

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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An invitation for a seminar - a conspiracy theory

I am a little groggy. Perhaps it is the time change, or the hotel room and the lack of air circulation, or the previous day's inactivity sitting cramped in an airplane all day, or maybe it is just my body rebelling against being away (again!). Whichever - my brain is befuddled, thick and definitely not feeling inspired for any sort of attempt at intellectual banter. I am finding it hard to get out of the bed. I reflect on my brain's inactivity. This is not a common occurrence (despite what my colleagues say!). Normally, I rise early, very early by most standards. I do not have difficulty getting out of bed, and I have a definite bounce in my intellectual step, looking forward to the events and challenges of the day. But not right now, not in this foreign room, not with this day ahead of me. This is unfortunate, because today I am the invited speaker at the august scientific institution in this city. I contemplate having some breakfast - a luxury for me (the forbidden porcine fruit!) and one

that could put me in a better frame of mind (especially with coffee). I glance at the clock - Oh, @^*^#!, look at the time! I am being picked up by my host in 15 minutes!

The rush to complete my ablutions and to dress has not put me in a better frame of mind or, for that matter, put my mind in any sort of frame. I descend in the lift to the hotel lobby to meet my host. It is always awkward meeting someone whom you have never seen before - should I have worn the red carnation in my buttonhole or have a rolled-up newspaper under my arm? Not in this instance, as I am immediately accosted and whisked to a waiting car. In my continuing befuddled state, the thought passes through my mind that I might have been mistaken for someone else and I am going to be taken to a cosmetics convention. But no, the conversation quickly turns from my host's apparently hectic home life to science.

So, my day starts. I am not due to give my seminar until later in the afternoon, but in the time-honored fashion I will spend the day with other scientists, most

of whom I have never met. There are several constants about the day that in my experience never change, regardless of the institution, and, as you will see, have led me to my conspiracy theory.

First, the timing of the carefully organized itinerary will be lost by the third stop. It never fails to amaze me why anyone thinks that a schedule can be maintained when it is packed with 30 minute meetings that require forced marches along corridors, between floors of buildings, and often to and from different buildings in order to take one to the next visit. This is very tiring.

Second, I am guaranteed to see a very broad cross-section of science. And recall that my brain is not working and is incapable of the sort of mental gymnastics required to ask intelligent questions on diverse topics that change every 30 minutes. Consider also that each meeting occurs in a different office, which is personalized with that individual's paraphernalia and which is a source of great distraction when I should be focusing hard on intelligent questions (remember, my brain is still inactive).

Third, I will not have the opportunity to talk about the one thing that I know about, my science (remember, I have the 60 minute slot at the end of the day). Instead, I will be assailed with 30 minute mini-seminars that may include PowerPoint presentations, scribbled drawings shown to me upside down and publications (always in the top journals) opened to specific figures. Invariably, each of these meetings is actually very interesting - I have a pretty broad interest in science. I tend to come away from each meeting feeling increasingly less sure of the significance of my science and wishing that I were working on any one of the diverse topics presented to me. Given that there are about ten of these meetings in a visit, the accumulating affect is one of increasing insecurity and deflation about what my lab works on.

Fourth, there will be no time to go to the bathroom.

Fifth, it is guaranteed that I will arrive at the seminar room only 5-10 minutes

before the seminar's official start time (the time lost between the jumble of 30 minute visits is made up at the speaker's expense!). Now, I don't worry about getting my computer started or understanding the light controls and microphone. What does concern me is that there is precious little time for me to focus on my science (my head is whirling with all the information I have been fed during the day). It takes a few minutes, which I do not have, to get into the right mind-set for a seminar so that I can to start at the right pace and without fumbling around for words. And, I still need to go to the bathroom!

It dawns on me that this is all a carefully planned conspiracy. Here is my theory.

Initially, you are duped into travelling many, many kilometers to a far off institution (a journey that can take two days of travel (there and back) and one day of hectic meetings) because you and your science have been identified as being notable, interesting, important even. You, the great scientist, have been asked to take time from your important life to take your message to the masses, who will sit around in adoration at the words of wisdom presented at the seminar (or some such delusional notion of your worth).

But the invitation is just a piece of cheese to bring you close to the trap! The real purpose of the invitation is to show off the host institution and its scientists. This is the nub of my theory. Your approach to the trap starts with the inconvenience and discomfort of traveling from your warm home institution and the airless hotel room used previously by other people. Right from the beginning you realize that you are not on your home turf, that you have entered a foreign and potentially hostile land and that you do not have anything to protect you other than your wits and the PowerPoint presentation of your seminar in your computer. Your wits, as you recall, are disconnected and short-circuited from travelling, the time change and the hotel room. You have, initially, been softened up for the pummeling that you will get during the day.

But, you still have that great work in

your computer that you are ready to unfurl at the seminar to dazzle the masses with data and ideas from your lab. And it is for precisely that reason that you will not be able to talk about it until the end of the visit. First, you will meet at least 10 of the smartest scientists your host institution has to offer, each of whom will regale you with the brilliance of their work (each in a different area of science), the high standard of journals in which their work is published and the general excellence of their institution.

And, you will not be allowed to go to the bathroom!

At the end of the day, you are tired - the previous day's travel, the uncomfortable hotel room and the rapid changes in mental direction required at each of the ~10 visits during the day, and the forced marches between offices are all designed to make sure that you are tired before your seminar. Most important for the conspiracy theory, however, is that your vaunted view of your own science has gradually diminished during the day, beaten down by the onslaught of research topics, results and ideas from faculty in your host institution. Can your science still match up? There are doubts. Now is the time to collect your thoughts for the big introduction that gives the 'big picture' view of your work. But, you do not have time to collect your thoughts, because you were only given a few minutes to set up after the last visit. And, you still haven't gone to the bathroom! This is not the right mental or physical state for a seminar. But that is the position in which you have been carefully placed by the host institution.

You have taken the cheese and now the trap is sprung!

The audience sits back smugly. So, the big shot from afar is not so hot after all, looking rather old, tired and disheveled, fumbling for words - the pacing is off too (too slow at the beginning and then rushed at the end) - and seeming rather insecure of the data and conclusions. In comparison the audience looks damn good. Nice job everyone. Who's next on the seminar list?

Caveman