Fiction | *Michael H. Brooke, MD, FAAN*

Human errors

The light was unusual. The old man had noticed it first thing in the morning as he awoke. It came from below and brightened the ceiling as it always did following a snowfall. He got up, made his cup of tea, carried it to the front room, and stepped over to the big picture window out of curiosity. He would guess about 5 centimeters had fallen during the night. The road outside climbed up the hill and enough snow had fallen to soften the curbs and cover the ice that lay underneath. March in the Rockies, what did one expect, palm trees? As he watched, a car turned the corner at the top of the hill. Halfway down, it was going a mite too fast and the brake lights flickered on. Predictably, the car began a gentle balletic turn, a pirouette in slow motion. He thought he could almost hear an accompanying fragment of Strauss. As the back of the car turned past him, he recognized a rental car license plate. The ballet ended abruptly as the car came to rest backwards in the snow bank beneath the window. The driver's door opened and a man got out dressed in a sports coat with a prominent check and light blue slacks. He looked at the front of the car disapprovingly and kicked it. He limped back inside the car and started the engine, putting it in gear and giving it full throttle. The back wheels spun happily around, digging the car deeper into the snow. The old man smiled. The rental company was going to have one unhappy customer complaining how the no-good car got him stuck in the snow and what were they going to do about it. He could hear the complaining whine of the tires as the hapless tourist took out his frustration on the accelerator pedal. The old man had lived in the town for some years now and had readily adopted the attitude of amused condescension that most of the townspeople expressed toward the "outsiders." He frowned suddenly as he remembered a time when he, too, had been imprudent in negotiating an icy hill and had ended up on the end of a towrope, courtesy of a passing Samaritan in a four-wheel drive.

It wasn't the only time he had been in trouble on the road. He had been an overly aggressive driver in his day. It had always seemed important to get from A to B as quickly as possible. Nowadays, getting to B at all seemed doubtful and probably irrelevant. Besides, he found A very comfortable. A series of near misses and a couple of fender benders played in his mind like old silent movies. One instance in particular flickered into his consciousness. He might have

forgotten about it except that it was a prelude to a day he still thought about. He looked, unseeing, at the icicles festooned from the eaves of the house across the street. His mind started the fresh reel of film in the glorious Technicolor of times past.

It was a day many years ago, and he had been driving to work in his usual haste. He had cut off a car as he pulled sharply onto the exit ramp. The other car swerved and went up onto the grassy edge. It would have been bad enough had it been a stranger, but he recognized the driver as one of his colleagues. He was certainly recognized in turn, which added a further layer of guilt, however illogical. It made his toes curl with embarrassment when he thought how close he had come to causing a disaster. He had been thinking about it on his way down to the outpatient clinic, and it was still bothering him as he walked into the room to see the young boy who was his first patient that morning. Giles was a boy of 9 or 10 years. He sat on the chair rocking slightly from side to side. His hands were tightly clasped across his chest. His face was a long oval and his mouth hung open, the upper lip triangular like a pink arrowhead, pointing at his nose. He drooled slightly. His long-lashed eyelids drooped softly over his eyes, and above them a high forehead was topped by stringy brown hair. The boy waited patiently, as if his role were merely to be there, regardless of what happened around him, no matter how unusual, how bizarre. I am, therefore I sit. His mother was in charge. He had no doubt of that, nor did she. "Now, Doctor, we have to do something about my son's grades!" He was still thinking about the near accident and murmured perfunctorily as she continued. "The school gave him a C in English and it is just not fair because he really tries." He looked up from his notes and suggested, as diplomatically as he could, that maybe the school knew best. This was unwise. Mother flinched slightly and her stare hardened. "The teachers don't know how to handle Giles in a sympathetic manner. It's not really their fault; many of them have no training in this area. Already, they have held him back for a year. He is actually quite bright. He knows his colors and numbers and has a remarkable memory. Why, he can tell you all of the family's birth dates. They just need to make allowances for the fact that his speech is a little difficult to understand." The old man had tried to persuade her that a medical opinion was not something schools

always took into account when assigning grades. In fact, he suspected that the school was being fairly lenient in awarding a C, but she would have none of it. "Doctor, my husband is a very prominent politician with a good deal of influence around this city and the university. He is most concerned about his son's welfare. I am sure you would want to talk to the teachers as part of your overall management of the case." Sighing, he recognized a battle lost and promised to talk to the school. He went over to the boy and unclasped the child's delicate hands to evaluate their strength. The slender fingers closed round his own in a lingering grasp. The old man extricated his hand with difficulty. "Giles, tell the doctor what color his tie is," said the mother. Giles said something that could have been either "blue" or "poo." The old man recognized it as a fair comment. He had never been very fond of the tie anyway. After this, the mother displayed no further interest in the examination and, truth to tell, neither did the old man.

