

# Hysterics

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In my first year at university we had a 9 o'clock Saturday morning biochemistry lecture. Biochemistry was considered a key subject in the preclinical medical curriculum. I was bad at it. Very bad. I just couldn't understand the subject. In the practicals so many things were apt to go wrong. The tutorials were dull and incomprehensible, and the lectures—

The lectures were held in the big lecture theatre in the then new school of Chemistry. It was a vast theatre, with raked seating. It was badly designed. The tiers of seats were very close together; each tier had a ridiculously narrow board, serving as a desk, which was attached to the back of the seats of the tier in front. This made the taking of notes very difficult. If you placed a pad of A4 paper on the board the person in front, on leaning back, would push it off. The closeness of the desk to your body prevented you from placing your folder on your lap. The seats were narrowly spaced. There was a lot of ill feeling, as happens when persons unknown are cramped in a close confine for an hour. And this hall-of-little-ease was overcrowded with persons. Medical students, Veterinary students, Honours Biochemistry students: all attended. The course was intended and designed for the last — who presumably wished to study biochemistry — and no thought was given to the first two — who, by and large, did not, and who had had no grounding in the subject whatsoever. So the theatre was packed to overflowing. I recall the first of these grim lectures, in early October. Every seat was occupied. Every square foot of aisle was taken. Students sat round the lecturer's podium. The doors at the back were open and you could see the foyers filled with youthful faces.

The first week of a freshman's term. You would have expected an introduction to the subject. I would have, anyway. But that didn't happen. The lecturer entered. He was nervous; he was a naturally poor speaker. His voice was mumbling and his delivery monotonous. His attitude was one of defensive hostility, which is about the worst attitude a lecturer can have. He had got his ancient, bleached slides mixed up. It was a disaster. The sound system was poorly adjusted, and, when he turned, it produced a wailing feedback. The audience was growing restive.

Oh — there is something else I have to tell you. It had rained.

As the young lecture-goers were approaching the University that morning, myself amongst them, the heavens opened. The rain came down in stair-rods. To be in that unexpected storm was like stepping, fully clothed, into a shower-bath. It was literally like a waterfall. In moments torrents of water were running down the steep streets. So all the people in that lecture theatre were soaked to the skin.

As the lecture progressed the relative humidity soared as several hundred saturated young bodies steamed in the confines; the climate was that of a tropical rain forest. I'd swear a mist had begun to condense in the mid-region of the air.

It being Saturday, the air-conditioning was not switched on. Even the extractor fans were not functioning. The humidity! and the smell — ! Underneath the smell of wet mackintosh and gabardine there was a pleasant human smell of wet skin and wet hair: but underneath that pleasant smell was something less appealing: something

perhaps to put one in mind of the unwashed smell of Newgate, as described by Defoe in *Moll Flanders*.

At quarter to ten the mysterious event occurred.

Right in the middle of the middle tier someone had a fit of hysterics. I'll try to describe it. It has been etched into my memory. My hippocampi — those areas of the brain where memory is apportioned, and which in health are capable of generating new nerve cells, contrary to popular belief — are working on its recall now.

*[This is a preview. The full text is approximately 2,000 words]*