

THE RESEARCH GRANT

by

Marvin Green

Kevin was on his hands and knees in front of the produce store, searching under the cars for a nickel he had lost somewhat over a year ago.

School had just ended. Miss Grosskleiner, the science teacher, had not yet emerged from the building. She had not mentioned the summer project since April.

When he recognized some shrill voices, he turned and sighted along the crack that extended from the fire hydrant to the crates of watermelon and sweet corn. He was able to count most of the sneakers and white anklets that flashed across. He estimated thirty-six classmates. They made only one or two remarks, and he was not even sure they were about him.

It became quiet again. As soon as he put on his glasses from his shirt pocket, the world came into focus - the embossed words and numbers on the automobile tires, silver and cellophane from cigarette wrappings, a trail of yellow ticket stubs which were drifting toward the corner sewer.

Sitting on the curb, he stationed himself between Judge Boylan's Cadillac and the rear bumper of Kensington's only taxi. Across the street, the steps of the schoolhouse wavered - they bulged and contracted - as the sun reflected through the convection currents and the varying densities of the intervening air. He had known about these distortions since he was in fourth grade. Until he began reading about optics and lenses, the question had been whether objects actually bulged and contracted. In July last year it was his own discovery that air pockets are lenses. The most amazing view of the phenomenon was through razor blade slits in one of his father's shirt cardboards .

When the door opened at the top of the steps, an orange flap of Miss Grosskleiner's skirt emerged. Quickly he smoothed his hair and resumed his searching posture. The door opened all the way, and she backed out, the wind wafting her skirt high above her knees. She waved goodbye to someone inside. Then she turned and came forward. The monogram on her blouse bounced with each step downward.

For a moment, as she passed beyond the cab, she was out of his line of vision. He was able to get his glasses back into his pocket before she reappeared at the corner.

He swished his fingers through the ticket stubs and the dirt and debris in the gutter. Her heels began to tap. They came closer to him, and suddenly there was a tiny deviation in their rhythm. She had recognized him, but he did not deviate. He kept his fingers in steady sifting of the stubs.

Now her hand was on his head, tugging him by the hair, softly forcing him to look up.

The sun, directly behind her, exuded in bright flashes all around her face. It glinted through her hair, which acted as a prism and shattered the light into spectacular rainbow intervals along her cheeks and above her eyes.

She said, "Kevin." The one word, his name, entered his body through his ears, triggered his nerves, squeezed his throat and, by mysterious hormonal mechanism, absolutely paralyzed his lungs. "Kevin, did you lose something?"

He nodded. His mouth formed the words "A nickel," and he was able to expel enough air to produce an intelligible sound.

Squatting next to him and balancing herself with one finger against the fender of the Cadillac, she said, "Oh my." She bent toward the gutter, her perfume mingling with the dust he had stirred. As she shifted to one side, her face came very close to his. "I don't see it, Kevin. I think you can find it if you put on your glasses."

She stood and stepped back. The perfume remained with him. She said, "I was going to call you. I hope you've been planning our summer project. Will you come to see me?"

He nodded. His lungs were working again, and now he was able to speak. He said, "The physiology of the brain."

Her eyes narrowed so that a funnel formed between them on her forehead. She cocked her head to one side, the way she did when she was puzzled. Then abruptly she smiled. "Well! I see I have some studying to do. Give me until three tomorrow and then come over. And do wear your glasses. You look very nice with them."

She touched his head again. The feel of her hand lingered even after he could no longer hear her heels. Still on his hands and knees, he watched down the block over his shoulder. All he could see was an orange blur that oscillated left and right as it became hazier and smaller and finally disappeared.

He closed his eyes tightly. At first her calves and knees materialized. With supreme effort he distorted their curves and involuted them. He was seeing the surface of the brain. Somehow its folds and arches, in an utterly astonishing fashion that he could not yet account for, produced thoughts and ideas and the Pythagorean theorem and visions such as he was now having.

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Supper was almost over, and still he was not sure whether he should make an assertion or else a request. The fluorescent light wobbled in reflection from his milk, but suddenly it was extinguished by a corner of Dad's newspaper. Mother was leaning over the sink, scooping ice cream into their dishes.

