



The SPEISENSTEIN Files

10. Crime Time News

The editorial staff of the news room of the ICU Television Corporation is engaged in its monthly review meeting. It is a time for serious professional decisions.

“You’re dead right, Dick,” says the Editor-in-Chief. “We’re getting seriously out of line. International news is going sky high: up from 5% to 8% of viewing time. That’s one hellova sure fire way to make our faithless viewers switch over to the deadly rivals. We need to get crime and violence back up to the normal 78% level. Just to remind the American public what family values is all about. Disaster coverage is holding up, but health care needs a big big boost.”

Encouraged by the accolade Dick leans back in his chair. “You heard about that French station that puts out blue movies on its all-night channel? Calls them its ‘nocturnal emissions.’”

“Yeah. Get lost,” snaps the E-in-C and turns to a brunette daydreaming at a computer table surrounded by a strong aroma of Mitsouko. “Can you do something about the Health Care side, Nancy?”

“That will be my pleasure, “ she beams.

Nancy Gonnella just loves people. Her job of News Reporter for ICU, bringing her into daily contact with so many personalities, is the great passion of her life. By good fortune, her professional training as an aroma therapist provides the technical background necessary for the balanced reporting of Health Care which is her specific responsibility to the public.

Sorting through her filofax, she has come across a note of a certain Chuck Robinson. She smiles as

she remembers the genial truck driver who won thirty million dollars in the Florida State Lottery. 'Chuck the trucker,' hit the headlines. At his TV interview he burst into tears as he spoke of his dad's death from a heart attack, vowing to put five million into research that would lead to the cure of that terrible disease. It had been an outstanding interview with high human impact. ("Tears are always great value," said the E-in-C.) Letters and 'phone calls had poured in from a public intent on advising Mr Robinson on the more specific directions his philanthropy should take. Now would be a good time for a follow-up call, she thinks as she picks up the 'phone.

"Hi, Doctor Speisenstein. I'm Nancy Gonnella. Sorry I'm late. I came straight from step aerobics and that's so very important to me?"

She has a way of lifting her voice at the end of a sentence, turning statements into questions, as though there were always some terminal unenunciated "you know?" or "don't you agree?"

"This is my camera man, Steve?"

"Good of you to come," says Speisenstein, and waves a Misouko-contaminated hand to an armchair.

"You see, Chuck and I are old friends," she lies. "And, when he told me about your fascinating research, I just had to meet you? We at ICU are very very aware of our responsibilities to the American public over the reporting of Health Care. And, when we have the opportunity to meet a great Health Scientist actually in the flesh -- Wow! We move in there!"

"Sure," mutters Speisenstein. "So waddy wanna know?"

"Everything," she breathes. "Just everything?"

Then she giggles. "You see. I brought my recorder with me, so I won't miss a golden word? Lets start with a shot of the scientist at his desk. Steve, are you set? Now, Dr Speisenstein, just turn to the camera. Its not every day you're a TV star is it?"

Speisenstein swivels round in his chair to face the camera, the corners of his mouth curving down in a sickly self-deprecating toadfish grin.

"You bet!" he says.

Two hours have passed by. Speisenstein has explained to Ms Gonnella in minute detail the workings of the Fleischer paraganglion of the toadfish, its importance for channel physiology, the need for strict temperature control and sophisticated electronic analysis, the interest of submaximal adrenergic stimulation and the extreme importance of all these phenomena in our understanding of the clinical condition. Steve has taken shots of the toadfish, of Speisenstein with the toadfish, of Stephanie pipetting and of Joe pouring dilute ink from one test tube into another. It has been like a dream for Nancy.

"It has been like a dream" she sighs, half closing her eyes in that Hilary Clinton look. "Now, I sure would be grateful if you could stand just right there in front of that toadfish tank and summarize in a few sentences the nitty gritty of ..."

“Coming up next: Turning ducks into dollars AND -- WAIT FOR IT -- The toadfish brings new hope to heart sufferers. Stay with us, after the break.”

I turn down the sound and pour myself an Old Granddad on the rocks while a hallucinatory sequence of pick-up trucks, deodorants and mutual funds rolls silently across the screen.

“The biggest advances in Medicine can come from the strangest places,” grins the telecaster. “But (can you believe it?) the toadfish has all the answers. Here’s Nancy Gonnella with the story.”

An excited Nancy is speaking against the background of Speistenstein’s laboratory. “For millions of years the ugliest fish in the world has guarded its shy secret deep deep at the bottom of the ocean. Now an American scientist and his brilliant team...”

The camera zooms in successively on the toadfish tank, Stephanie and Joe. And now we see Nancy talking to Speisenstein against a background of moving fish. Speisenstein’s face is as contented as a toadfish after a dish of scallops.

“So, if I might summarize, Dr Speisenstein,” breathes Nancy, “you are telling us to cut back on cholesterol, salt and, of course, sugar, take plenty of aerobic exercise and avoid stressful situations?”

The camera flashes back to Speisenstein who, to anyone knowing the layout of the Marine Biology Lab, is now in some miraculous way translated to the desk in his study.

He swivels round in his chair to face the camera, the corners of his mouth curving down in a sickly self-deprecating toadfish grin.

“You bet!” he says.

“Nancy Gonnella, ICU, Florida.”

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