

Conflict in the Workplace

Afternoons are usually quiet in the geriatric wing of Hillsdale Hospital. It had been 9 months since Lauren started working there, and she was thankful every day that she transferred from her previous place of work. Here, all the nurses are friendly and considerate to each other, and the administration seems to care genuinely about work-life balance issues. As long as the nurses fill their weekly quota of hours, they can switch shifts with each other at their own discretion. Although Lauren hasn't needed to ask anyone to switch shifts with her yet, she has seen other nurses talk about swapping shifts when things came up in their personal lives. It always seems like an easy discussion, so she is surprised one afternoon when she overhears a difficult conversation at the nurse's station.

Ronnie Lombardi hurries in from her lunch break, nods hello to Lauren, and sits down at a chair inside the nurses' station. She smooths her hair and keeps looking at the door, as if she is waiting for someone.

When Kai Yang walks through the swinging doors, Ronnie jumps up. "Kai, darling! Just the man I want to see. Did you have a nice lunch hour?" she asks.

Kai has spent most of his lunch hour on his cell phone arguing with his wife, and he barely had time to eat. But he forces a smile at Ronnie as he strides into the nurses' station and puts his sweater on the back of a chair. "Well, yes, I did. Thank you for asking. How about you, *darling*?" he says, echoing Ronnie's syrupy tone. In Kai's experience, she only calls people "darling" when she wants something from them.

"Oh, it was fine, fine." Ronnie grabs Kai's arm and leans in. Kai braces himself for the worst. "Listen, I need to ask you to switch shifts with me next Wednesday. My mother has a doctor's appointment."

Kai puts his hand on Ronnie's arm and pats it, while gently pushing her away. "Oh, I'm sorry, I can't next Wednesday. My son has a soccer game."

Ronnie frowns. She is not expecting such a quick rejection, and she feels flustered about how to respond. "But I switched with you last week when your daughter had a ballet recital," she whines. "You promised me you'd switch with me next time I had something come up." As she hears herself speak, she becomes angry that she is losing control of her emotions. A mature woman should not sound like a little child.

"I know you switched with me last week, and I do appreciate it," says Kai. "Really I do. But I missed my son's soccer game last month, and I promised him I wouldn't miss another one. Why can't you just reschedule your mother's doctor's appointment?"

"It's with a glaucoma specialist, and the doctor is booked for months. I can't reschedule!" Ronnie blurts out. In the back of her mind, she wonders why she is so irritable these days and concludes that it must be the new medication she is taking for her blood pressure.

"Well, I'm sorry," says Kai. "I don't know what else to tell you. I'll switch shifts with you next time, okay?" Kai pats Ronnie's arm again, then picks up a patient's folder and walks down the hall with it. He leaves feeling annoyed that Ronnie expects him to return a favor after only a week—as if she is afraid he'll forget that he owes her one.

Ronnie sits back down in her chair. "I can't believe he said no!" she says to Lauren.

“I’d switch shifts with you but I’ve already got plans that day too,” Lauren says.

“I wouldn’t let you do that anyway,” says Ronnie. “The point is I switched with Kai last time, and he promised to switch with me next time. This *is* the next time!” She folds her arms across her chest and sulks. “I mean, who does Kai think he is? I bet he thinks he’s better than us because he’s the only male nurse in this wing, and the patients all think he’s a doctor. Did you see how fast he played the ‘I have kids’ card? And just because I don’t have children, I am expected to take on the extra work load!”

Lauren looks at Ronnie. “Why don’t you tell me how you *really* feel?” quips Lauren.

Ronnie laughs. “I mean, normally I could ask my partner Izzie to take my mother to the doctor, but I can’t ask her to take off any more work either. She’s 5 years away from retirement and she’s already got an office full of younger people ready to push her out the door. But she won’t budge until she accrues the full retirement benefits.”

Lauren thinks for a moment. “Maybe you could ask Pam to find a replacement for you that day?”

“Pam’s still on maternity leave. I’d hate to bother the senior nurse administrator at home about something like this. Besides, I’m just a few years away from retirement myself. I don’t want to make any waves before I’m eligible for full benefits either!”

Suddenly, a red light flashes at the nurses’ station, indicating that a patient has called for assistance.

“Back to work,” Ronnie sighs, getting up and walking down the hall.

Later that afternoon, Lauren runs into Kai in the break room. She has just sat down with a cup of coffee, and Kai comes in to get a bag of potato chips out of the vending machine.

“Hi, Kai, how’s it going?” Lauren asks.

“Could be better,” he says, leaning against the vending machine. “You heard Ronnie and me talking earlier, right?”

Lauren nods. “Sounds like a tough situation.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Kai says. He hesitates to burden a co-worker with his feelings, but he really needs someone to talk to. “Thing is, I really would like to return the favor and switch with Ronnie, but my wife would be furious if I missed my son’s soccer game. She’s working on a big project at a branch office, so her commute is longer than usual for a few months. She’s going to be stuck working during my son’s game, and there’s no one else who can take him but me.”

“Can’t he just skip a game?” says Lauren.

Kai looks at her and raises an eyebrow. “You don’t have kids, do you,” he asks facetiously.

“Seriously, though,” Kai continues, “my wife and I already argue too much about taking care of the kids. Even with flexible work schedules, it’s hard to do it all. And with the kids’ schedules on top of that...sometimes I wish my wife didn’t have to work. But I know she wants to, and until I earn enough to support us both, that isn’t going to happen. Speaking of which, I still want to get my master’s degree so I can earn better pay. But with all this going on right now, I just don’t see when I’ll have the time.”

Lauren listens and nods. On the one hand, she suddenly feels lucky that she is young, single, and doesn't have kids. But she also cares about both Ronnie and Kai as colleagues and friends. She wonders what she would do if she was in either of their situations. She wonders if she can do anything to help them.