As Mother sat down, he rapped with his knuckles against the gray and white pictures on the sports page. He said, "Say, Dad, you'll be interested to know I'm going to buy a dog."

The newspaper barely fluttered, and there was a grunt from behind it. Mother was bent over so that only the top of her head was visible. When she had her hair a certain way, she looked a little like Miss Grosskleiner. She clutched a spoon in one hand and a pencil in the other. On a page in her bridge club's notebook, she was totalling the month's expenses.

He cleared his throat to give them more time to think. "Then it's agreed," he said. "I'll use my own money, of course. I've gotten some prices from the Indianapolis Kennel."

Mother laid down her pencil and scraped the dish very thoroughly. "I'm still short a dollar and a quarter. I wish you would find it, Kevin."

"No math, please. As you know, Mother, these days I'm concentrating on biology. I suppose you've heard about Pavlov's dogs."

"I haven't. I don't actually care for dogs. I think your father can help you."

They both turned toward the newspaper. Its vertex slanted over the table at about a seventy degree angle, the upper corners curling symmetrically and forming a curve very much like the cosine graph in the calculus text. It remained perfectly stationary.

"Jim," Mother said sharply. "Help your son. He wants to know about dogs."

Dad sighed but did not lower the paper. "Very well. I'll tell him everything I know."

"Please, Dad, I was wondering if you know about Pavlov's dogs."

"I think so. Give me a few clues."

If the newspaper were not there, and if Dad could be persuaded, the two of them might persuade Mother. "Dad, I know you need this opportunity to relax. If you could talk with me for a minute, I think I can explain what I have in mind."

"Fire away, Son. I'm listening."

Mother was erasing something. She said, "I'll start over. Then I'll find it."

The refrigerator motor sputtered and turned on. A warm breeze carried all the way from the fan at the bottom, blowing half way across the room to his ankle. He went to the sink, rinsed his ice cream dish, and laid it upside down on the rubber mat. Back at the table, he leaned on one elbow and applied a reverse spin to the napkin ring, so that it rolled away and then rolled back.

He waited. When Dad turned a page, he began immediately before Dad could commence a new story. "Pavlov did some great work in the last century, Dad. Conditioned reflexes and salivation. I also want to do some work with dogs. My approach is different. I am going to study the way a dog's cerebral cortex responds to electrical stimulation."

Dad muttered, "Pavlov, you say? He's a Russian. He trained some animals. They were dogs."

"Exactly, Dad. I propose to buy a dog. Last year Miss Grosskleiner's dogs won three first prizes, so you see I'll be working with a true expert. When she was in high school, she had gerbils and won the science fair. The dog will be very helpful, because I have some new theories about the cerebral cortex."

The newspaper remained still, but Mother poked him in the elbow with the pencil. "Professor," she said, "no dogs. Please drop the subject. I do not care whether you use your own money or anyone else's. I repeat - no dogs! And that is final."

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It was 10:30, a half hour before summer bedtime. He was on his stomach in the flower bed, looking through the Grosskleiners' basement window, watching Miss Grosskleiner playing ping pong with the insurance man. She was wearing light green slacks. Whenever she leaned forward for the ball, a streak of perspiration was visible up and down the back of her blouse.

This was espionage. It was unethical, but it was excusable, not having been his intention when he set out for his evening stroll. The insurance man was no surprise. It was well known at school that she had a steady boyfriend, and he seemed a decent match, judging by his athletic skill.

Now he served. On the return he reached way back and sliced a shot that dribbled over the net. She waved, but it was futile. The ball rolled along the white line and dropped over the edge.

She laid down her paddle and curtsied and applauded. He bowed, tucking his paddle under his arm and patting his forehead

and throat with his handkerchief. He came over directly under the window. She had disappeared for an instant but now emerged again. She was carrying two small bottles of ginger ale and was wiping her face along her shoulder.

When she arrived under the window, nothing was visible except the table and the laundry basket by the furnace. Their voices were unintelligible against the crackling of the summer insects. As he got onto his knees, preparing to leave without further intrusion, her fingers showed at the bottom of the pane. The window pushed open and almost scraped his knuckles.

