

Animal, Vegetable, Mineral

By James Marcus

Last year the ASHOS conference had been in Dallas, in early June, and the heat had flattened most of the participants. As long as you huddled inside the sleek convention center, it was fine. Outside, no. The parking lot was one long expanse of molten tar, with dust devils on the ground and hallucinatory flickers in the sky. Convection currents, the Dutchman had explained. The tortured air escaping upward, into the dull, nickel-colored atmosphere. You had to cross the lot to catch the shuttle bus back to the hotel. One of the grand old men of plasma-derived therapeutics, a saintly figure in shirtsleeves and a straw boater, had almost collapsed en route. Short of breath, with a pounding heart, he was forced to squat on the curb and fan himself until two younger oncologists raced outside with a bottle of Evian.

The Steering Committee had gotten endless shit over that. So the next conference was bumped back to the second week of April. And after considering Sanibel Island and Vancouver, the committee found a nice convention center in upstate New York, within striking distance of Rochester. Out-of-staters flew into Greater Rochester International—the Dutchman found the name hilarious—but Deborah and her team had driven up from Manhattan on Friday morning. They missed an opening reception on Thursday night and a group visit to George Eastman House. Whatever. There was still the plenary session, abstracts, workshops, and panel discussions, with a million coffee breaks, which was good, since Deborah couldn't seem to stop eating.

She was sure it was the Wellbutrin. Her psychiatrist thought otherwise. Indeed, weight gain was one of the few side effects *not* associated with the little blue tablets. But

once Deborah had recovered her appetite, a couple of weeks after being discharged from the hospital, she had felt an embarrassing compulsion to eat. To *devour* things. It was a good sign, her husband said. Henry made her salads, sandwiches, frozen waffles. Still, she had gained a few pounds and was unhappy about it. Her conference clothes—the dark skirt, the cotton-and-linen jacket she had splurged on at Jil Sander—felt tighter in the waist. And the butt, of course. She would live with it.

After a quick snack in the greeting area (tall coffee, two mini-raspberry Danishes) they hurried into the plenary session. The only seats available were toward the back, which meant that Deborah had to put on her glasses to see the slides and PowerPoint nonsense. The Dutchman and Vinod, her entourage, sat on either side of her. In the warmth and darkness of the auditorium, the Dutchman would soon fall asleep: this she knew from experience. The rectangular head would tilt one way, then another. But Vinod, her younger colleague on whom she had a mild, studious crush, stayed awake at these things. Alert.

The speaker, a faraway figure in a tan blazer, announced his topic: gene transfer into human primary blood lymphocytes. Vinod perked up. He actually leaned forward, like a boy. Well, it was fascinating stuff. The idea was to activate more T cells, send them into immunological combat. To do so, you had to fool the body. The speaker, whose lab at Vanderbilt had clearly hit the NIH jackpot, was now jabbing at the screen with a laser pointer.

“How did they derive the peptide?” Vinod whispered to her. He was taking notes on the program.

“From another antibody. We can look at the abstract later.”

“Talk about clinical application!” Vinod’s voice was less melodic when he whispered: the music must come straight from the larynx. Vibrating cords. Deborah was aware of his mouth near her ear.

Now came a couple of slides. Mitomycin C treatments, a vast array of cells, which made her think of the night sky. Green, stellar clouds, with smaller constellations of red and orange, where the cells had responded to the cytotoxin. Where they had died. The smallest things always resembled the vast ones.

Afterwards there were questions. The investigators stood up, approached a microphone near the stage. Some sounded genuinely thrilled about the news from Vanderbilt. You could hear that note of pure science in their voices. The others were looking for soft spots, chinks in the procedural armor: they had an agenda. Well, who didn’t? Even Madame Curie had to watch her own back. Playing the Sorbonne off the Pasteur Institute, squeezing a donation out of Andrew Carnegie. He sent her a check for \$50,000, back when that was still real money: a shrewd woman.

The lights came up. The Dutchman awoke, right on cue. The three of them left the auditorium and wandered through the exhibition area, with its displays and posters and demo models from the manufacturers.

