Wood and Trees attend a conference

Wood and Trees

“What a treat,” said Wood to Trees.

“An educational experience that is neither mandatory nor within the confines of that decrepit, windowless room in the department, the one with an unusual odour that the Trainees sleep in.”

Trees nodded, enthusiastically, “I can’t believe we are finally going to a conference together. And in London too. *London*... That’s where it all happens. The place where they have all those great big towers.”

“Shame they can’t actually make them of ivory any more though,” chipped in Wood, “I wonder what they use instead these days?”

And so it came to pass that Wood and Trees successfully negotiated the hazards of the World Wide Web and found themselves in possession of rail passes to London, splendid accommodation (read: an overpriced lower ground floor room struggling to admit two single beds, with a panorama that comprised mostly stacks of jam) and two golden tickets to the conference of all conferences. They were in for the spectacle of a life-time, a learning experience to hone their clinical skills and expand their curious minds. Pens and paper were packed into a small rucksack a week before the big day, along with the programme, conscientiously printed, pored over and annotated with circles, stars and crosses. When the day arrived, they paused to look up at the giant concrete building, the gateway to their professional development, and host of lunch for the next three days. Their excitement was palpable.

“So,” said Trees, rubbing his hands together, “how shall we begin? Divide and conquer or safety in numbers?”

“What do you mean?” replied Wood.

“Well obviously we can’t go to every one of these lectures.”

“But we must!” exclaimed Wood.

“Did you not understand the programme at all?” exclaimed Trees. “It isn’t a list,” [in hushed tones that Wood felt to be unnecessarily dramatic], “...it’s a matrix!”

“Oh, I see,” replied Wood, his enthusiasm momentarily dampened. He perked up a second later, “Let’s try this room then, I’m sure I can hear “Ride of the Valkyries,” that’s got to be a good sign.”

They entered together, flinching unnecessarily under the swirling spotlights, and chose the safe middle zone as the ideal spot for absorbing wisdom; not so near the

front as to appear over eager but not so close to the back as to seem nonchalant. Note-writing accessories at the ready, the show started. The session was sensational, animated and dynamic. Wood and Trees were transfixed by the four *men* on stage, talking comfortably in comfortable chairs. What it was they were talking about was unclear, but it was captivating. It seemed as though they were defining the meaning of life, and then redefining it, before deconstructing that, only to put it back together again exactly where they’d begun. Afterwards Trees admitted that he’d written absolutely nothing down during the session, but felt certain that he could return to work with new energy and enthusiasm for life. He would be so much better at thinking, about stuff and things, after that.

Coffee.

“This is the one,” announced Wood, whilst Trees frantically flicked back and forth between the pages of the programme, ignoring the accompanying shower of biscuit crumbs.

“Are you sure we should be in this room, Wood? It’s full of... *scientists*. Look at them. They mean business.”

The first lecture was a whirlwind of p values, confidence intervals, genomics, metabolomics and all sorts of other “omics” that were quite alien to Wood and Trees. They listened nervously, trying to take in this unfamiliar language and work out how they were going to explain it all to the “young ones” on next week’s ward round.

“This is going to blow their minds, isn’t it?” said Wood. Trees nodded slowly and continued drawing interlocking triangles on his notepad.

“I mean, this is Nobel Prize stuff, isn’t it? Krebs’s cycle has come a long way...?”

The moment the applause subsided at the end of the lecture, a character in the front row popped up like a jack in the box and grabbed the microphone.

“No!” he exclaimed. “No, no, no, no, no. This is not how it is. Do you understand nothing?”

“He must be a Professor,” whispered Trees, “Professors know so much.”

The Professor was still talking, though no question ever transpired.

“These are not the molecules you are looking for,” were his parting words, as he slowly swept his hands across the heads of the seated audience. Then sat down.

"Never mess with a Professor," agreed Wood.

"We have been touched by greatness," sighed Trees.

The science continued.

During the next lecture, the lady seated next to Trees nudged him and whispered, "Have you been following the Twitter War during this session?"

"War?" barked Trees, forgetting the speaker was in full flow. He threw his hand to his mouth, ducked his head down and then whispered, "We're at war? Have the Falklands Islands been invaded again?"

Wood rolled his eyes and continued scribbling. The lady nudged Trees again,

"No," she mouthed, "the *Twitter War*. Just follow the hashtag."

Trees was even more confused now. Hash browns? What kind of people were they letting into this conference? Maybe she's a surgeon, he thought to himself. He decided to ignore her and began flicking through the pages of the programme to trying to look like he understood what the titles in front of him meant. Twit-er...? Must be a London thing.

Coffee.

"What's wrong with you Wood," complained Trees. "Why can't you just sit still?"

"It's my legs, they are doing that thing they do when my Tuesday list gets cancelled. What do you think it is? Should I have an MRI scan? Maybe I should call that neurologist you play golf with?"

"Maybe you should consider fluid resuscitation with a high-volume balanced salt and sugar solution rather than an 8th cup of that concentrated caffeine slurry".

Wood looked hurt at the thought of being challenged about fluids, Wood knew a lot about fluid, he'd even visited Starling's laboratory on a previous trip to London.

The day moved on, and Wood and Trees settled in to the rhythm of the proceedings. They became quite the critics with their newly learnt phrases about sample size calculations, power and bias. They rolled their eyes at the misguided attachment of significance to secondary outcome measures.

Finally, it was time for the last lecture of the day. The same eminent Professor now addressed a weary looking audience. But he held their attention to the very end with tails of mice, and occasionally tales of men.

"It's damned lucky that mice are miniaturised version of humans, isn't it?" remarked Trees sagely afterwards, drinking deeply from a glass of cold red wine. "Evidence of the existence of God," he continued. "Where would we be without these frisky little four-legged marvels? We have learnt so much from them, it truly is a miracle."

Wood looked at Trees poignantly as he placed a sausage roll in his mouth.

To be continued...

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