

Brilliant Odd Characters

Since my wife, Carol, had her heart valve replaced, she has been on blood thinners. I've become fascinated and interested in blood clots and blood clotting processes.

While working on my PhD at the University of Alberta in the seventies, I got to know and spent a lot of time with a biochemist studying blood clotting, Bob Radcliffe.

Bob had done an undergraduate biochemistry degree in Ithaca, New York, at Cornell. Bob would sometimes take the bus from Ithaca to New York City and the airport. He would hop on the plane with his family pass as his father was the vice president of United Airlines. Sometimes Bob would spend a weekend in Cairo or Barcelona, or anywhere that met his fancy.

Bob's research at UofA was working on one of the factors for blood clotting. He would hop on his ratty old bicycle and ride with his backpack and gallon jug to the Gainers Meat Packing Plant in our adjacent neighbourhood, where he proceeded to the killing floor to be harassed by the rednecks telling him to get a haircut while they were standing ankle deep in cow shit and blood.

Bob would get a gallon of blood and take it back to his lab at the university. For the next two weeks, day and night, he would refine the blood, searching for the factor. Half the time, two weeks' work resulted in zero results.

Bob had many coping mechanisms. Two of his favourite were nitrous oxide (laughing gas) and marijuana. He stopped doing the laughing gas alone in his lab when he woke up on the floor with the canister on his chest.

In the ramshackle hippie house that he shared with his gregarious wife, Martha, he had a grow light and a small marijuana crop in the basement. He liked to smoke up and watch his plants grow and I shared that activity with him several times.

When Bob would call me up, he would say, "Heeeellloooo Dick.....iiiiittt's Bo.....b". And I would say, "Bob, I knew who it was at 'Hello'....". He had a really slow voice. Martha, on the other hand, was chatty in the extreme. She often jabbered on about her cats, which she entertained with a cat door open to every feral cat in the neighbourhood.

One particularly cold winter weekend, Bob and Martha went skiing in the Rockies, leaving their furnace turned up high because it was so cold. When they returned, their house stunk like crazy as one of Martha's stray cats had slipped down next to the old octopus furnace, seeking warmth. When Bob reached in to pull the cat out, all he got was a leg!!!

After isolating one of the blood clotting factors for his dissertation, Bob applied to over fifty universities for a post-doc position in biochemistry. If you get a post-doc from a university regarded as the same level that you graduated from, that's a win. Bob only got one post-doc offer, from New Haven, Connecticut, at Yale.

A year later, my friend Kevin and I visited Bob and Martha at New Haven. The reason he had landed there was that a biochemist there was researching blood factors and selected Bob because he was also working on factors. They successfully isolated another factor and published together and Bob took a job somewhere in the midwest, the last I heard from him.