

# The Remarkably Cool Professor | Purple Clover

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by Amy Paturel | Friday, February 28, 2014

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"I haven't had a period in two years," I blurted out.

I felt my cheeks flush. Suddenly I was hot. Really hot. I ditched my sweatshirt and began spouting off facts, eyes downcast.

"Thick, dark hairs have been cropping up on my belly, neck and face. According to my lab tests, my body is pumping out more androgens than a champion body builder's. And, well, I'm afraid something is really wrong ..."

Then, finally looking up at him, "Do you know a good endocrinologist?"

What might be standard operating procedure in a gynecologist's office happened in an empty lecture hall. After the first course of the semester. With a remarkably cool professor who was also my boss.

I was one semester shy of completing a dual masters degree in nutrition and public health and Mark handpicked me to be his teacher's assistant. My job: to ensure students understood basic epidemiology (the study of patterns, causes and effects of health-related states).

But for the most part, the students didn't need me. Mark was always engaging. His lectures felt more like 90-minute stand-up routines than discourses on health sciences. I just didn't realize I would become material for his lectures and he an unsuspecting lifeline.

With his black-washed jeans and nondescript sweatshirts, Mark looked more like a student than teacher. His graying buzz cut and black spectacles were the only outward signs of the 10- or 15-year age gap between us. Well, that and he had a wife, four children and a house in the suburbs.

"I'll get you some names. Have you noticed any aggression? What about your sex drive? Is it higher than usual?" he asked, seemingly unfazed by a 23-year-old sharing such intimate details.

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Beet red, I responded, "I wouldn't really know since I haven't ..."

He nodded and moved on. In 10 minutes, Mark uncovered my deepest secrets. While he may not seem like an ideal confidant, he was one of the few people I knew in Boston who was not only kind-hearted, but also had an uncanny knowledge of rare diseases. Plus, he had solid connections in medical circles.

When I left the lecture hall, I felt exposed, but safe. By the time we met in class the following week, Mark had reviewed the medical literature and had a scientifically sound theory—something my doctors had, as yet, failed to offer.

"Most likely, you have an adrenal tumor and that's why your hormone levels are out of whack. Hey, and since DHEA is often called the 'Fountain of Youth hormone,' you may even tack a few extra years onto your life," he quipped, evoking the natural sarcastic banter between us.

He explained that the adrenal glands are little hormone-producing factories that sit atop the kidneys and that, if I had a tumor, removing it should resolve everything from my missed periods to the five o'clock shadow covering my legs.

In the ensuing weeks, I endured CT scans, blood draws and seemingly endless poking and prodding. The puncture wounds on my arms made me look like a drug addict. And, since I was 3,000 miles away from my California home—before the rise of cell phones—I had no support system in the waiting room. So, I called Mark.

He walked me through every medical hurdle, presenting information matter-of-factly but in terms I could understand. And his raw, often humorous way of translating my biological quirks served as a life preserver when I felt like I was sinking.

After weeks of testing, doctors proved Mark's theory. I had a melon-sized tumor attached to my right adrenal gland. It was displacing my liver and kidneys and making its way into my lungs. Surgery was the only option.

I wasn't concerned about dying, my 23-year-old sense of immortality still firmly intact. Instead, I worried the tumor would define me and somehow brand me as different and inept. So I sugarcoated the situation with family and friends.

If I painted a picture that everything was fine, maybe it would be, I hoped.

Mark didn't buy it. Instead of asking if I needed support, he showed up, carrying me in ways my family couldn't—both because of the miles between us and because they had zero health care experience.

Two weeks before my surgery, he stopped his class mid-lecture and asked me to take over. At first, I stuttered, but before long, something switched. I got this! Instead of feeling weak, insecure and powerless, as I did every day I navigated my medical crisis, I felt confident, respected and empowered.

Soon, I began to feel the same way about my surgery and recovery. It was like Mark had his finger on my pulse. He knew how to shift my mental game in positive ways. And though my medical issues forced me to step down from my role as his TA, Mark shouldered the extra burden without complaint—and still made time for me.

After the surgery, he hand-delivered pictures his kids had drawn for his "sick TA" and sat beside my hospital bed inquiring about my plans for the future.

"You'll see. In a few months, you will be doing a pas de deux with your fiancé," he promised. While I had no idea who this fiancé might be, his vision of a normal future fueled my recovery.

Four months later, the theme to "Rocky" blared through loud speakers as I walked into a packed ballroom. Mark trailed in a few steps behind, having rerouted a business trip to attend the surprise graduation party my parents planned for me in California.

My father shook Mark's hand and gave him the signature man hug, a quick embrace with a pat on the back. "Thank you for carrying my daughter," he said, while I twirled around the dance floor.

Now, as a wife and mom of three children, I have the ordinary life Mark promised. And instead of emerging from my health scare with much rebuilding to do or merely happy to be alive, I gained newfound optimism about my own potential. Most importantly, I know my ability to dance—not just that night but throughout my life—is directly related to people who mysteriously drop into my life at just the right time.