“Looks like Grand Central here,” the Dutchman said, sounding none too pleased about it. “After Dallas I thought the place would be empty. Just us, and maybe a dairy farming convention on the other side of the hall.”

No, the meeting was crowded. Doctors in suits, doctors in casual tweed-and-khaki combos, most of them men. You saw more women than before. More Indians, too: when Deborah had begun attending these events, Vinod would have stood out. Now it was an accepted fact that the lazy Americans were ceding the field to Indians, Asians, people

who still knew how to put in a 16-hour day. Not that she, Deborah, had anything to apologize for.

The Dutchman dragged them into a panel. The lights were on in the conference room, meaning that they would have to stay awake. In back, Deborah snagged a croissant from the snack table, took a bite, threw it away: even she had her limits. Then they found three folding chairs, just as the discussion of diffuse large B-cell lymphoma began to heat up. One panelist, with silver hair and silver glasses and a suitably metallic, nasal voice, had identified a unique subset of DLBCLs. It was a matter of gene expression profiling. Nobody on the panel challenged his findings, not exactly. But they did question whether the two subgroups were differentiated enough. Logic chopping, Deborah thought, as the panelist on the far right waded in: “Could you describe the germinal center model again?”

Vinod was taking more notes, using the instep of his shoe as a writing surface. That was a new one. And the Dutchman was waiting for the Q-and-A, so he could ask about the experiments themselves. He was an insanely pragmatic personality. If you discovered America, he wanted to know all the details—about the boat, that is.

The silver man, whose name was listed on the program as Winnick, began to fight back. “Clear as night and day,” he said, referring to the two subsets, and held up his hands to indicate the two models. That business with the hands was strangely convincing.

“Questions, anybody?” the moderator said, speaking into a superfluous microphone. The Dutchman waved, was called upon.

“How did you handle the tissue cores?”

“Dewaxed them in xylene,” Winnick told him.

“Then what?”

“Rehydration. After that, they were minced and digested for about thirty minutes. Look, it’s all in the abstract. I don’t think we need to waste everybody’s time with procedural trivia.”

Harrumphing, the Dutchman desisted. He wasn’t going to talk shop if the guy didn’t want to. He slumped in his chair while the discussion wafted back up toward the theoretical highlands. “We’ve *got* the abstract,” Deborah whispered to him. It was embarrassing to have one of your team behave like a fucking child. “Don’t sulk.”

Winnick fought off a final ambush from the audience. Then the panel wound down and they were dismissed for lunch. “The Livingston Room is upstairs,” the moderator announced, reading from the latest hand-written update. The schedule changed at least once an hour.

Out in the hallway, the Dutchman got out his cell to call Annika. Deborah got out hers to call Henry. Only Vinod, smoothing back his expensive-looking hair with three fingers, felt no need to communicate. He leaned against the wall with a vague smile while his colleagues talked to their invisible spouses.

“Hi,” she said, when Henry picked up.

“Sweetheart,” he said. Ever since February, when she was released from the hospital, he used at least one endearment in every conversation. “How’s Rochester?”

“Oh, fine. We’re not really in Rochester, you know. It’s a convention center. It could be in Timbuktu. What about you?”

“Great. Benjamin loved my David O. Russell piece. He said it was a surgical strike on the celebrity bunker.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not exactly sure. But he was smiling while he said it.”

“So it’s good.”

“Definitely.”

Henry’s career as a film critic had been bogging down for years. Now it looked like he might finally move up the journalistic food chain. Deborah wasn’t so sure. She wondered if her husband wasn’t too staid, too old, a dinosaur from the Woodward-and-Bernstein era. On the other hand, *something* was going on. Just six months ago, Henry would never have been invited to the David O. Russell thing at MOMA. He had been in a state of euphoria since Wednesday, having rubbed shoulders with Mark Wahlberg—even Deborah remembered those underwear ads, back when the guy was Marky Mark—and McCauley Culkin, who didn’t seem at all eager to discuss *Richie Rich* with Henry.

“What’s for dinner?” she asked.

“Probably a trip to the Golden Arches. I’m too beat to cook.”

“But Ronnie doesn’t like going there anymore. Remember?”

“Oh, right. The Amazon rainforest. Maybe he changed his mind. He gave up on being a vegetarian after about two weeks.”

