

# 449<sup>th</sup> Day in Hospice

Alissa Kuster

**A** woman kisses a forehead and knows that it is warm. Baby fat-filled cheeks burn with eyelids shuttered in sleep.

## 7:30 a.m. - Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

The insides of Mara's eyelids feel cold. She traces her pointer finger around the logo on her steering wheel. A thumbnail size piece of plastic hangs from the bottom right edge and she tears it off. Mara opens her eyes and tosses the plastic into the passenger side cup holder. The hedges outside the client's blue brick house are covered in snow. She doesn't like the slope of the snow on the roof. She'll call the snow shoveling company they contract with. Mara pulls the correct chart from the stack in the front seat and walks up the drive. Daughter answers the door. She smiles at Mara but the skin under her eyelashes is puffy, and yesterday's oil has settled into her hair.

"Good morning, Mara. Come in out of the cold."

Mara scrapes her boots on the welcome mat.

"How are you doing today, J-----?"

She nods. "He's doing okay. You know how much of a fighter he is. He's just, we're just, I'm just probably messing things up, but he's having trouble taking fluids this morning." J----- covers her mouth.

Mara rests her hand on the daughter's elbow. It will be less than a week now. Probably more like a couple of days. "I'm so sorry. You aren't doing anything wrong." Mara scribbles something on a

piece of paper in the chart. "I will call his medical team today to let them know. They may be able to help with some med adjustments."

The daughter presses her forehead against the wall. "It's happening, isn't it?"

"It may be. What I do know is that we will continue to support you both in this."

"I'm not ready."

"That's a normal feeling. We aren't ever ready." Mara exhales. "I'm going to go check in with your dad. You take a little time for yourself."

Mara walks down the hall to the living room. The client smells like Ivory soap and reclines in a La-Z-Boy. His favorite pillow embroidered with "World's Greatest Grandpa" must be in the laundry. Purple veins run the length of his lips. She sits on an armchair next to him. "Hi there, F-----."

His eyes roll toward her, and he lets out an uh-huh sound.

"J---- was saying that this morning has been hard."

He grimaces. "You know, she worries."

"She loves you very much and our team is going to make sure that she is taken care of too. Is there anything I can do for you today?"

He shakes his head, but his eyes look toward a box on the TV tray next to him. Mara picks up the box: baseball cards. She remembers from his intake that he'd coached the St. Paul Saints for a decade. Mara smiles and pulls one out, careful not to leave fingerprints on the laminated corners. "Roberto

Clemente, #21. Right fielder. Pittsburgh Pirates. Career RBIs: 1305.” He reaches for the card. She reads each card, one by one, then hands him the cards until his face returns to a grimace.

D. A. P. Notes: 12/20/2022

Client is unable to take fluids orally and has begun to withdraw but remains alert.

Called med team who will follow up with client’s daughter. Daughter will need significant bereavement counseling (get referral, Aetna Cigna insurance).

Mara Richards, Licensed Clinical Social Worker

*A woman looks up to falling snowflakes. Mittened hands scoop snow before packing it against a tiny neck and armpits.*

### **9:00 a.m. - Liver Disease (end-stage)**

It was supposed to have been a fifteen-minute drive but there’d been an accident on the I-35E. Right lane closed. Mara takes the last bite of her granola bar and shoves the wrapper into her pocket as she walks up the two flights of stairs to the client’s apartment. She knocks and the wife yells for her to come in. She walks to the bedroom and sits down across from a shelf packed with frog figurines. A frog playing hopscotch. A baby frog with a pacifier. A frog with a lily pad hat. Two frogs dancing. The wife is smoking cigarettes through the open window.

Mara opens the patient’s chart. Without raising her eyes, she says, “B-----, secondhand smoke can make it harder to breathe, and it is also really unsafe with the equipment in here.”

B----- removes the cigarette from her lips and dabs it out with a little scoff. “I’ll be back.”

The client’s face is filled with smile lines, and he has a horseshoe shaped scar on his jaw. “You sure are tough on her. You know she’d quit before this, right?”

“I know. It’s a safety thing though.” She raises

the corners of her mouth a little. “I have to make sure I am looking out for your well-being.”

He scoffs. “Government regulations.”

She exhales. “How are you doing today, S-----?”

The client clutches his hands over his swollen abdomen. “I feel blown up like a hot air balloon.”

Mara looks down at his feet, also puffed full of liquid. “We’ll see if your team can up your Lasix more.”

