ies to collagen type II associate with pathology in collagen arthritis in mice. (To be published).


**AN INNOCENT ABROAD**

The broad leaved coconut palms reflected the glow of a tropical dawn as Jim's plane pitched gently and stopped. For the tenth time he examined his slides then carefully replaced them in his hand baggage. Emerging from the airport he sniffed the stale aroma of diesel oil and sweat which he associated with the Third World. An agent from a pharmaceutical company held out a hand of welcome.

Outside his hotel, dark skinned men and boys in soiled, threadbare clothes offered him T-shirts, towels, balloons and beads. Within, the air conditioning blew luxurious draughts of scented air. From his room he could view a long arc of white beach, conical mountains and tumbling foam. He soon located the hotel pool and restaurants where he scrutinized the menus with anticipation. True, he had eaten and drunk regularly during the business class flight and the flavour of dry champagne lingered on his palate. It is strange how a man may quickly accept as customary that which was previously rare or remote.

He looked forward to the meeting, displaying genuine enthusiasm for exchanges with overseas friends and the serendipitous opportunities for learning. The halls bustled and speakers performed to large audiences. The organization worked well. Around the exhibition stands, throngs moved and paused, some delegates carrying plastic bags bearing the names of drug companies.

On that first day, Jim attended many sessions but his concentration was ordinary. By mid-afternoon he was becoming more reflective than receptive, isolated from the world by the hesitant transmission through his headphones of what he thought might be a Portuguese translation. A spontaneous doubt troubled him. He could not define it or even call it a thought. His reverie disturbed, he left the auditorium. A doctor hurried past in apparent consternation muttering 'I've had enough'. The man rushed through the door and into a taxi. He was not seen again until the last evening of the meeting when he was smiling, perhaps a little fatter and certainly more tanned.

On the second day Jim found that there was no difficulty at all in finding a seat. He listened patiently to the tedious argot of 'deemards' and 'enseds'. He was much relieved not to hear 'paradigm' more than twice. Some presentations were patronizing and they bored him. These talks were usually given by famous guest speakers who graced the meeting for not much longer than their lectures. Mainly, they flew directly northward on the same day.

There was conversation about robbery and mayhem in the streets but Jim, like many of his countrymen, secretly revelled in these hazards, often to the point of recklessness. There were other distractions. Jim received many dinner invitations and accepted them all. Sometimes, after a meal, he was taken to a show or discotheque. He was surprised that despite these lavish nocturnal activities he seemed to spend little money.

The daily bus route to the congress was long but scenic. Jim, romantic by disposition, wondered whether he was passing the hills and islands where the fictitious Nostromo secreted his silver. Jim wished he could write like Conrad and often tried to do so. On these journeys he talked to colleagues about the congress and the country. Occasionally there was serious discussion. He enquired, 'Do you think that we need large international meetings when two excellent gatherings occur in America and Europe annually?'
'My dear chap, if the pharmaceutical industry were not provided with such a cost effective opportunity as this it would devise one.'

'Most delegates and not a few of the spouses are being paid for by drug companies. Some are not even contributors. Surely this level of support should be confined to scientists, trainees and genuine discussants?'

'My dear chump, drug companies prefer to invest in those who most influence prescribing habits.'

'Acceptance of nearly all abstracts at this meeting means that the content is inconsistent. Less diplomatically, is it not half rubbish?'

'My dear idiot, an international meeting must be big to succeed. How else can one attract so many people? Quality is not an issue.'

Jim was told that such events were of immeasurable importance to participants from countries where facilities for learning were poor, opportunities for travel few and contact with the famous rare. He began to regret the censorious tenor of his questions. He, the recent recipient of so much largesse could see that his sentiments were too sanctimonious, too hypocritical to be taken seriously.

Jim mounted the podium of an immense hall. Scattered sparingly in the vast darkness were perhaps 10 pale faces. He was not famous but he still wondered where the crowds of the first day had gone. Where were the huddled and deprived masses yearning for knowledge? Within 15 minutes his contribution to the assembly was completed. From that time on he attended the conference sporadically. He remained cheerful but his perspective had altered.

Seated in the bar of his hotel he awaited the bus to the airport. There was relaxed banter and only feigned disappointment when Jim and his companions were told that their flight to England was postponed. How annoying they all said. Another day of sunshine. He resolved to eat a brief supper and retire early but in the event did neither.

The red sun rising on the rim of the sea promised a hot, last day. He later sat near the hotel pool. Amongst the scraps of paper he had acquired at the congress were five colourful and shining leaflets advertising international rheumatology conferences in 1990 and 1991. He noted the dates and tried to imagine what work he might submit. He saw that each brochure was produced by the national airline of the host country, sometimes with assistance from a drug company. This did not surprise him nor did it arouse in him any residual regret. He had some time earlier seen the point of it all. Without remorse and with eyes closed he leisurely turned his face to the sun.

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Further Reading