

Gunter

by Helen Sedgwick

He always sits at the head of the table. He sees everyone, and notices them. He smokes neat little roll-ups made with black rizlas and free trade imported tobacco. He's a tiny man, smaller than me; at 5ft2 I see the thinning hair on the top of his head and feel weighty and clumsy, and also fond.

Everyone knows he's something of a genius. When things are slow or stalled, ideas scarce, cells misbehaving in their culture or dying in their isolation chambers the suggestion is always the same: we could ask Gunter. I used to have weekly meetings with him, to show him my latest designs for the microfluidic chambers and get his ideas on which carcinoma cells to use. These days I try to stop myself relying on him too heavily. I spend more time on the biochemistry – always my weakest subject – aware that I should be better than I am, less dependent.

Gunter tells me that he will not give up his roll-ups. He says that he has two a day, and that they are a pleasure. He's European like that. We meet outside to smoke, and I take out my extra-light, white-as-a-fume-hood cigarette with the perforated filter. I've started smoking a lot more than two a day. I'm not sure if I'd call it a pleasure.

We talk about things other than our own research. We talk about holograms and galaxies and the ten thousand people working on the large hadron collider; we talk about jazz and London and blue cheese and, once, The X-Factor. Gunter is interested in every subject I can think of, and he knows more about all of them than I do. If I were him, I think I would have stopped coming into work by now. I wish he would rest.

Every cell is different. That's fundamental. Until recently, research was carried out on millions of cells at the same time. Any result was an average result; details were smoothed out or lost and inhomogeneous responses were neglected.

So instead, we're trying to isolate arrays of single cells. We can see how each one behaves individually. We can see if some are more aggressive than others (they are) and if some respond to drugs differently to others (they do). We are trying to determine if individual cells can be targeted to achieve a population level response.

I find myself lingering behind after our meetings, wondering if I should do something, or say something, but I can't think of what that would be. I hesitate by the door and look back at him, trying to find some optimism to offer. "Have you heard?" he says to me one day, and I think: heard about the fire that destroyed that lab in Southampton, heard about my fellowship application, heard how long he has? I shake my head. "They've found the Higgs," he says, as if that proves it is all worthwhile. "Maybe," I say, too aware of the uncertainties, and close the door quietly behind me.

When I get my device to work (which takes months) and my cells to survive, and my microfluidics steady, and I finally get a result that is interesting (which takes over a year) I decide to show it to Gunter. I walk into his room and thank him for seeing me, then say sorry for disturbing him at a time like this. He smiles and tells me not to apologise; it is a pleasure. I find myself babbling on, not about my result so much as about the lack of other results. I tell him that it is too hard, too much, that there are too many variables. I tell him that my contribution is too small to be significant.

Gunter smiles. He says we are nearly there, that the ending is in sight. When he says "we" he means all scientists. Not just him and me. He's working on a paper himself, and in it he will write: "Our science is interdisciplinary. It must be. Combining our knowledge is how our field will progress. We will cure cancer. It is only a matter of time."

Six months later, Gunter's paper will be published. I will print it out as soon as it's available and put it in a transparent plastic folder. Sometimes I'll take it out and re-read those lines, because it seems to me that the things worth writing are worth reading over and over again. Then I'll smile and put it back safely in the folder and put the folder back on the shelf, and I'll return to the lab and keep working.