“That was different.”

“How was it different?”

“He *said* he was just experimenting. It wasn’t a matter of principle.” Or was it? She felt herself settling into one of those deadly conversational grooves, talking for the sake of talking: silence had to be avoided. Henry found it comforting. She no longer did.

“Well, he can get some fries. Maybe a salad.”

“That makes sense.”

“Or an apple pie. Although I’ve heard they use potatoes instead of real apples.” If she didn’t get off the phone she would slit her wrists. “Henry? I’ve got to go. There’s a panel.”

The Dutchman was terminating his conversation as well. Deborah listened, trying to gauge the level of warmth. “Love you too,” she heard him say—such a sweet phrase from such a grumpy man—and she felt a flicker of sadness, itself just a hint, a meticulous titration, of the emotion that had put her in the hospital. She was still alone. But that fact no longer tormented her. The pills, which were making her fat, also worked.

In the enormous Dickinson Room, Deborah opted for the roast beef. The Dutchman, eager for something to complain about, brought a copy of the local newspaper back to the table. There was Pataki on the cover, insisting that all the New York airports buy fingerprint scanners for their employees. Here in the boonies, the gangly governor was a big deal. Not in the city. There he was viewed as a hayseed, who hadn’t risen to the occasion back in September.

They were joined at the big round table by a team from Gundersen Lutheran in Wisconsin, then by some young guys from California—you could tell they were from the Bay Area, even their ties had a faintly psychedelic look to them. Biotech: where the money was. A few hardcore academics from Philadelphia grabbed the last couple of chairs. Almost everybody had stuck with the roast beef, which was rare, almost bloody. Very appropriate, when you thought about it.

Introductions all around. Deborah had read a paper by one of the Philadelphia guys, about heparin and single-chain antibodies. He was a bald man with an elegant, shiny skull and an Italian suit that actually fit him, which was more than you could say for a lot of the crowd in the Dickinson Room.

“Tremendous piece of work,” she told him.

“You’re very kind.”

“You ran the series on rats, right?”

“Good memory. The kidney and pancreas.”

“Local specimens? Or did you have to go out of state?”

There followed a lively exchange about rat procurement. It wasn’t intrinsically less appetizing than mosquito procurement, a topic dear to Deborah’s heart. Still, the Gunderson guys seemed happy when the conversation ended. They went at their roast beef with renewed vigor, cutting and slicing in that fussy way scientists did.

Deborah went back for seconds: just one piece of meat and a little broccoli. When she returned, everybody was gabbing about some new flow cytometer display on the exhibition floor. For the crew here, instrumentation was a sexy topic. They treated the catalogues like porn, thumbing through them compulsively, folding back the corners of the most delicious pages.

Yet somehow they ended up back in the animal kingdom. First Dave Palantz, one of the Bay Area guys, informed the table that monkeys were taking over the world. “You must be thinking of our *lab*,” one of his colleagues said. But no, Palantz was serious: “It’s already happening in Japan. Monkeys rooting through your garbage can, stopping your car on the road. They shake you down for food.”

“How do they stop the car?” the Dutchman asked.

“Jump on the hood, I guess.”

“I would just keep driving. Speed up, if necessary.” This from the heparin man, shaking that Faberge egg of a skull. It sounded like a brutal strategy, but Deborah would probably do the same thing.

“I read an interview with a Japanese sociologist,” Palantz continued. “He said that if things keep going at this rate, Japan will be an archipelago of monkeys by the year 2200. He used that exact phrase.”

“An archipelago.”

“That’s right.”

Deborah tried to picture it. A civilization of monkeys. Taking showers, driving cars, turning on the television with their opposable thumbs. She couldn’t decide if it was frightening or funny. Henry had forced her to watch a DVD once—wait, it was *Passage to India*—where monkeys had accosted a single woman on a stroll. They screamed at her, bared their yellow teeth. Afterwards, she wasn’t frigid anymore.

“They’re the same as people, anyway,” Vinod said. “Or almost.”

“Speak for yourself,” Palantz said.

“No, really. Our DNA is almost completely identical to theirs. The discrepancy is less than two percent. These people in Leipzig, they’re using a gene expression chip to pin down differences on the cellular level. Amazing stuff.”

