



The SPEISENSTEIN Files

8. *Apply with Care*

The sun shines through my office window. From outside comes the sound of tennis. Inside is silence as I pore over a desk strewn with documents.

At this critical moment the door bursts open and in crashes Speisenstein. “Hey! Howya doin!”

“Why don’t you get lost, Spicy.”

“So what’s the big problem?”

“I got this major major grant application. You know how it is.”

“You said it! Lemme have a look.” He takes the document in his hands and screws his eyes up and nods and hums. “Mmm... Look, you’ll kill me for saying this. But you’ve not a hope in hell of getting this shit through. It needs a major, but I mean *major*, re-writing.”

“So what don’t you like about it?”

“Ask me what I *do* like. Look, for starters, its too short. Needs dressing out. And then there’s no hypothesis. Where’s the hypothesis? These days you’re nowhere if you not got a hypothesis.”

“I haven’t got one. I just wanted to see what happens if I sub-stimulate the Fleischer paraganglion. I don’t think I’ve ever had a hypothesis in my life. That’s not to say one won’t come along some day. After all, Darwin didn’t start with a hypothesis; he just collected shells and things for the hell of it.”

“Don’t you give me none of that Darwin shit. You gotta have a hypothesis. Listen to this. ‘We hypothecate that Fleischer organ paraganglionic element sub-stimulation under catecholamine-induced semidepolarization will, at least minimally, affect the transplasmalemmal halide flux and/or transmembrane afterpotentials.’ Something like that.”

“Just a second and I’ll ask Mabel to come in and get that down.”

When I come back with my secretary I find Speisenstein sprawling in my chair. “Just take this down, Mabel,” he says and makes sure she has it correctly. “Now, you just don’t talk about a ‘preparation’ or an ‘experiment’ these days. It has to be a *model*. See what I mean? So you should say, ‘the Fleischer organ paraganglionic element substimulation model’; or the ‘FOPES model’, that would be even better. See what I mean? Make it sound kinda professional. These are small things; but, believe me, they make the world a difference.”

“Take your ‘increase in ionic flux,’ for instance. You just don’t say that sort of thing these days. Make it ‘up-regulation.’ See what I mean? Sounds as though you’re with it.”

Mabel is getting it all down in shorthand.

“Then there’s this other thing,” he continues. “You’ve absolutely none of the molecular biology key words. Let’s get in something about gene expression or transgenic animals, that kind of thing. It needs it. Hell! You’re out of the last century.”

“Well, it’s been good seeing you, K.I. I hope you’ll be at the Section Meeting in June.”

“Sure. Sure.” Witherington is taking a small diary out of an inner pocket. His life is, I understand, overcrowded with important appointments. “Let me see. When exactly is the Meeting?”

“Twenty fifth and twenty sixth.”

He purses his lips. “Gee, I can’t. I wish I could, but I have to be in Miami on those days.”

“You can’t get out of it?”

“No way. I wish I could. I’ve promised to chair the Research Grants Committee of some Florida funding organization down there.” He shakes his head. “Gee, I would do a lot to get out of that.”

“I bet. There’s a lot of homework for you there.”

“You said it. There ought to be some law restricting the verbosity of research grant applicants. You know how it is. They’re all pursuing some stupid hypothesis. Everybody’s got a model of something instead of the real thing. Everything’s up-regulated or down-regulated. And all that garbage pseudo-molecular talk. That’s two whole days of reading shit. Only once in a while do you get some honest guy who says what he wants to do in plain English. I’d take that boy any time.”

“When does that grant application have to be in, Mabel?”

“Oh, we’ve plenty of time. I think June first’s the dead line.”

“June first? Do you happen to know when we know the results?”

“Let me see. The Committee meets on the twenty fifth, I think. So we should hear a day or two later.”

“June the twenty fifth. I see.” I am distracted by the black silhouette of a frigate bird wheeling high over the campus. “By the way, I think we’ll go back to the original draft. Just put that version of Dr Speisenstein’s on hold.”

“... your gratefully received grant submission. This has now carefully been considered by the Research Grants Committee Subsection and I have to regretfully inform you that it has numerically failed to reach the minimally acceptable score rating for supportive recommendation to the Foundation Board...

... the additionally enclosed extraction of the referee statement which hopefully you may find helpful...

... complete absence of any hypothesis...theoretically unsophisticated...difficult to be certain what relevant application this scenario might have to clinical situations...needs a defined model...lack of appropriate scientific terminology suggests inexperience...could well be solved by the use of transgenic models...”

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“Afraid so, Spicy. No luck this time.”

“Tough bananas. We got the presentation the best possible, didn’t we. Tough bananas.”

“Thanks for all your help, all the same.”

“Gee, I’m really sorry. You can’t fool them all the time. I guess. You can dress up the frosting but the cake underneath has gotta be good. I tell you, that cake has gotta be *real* fruity these days.”

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