“Nutella,” she whispered mischievously, trying to taste the words as they tumbled from her cracked lips. I smiled at her as I bent down and said, “Soon. Hopefully.” Familiar with our daily routine, she pressed my cold stethoscope against her chest, the warmth from her delicate fingers fogging the silver etching where my initials had been carefully engraved just months before.

She smirked as I asked if she wanted to go to the playroom. Just then, her smirk morphed into an awful scowl as she lunged forward retching bilious liquid into the pink, plastic container splayed across her knees.

My heart broke as I explained that we were going to need to replace the NG tube. “No, please,” she pleaded, “I won’t throw up anymore. I promise.” Her nails dug into my skin as I inserted the long tube. “No, please,” she pleaded, “I won’t throw up anymore. I promise.” Her nails dug into my skin as I inserted the long tube. “No, please,” she pleaded, “I won’t throw up anymore. I promise.” Her nails dug into my skin as I inserted the long tube. “No, please,” she pleaded, “I won’t throw up anymore. I promise.” Her nails dug into my skin as I inserted the long tube.

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My heart broke as I explained that we were going to need to replace the NG tube. “No, please,” she pleaded, “I won’t throw up anymore. I promise.” Her nails dug into my skin as I inserted the long tube down her nose and back into her stomach. She gagged and begged me to stop.

I wanted to feed her but she had a small bowel obstruction, a long-term complication of extensive surgery for the necrotizing enterocolitis she experienced as an infant. The act could have killed her.

Through thick, matted, tear-stained lashes she glared up at me. I could tell by the look on her face that I had betrayed her. She was only eight years old but already she had known more loss than I had.

The day she went for surgery, I could barely watch. The surgeons wheeled her away as her parents stood in the hall; she was a crumpled mess of wiry hair and exhaustion, staring down every turn of the corridor. I knew she would be okay, but the awful question banged against my brain. What if she wasn’t?

She would never be able to taste Nutella again. The idea was suffocating. I somehow felt responsible.

Weeks went by and finally she was healthy enough to go home. She was no longer my patient or under my care but I couldn’t forget the connection we had made. On the last day of her hospitalization, I stopped by her room. Weary from my overnight shift, I peeked my head in and asked, “Did someone order Nutella?” proffering the jar. Her eyes shone.

Gabriella taught me something that day that I hadn’t realized before. She taught me that some days being a doctor means medications, surgeries, ventilators, and heroics, and some days it means sharing secrets over a single bite of hazelnut chocolate. It means taking the time to appreciate the ordinary, mundane things that make a person human and realizing that those are the best things of all. Finally, it means accepting that often, the greatest gift I have to give my patients is my ability to stand guard at their bedside and bear witness to their beautiful, peculiar, fleeting journey for as long as it may last.

Author’s Note: The name and identifying information in this essay have been changed to protect the identity of the individual described.

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