He frowns. “I don’t want any more medicine.”

“Okay, I hear you. I’ll just leave a note for your medical team so they—”

S----- crosses his arms. “Why don’t you listen to me? You never listen to me. Well guess what? I won’t let you blame me!”

“I am not trying to blame you for—”

“I know I had a little too much to drink last night! So what that I kissed her? It didn’t mean anything!”

Take a breath, stay with him in the moment.

He looks toward the stippled ceiling. “Stop crying about it! She doesn’t mean anything.” His arms tremble against the bed. “You’re not leaving! Come back, come here!” His arm knocks over a glass of water. He cowers at the sound and looks directly at Mara. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, baby. You know I am. I just get so mad. You gotta forgive me, please.”

She knows she’s not supposed to break the patient out of a delusion, but she’s not sure if she can say the words that would calm him down. Over her shoulder she hears them.

“I forgive you.” The wife walks past her to the bed. The pack of cigarettes makes an outline in her back pocket. “I forgive you, S-----. Go to sleep, sweetheart.”

He drifts off and B----- looks at Mara. “This is the third time he’s done this today.”

She stands. “I’ll call his providers, see if we can—”

“Forget it. It will be over soon, right? It’s one of those signs you all talk about?”

She nods. "Give me a call if you need anything."  
A splinter of wood falls out of the frame as she closes the door.

D. A. P. Notes:

Client complained of swelling, significantly worsening Ascites observed, S----- also displayed a high level of agitation (med team will follow up).  
Mara Richards, LCSW

***A woman's power is out. Phone lines frigid, minivan in drift.***

### **10:15 a.m. - TOD**

Four minutes into a gas station cup of coffee, her phone rings. Her boss lets her know that a client just died, and that Mara is closest. She jumps back in the car and takes one last gulp before throwing the cup into a pile on the backseat. Mara drives past a yard where two children are building a snowperson. It takes them both shoulder to shoulder to keep the ball rolling. Her tires slide on the ice as she turns. The front door of the house is open when she arrives. The sidewalk is covered in gray snowplow slush. The son stands in the doorway. He twists his wedding band around his finger. She can see his shoulders shivering. Mara shakes his hand. "My name is Mara. I am here from the hospice agency. I'm so sorry about your mom. Could you tell me a little bit about what happened?"

She takes a step forward so that he will step back into the warm house. "I just, I came to check on her on my way to work. I dropped my kid off at daycare and I was just here last night, and mom was doing okay, she was sitting up and talking, and she wanted to talk about when I was little, and she seemed like her. And I thought we'd have more time." He stops and holds his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," she glances at the chart, "I----. I'm going to go check on her and then I am going to call her doctor so we can have an official

pronouncement. Can I call someone for you?"

"My husband worked the night shift and I—" "I'll call him for you."

She guides him over to a chair then walks toward the smell. Like baking in the sun then running a marathon without deodorant. It's amazing how close dead is to alive. The mother lies on her back, mouth slightly open. Mara closes the client's eyes, clasps her cold wrists across her chest, and pulls up the quilt.

She steps back into the hall and dials the hospice agency. She keeps her voice low. "We need somebody to call it."

"We're swamped with Strep cases."

She nearly drops the phone. "Isn't it early for Strep? Someone has to come so we can get the certificate."

"It's earlier every year. A doc will be there in an hour."

"Great, thanks for nothing."

She calls the son's husband and walks back to the living room. "Okay, so a doctor is going to come in about an hour so we can start the death certificate process, and your husband is on the way now. Once the doctor is finished, the funeral home will be able to come."

"All right, that all sounds like a plan."

She walks him to the bedroom and watches him lay his head on his mother's chest before the doorbell rings and she greets the husband.

D. A. P.s:

Patient pronounced at 11:57 a.m.

Total days in hospice: 6 8

Spoke with son-in-law and left card about bereavement counseling (follow up in 2 days).

Funeral to be handled by Belson & Sons, provided patient's wishes to them.

***A woman makes a decision. Stay with her, I'll go.***

### **12:45 p.m. - Fill Up**

The gas station toilet is out of seat covers so she hovers over the bowl. After scrubbing herself clean Mara grabs a piece of pizza out from under a flickering heat lamp. The attendant doesn't charge her for this cup of coffee. The slice is cold by the time she gets to the car. Her personal phone buzzes on the dashboard while she wipes grease from her fingers with paper napkins. She hits ignore before throwing the napkins into the backseat.

