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I Am a Customer Service Representative

Beth Goldner

I work at a hospice,
fielding calls from oncologists, neurologists,
caseworkers, and clergy,
referring their patients and parishioners, knowing it is time.
Sometimes the families call, weeping or angry,
giving me too much information, or not enough,
needed to get their loved one on service.

Nurses used to do my job.
They called it Intake.
Now they hire English majors and call us Customer Service
Representatives.
They give us business cards.
They equip us with headsets and a checklist of questions.

Occasionally, the person who is dying calls, for a chat, a
look-see.
Like M—, who called every Tuesday.
She was a former Avon lady, had once lived in Prague, mar-
ried four times.
She'd ask the same questions about hospice services on
every call,
but would never consent to care.
My boss, a middle-aged woman with bitten fingernails, told
me to push M—.
She's getting there, but isn't quite ready, I said. She says she's
not in pain.

My boss' brow, a knot of annoyance: It's your job not to let her get to that point.

When I am dying,
if I'm not lucky enough to have a widowmaker heart attack
or a ruptured brain aneurysm,
I want my sister,
(who will be the one to call hospice)
to reach an LPN or RN or BSN,
who will take charge. Delicately, but confidently,
ask my sister my diagnosis, my physician's name, what medications I take
—if I am in pain—

I do not want the person who answers her call
to be a customer service representative,
some person who knows nothing about my pain:
the causes and nuances,
the trajectory and uncertainty,
a person who has never studied the human body,
or smelled the smells of medicine,
or heard the sounds of decay.
I do not want the customer service representative to tell my sister
at the end of that first call,
that if she should have any questions later, to please—
just please—call them in the Customer Service Center.

About the Poet

Beth Goldner is a fiction writer and poet. She is the author of a story collection, *Wake*, and a novel, *The Number We End Up With*. She lives in Philadelphia. Email: bethellengoldner@gmail.com