

An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Correspondence for Mole and his friends can be sent to [mole@biologists.com](mailto:mole@biologists.com), and may be published in forthcoming issues.

HEY, MIRROR MIRROR,  
ON THE WALL...  
WHO'S THE FAIREST  
POST-DOC OF...



NOW DON'T YOU  
DARE GET CAUGHT  
IN THE MIRROR, MONEY,  
FOR A POST-DOC COMES,  
A POST-DOC GOES...  
THUS THE RIVER  
OF SCIENCE FLOWS,..



## If I were you

Someone once said that labs are like families: there's a lot of affection and loyalty, but occasionally sparks fly. Just as brothers and sisters might compete for the attention of Mum or Dad, so too can post-docs jockey for favour with their lab head. Usually it's all fun and games, but occasionally someone injures an eye – metaphorically of course. (Except when they're involved in an intense, after-hours Gilson p1000 shoot-off – but that's another story.)

Just ask my colleague Receptor Rita, who works one floor down from me in the lab of Professor Limelight. Limelight is the sort who crams too many post-docs into one intellectual space, and then sits back to wait and see which one can bring him a *Cell* paper on a platter first. As “Lord of the Flies” as this might seem, it's a strategy that can actually be successful.

Rita says that, at first, being placed on the same project as two other post-docs really served to sharpen her mind. The three researchers only partially overlapped and, although the friendly competition did cause her to work a bit harder than usual (as no doubt Limelight intended), the post-docs all strove to maintain and respect certain boundaries as they cooked up the magic angle that would pique Limelight's interest.

Well, Rita won the first round. After dishing up an intriguing non-canonical signal transduction pathway branching off from Limelight's favourite receptor, she was suddenly showered with attention, asking her to his office to bounce around theories, highlighting her work with fanfare at all his keynote lectures and introducing her favourably to various key cronies at the drinks sessions.

But alas, it was only a matter of time before another post-doc produced another eye-catching piece of data and the former darling was dropped like a hot potato back into the primordial soup. (All these food metaphors – I really must start bringing more snacks to the lab.) Rita confessed that she felt uncharitably jealous towards the new star, even though she understood why this was unfair. No lab-mate, she told herself, should possibly harbour any bad feelings when a colleague does well.

Although it's no consolation to Rita, lab competition really can be much worse. Golden Girl, having recently passed her first anniversary as an assistant professor in Boston, sends back word that the rumours of cut-throat behaviour in her infamous institute are not, actually, greatly exaggerated. Okay, the tale about people running empty Sorvall centrifuges all night to make sure they're available in the morning is probably an urban myth, but she says that post-docs in her institute are often loathe to reveal hot results at lab meetings or to help out a colleague if that assistance might give them an advantage. Limelight's lab might be a pressure cooker, but at least people are still on speaking terms.

I myself have not been beyond a bit of jealousy. In my previous stint, there was a long spell when nothing seemed to go right for me. Meanwhile, a bright spark of a new PhD student ten years my junior whizzed into the lab and, within about eight months, was writing up a hot paper. I used to simmer in the lab meetings and try not to bite her head off – not that there was anything about her work to criticize.

The world is not fair, especially in science, so I don't think that we can be blamed for feeling a bit territorial now and again. For after all, the deck is stacked against us – especially those of us in the terminal stages whose next stop is a permanent academic position. For every one job advertised, or start-up grant deadline coming up, there are probably hundreds of us who will walk away disappointed. Rita tells me she's even started to get spooked whenever she sees a biotech supply sales rep tapping down the corridor with wheezy suitcase, skirt suit and stiletto heels. ("Get thee behind me, Qiagen!")

Of course, we *will* feel a little bit envious, deep down, when one of our colleagues gets a *Cell* paper or is asked to give a podium talk when we are only allocated a poster. And this is because success and failure at this stage truly

can make the difference between a new lectureship and that dreaded Chanel two-piece. But I think it's very important, despite all the hardships ahead, not to surrender the time-honoured camaraderie, friendship and support that hold our lab families together. Rita swallowed her pride and took her star colleague out to lunch to congratulate him on the new finding – only to discover that he had initially been resentful of *her* success, and was now full of uncertainty and angst about what would happen when Limelight dropped him for someone else. A bottle of wine later and the air was cleared.

And, as for me, once I'd got over my inappropriately jealous snit, I taught that jammy PhD student my secret recipe for running the sharpest, most beautiful phospho-shift western blots in the world. And at her leaving party, she confided in me that I, and not the boss, had been her most important role model in the lab.

Which, in some ways, is a lot nicer than a *Cell* paper.

Almost.

*X-Gal*

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