*A woman breathes into a scarf and doesn't feel the frostbite on her face. Ice-soaked lips.*

### **1:30 p.m. - Cancer (Stage Fucked IV)**

Mara holds the railing to steady herself on the ramp's ice. The care nurse doesn't say anything to her. Shift change. Not her problem anymore. K----- is asleep on her bed, safety railings up. Mara places a cool compress on her forehead. The woman's breathing rattles through her teeth and gurgles in the back of her throat. She moans loud then soft then switches.

"Hi, K-----. How are you doing today?"

Another moan. The client's lips are chapped. She can't keep her mouth closed anymore. Mara wipes excess mucus away from K-----'s nose and mouth before applying a thick layer of lip balm. K----- keeps moaning. She scribbles in the chart. The client's bed is covered with dolls and stuffed animals. Her favorite, a curly haired teddy bear wearing a sweater, has fallen from her grasp. Mara puts it back between K-----'s fingers.

They've always shared something. K-----'s daughter is dead. Her husband left and her son is in New Zealand. Mara hums a few bars of "Stand by Me." Her intake says it's K-----'s favorite song. The moans get a little quieter and she falls back to sleep. Mara charts next to her until the front door unlocks. Care nurse arriving.

D. A. P.s:

Client is nearly unresponsive; nurses are proceeding with around-the-clock care.

Called client's son to inform (will fly in from Wellington tonight)

*A woman walks until she gets to a three-story building. EMERGENCY.*

### **3:15 p.m. - Just One More**

Mara drops K-----'s chart in the crack between her seat and the car door. Goddamnit. She pulls the lever on the seat to push it forward, revealing a pile of stale Cheerios. Probably dropped from a sippy cup in the backseat. She slams her hand into the window. "Fuck!"

A man walking his dog on the opposite end of the street looks at her. She can see his breath. He zips his jacket a little tighter. She grinds the Cheerios into the carpet with her feet then shoves the seat back. She sits down and looks at the missed calls on her personal phone. All the same number. Mara's work phone buzzes before she can press redial.

Gale: Can you take my 3:30 with the R----- family? I spent the last 20 minutes puking at the P----- family and need to go home.

Mara: Do they have kids?

Gale: They're new to my client list.

Mara: I don't work with kids.

Gale: There's no one else who can take them.

Mara: I don't do kids.

Gale: I don't have my files to check.

Mara: Can't Sam go?

Gale: You're the only one still on shift.

Mara: Fine.

Gale: Thanks.

*A woman begs then cries for help from a person in scrubs, then another, then a lab coat. Not safe to go out, but I got here!*

### 3:30 p.m. - Bullshit (Stage 10)

She pulls into the salt-covered driveway. Mara walks through the snow-covered grass and begins to tremble when she sees two little snow angels. Side by side, fresh. A woman in a puffy jacket opens the door and starts walking toward her. "I've been calling the hospice agency for thirty minutes. You're late!"

She clutches her notepad closer to her chest. "Good afternoon, I apologize, Gale is sick today, so I will be filling in. My name is Mara."

The woman doesn't exhale. Everyone deals with the end differently. "Okay, well. I was just thinking there would be a—"

Two children start to run toward them. "A-----, give it back-ahh!"

Mara takes a step back. The smaller one chases the bigger one.

The mother turns. "Girls! Stop. A-----, give M--- her Barbie back, now."

The oldest girl stops and looks at the mother like she's been bitten. A----- drops the doll in the snow. The little one picks it up, hugs it, then uses it to hit the older daughter in the face. Mara scribbles a note in the chart.

The mother (Gale didn't send her name) rips the doll from M-----'s hands. "Apologize to your sister right now." The little one starts to cry.

Mara exhales again. "I'm not sure how much the agency has communicated with you already but my role as your social worker is to make sure you all have the resources you need and to coordinate them for you. If you would like, I can talk with your daughters' schools and make sure they are getting the support they need."

She starts to tap her foot. "My daughters are fine. They are just a little upset because this is all new."

"I hear you. Someone like a school counselor may be able to help with that newness."

The woman pauses until A----- interrupts, "Mom, can we go get hot chocolate?"

She faces her. "You know we can't leave your dad right now, A-----. Some other time."

The little one starts dancing. "Now, now, now."

"We could do it with marshmallows and sprinkles and it wouldn't even take that much time and—"

"No."