“So what did they find?” Deborah asked, genuinely curious.

“Different levels of protein production in the cerebral cortex. Same cells, though.”

“Two percent is still two percent,” Palantz said.

“*Less* than two percent.”

“He’s not saying we’re monkeys,” Deborah said, wanting Palantz to shut up.

“He’s pointing out a *similarity* between primates and humans. I hope we’re not debating the theory of evolution here.”

“Of course not.”

The humans, most of them, adjourned to the dessert table. Tiramisu and little napoleons: there must have been a budget surplus this year. Deborah abstained, since her skirt felt tight again. Then they all carried their coffee cups back to their seats with maniacal precision: doctors *hated to spill things*. It was a kind of sin, a contamination. They were a strange breed.

At the table, Darwin was no longer a hot topic. They were talking politics, which was almost as dangerous. Mass graves in Afghanistan, 80 miles northwest of Kabul. Filled, according to the Dutchman, with the bodies of men, women, and children. Deborah couldn't bear to think of it. She always saw Ronnie in a scene like that. On the bright side, a sculptor was going to reconstruct those giant statues of the Buddha, the ones the Taliban had blown to pieces before the invasion. She had seen the pictures on TV. The mounds of rubble, the giant gashes, like wounds, in the side of the cliff. An archipelago of monkeys was looking better all the time.

After lunch, the reps from the big drug companies—Bayer, Eli Lilly, Pharmacia, and a few second-string firms—were passing out pamphlets on the exhibition floor. Deborah assumed it was promotional trash and sailed right past. But the Dutchman grabbed a few and showed them to her: bioterrorism updates from the CDC. Treatments for anthrax, ricin, radiation sickness. At a fucking *convention*, for God's sake!

Then it was back to the animal kingdom again. At the afternoon session, a woman (finally!) discussed a hereditary bleeding disorder in dogs. The subjects—five related Dobermans, who looked quite gentle and melancholic in the slides—were cursed with a lack of platelet procoagulant activity. A small incision brought forth a scary quantity of blood. Bright red, like ours.

Doctor Yee-Levine dwelled for a moment on the Scott Syndrome, another rare bleeding disorder. And Deborah felt a sudden onrush of pity for the dogs, whose treatment would ultimately make their illness look like a walk in the park. It wasn't fair, she knew. They were fed, petted, housed in AAALAC-approved kennels. And Deborah recognized the need for animal experimentation. She had defended it a million times to Henry, who always invoked the family cat at the end: "What if it was *Federico*?" Still, you looked into the eyes of those Dobermans—disturbingly human in their depth and sentient glow—and felt rotten about yourself.

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Back in her room, Deborah considered her clothing options. Drinks and dinner, again in the Dickinson Room, were listed as semi-formal on the program. For the men, that meant nothing: they would put on a fresh tie. For women it was more of a challenge. She decided to stick with the Jil Sander but change into her black skirt, more amply cut and with a silver belt at the waist. She combed her hair, checked the supply of Wellbutrin in her cosmetics bag, and went down to meet the Dutchman and Vinod.

In the elevator her cell rang. Ronnie had reset the ring tone—now it was a noisy little piece of music—and sometimes she failed to recognize it. Luckily she was alone. She fished it out of her bag and answered.

"Hi Mom."

"Sweet boy! Where are you?"

"MacDonald's. Dad said I had to make peace with meat."

"He did not."

“Maybe he was kidding. I don’t know.”

“Put him on, okay?”

“Just a minute.”

Henry got on. His voice had a muffled quality, probably because he was chewing. He loved salt, fat, sugar. His doctor had scared him with the cholesterol stuff, but he had long since reverted to his wicked ways.

“Why did you drag him over there? We talked about this before!”

“You said he could get a salad. That’s what he did. You should see the croutons in there. Big as your head. You like the salad, right?” A pause. “He says it’s okay. Better than okay.”

God was punishing her. There was no other explanation. She told Henry to hand the phone back over to Ronnie, and promised to make him some healthy food as soon as she got home. Enough!

