

From Auschwitz with love



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One Friday night a few years ago, I was finishing a long day and hoping to make a late dinner with my wife when I received another page. Reluctantly, I turned around and headed back to the holding room to find Ms. J, an eighty-six-year-old woman who had fallen on the sidewalk and broken her hip. I called my wife to let her know I would be working late and then walked over to the patient's bedside.

Ms. J was alert but in obvious pain. I introduced myself and reviewed her medical history. Despite her age and present condition, she appeared to be in good health. To add to my surprise, she was pleasant—something I rarely encounter among patients in such circumstances. She even apologized for “inconveniencing” me. She then noticed my wedding band and asked about my family.

After I explained the anesthetic plan and assured her that I would take excellent care of her, she smiled gratefully. While we waited on the OR to get

ready, I noticed her IV had infiltrated. I turned her forearm over to search for another vein and noticed a faded tattoo a few inches above her wrist. The numbers were barely decipherable. When I asked her what they meant, she answered with one word: “Auschwitz.”

For the next several minutes she told me her story. Her entire family had been taken from their home and transported via cattle cars to one place after another before arriving at the concentration camp. She was a teenager then and was imprisoned initially in the same camp with her mother. At one point, she could look through the fencing and see her father in the men's camp, but soon he disappeared. Her mother was taken elsewhere not long afterward. She never saw any of her family again.

Ms. J's surgery proceeded uneventfully and she was taken to the recovery room in good condition. I endorsed her care to the recovery staff and went to complete a few charts before heading home. On my way out the door, I stopped by to check on her one last time. She was comfortable and perfectly lucid. She asked me how everything had gone during surgery. I explained

that she had done remarkably well and should be going home in a couple of days. She expressed her thanks and then motioned for me to lean closer. As I did, she took my hand, kissed me on the cheek, and said, “I love you.”

In a profession that can desensitize its practitioners to suffering, I struggle at times to maintain compassion for my patients. I administer over a thousand anesthetics a year to patients with all types of illnesses, and I try to comfort them and their families. But it is not often a patient comforts me. Ms. J had as much as reason as anyone to be bitter, but she possessed a spirit of kindness I have rarely encountered.

Ms. J, wherever you are, I hope you are well. I hope you are surrounded by loved ones, and that the people in your life are touched with your gentleness and grace, as I was. Thank you for reminding me of the compassion I am to give to others. And I love you, too.

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