The girls turn toward Mara. "Could you take us?"

She shakes her head. "No, I'm here to check in with your dad and then it will be time for me to leave."

The woman looks at her. "Can't you just take them? I'll sign whatever paperwork so they can go in your car."

"You all can set your boundaries with Gale when she becomes your regular social worker. For now, I need to check in with O-----."

"Gale can check in with him, can you just do this?"

"No, I have to put O----- first and I will not compromise on that."

M----- runs toward Mara's car and A----- follows.

M----- sticks her hands to the backseat window. "Ewww! Why is there so much trash in here?"

A half-consumed smoothie swirls with white mold. Tin foil wrappers covered in chocolate are cemented into the backseat.

A----- chimes in. "That's gross. No wonder you smell bad."

Ten plastic spoons peek out from under the passenger seat floor mat. The ones closest to the door have turned yellow.

Mara's face starts to burn. "A----- and M-----, please step back from my car."

Greasy fingerprints on the seatbelts. A stack six high of yogurt cups shoved into a backseat cup holder. The leftovers in the top one have curdled. Black banana peels and white orange rinds cover the floor.

"It's not polite to talk to people like that—" The

woman's eyes flutter through the back windshield avoiding Mara's attempts to block the window. "You should go."

"Please, I need to check on—"

The woman scowls. "This is disgusting and unprofessional. Please leave."

D. A. P.s:

~~Fuck, goddamnit, shit, fuck, fuck, fuck~~

Family refused to let me see the patient, Gale will follow up at next visit.

*A woman punches a security guard. Pushed back out of EMERGENCY and into a snowbank.*

#### **4:15 p.m. - Don't Look at Her**

Another cup of coffee and three cake pops. One bite after another. Mara's personal phone buzzes again. Ignore. She pulls into a parking lot to finish charting.

*A woman's gut feels past, present, and future. Chromosomes dim, unraveling meiosis.*

#### **6:30 p.m. - Unprofessional**

Her work phone goes off.

Brenda: Your 1:30 just died.

Mara: I'm on the other side of town, but I can come back.

Brenda: You've been on too many hours. We can't afford the overtime. And L----- from your last visit called and said you weren't at your best. Said your car was full of trash?

Mara: She was pissed I wouldn't take her kids to get hot chocolate. She wouldn't let me see the client.

Brenda: Well, take care of it and make sure it doesn't happen again. We can't lose clients.

Mara: Will do.

Brenda: Go home.

She jams the cake pop sticks under her seat and drives to the bookshop a few blocks down. A sandwich and another cup of coffee. Mara picks up some book and sits down in an armchair in one of the aisles.

*A woman turns toward home. Cracked ice and rolled ankles.*

#### **9 p.m. - Can't Stay Here**

The clunk of a book being placed back on the shelf. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

She shudders awake. "Huh? Yeah, sorry I just dozed off, I'm—"

"We're closing up."

She picks up her bag. "Gotcha. I'll buy this one."

*A woman dives up a flight of stairs then past a wreathed front door. Snowperson button eyes buried in the yard.*

#### **9:30 p.m. - There**

She pulls into the drive. It's clear concrete where she expected snow. The steps are shoveled too. Two footprints sit just under the bench outside the front door. Her neighbor is taking out his recycling. He's new, maybe moved in six months ago. He waves. "Hello there, Mara."

She waves back but moves toward the front door.

"Someone stopped by your house earlier today. I saw him knocking and waiting. He said he was your husband."

Shit. "Oh, that's very odd."

"It was. I didn't think you were married. Well, in any case he left something for you. Give me just a second."

"We don't need to do this now. You're cold, it's late."

"No trouble at all."

He steps inside then back out holding a small pink box. She knows that they'll be pink chiffon

cupcakes before she opens the lid.

“He said he wanted to talk with you about your daughter?” He shrugs. “I said, I think you have the wrong house. I think I’d know if I’d seen a little girl playing in your yard?”

Her voice closes in her throat. “You would. Weird. Thanks, Peter. I’m gonna head home.”

“Sure thing, Mara. Have a good one.”

Mara pushes open the front door and hangs up

her jacket on a hook. She dumps the charts onto a dusty highchair. A few fall through the leg holes but she doesn’t pick them up. Mara places her last frozen dinner into the microwave. Peas shrivel in butter syrup.

***A man tells a woman that a little girl couldn’t stay any longer. Is it was. A woman holds a little girl for fourteen hours.***