The Mentor

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The last month of my Internal Medicine residency was a memorable one, thanks to Mr. Perini¹. He had had an anterior myocardial infarction complicated by malignant arrhythmias, and in the days before electrophysiology mapping and cardiac ablation, stopping them had proved impossible. Without a continuous lidocaine infusion, Mr. Perini rapidly developed ventricular fibrillation and cardiac arrest. We were at a loss.

The day the new interns arrived, my attending, Dr. Benedict, called me aside. “I’ll be out of town for a few days, but Dr. Furstmann has agreed to cover for me. You know, he’s an authority on arrhythmias. Maybe he can help us figure out what to do for Mr. Perini”. My heart sank.

Karl O. Furstmann, MD, DPhil(Ox), MACP, AAP, FACC, FAHA was the most feared attending physician at University Hospital. Not only was he demanding and abusive, but he was possessed of an arrogant conviction that he was always right, and reputedly used his powerful political influence to punish those who dared to suggest that he was not. I had managed to avoid him throughout my entire residency—until now.

The sound of angry shouting greeted me as I arrived on the ward the next morning. “Did you not go to medical school? Are you totally ignorant about how to manage ventricular arrhythmias? You obviously are, or you would never have let this happen!” Dr. Furstmann stood ranting outside Mr. Perini’s room, my intern cowering before him in tears, while inside, the code team was furiously trying to resuscitate Mr. Perini and replace his occluded central line. I rushed forward to defend my intern, explaining that maintaining IV access had been a recurring problem, but Dr. Furstmann cut me short.

“Are you in control of this ward or not? This patient could have died! I was told that you were a good resident, but instead I’m afraid you’re a big disappointment.” A wave of righteous anger welled up in my gut, not so much from his impugning my clinical skills but from his unjustified, vicious attack on my inexperienced intern. “Well,” Furstmann demanded impatiently. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

The wave crested. In dealing with the Gods, the Greek myths warn how such moments can seal one’s fate. “Dr. Furstmann, I was told you were an expert who could help us. But instead, with no idea of what’s been going on, you just show up and yell at my intern for something that’s not her fault. Dr. Furstmann, you’re a big disappointment, too.”

Furstmann worked his jaw, but no words came out of his mouth. I turned away to attend to Mr. Perini and console my intern. That evening, Furstmann left a long note in the chart, but he did not appear for rounds the next day. Dr. Benedict returned, and the whole unpleasant episode was soon behind us—or so I thought.

I moved on to my fellowship, and 3 years later, I was made an Instructor with the promise that if I continued to do well, an assistant professor appointment would follow. But my expectations were clouded by an ominous development: Dr. Furstmann had become Chief of Medicine. We had not crossed paths since our bedside encounter, but at his first faculty meeting, I sat in the back of the room and tried to be invisible.

“We shall make important changes which will finally address the problems which have held the Department back for years,” Dr. Furstmann announced imperially, as if these problems were the collective fault of everyone present. “First. Henceforth, we will appoint four Chief Residents, so they can share the administrative, teaching, and clinical duties of our program.”

“Oh for God’s sake, don’t try that again!” a voice called out. Furstmann flinched as if he had been slapped. All heads turned. A distinguished looking elderly gentleman with bushy white eyebrows and a neat bow tie had risen to speak. “They’ve tried that twice already in the past 20 years, and each time it was a colossal disaster—nothing but endless squabbling. Pick one good fellow, and let him run things.”

“Who’s that?” I whispered to a neighbor.

“That’s Dr. Franklin Mackenzie. He’s been at University Hospital since he went to medical school here 50 years ago.

¹The identities of the patient and physicians in this story have been changed. Resemblance to any individuals, living or deceased, is coincidental.

He's an emeritus now, but before he was Chief Resident, Chief of Medicine, Dean, you name it."

"Thank you, Franklin, for that penetrating insight," Furstmann riposted, and then, regaining his composure, continued on with his agenda. "Next. Fewer of our residents are choosing careers as physician-scientists. So, we shall establish a departmental advisory committee to help guide them."

"What a waste of everybody's time! When Telemachus needed help finding Odysseus, did he make an appointment with the lost father committee? No. He called on Mentor."

Furstmann gritted his teeth. "I'm sure we're all tremendously grateful to Dr. Mackenzie for that edifying lesson in Greek mythology," he retorted tersely. "But we will be moving ahead with this."

