

By Dr Tan Yixuan



The Devil Wears Scrubs – A Serious Parody

FOREWORD

To fully enjoy the story, you should:

1. Have watched *The Devil Wears Prada*;
2. Have a reasonable knowledge of Hokkien and
3. Be in the same boat as myself, that is, junior surgical trainee.

I watched *The Devil Wears Prada* with some girlfriends: an accountant and a lawyer. Over dinner, we were, er, swapping stories of our various bosses. On the way home, I was thinking of all the different consultants I have worked for over the years. I realised that in all our bosses, certain traits are always present – in summary, an expectation of perfection.

Do all bosses go through the same training course? Or is it the personality type? Will I ever find out? Or will I have to learn how to farm after this?

Read, and have a laugh. With me, at me, whatever. If you are my boss, please be merciful. I am the sole breadwinner in my family of six. Well, I guess I could always return to our hereditary plot of land in China to eke out a living from the good earth. Now, is the potato a stem or a root?

“So, Dr Buay Zai See, why did you apply for the Surgical Traineeship?”

“Well, I have always liked working with my hands, and I hope to do that as a career.”

“*Hmph*. Carpenters and butchers work with their hands, farmers too.”

An uncomfortable silence. One of the other interviewers tried to make a joke of it but failed miserably.

“Very well. Thank you for your time, we will inform you of the outcome of the interview in a few weeks.”

I walked out of the room dejectedly. What a trial! Those people were just so keen on putting me down! Everything I said prompted a sarcastic comment. Was it just me or did every interviewee get the same treatment? Whatever it was, I was convinced I would never get my traineeship.

To my amazement, I got the traineeship, and

more importantly, I was accepted into Professor Tua Tao Kay’s unit. A million doctors would kill to get the job. I did not try that hard, but I am sure I must have gotten it because I graduated top of my class. I was pretty excited about it, and figured I should do well. After a year of training with Professor Tua, any surgical unit in the world would take me in for advanced training.

I turned up for work, all ready to impress him with my razor-sharp knowledge of anatomy and incisive judgement.

“Hi Prof, I am ...”

“Oh, can you bring a bedpan for the patient in Bed Two?”

“*Er* ... Prof, I am not the staff nurse, I am your new MO.”

“I know. And I expect my MOs to do what I tell them to.”

Swallowing my pride, “Yes, Prof.”

Dr Tan is a struggling junior surgical trainee who is as foolish and reckless as Dr Buay Zai See, but unfortunately unlike him, she is far from being at the top of the class – it is more like near the bottom. She cannot afford Prada, as she has to support the family. All she has are magazine clippings of Prada products. She hopes to save enough to buy a Prada keychain one day.

“Oh and after that, I want you to go run my clinic.”

“But I am in OT later!”

Cool stare.

Grinding my teeth, “Yes, Prof.”

Clinic was hell. The patients were all angry that I was not Professor Tua (Duh!), and I had trouble reading his chicken scratching in the case sheets, and some of the patients had quite complicated conditions. After the session, it did not help that the other MOs were gushing about all the exciting operations they saw in the theatre, and what a good teacher Professor was.

There was a senior MO in my team, Kah Kia. He had already done five surgical postings before me, and passed the MRCS. He was trying hard to get an AST post with Professor Tua. His advice to me was, “Just do what Prof Tua wants, and everything will be fine. Do not ask, do not think. Just do it. I have been doing his bidding for years and I am just waiting for him to confirm my position in the next selection. In fact, he is going to take me on an overseas conference to France end of this year to present the data for the results for our new surgical technique! This is my chance to make myself known to the Higher Echelons!”

I was rather sceptical, “Not think?” But seeing how senior he was, I tried to follow his advice.

During grand ward rounds, he taught me how to watch Professor’s expression to know how to direct the discussion.

“See, one nod means good, two nods mean very good, a smile means excellent. But he hardly smiles. The last smile was in 1995 when Mr Damme Clavaer was here as senior registrar. When Professor Tua is angry, he does not shout or scream, just a twitch of the eyebrows. If you see that, better retract your statement.”

I did not know whether to be amused or scared witless. Until I started getting twitches thrown my way.

Over the following weeks, things happened. A patient collapsed on my call, and I was blamed for not attending to him early enough when the house officer did not even call me and it was the staff nurse who did, AFTER several failed attempts at intubation. During mortality round – *twitch*.

One of the house officers tried to pull out a drain without removing the anchoring stitch. Again I was blamed.

When Professor had to answer the complaint letter – *twitch*.

One of Professor’s patients had her operation postponed because she forgot to fast, and the nurses and house officer forgot to remind her. In

the induction room – *twitch*.

At the end of the month, all Professor said to me was, “Is it too much to ask for a competent MO who knows his work?”

“Prof! I was not involved in these cases. I do not think you should be blaming me!”

“You are in my team. That makes it your business to know. I used to take in only advanced trainees because they should know their work and they are responsible. Sometimes I am disappointed. But you, you are the most disappointing of the lot. Young, ignorant AND stubborn. I cannot teach you. Go.”