It was two days before he called the school and talked to the teacher, a Ms. Fletcher. "Ms. Fletcher, I do apologize for bothering you, but Giles' mother seems to think that Giles has been treated unfairly at the school and I wonder if you could tell me a bit about him." Over the phone came the sound of an exhalation of breath long held.

"What would you like to know?"

"I suppose he has a problem paying attention in class and with the subject matter."

"You suppose correctly. None of us has any idea whether he is taking in any of the subject matter or not. Certainly, there is little evidence of it from anything we can tell."

Her tone was polite, but she was wary. She would be thinking that his call was another example of the medical profession presuming it knew more about the education of their students than did the educators. She didn't want to have to explain to the principal why she had been rude, but neither was she going to be browbeaten by some know-it-all with a bunch of letters after his name. He decided to be as conciliatory and sympathetic as he could.

"It must be terrible to have people call you all the time who know nothing about classrooms or curriculum, but I wondered why Giles' mother is so insistent on having me talk to you. She seems to think the C is an unfair grade."

The teacher's voice relaxed a couple of notches. "She is right about one thing. Giles should never have been given a C. He should have failed the grade outright. That was my recommendation, but Giles' father seems to have a lot of political influence and the principal was anxious to do what she could for Giles so he got a C."

"I completely understand that, Ms. Fletcher, and I really have nothing to add, except that the reason for his learning problems lies with his illness."

"All of us realize that, Doctor. Nevertheless, he does have a problem and we are having a hard time dealing with it."

All of this happened a long time ago, long before the days of special classes and individual educational plans. He would probably have forgotten all about it except for the curious sequel. He had heard no more from Giles or the mother and had assumed that, somehow, the problem had been dealt with. It was later the next autumn that he stopped by the mailbox to pick up his mail. There was the ever-present assortment of junk admixed with a few genuine letters. He wasn't going to buy a new car; he didn't want to share time with anyone and had no interest in buying land, no matter how close to a lake. Why people sent him these things, he couldn't imagine. Then a flyer slipped from his hand and spiraled to the ground. It was of the standard "Vote for —" variety. They were in the middle of an election campaign and the reason that he picked it up again was that he disapproved of this type of litter even more than the colored sheaves of grocery coupons or the real estate brochures. He was crumpling it up when he stopped short. The name, so prominently displayed, was unusual. He recognized it to be the same as Giles'. The face, only slightly less prominent than the name, belonged to the mayoral candidate. The family resemblance was unmistakable. The head was balanced on a slender neck. The face was long, even cadaverous, with hollowed temples and sharply defined jaw. The hooded eyes stared sleepily from the page. The high forehead and the receding hairline could have been from a textbook. Underneath was written "Good Judgment: Good Planning: Good Government. Vote for —."

How odd, he thought. It should have been the mother.

Standing by the window, he roused himself from his reverie of times past. The car was still there, a wheel spinning futilely. His hip wasn't too bad today. He went for his coat and pulled a burlap sack and a snow shovel out of the closet. The chill hit him as he opened the door and, for a moment, he wondered whether he was doing the wise thing. Then he climbed slowly down the steps to the road, congratulating himself on being such a Good Samaritan. He didn't miss the past, the days when the hours went by like telegraph poles on a train ride, the days when the patients' problems far outnumbered his solutions. He no longer experienced the paranoia, quite common among his colleagues, engendered by that Golden Rule of Academia: "Do unto others before they do unto you." He was quite happy that the only thing he had to do today was to dig a tourist out of a snow bank. He might even offer him a cup of tea. Well, that was probably going a bit too far!

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Michael H. Brooke

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