And so it went at each meeting: Furstmann would expound upon his next grand plan, and like a soothsayer Dr. Mackenzie would foretell why it was destined to fail. I was amazed to see over the course of the year how often Dr. Mackenzie was right.

As the winter holidays approached, I became increasingly anxious. Despite the assurances of my section head that negotiations with the department for my assistant professor appointment were going well, no job offer was forthcoming. I started sending out inquiries to other institutions, but they generated little sustained interest. So, returning home one evening, I was excited to find a letter in my mailbox bearing the seal of the University Provost. Eagerly, I ripped it open and read:

"We have been informed by your Department that you will be terminating your employment with the University at the end of this academic year. We thank you for your service and wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors."

Hot tears stung my eyes. The negotiations had been a sham! There had never been a job! The ultimate insult was the phrasing of the letter, which suggested that leaving the University had been my decision. I passed a joyless holiday and returned to work defeated, with no prospects and little hope for the future.

Soon thereafter, as I was dining alone in the hospital cafeteria, I heard a familiar voice. "Do you mind if I join you?" It was Dr. Mackenzie. He sat down next to me and began to eat his lunch, as if we did so together every day.

"I hear you'll be leaving us."

I nodded.

"Best thing that could ever happen to you."

"How could you say that?"

"Because as long as Furstmann is Chief of Medicine, you'd never have any real future here. Yes, I heard about your little tête-à-tête. Do you have a job lined up yet?" I told him how any initial interest in my inquiries always mysteriously faded away. "Furstmann's black-balling you. You need to find a place where they appreciate your talent but don't give a damn what Furstmann says." Seeing the incredulous look on my face he added, "They do exist, you know. Let me make a few calls for you."

The next week the chief of medicine at a new medical school called to invite me for a recruiting visit – my first. "You're not going to get a good recommendation about me," I cautioned him. "Dr. Mackenzie's word is all I need," he replied. What I had not been told at that first faculty meeting was that Dr. Mackenzie had also trained a generation of leaders in academic medicine.

I was asked to prepare a research talk and Dr. Mackenzie wanted to hear it first. "What's that?" he asked, pointing to the fully loaded slide carousel I brought with me to his office in Emeritus House.

"The slides for my lecture."

"Could I see them for a moment?"

I handed him the carousel and watched in disbelief as he opened the top and dumped all the slides out on top of his desk. "Pick out ten slides and give me your talk."

"I couldn't possibly do that—there'd be too much information missing."

"Then you don't know what you're talking about. Come back when you do."

After a week of hard work I returned, having condensed my talk into just ten slides. But I had no sooner put up my first slide when the screen suddenly went dark. I turned and saw Dr. Mackenzie holding the projector plug in his hand. "Bulb just burned out," he announced, and tossed me a piece of chalk. "Pull up the screen and use this." And for the next tortured hour I sweated through my presentation as Dr. Mackenzie peppered me with questions, comments, and suggestions. "Now you're ready," he declared, finally. At my recruiting visit my talk was well received, and within a month I had a job.

The week before I left town, Dr. Mackenzie invited me to his home to celebrate. "How did you know I needed help?" I asked after dinner over a glass of fine single malt. "Oh, I've had to keep an eye on Furstmann for a

long time.” He paused and took a sip of his scotch. “Never could teach him any humility. But I have every expectation that you’ll turn out much better,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. At the front door he shook my hand. “Now go and do well. And send me a copy of the first paper from your new lab.” I recall him often that way—waving goodbye with the porch light shining on his silver hair.

For the crime of offending Poseidon, Odysseus was condemned to wander lost forever. But through the intervention of Athena, in the guise of Mentor, he was guided home. At the age of 87, Dr. Franklin Mackenzie died in his sleep at his summer cottage, after a day of fly fishing. His most famous protégé memorialized his life in a moving editorial, writing: “All of us who were fortunate enough to

have been graced by the wisdom of this great man have carried a part of him inside themselves ever since.”

And so, too, it has been for me. For I believe that my fortuitous lunch with Dr. Mackenzie was not a chance encounter—that he had been watching over me like a guardian angel. Dr. Mackenzie had understood what I could become, and had championed me in a time of grave doubt and professional peril. I have endeavored since to do no less for those who follow in our footsteps.

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