

Asphalt Attempted Assassination

A Dara Scott Mystery

The intensity of the summer sun hit her as soon as she walked out of her apartment; tears formed in the glare and streaked down her cheeks. Maybe this weekend she will finally buy sunglasses. Her tongue explored cracked lips and she took a deep breath. Having not yet mastered the need for continual moisturizing inside and out, in this new climate her throat felt dry, Dara filled her lungs with the unfamiliar dry air. She did like the sharp herbal smell of those strange little green/gray bushes. She loaded her lunch bag, water bottle and carefully placed her freshly pressed lab coat (blue because she is still a student) onto the passenger seat and finger fluffed her hair as she slid behind the wheel. Eighty five degrees and just seven in the morning, Dara drove with the windows down for the ten minute commute. She finally reached for the lip balm she knew would be absorbed within minutes. The tube was warm and the contents nearly liquid as she made a mental note to never leave this in the car again.

The eight year old Toyota Corolla with just about one hundred thousand miles always started up with a soft groan and today was no exception. She washed the faded paint job every two weeks, when it was fairly dusty. After she washed, vacuumed and cleaned out the assorted papers, candy wrappers and other vestiges of her life that collected during that period of time, Dara felt a soothing satisfaction.

Short brown hair finished drying in the breeze, while the papers on the back seat kept a rhythmic beat, and she thought maybe she would get to those journal articles tonight. Most nights, Dara was home, alone with her embroidery or knitting needles. She occasionally met new friends and explored the different Mexican restaurants this city seemed to have on every corner. Her chest filled with warmth mixed with excitement as she thought about her

circumstances. Just two months into her internship, Dara felt like she had a routine, a full life.

She hoped that nice Mr. Trapper had not been discharged over the weekend. He had, had a small stroke, and she was encouraged by his progress.

With a satisfying tug, she set her parking brake. Perfect, a spot near the entrance of the University Hospital, she had time to join neuro rounds. It was just after 7:30 in the morning so she had plenty of time.

An occupational therapy student was not required to attend rounds. Dara went along anyway, not speaking with anyone and barely being acknowledged, but did that ortho resident purposely stand closer to her each time she followed the group? A brief smile and slight upturn of his lips would keep her happy for hours.

The teaching hospital was full of groups of lab coat clad groups walking in and out of patient rooms all day. Neurology rounds were especially interesting to Dara. She frequently had patients who were the subject of the discussions. These were led by a wizened balding and brilliant doctor, and often the overt competitiveness of the orthopedic, respiratory and the neurology residents was amusing to observe.

The automatic doors opened with a resounding swoosh and Dara was instantly chilled as she stepped into the bustling world of this one thousand bed facility. Even at this early hour, the hospital was full of life. Multi-generational families milled around in a sort of orchestrated chaos. The people who were seemingly oblivious of each other had varying levels of anxiety or elation conveyed on their faces; some were corralling toddlers who were not allowed near the ICU to visit their sick granny or horribly injured brother passed without greeting the beaming relatives who escorted the new mothers festooned with flowers and balloons as they held their newest addition safely

ensconced within a car safety seat. The mothers too had at once expressions of anxiety and elation.

Dara took the elevator down to the therapy department, quickly stowed her lunch and water. As she was checking the assignment board, she donned her lab coat and nodded hello to the other therapists. Her supervisor was not there, and the other seasoned veterans had no interest in her bright eyed enthusiasm, and were under no obligation to help her in any way. Dara checked her collar in the tiny mirror next to the board, collected some black pens from the cubical with the name plate "STUDENT", made sure her note pad and mints were in her pocket and headed to the elevator.

Frank, a physical therapy student was taking the elevator up at the same time. "Heading to rounds?" "Yes." Dara offered, keeping her disappointment that another student was taking the initiative to go to rounds as well, from showing on her face. "My supervisor told me I have to up my game, so I am hoping some interesting crash victim came in last night, maybe even a motorcycle wreck. Did you know the docs call them suicycles?" He guffawed. "OK", Dara thought, "so he probably won't become a regular, just picking up a case study to impress his supervisor". "I'm hoping for a compound fracture, maybe even a TBI". "Wow, Dara thought, he sure has his Plexiglas shield in place, I don't know if I could ever become so cavalier about a traumatic brain injured person." But she just smiled and changed the subject to a discussion about how different the Sonoran Desert was from anyplace she'd ever lived.

As if by an unspoken agreement, they both became silent as soon as the elevator doors opened and they found themselves right in the middle of the cadre of doctors, residents, interns and medical students. Dara was still considering Frank's approach to patients compared with her own. She wondered if she was getting too close. This was the second week she was allowed to independently follow a case from admission to discharge.

“This is Mr. Trapper who suffered an intracranial bleed, ten days ago on the 5th”. The chief neurologist boomed,” pulling Dara from her reverie. Who can tell me his prognosis at time of admission versus today?” Dara held her breath, cursed her butterflies and hoped that the neuro resident was going to report how Mr. Trapper progressed from being *max assist* to *stand/by with supervision* while dressing his lower body. Instead, slimy Dr. Norburt rattled off blood and anti-coagulation results and his plans for discharge with home therapy by Wednesday.

Dara caught a quick wink from Mr. Trapper and give him a signal that she would return in ten minutes for a trip to the shower room, where she would teach him and Mrs. Trapper the safest way to use the shower seat he would use when he returned home. The equipment had been ordered and insurance coverage was confirmed.

