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The Date, Not the Year

I always look at a patient's birth date; not the year, but the date. Sometimes it becomes an easy conversation starter, an excuse to offer an early or belated "happy birthday". It's Friday at 8:45 pm when the resident beside me gets a page: EB in room 241. I know the patient. Mr. Bellinger has a rectourethral fistula managed with bilateral nephrostomy tubes and foley catheter. He also has a reputation—demanding and difficult. Despite repeated discussion that low urine output from the foley is expected, he frequently requests catheter exchanges "just to be sure". I usually have the junior resident tend to such requests, but tonight the resident is post-call and counting down the seconds until escape. "I got it," I say. He doesn't argue. As I review Mr. Bellinger's chart, I do what I always do—I check his birthday. It's the same as mine. When I walk into his room, he looks at me and asks flatly, "who are you?" I introduce myself as Carla, the chief resident of the Urology service. He studies me, unimpressed. As I set up for the catheter exchange, I mention—almost as an aside—that we share the same birthday. He pauses, looks at me again, and something shifts. Not warmth exactly, but something. The next time I see him, his wife is at bedside and I'm explaining why the catheter needs to stay in. Mr. Bellinger is uninterested and uninvolved in this conversation until his wife says, "Doesn't she remind you of Anna?" She turns to me, "that's our niece." Mr. Bellinger breaks his glance at the ceiling to study me—again. A smile flickers and he nods in agreement. At the next catheter exchange, he tells me his first girlfriend's name was Carla. He drifts into stories about high school and being young. In this moment, I realize his frustration is less about the catheter and more about the independence he fears he won't regain. A few weeks later, Mr. Bellinger needs one final catheter exchange prior to discharge. We both joke about the hospital being a second home. As I am cleaning up and wishing him luck at home, he stops me. "Never change," he says. "You're going to make a great doctor." I don't correct him. Instead, I say, "you're going to make a great patient." I'm not sure he understood my joke, but he chuckles anyway and waves goodbye. The following Monday, the attending stops me in the hallway to tell me Mr. Bellinger passed over the weekend. I felt my breath catch. "Mr. Bellinger? Are you sure?" The attending confirmed explaining it was likely a cardiac event. The rest of the day blurred, but Mr. Bellinger stayed with me. I thought about his high school stories, his wife, the job he worried he'd never return to, and how much of himself he felt he had already lost. In medicine, we often meet patients at their most vulnerable, reduced to problem lists, labeled as easy or difficult. Mr. Bellinger taught me that resistance is frequently grief in

disguise. I still look at every patient's birth date. Not to make conversation, but to remind myself that every patient has lived so much life long before they became a patient. Sometimes, the greatest lesson a patient can teach us is not how to treat them, but how to see them.