The Dutchman had changed his tie. Vinod looked the same: dark suit, dark skin, lustrous hair, lustrous teeth, as if he had just been removed from a layer of protective shrink wrap. Together they returned to the Dickinson Room. And there Deborah, who had lost her appetite, began to drink. It began with a gin-and-tonic. A weak one, which she had asked for in deference to the Wellbutrin. She clutched the plastic cup and mingled and took carefully regulated sips. The gin tasted better, sharper, than the tonic.

Here was Palantz, no longer in a combative mood. Winnick, considerably mellowed since his earlier appearance, chatted to the Dutchman while they both picked clean the cheese platter. It was a peaceable kingdom now in the high, bright room, and Deborah began to feel almost giddy. She ordered another gin-and-tonic, a weak one, at the bar. The alcohol was giving her a strange feeling of levitation. She was taller, less

securely tethered to the ground: at times, just for an instant, she imagined she was looking *down* on the assembled crowd, the doctors and scientists and salesmen, the technicians and the ABDs, who were no longer discussing blood disorders but had moved on to real life, quotidian stuff, mortgage rates and baseball and Viagra. Perhaps it was a side effect. She didn't mind much. The floating sensation distracted her from the intense loneliness: a perfect match. She had a third gin-and-tonic, not intending to drink the entire thing, and she didn't—she threw the cup out with a good half of it remaining, and the slice of lime, too.

Edwin Thayer, a guy from Baylor, was sitting one seat away to her right. He was chummy. He refilled her wine glass once or twice, heavy on the Southern civility, and told her she was the loveliest woman at the entire ASHOS convention. This was a joke, of course. The choice was essentially between her and the tiny Doctor Yee-Levine. But Deborah began to wonder whether the Texan was hitting on her.

Slightly flattered, slightly repelled, she tuned it out. Deborah ate her food, which tasted like nothing, and tried to avoid the wine. Also, she watched Vinod, seated two seats to her left. Even in the loud room, with Norah Jones murmuring in the background, she could hear his voice. So courteous, so reasonable, so lulling in its non-American cadences.

“Can I fetch you a napoleon, young lady?”

“No thanks, Edwin. I'm beat. This young lady is about to hit the hay.”

“See you tomorrow, then. Bright and early.”

“You bet.”

Thayer left. The Dutchman retired soon after. He had to sleep, recharge his anger batteries. The table thinned out. Eventually Vinod moved into the vacated seat beside her,

and to her surprise, they settled on a new topic: his father. A civil engineer, who had spent most of the last decade working construction projects on the East Side.

“Big buildings,” Vinod said. “Luxury towers. He could never afford to live in one of those places, but he treated them like his own property. His babies, he called them.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“Retired. Two years ago he broke his ankle. Not on the site—in Maplewood, on the front steps of his apartment building. Slipped on the ice.”

“Ouch.”

“Not too bad. He had to stay off his feet for almost a month. Hated to use the crutches. Anyway, when he went back to work, the passion was gone. The work meant nothing. He finished one last project—luxury condos on First Avenue—and quit. End of story.”

“Is he enjoying his retirement?”

“He watches TV, plays cards. Visits my brother. Radiologist in Baltimore.”

“That sounds like the good life.”

“Not good, not bad. Just muddling along.”

Deborah had hired Vinod more than two years ago. Never before had he volunteered so many personal details. His tone was weirdly detached: he could have been discussing somebody else’s life. Still, he was filling in the blanks. It touched Deborah, and made her feel a little less alone.

“And your father?” Vinod said. “Is he retired?”

“He died. A long time ago.”

“I’m very sorry.” Vinod looked crushed. “I must have forgotten.”

“No, it was fine to ask. Perfectly natural. You tell me, I tell you.”

“When my father is dead, I will be lost,” he said.

“That’s true,” Deborah said.

At once Vinod seemed to regret this confession. He changed the subject, asked which panels they would attend tomorrow. He *scuttled* backwards—that was the only word Deborah could think of—from the precipice of his father’s death, or from his own recognition of it. To see somebody so exposed was a kind of intimacy. Deborah filled him in on the panels, followed him off the thin ice of mortality, talked about cell individuation. But something, for her, had been set in motion.

