LAW

THE MISSED APPOINTMENT

CASELET

Sarah Green had known from an early age that she wanted to be an attorney. The idea of law school—the rigor, the structure, the intellectual challenge—had always appealed to her. And as someone who hoped to do good in the world, she had long believed that practicing law was one of the most effective ways to make that happen. She was still a 1L when she realized that, although demanding and often emotionally difficult, family law was where she could make the most meaningful difference. After a brief stint at a legal aid office doing more generalized work, Sarah was thrilled to begin a new position at a family law clinic downtown, though she had to admit she was somewhat anxious. The clinic was well respected, and provided free or sliding scale services for those in need, funded through grants and donations. Sarah was by far the most junior attorney in the office. While confident in her knowledge of the law and her own values, she didn't want to appear naïve to her new colleagues.

As she settled in for the day, she looked at her calendar and sighed. That afternoon she would be meeting with a client, Ms. Lane—or at least she hoped she would. Ms. Lane, the mother of two, was in the midst of a custody dispute following a particularly difficult separation. The challenge was that Ms. Lane often seemed overwhelmed, and she had already missed two appointments. Sarah typically had to call multiple times before receiving a response, and even then Ms. Lane seldom had the information Sarah needed. The first mediation date was approaching, and Sarah's anxiety was growing.

Just as she feared, the afternoon came and went without Ms. Lane arriving. Sarah called and texted several times but received no reply. She sat for a moment in the quiet office, feeling a familiar mix of frustration and self-doubt. Each of these difficulties with Ms. Lane took time, and ultimately funds, away from other more responsible clients, and Sarah also felt like she was failing in her role. Later that day, she met with her supervisor and felt herself flush with embarrassment as she explained the missed appointment. She worried aloud that she must look irresponsible. "How can I help Ms. Lane," she wondered, "if we can't even meet?"

The next morning, Sarah listened to a voicemail from Ms. Lane. Her voice was strained: "I'm sorry I didn't make it yesterday. My youngest had an asthma attack. I was at the ER all night." Sarah felt a knot form in her stomach—a mix of guilt, concern, and the sudden realization that she had never asked why Ms. Lane had missed previous appointments. She had assumed carelessness when something else might have been happening entirely.

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At the rescheduled meeting later that week, Ms. Lane arrived exhausted, carrying hospital discharge papers and apologizing softly. She explained that she had been caring for her children alone while working night shifts, struggling to manage appointments, transportation, and childcare. “I’m trying,” she said, “I really am.”

As Sarah listened, something in her understanding shifted. The legal issues were the same, but the situation felt more layered than it had before. She realized she had been focused on the missed appointments without fully considering what might be happening behind them. Still, she also knew that good intentions couldn’t change deadlines, court expectations, or the costs to the clinic. Now, she found herself balancing her concern for Ms. Lane with the practical constraints of the case, wondering what kind of support she could reasonably offer without overstepping the boundaries of her role.

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