Can you get rid of it?"

"I have a friend I could give it to. He would keep it for me. I could put it in a box and not even tell him what it is."

"Would you do that, Hao? Would you do that and promise me you won't do anything to hurt yourself without contacting me first?"

"Okay. I'll take it to my friend tonight."

Melissa felt satisfied that she could trust Hao to give the gun away and call her if he was having thoughts of suicide. She had a sense that because he told the credit counselor—a total stranger—that he was suicidal, then maybe he wanted help, and wouldn't hurt or kill himself. Melissa wasn't certain that he wanted to live, but she knew he wasn't going to kill himself that night.

Melissa addressed another matter. "Hao, I can't be your therapist and your supervisor, too. You need to be seeing someone." Melissa knew that Vietnamese people don't like talking to strangers about their personal problems because it brings shame on their families; everything gets dealt with within the family. She also knew that Hao, like most Southeast Asians, tended to defer to authorities and would be reluctant to openly disagree with her. Melissa often thought that the refugee staff she supervised were psychologically incapable of saying the word "no." *Asians want to please, they want things to be harmonious, and they do not like arguments.*

"I'll think about it," Hao said.

This was the best response Melissa knew she could get—she couldn't call to make the appointment because he would need to think it over. She thought he had a better idea than most refugees of the purpose of therapy because he

took kids to therapy—actually interpreted in therapy assessments. She had hope that he'd agree to counseling.

Reassured by Hao's responses, Melissa ended the conversation with a request: "Tell me if anything changes."

MORE TROUBLE

Although Melissa believed that Hao was truthful and she was hopeful that he would agree to therapy, her sense of relief was short-lived. Late that day Eva Black, one of the URM foster mothers, called her. Mr. and Mrs. Black had two boys in their home. "We have a crisis here," Mrs. Black confided. "We can't really understand what the boys are saying, but I think. . . ."

Melissa interrupted her. "I think Hao is at the health clinic with another kid, but I can try to track him down for you."

"I'm afraid Hao may be the problem."

"Oh." *Oh no!* Melissa thought to herself, *How can things get any worse?!*

"I think there is money missing from the boys' bank accounts," Mrs. Black continued. "There should be several hundred dollars in each one, and there's almost nothing. Hao opened a joint account for each boy with himself as a cosigner."

"Will you be there for awhile? Let me get right back to you."

Melissa went straight to Bill's office. "We've got a problem. A big problem." She filled him in on her conversation with Mrs. Black.

"What do you plan to do?"

"If Ly Thanh is free tomorrow, I'll ask if she can go with me to talk to the boys and maybe go to the bank. Do you think it's okay to get her involved in this?"

"I don't think you have any other choice," Bill responded. "Keep me posted."

Melissa checked with the other interpreter and called Mrs. Black. "Can you and the boys meet us at the bank tomorrow at 3 P.M.?"

On a hunch, Melissa decided to take a look at the program's petty cash box. The account balanced, but she was surprised to find there were several large IOU's filled out by Hao. It wasn't unusual for staff to put an IOU in if they planned to take a client to lunch or for other small bills, but these weren't client-related expenses and the sums were much larger than a lunch. On the other hand, the fact that he was putting in IOU's was reassuring. He wasn't stealing and was trying to be accountable. But to Melissa it seemed a disturbing indicator of a broader problem.

The visit to the bank the next day confirmed Melissa's worst fears. It was clear that Hao had withdrawn funds from the boys' accounts. Melissa started to feel nauseous. *What about Hao's fragile mental health? If I have to confront him and maybe even fire him, it might push him over the edge. If I don't handle this right, and he kills himself, is his blood on my hands?*