

Getting a Grip

Category: Stories

written by Raymond Abbott | April 4, 2014

Raymond Abbott

"Ray, can you bring me some Poligrip?" says the message on my voice mail. "My teeth are falling out."

I know Barbara means just her uppers, because she has no bottom teeth.

"I don't get my check until Tuesday," she adds. It's now Friday afternoon.

I smile, thinking, *Where does she think I might get Poligrip? Does she think I have a supply in my desk drawer?*

The support staff, who have a lot of items, won't have Poligrip. If I asked them for it, however, they too would smile.

Smile is the word you want to remember in this account, because Barbara makes me smile—and I especially value those who can do so these days.

Some persons I know get quite pissed off at Barbara and her antics. Take Jim, who was her case manager before me. What really got to him had to do with Barbara's apartment.

Barbara lives on 6th Street, where there are many small apartments rented at high prices to the poor and mentally ill. I work exclusively with severely mentally ill adults. I am employed by an outpatient mental-health agency in downtown Louisville. And my clients, of whom I have about thirty, are almost all impoverished.

Barbara had a second-floor apartment, and when she learned that a larger apartment was to become available on the first floor, she set about getting it.

The problem was that Jim had planned to move someone else into the unit, and now he could not. He was furious, accusing Barbara of betrayal.

I figured she was just being assertive, going after what she wanted—in this instance, a better apartment. I feel it's what we should be teaching our clients—to be more assertive—but I said nothing about this to Jim. I've learned that it is not wise to become involved in another case manager's business.

After the incident, Jim did everything he could to get rid of Barbara. Then, on her own, she moved to Tennessee to be with her older brother, her only living relative apart from her son. Three months later, her brother died, so she returned to Louisville.

Now I have Barbara as a client. We'd had some brief dealings before, so I knew her and she knew me. Having moved back into the same 6th Street building, she calls me about various matters.

I've explained that I will do my best for her, but that it has to be a two-way street. She can no longer come to the office and raise hell with the staff, especially our receptionist, Janet.

She will also have to see a therapist once a month. The therapist, George, is a somewhat pompous fellow. I don't especially like him, and I believe it's mutual.

"But George just likes to talk about dead people," Barbara complains. I laugh, thinking she probably has that right.

"Well, whatever, it's a package deal, Barbara. You have to go see George every few weeks in order to get me as a case manager." I don't know if this is true, but it sounds plausible.

Barbara knows I am easy. Most case managers are reasonable. Some though are real hard asses, and guess what, clients notice. She says, "Okay, Ray, I will do it—and I won't cause any trouble at the office, none whatsoever." And she hasn't.

Barbara is tall and very thin. She's about sixty now. Her stringy brown hair looks as if it needs washing, which I am sure it does. Barbara can be wild-acting, especially when she is off her medicine even briefly. She has been on Haldol a very long time. It works pretty well. But mostly when she goes off her meds she becomes very talkative. She wears a perpetual grin; I see it all the time. She laughs a lot too.

Barbara has been in prison several times, once for shooting her ex-husband. He didn't die then, but he's dead now, I think she said.

The story is that she shot him because he complained about her cooking, but she tells me she did it because he was "very annoying" and leaves it at that.

She talks a lot about Robert, her only child. She adores him, but he only comes to see her occasionally. She tells me that he's married.

I don't know why I ask—just making conversation, I guess—but I say, "Do you like his wife?"

"She's all right," Barbara says. "But my son and his wife are not getting along so well."

"She likes you, does she?"

"No, not really, not since I stabbed her father." She says this very matter-of-factly, as if every mother stabs her daughter-in-law's father. It's hard to keep from laughing, so I don't try.

"So what did he do to you?"

"Oh, he was being annoying, too," she says, without further elaboration. As before, I don't push for more information. Sometimes you'd rather not know.

"You know Ray, I use three tubes of Poligrip a week," Barbara says.

"Why don't we see if I can get you some new teeth? It might take a while, but it can be done, I think."

"No, no. I like these. I don't want new ones." She changes the subject. "You think Social Security is going to take away my check and send it to you, Ray?"

She means that Social Security might once more insist that she have a payee, someone else to manage her funds. Our agency does this for many clients, and it is a task.

"Dr. Ames did not insist this time that you have a payee," I say. "But you've got a history with Social Security, so they may insist anyway. I don't know. They just may want to send it to our office. I would then get to handle your money, you know." She knows that very well indeed.

"I want to handle my own funds. I can do it, Ray. I really can!"

"It's all right by me, but ultimately, Social Security will decide." Barbara has handled her money solo before, and usually with disastrous results. Still, I think she ought to have a go at it again.

This conversation happened a week or two ago, and she has managed to pay her rent and her utility bill out of her last Social Security check. She admits that the rest of the check is gone, spent on cigarettes and ice cream. She's now out of both, but she does have some food stamps. And there is no Poligrip. She may be able to buy it with food stamps—but maybe not.

I know that I'm going to buy her a small tube of Poligrip for the weekend, and I do. It costs me \$2.99.

"Can you give me another dollar, Ray? Please!"

"Poligrip is all you get out of me today, Barbara."

She giggles, revealing the false teeth that are so loose in her mouth. She uses a finger to hold them in place.

"Thanks, Ray. I love you, Ray. And I will pay you back when my check comes on Tuesday."

These days, she's the only person I've got who tells me she loves me. I think she means it, too.

I'm frequently asked for money on this job, and I don't often give it; you really cannot. Still, once in awhile, with a person like Barbara, who makes me smile on a day when not much else has gone right, it's worth the cost of a small tube of Poligrip.

Indeed, maybe even a large tube.

About the author:

This is one of a collection of twenty-five unpublished stories entitled *The Unique Boarding Home* by Raymond Abbott, a licensed social worker in Kentucky whose works have appeared in [Hospital Drive](#) and elsewhere. "I have been writing for many years on just about every subject."

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