



The SPEISENSTEIN Files

13. A Peak in Darien

*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific - and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise -
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

John Keats

Speistenstein is spreading the cream cheese lightly over his breakfast bagel as he looks over yesterday's data, the corners of his mouth turned down in resemblance of the fish on which he has based a distinguished scientific career. It has to be admitted that the face of the South American toadfish, even in its most felicitous moments, is not one that in human terms expresses joy. And Speistenstein's glum appearance at this moment is a reflection of the irredeemable gloom that has descended on the laboratory since Stephanie Dubois left. 'Brightness falls from the air.'

"God-awful bagels. Get me some more coffee, Joe. And fetch your tuchus over here. I can't figure out what in the hell you been doing."

Joe slouches over with the Kona, refills the boss's mug and perches on the stool beside him.

"Guess I goofed," he apologizes. "These results are just crazy."

“You did everything the usual way, for God’s sake?”

“You know something? I’m not sure, I had a long call from Miami and it’s just possible, you know, I left the preincubation too long.”

“That shouldn’t make any difference at this stage.”

“Gee I’m not sure. Stephanie was always telling me to keep the preincubation short. I never knew why.”

“Yeah, what the hell.”

“Guess I’ll just scrub those results and repeat the study properly.”

“Hell you will! You just go right back to your bench and do it again the way you think you did it yesterday.”

And that’s how they made the GREAT DISCOVERY.

Speisenstein’s hands are trembling. “Christ almighty. They’re the same as yesterday.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I can see now that’s what I did wrong.”

“You crazy or something? Don’t you see? You changed the whole system just by prolonging the incubation. Could be you are destroying some vital modulator. You just go right back and do it again.”

“What about: ‘Ion transport modulation in the toadfish’?”

“Stupid!” shouts Speistenstein. “You gotta make sure they see the importance of it. Let me see. Try this:

‘Todonin: evidence for a new heat-labile regulatory protein modulating adrenergic control of ion transport in the substimulated Fleischer paraganglion of the South American toadfish. Importance of limited preincubation’.”

Joe takes time writing it down.

“You know,” he says, “I’d kinda like to put Stephanie’s name on it. Seems wrong not to.”

“Do whatever. But get it off to Audley quick quick.”

Audley is on the line to Speistenstein.

“Yes, of course. I agree, Spicy. It is an important paper. A very important paper.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that we have received an almost identical study from another lab. Did you know about it?”

“Sons of bitches! They got inside info. Who in the hell are they?”

“That’s just the problem. The names of two of the authors appear in both papers. But didn’t you know? Smith and Dubois?”

“OK Joe. I accept your explanation. She went and made the same mistake as you did but had the intelligence to see what it meant. God knows why she put your name on the paper. I thought she’d well and truly dumped you. But God knows why you put hers on yours, come to that.”

“So Dr Audley wants us to combine the two?”

“That’s about it. You’d better get up there and sort it out. But don’t hang around. You got two weeks. That’s all you need.”

“Gee, it won’t be easy. We weren’t in touch all this time. But I guess I got to.”

“I said two weeks, not a whole month. What the hell were you doing up there?”

“Gee I’m sorry, Dr Speisenstein. But things took a bit of sorting out.”

“I bet. You put the names alphabetically like I said?”

“Yeah... in a sort of a way.”

“What’s that mean? ‘In a sort of a way’. Let me see:
‘J Smith, S. Smith, FR Speisenstein and KI Witherington’.
What in the hell is going on here?”

THE END

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