After traipsing around, behind the big boys for a few more minutes, Dara went into the supply closet and retrieved a basin, a small bottle of soap, disposable razor, the tiniest can of shaving cream she had ever seen, and lots of towels. Dara always brought extra towels, despite her specific training to the contrary; she knew her patients appreciated the personal touch. Mr. Trapper had his own special deodorant and tooth brushing supplies, so they would use his. Dara loaded all this into the basin and brought the supplies to the shower room she had reserved for the next hour. She knew she would not need all that time, but the Trappers like to go on about the latest things President and Mrs. Raegan were talking about, she allowed them the time.

Dara rehearsed in her mind, the cues on movement and prior preparation she was going to teach the Trappers about the safest and the most independent way Mr. Trapper could shower with his residual left sided weakness. As she approached his room, Dara’s breath became quick and sharp. A tumult of high speed activity was happening in the hall. “My first CODE she thought to herself”, proud of her objective mindset.

Just as Dara rounded the corner she heard “CODE BLUE 145 SOUTH”, Mr. Trapper’s room!!! He did not have a roommate, what could have happened in the past ten minutes?!

A nurse was firmly, but kindly moving Mrs. Trapper to the side of the door, in the hall as a team in scrubs raced by with a cart. Mrs. Tapper saw Dara and reached towards her, “Oh dearie, here I am on time for our shower appointment with you and when I walked into the room, well, he fell asleep suddenly and I just could not get him awake,” she sobbed, bits of wet tissue clinging to her sopping nose. Dara felt her heart race and sweat stream down her back, “I will try to find out what I can.”

Unnoticed, Dara slipped into the corner of the room in time to hear those dreaded words, “...patient is anoxic- pulse ox is 50”. “We have to intubate now!” Dara watched and knew he would be moved to the intensive care unit. It was going to be long after Wednesday for Mr. Trapper’s release-but why?

Dara returned to the hall to report to Mrs. Trapper and help her to a seat. “This is going to take a while; can I get you something to drink, some water or coffee?” “Oh my, oh my”, was all the old woman could manage suddenly looking every one of her 81 years. Blue veined hands clutched her straw bag and shook uncontrollably. Dara lightly patted her arm, sat quietly with her for a few moments. She returned with a cup of ice water and placed it on the table next to Mrs. Trapper’s chair. Then Dara took the elevator down to the basement therapy office.

She shared the cubicle with five other therapists. Not too bad for a student position, it can only get better from here. Armpits stinging and moist, thank goodness for the lab coat. “That’s the last time I take hygiene tips from patients”, Dara thought. She’d bought a crystal to use as a natural alternative to deodorant on the advice of an 85 year old patient who had virtually no medical record and no history of illness of any kind, but was in the hospital because she told her son she was going to die. Although the doctors could find

nothing medically wrong with her, she did indeed die on the day she said she would. Dara exhaled loudly-not realizing she had been holding her breath. She reached into her lab coat for a tiny mint.

All the other therapists were out seeing their first patients of the morning, and her supervisor was in her Monday morning meeting, that usually lasted until lunch, so Dara had some time to think.

She closed her eyes and tried to understand what happened. She would look at the chart later, when things calmed down, but for now she needed to understand why a man who had a tiny stroke and just a bit of residual weakness was being intubated and heading for the ICU.

Dara had thoroughly reviewed Mr. Trapper's thin chart before her first visit with him last week. She learned that his health history was basically non-eventful except for a third degree burn on his left arm. He wore the scar proudly and told the story at some length of his first asphalt pour and what a perfect job it had been. So why, Dara asked herself again did he suddenly stop breathing?

As Dara went over the rounds in her mind, she remembered thinking how the nurses always seem to know which patients the attending doctors would focus on and change those sheets just before the group entered the room. The sheets should have been pristine, except when Dara slipped in during the code she noticed crumbs on the sheets and Mr. Trapper's chin. Did he choke? No, she would have heard something about there being an obstruction during the code.

Remembering a conversation she had had with the Trappers last week Dara mused. They were laughing about how glad they were that this stroke did not kill him before he had time to change his will and leave his entire estate to the cat shelter. They joked about how their estranged son would be dumbfounded and that Mr. Trapper's only regret at dying was not being able to

see his son's face when he realized the cat shelter now had to run the asphalt empire-if he hadn't sold it by then.

Mrs. Trapper laughed along with him, saying that she already had all she would ever need in her own name but she would miss him terribly, believing they were talking about the distant future. Of course, she reminded him that his competitor whom they referred to as Ol' Barney would have a cow when he realized that they were planning to sell the business next week to that national chain, and the chain will now be Ol' Barney's competitor with all the proceeds from the sale going to the shelter. "The papers are all ready, just need my signature, we have an appointment at my lawyer's next week", Mr. Trapper bragged during one of his arm strengthening sessions. He was glad he was going to see Ol' Barney's reaction to that one!

"Oh come now, Bill", Mrs. Trapper said, "don't be mean- they have been our friends for years. Ol' Barney's wife said she would bake some blueberry muffins and send them along with me before you get out of here".

Dara took the elevator and detoured past Mr. Trapper's room. On the way to her next patient she overheard a doctor she did not recognize speaking to a respiratory resident. With great authority he explained that the patient most likely suffered a pulmonary embolism from immobility. "What total bullshit", Dara thought, she knew that she had Mr. Trapper up and moving three times a day. He was doing ankle pumps when he was in bed, and ate all his meals in the sun room. That is not to mention all the physical therapy he was getting to strengthen his leg. Frank even remarked that "Mr. Trapper was in better shape than some of the old therapists!"

The haughty respiratory attending doctor was congratulating the respiratory resident on the excellent job he had done with his quick response and accurate intubation.

Dara turned to find her next patient's room, as she saw the resident furtively drop a small syringe into one of the wall mounted "sharps" containers, and keep walking with the attending.