Together they rode the elevator to the sixth floor. To get to her room, they had to first pass his. He paused, unlocked the door with his entry card, and turned to say goodnight. And there, after a quick glance down the empty hallway, she stepped very close to Vinod and kissed him on the mouth. Clearly he was surprised. Yet he didn’t pull back. Deborah felt as if waves of heat were pouring off him. His lips were soft, with a bow shape entirely unlike Henry’s, and they tasted sweet, without any of the gin-and-tonic overtones that Deborah could still sense on her own tongue. She reached up with one hand, feeling adventurous, and touched the gleaming rampart of his hair, rubbed some of that fabulous substance between her fingertips. Glossy: like some kind of animal pelt. Her heart was pounding, a systolic thump in her chest that almost embarrassed her. Deborah hadn’t felt this way since she left the hospital, so extraordinarily conscious of her body, skin, saliva, the surfeit of sensation, the warmth and moisture and the unbelievably smooth texture of Vinod’s skin. Did the man have no pores? No random bumps or bony spots? Without a word, without fanfare, they backed into the entryway of Vinod’s room and let the door close. They continued to kiss. To her right Deborah could see the bathroom, with its feeble florescent tube and the tiny hotel towel, not much larger

than a dinner napkin, draped over the shower rod. Vinod's toothbrush, razor, dental floss on the sink: a sight more intimate, in a way, than his revelations about his father. There was a smoke alarm on the ceiling, the red light winking complicitly down at her. A coffeemaker on a stand. An open overnight bag on the floor, and beyond the entryway, an unmade bed, more evidence of Vinod's secret life.

He had begun to make a quiet noise in his throat while they kissed, not a moan, but a purring noise like an animal. Now that Deborah's arms were around him, he was thicker, more substantial than she had expected. Not fat, just *there*, a corporeal fact. He breathed loudly, musically, through his nose. At this point Deborah was not thinking. You couldn't think and cheat on your spouse at the same time, one activity banished the other. But things were occurring to her: she was wrecking her life, her marriage, cutting herself loose from Henry and Ronnie, accomplishing what she had meant to do before she checked into the hospital. Destroying herself. There was name for that on the cellular level: *apoptosis*. Cells cutting short their miniscule lives, consuming themselves, breaking up into shards, fragments, organic trash. Now Vinod seemed to be flagging. A moment ago he had slipped one hand into the Jil Sander, tugged up her blouse, and touched her waist. It was an odd place to touch her. Not so much erotic as proprietary. He was hers, the hand with its pink palm and dark knuckles had claimed her, the senior clinical investigator, as his own. But now he had removed his hand, had stopped kissing her and taken a step back. His face, which she had never imagined she would study at such close quarters, looked stricken. She could see the exquisite capillaries in his eyes, the tiny vessels full of blood, and his long lashes. Something about the whites of his eyes looked frightened, with an equine hint of panic. It embarrassed her, that panic, and she looked down.

The carpet had a mustard color, no doubt easier to clean. A major erection was visible through the fabric of Vinod's pants. Deborah, still carried along by her erotic momentum and the three gin-and-tonics and the sweet, sad, frightening will to self-obliteration, wanted to see his penis. She wanted to touch it. Giving in to the impulse, she extended one hand—a gesture she would later view with intense regret, the mortifying cherry on the cake—and lightly touched the bulge in Vinod's crotch. At this he leaped backwards. It was now becoming clear to Deborah that she had made a terrible mistake. Her quaking subordinate looked like he wanted to hide under the covers. She, too, felt a mist of shame gathering in her skull. And then Vinod, always so miserly with the personal facts he would enter into evidence, added another: "I am engaged to be married!"

Learn something new every day, Deborah thought. "Congratulations," she said. Then she uttered the most childish sentence in the English language—*Let's pretend this never happened*—and returned to her lair down the hall, where she flopped onto the bed without undressing, groped for the clicker, and turned on the news. Deborah wished, not for the first time, that she could disappear. She couldn't. Meanwhile, Elton John was at the Capitol, shaking hands with Orrin Hatch. The senator from Utah always appeared to be blushing. "I've been an admirer for years," he said. Was the admiration mutual? Nobody seemed to know.