The Unbearable Yuckiness of Male* Scientists

by Heather Menzies Jones

*I know many scientists who are women. They do not seem to suffer, as do their male counterparts, from socially paralyzing bad manners. For example, I am never in conversation with a scientist who is also a woman and feel compelled mentally to draw a little cartoon balloon over my head begging: "Just shoot me now!"

A bit of background:
I just heard a most poignant story about an offended young sensibility. It seems that an earnest young female graduate student was mortified while talking with her chemistry professor about some issue having to do with laboratory procedures. Completely unwittingly, the chemistry professor was not only talking about the most prosaic of matters, he was also taking those few minutes out of his otherwise frenetically busy day to adjust himself. Going after his trouser test tube. Whatever. The young lady reported this most serious incident to the Dean of Students who perhaps should have shown more concern and not had the poor taste to mutter, "Why do you think they call it a hard science?" What this young woman should have been handed was the following little manual outlining the behavioral lapses found among the male denizens of the scientific milieu.

Matters of Dress
My husband, also a chemistry professor, feels no urgent need to spruce up for his job. Three years ago he kept a navy sports jacket and a nondescript tie on a hanger placed on a hook on the back of his office door. On his teaching days he would off his white lab coat, replace that with the sports jacket and on those more sartorially resplendent days, even wear the tie. Evidently, the ritual sameness of my husband’s attire drew the attention of the entire 200 or so students in class. It also got to be a running, albeit private joke among those 200 people. The course evaluations with their promise of anonymity woke my husband to the simple fact that his students were not laughing at his erudite bon mots and little inside jokes about other chemists, these kids were practically busting their collective guts every time Bill walked into the lecture hall in the same clothes for an entire semester. Bill has solved this dilemma and now keeps two sports jackets and two ties in his office and rotates.

Matters of dress also make me remember a broilingly hot August day in New Orleans where the American Chemical Society was having their semiannual
conference. I was sitting at a wrought iron table in an old quarter eatery with head in hands muttering, "As God as my witness, I shall never go to New Orleans in August ever, ever again." To fend off imminent heat prostration I decided to sit for a good long while and look at people as they walked by. Let me just say, there were two distinct groups - people who could have been from anywhere - Missoula, Montana or Minneapolis, Minnesota - regular people. The other group must have e-mailed one another the night before and agreed to show up in this particular square in New Orleans in the same button-down-the-front, short sleeved shirt, walking shorts, and socks with sandals. If Chemical Conference Casual wasn't enough identification, wearing little plastic name tags was proof conclusive that these were male scientists enjoying 'down time.' I don't know why they didn't have little strings attached to their wrists like pre-school kids on a field trip.

Remember: Scientists are not generally known for a keen sense of style. There is good reason for this.

Nasty Habits
I've already mentioned the nasty habit which most little boys are admonished into abandoning sometime in preschool or kindergarten - remember this guys? "It's not a toy, don't play with it?" Women save your feminist complaints for something, shall we say, meatier - like adding more female faculty in every department? Anyway, I digress - Thank God, my husband doesn't do much 'roto-rooting' however he does suffer from some basic misinformation, curious for one of a scientific bent. He truly believes he becomes invisible once inside the protective carapace of his car. He must think he's invisible for this is the only explanation possible for the assiduous nose picking and ear mining which begins in an eerily Pavlovian way once the key turns in the ignition.

I've seen other men do this too. Please, I am not asking anyone to stop this behavior. Mothers, how many routine car trips, to a soccer game or a piano lesson perhaps, are turned into hilarious giggle fests because of the guy in the next car going after the boogy bonus or the waxy wad? Schlepping the kids around doesn't get better than that! However, be advised, men of science, no matter how many episodes of Star Trek you've watched, even though you are in a moving vehicle, you are not going at the speed of light, and my kids are watching. You are not invisible.

Remember: Most scientists have one or two nasty habits. I even discovered a few Nobel Laureates who are unregenerate nose pickers and they still received royal invitations to Sweden.

Sparkling Conversation
When I was young and unspoiled I used to look forward to gatherings of my husband's colleagues as a chance to meet some of the brightest people in my community. I thought these gatherings would be like Plato's symposium with the learned individuals fielding questions about the nature of scientific inquiry or the ethical/moral obligations of scientists in a global economy. I certainly never thought I would find myself face down in a plate of chicken marsala after trying valiantly to stay
awake during a particularly long and detailed outlining of another professor's lawn-care strategy.

I have also found that conversational gambits I thought particularly witty or of-the-moment go largely unappreciated. Never say the following at a dinner party attended predominantly by scientists: "Well, the only reason why Prince Charles will never become king is because of what he said to Camilla that time. Now when anyone thinks of him it's going to be as a big you-know-what with ears." Blank stares all around. I then had to explain with growing mortification that Prince Charles was taped saying that he wished he could be transformed into one of Camilla's tampons. Much blushing and wincing at the word, 'tampon.' I know these folks don't have the same fascination as I have with the National Enquirer or Star, but come on, this delicious, character skewering anecdote also was alluded to in the New York Times, Newsweek and Harpers. "Get with it!"

Remember: Conversation between the scientist and lay person is bound to languish. Just try to stay awake.