



The SPEISENSTEIN Files

4. Strains to Relate

Witherington is sorting out papers strewn over the top of the desk. He puts on his half-rims, runs his finger down the top sheet of the pile he has selected, takes off his wrist watch, lays it on the desk and pulls over the microphone.

“Welcome to this session on the Toadfish Model and its Significance for Clinical Cardiology.”

We are sitting in a small class-room on tubular steel chairs. A central gangway allows projection of slides onto an undersized screen a yard away from Witherington’s left shoulder. At the moment there are twelve of us and, since there will be eight papers, it seems unlikely that the great world of clinical cardiology will derive much benefit from what we are about to hear. Nevertheless, for the scientific specialist, this is an important session; and a cursory glance round the room reveals some of the greatest names in the field: Audley from the UK and my old friend Speisenstein, for example.

“I would like to remind all speakers to adhere strictly to their allotted time. A red light will flash one minute before the end, and a bell will ring when time is up.”

He looks aggressively round the audience, his glance resting on one member who is rather ostentatiously reading the newspaper.

“Our first paper is by FR Speisenstein and J Smith...”

I make a note to inquire what the F stands for; the R might also be interesting. I realize how little I know of the private life of the man who is stumbling up to the podium where a girl is tangling a microphone cord round his neck.

“...the ionic transport microenvironment of the isolated perfused electronically substimulated paraganglionic Fleischer organ of the South American Toadfish maintained at sea water temperature: Importance and implications for the clinical cardiologist. The paper is presented

by Dr Speisenstein.”

Spicy picks up the laser pointer, fumbles with the switch, helped by the girl, and finally turns it on with uncanny precision directly into Witherington’s left eye.

“Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is well established that the Toadfish...”

Ten days before, I had dropped in at the Marine Biology Lab to pass time of day with Speisenstein. From behind a barrier reef of scattered documents, the angelfish face of a secretary shouted that Dr Speisenstein was in the seminar room, and waved a fin vaguely in a direction that I knew to be wrong.

The seminar room was in darkness; but, in a far corner, I could see Speisenstein and his young graduate student Joe huddled over a dimly lit table. I stumbled over a couple of chairs.

“Hi Spicy. Joe.”

“Yeah. You came at the right time,” said Speisenstein. “We need a critical audience. I’m going over this paper for the ISRH meeting.” (I have given up correcting him on the order of the initials of the Society.) “Just put these in the projector, Joe, and we’ll get moving.”

Joe picked up a stack of some forty slides and started to load the projector.

“Spice,” I said. “You’re not going to use all these?”

“There’s a lotta data there.”

“But you only have ten minutes.”

“Yeah, but... You know who’s in the chair?”

“It’ll be Witherington. It always is.”

“Witherington...”

Witherington has pressed a button on his desk and turned ostentatiously toward the audience. Speisenstein’s voice sounds on with all the delicate modulation of a hair-drier.

“...importance to clinical cardiology of this model is underlined by our second series of experiments...”

His face is flashing red in the darkness. The spot of the laser pointer is running riot in a bright red Jackson Pollock tangle over a diazo slide. Any second now and the dreaded bell...

There has been a polite round of applause.

“We have a few seconds left for questions,” says the Chairman. Apart from the furtive rustle of the newspaper there is silence. “Well, if I might start the ball rolling, can you tell us the geographic source of your toadfishes?”

“Ah! Well. That is... Joe, do you recall if these were Bolivian or Venezuelan?”

“Venezuelan,” shouts Joe from the back.

“The point is,” continues Witherington, “they were South American. I wonder if you would care to comment on the paper by Spielsudski and Dubois which came out in the Annals last week in which they found that, in the North American toadfish, cationic amphiphiles did not have the effect on transmembrane signaling you have just described.”

Speisenstein takes off his spectacles. “That’s a very interesting point,” he mutters. “Very interesting. But, of course, it doesn’t affect our main hypothesis.”

“I’m not so sure,” says Witherington. “It seems to me that it completely undermines the universality of the phenomenon.”

Speisenstein’s face is rapidly transforming into that of the toadfish in aggressive display. But at this moment all eyes are turned to Audley’s arm which has shot up from the front row and is waving from side to side in an urgent attempt to get the Chairman’s attention.

“Well, if there are no other questions,” says the Chairman, “I thank Dr Speisenstein for his contribution and ask the next speaker...”

The driver of the shuttle bus back to our hotel is in no hurry. As I sit looking out of a grimy window onto a wasteland of convention center concrete I am joined by Audley and, while we are chatting about channel analyzers, in come Speisenstein and Joe.

“Good show, Spicy,” says Audley. “Nice piece of work.”

“Glad you think so,” mumbles Speisenstein. “Not everybody seemed to.”

“You know, Witherington has got it completely wrong. I tried to say so but couldn’t get his attention. You see, the water temperature could be entirely different.”

“Holy shit! You sure of this?”

“Not absolutely certain. Could be significant, though, if you think of it.”

“Maybe,” says Speisenstein. “Maybe. What you think, Joe?”

Given permission, Joe now expresses an opinion. “They used a water temperature of ten degrees. Not only that, their amphiphile concentration was two orders lower than ours if you relate it to protein. And I don’t think their fish were in good shape actually.”

Speisenstein explodes. “You schmegeggy!”

“Sir?”

“You knew the answer, and didn’t say!”

“I couldn’t, Sir”

“How come, you couldn’t?”

“Well, the data weren’t actually published in the paper.”

“Then how in the hell you knew about it?”

“One of the authors is a kinda friend. That’s how I know. But, like it’s confidential. I kinda felt a loyalty.”

“Loyalty my ass-hole! So you know this Spielsudski guy?”

“No. The other one, Dubois, Sir. Co-author on the paper.”

“Dubois. Now where in the hell’ve I come across that name before?”

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