Filled with an overwhelming sense of injustice, I was ready to demand a transfer. Letter in hand, I stomped into the office. Linda, the department secretary was surprised.

“Why? He thinks very highly of you!”

“Oh right. He treats me worse than dirt. I am trying very hard to do my work, all I am asking for is a little appreciation!”

“Hey, I have to tell you, you are going about this the wrong way. Just because the department took you in does not mean you were the best. There are a million people out there who would die to have this job, and here you are, prancing around as if it is your right. Well, you can walk out right now, and I can EASILY find someone else to fill your shoes. Someone more experienced, someone more willing, and someone more humble.

Do you know you are the youngest one to be accepted since the unit was started? Professor chose you not because you got good grades, but because he thought he saw something of himself in you, a love for surgery and the drive, the ambition to succeed, so much so that you would go through any hardship to BE a surgeon. It is barely one month into your rotation and you want to quit? Fine, it is your choice. Think about it.”

I was stunned. I could never have guessed Professor had any good impression of me, much less “he saw something of himself” in me.

I took back my letter.

Over the following weeks, I showed more interest in my work, helping to supervise my juniors and assisting my fellow colleagues, rather than focusing only on my job and yapping about how unfair everything was. And for the first time, Professor actually nodded at me in approval.

Three months into the posting, Professor Tua told me, “There is a hernia repair tomorrow. My private patient. But I have to give a talk. Can you do the case for me? Straightforward.”

“Er ... but I am supposed to be covering the day surgery cases, and Kah Kia will be with you.”

“What did I tell you when we first started?”

◀ Page 35 – *The Devil Wear Scrubs – A Serious Parody*

“Er ... Yes Prof.”

“Good. Tell Kah Kia to cover day surgery.”

When I told Kah Kia, he was furious.

“You are only a first year trainee, why is Prof letting you do his case? You should be doing lumps and bumps first!”

“I am sorry Kah Kia, it is not my idea. I cannot help it.”

“Sure. Whatever. I thought we were friends. Go on, do your stupid hernia.”

Six months into the posting, my girlfriend broke up with me. She was upset that I kept talking about Professor Tua whenever we met. The killing blow came when I forgot her birthday because I was called back to EOT to assist Professor Tua. At that point, I did not care. All I wanted was to remain in Professor’s good books, and be allowed to continue to operate with him.

Nine months into the posting, Professor called me into his office for a chat. I was filled with dread. I had already done my best, WHAT is he going to find fault with now?

“You have been with us for some months. I am glad to see you have made some improvement in your work attitude.”

“Er ... Thanks Prof.”

“Good. Now, look through these data, I want you to present this at next week’s conference in France.”

“But this is Kah Kia’s work! He spent the whole year on this. He has not been sleeping and eating, learning SPSS and data analysis, preparing powerpoint slides and posters just so he can go with you to France!”

“Unfortunately, my assistant must be the best and most capable one in the cohort. Kah Kia, sadly, no longer holds that role.”

“But Prof, that is not a nice thing to do. It is... I do not think it is right.”

“You have already done it when you stole the hernia case from Kah Kia all those months ago. To be a top surgeon, there are times when you have to let these things go: friendship and family. I will expect you to be familiar with the information and lit-search by Friday. Meet me at the airport directly.”

“Yes Prof.”

As I stepped out, I noticed only how cold and lonely his office was. Pictures covered every surface. Pictures of him and his colleagues and juniors. Pictures of him and visitors. Textbooks. Publications. Administrative work. It suddenly crossed my mind that I had no idea if Professor had children, or even if he were married. I shuddered, telling myself it was only the cold. That night, I called my ex-girlfriend.

Friday came and went. My workphone rang till the battery went flat, and was thrown into the water off Palawan Beach. I was playing beach volleyball with my girlfriend. (She kindly took me back after I begged shamelessly.) I hope that Kah Kia enjoyed the trip. I never told him about the talk that Professor had with me.

I did not return to the unit, instead taking two months’ no-pay leave.

During that period, I had been doing locum at the emergency department, and some *lobangs* other classmates recommended. I was thinking of proposing to my girlfriend.

As for becoming the top surgeon, well, I wish Kah Kia all the best.

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because you got good grades,
but because he thought he saw
something of himself in you, a
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AFTERWORD:

Recently, I applied for an MO position at another hospital. The HOD there, Mr Moe Ree Lax told me, “Impressive. You were in Tua Tao Kay’s team. He is four years my senior. I remember doing 5 am rounds with him when I was his HO. It was fun when one is young. Cannot imagine doing it now! Even waking up for a 7 am tee-off is tough, ahahaha! I notice from your CV that you did not quite complete your rotation. Any reason?”

“Personal, Sir. I am planning to get married next month.”

“Good for you, young man! There is more to life than work, *eh?* Well, I called TK’s secretary about you, and to my surprise, he emailed me back that same afternoon, writing about what an utter disappointment you were – and how if I should take you in, then he would hate me for stealing his best protégé.

Welcome to the team.” ■