"I disagree," she was saying. "Pity is your word, not mine. I'm simply stating I wish some girl would take a liking to him."

The insurance man cried out, "I can't believe this. Can't you just one time drop this particular subject?"

She said, "One problem is, he's unappetizing. Scrawny little face, gigantic ears. He doesn't wear his glasses because he wants to look nice. I can't say which is worse - the way he squints or those huge thick lenses."

He was moving away, and the voices had carried. He crossed the street to take the short cut over the vacant lot. His stomach hurt, but it was purely a reaction. If during the night he could properly analyze his feelings, tomorrow the pain would be gone.

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At five minutes after three in the afternoon, Miss Gross-kleiner's footsteps sounded on the gravel outside the shed. He pushed back the bolt and opened the door without waiting for her to

knock. Her white raincoat was splotted at the shoulders. When she took off her scarf, a few drops sprinkled onto him.

He said, "How do you do. Welcome to my laboratory."

"Why, Kevin, it's beautiful. You've painted it. It is so white and clean, it's rather like a hospital."

"In a way it is a hospital, Miss Grosskleiner. At least that was my intent. Please sit over there and be comfortable." He motioned toward the card table chair he had brought from the house.

Opening her coat, she sat and with both hands on the seat leaned to and fro and looked around. "It is a hospital! That's a sterilizer, and there are your surgical instruments and your operating table. Wherever did you get them?"

"From Dr. Roger's estate. For eighteen dollars. I was going to use them in my project."

Her eyes widened, and she cocked her head and put her hand to her throat. "In your brain physiology project?"

"Yes. I was going to operate on a dog."

"On a dog! That's gruesome, Kevin. I will not allow you."

Walking around the table, he pulled away the sheet, exposing the plastic patches on the leather. He climbed up and sat with his back toward her.

"Miss Grosskleiner, I am quite aware of your ambivalence concerning vivisection. I think I can explain this to your satisfaction. First, let me assure you there is no danger whatever of my carrying out my plans. I spoke with my parents last night

and with Mother again this morning. She flatly refuses to let me buy a dog."

Miss Grosskleiner gasped. "Thank God! I never dreamed of this."

She began to say more, but he interrupted her. "I must confess I had punitive motives when I called you this morning. I suggested we meet here so I could show you my laboratory. I was going to dazzle you with the prospects of the project. Then I was going to ask you to leave and never speak with me again."

Her chair squeaked, and her feet scraped on the plywood floor. He waited for an instant, but she stayed silent.

He said, "Please pardon my back. Last night I had a strong emotional experience with you. I find it much easier if I sit this way."

His throat muscles were tautly constricted, but so far he had been able to keep his voice from faltering. He said, "I took a walk and happened to notice a light in your basement. It was unethical, of course, but I watched you playing ping pong. Although I was there no more than seven minutes, it was the end of your game. I overheard a fragment of your conversation which - which had to do with my being unappetizing."

Her chair squeaked again, and very quickly she said, "Oh, Kevin, I am so sorry. I do apologize."

Turning his head far to one side to show he was smiling, he said, "Please don't concern yourself. In fact, I appreciated learning it is a matter of indifference from an appearance

standpoint - whether I wear my glasses or leave them off. Since I'm still too young for contacts, my life will be much easier from now on."

She got up, and there was not even a sound as she came behind him and put her arms around his chest and pressed her cheek to the back of his head. "Kevin, your features will change." He felt her breath on his neck. "Many young people look funny. The nose is growing at one rate, the ears at another. I was quite ugly."

"Thank you," he replied. "I can't believe that. Maybe it's true. But would you please sit down? I find your proximity and your perfume somewhat intoxicating."

She squeezed him and released him. Her chair bumped against the wall. He closed his eyes to stifle tears that were forming.

He said, "I reflected on this problem all night. I decided it was not a matter of being funny looking. Rather I am a misfit. Some years ago my parents attempted to place me in a special school, but there were no scholarships available. And we simply did not have the money."

"Kevin!" She almost shouted it at him. "We must talk about something else. I'll be crying in one minute."

Even with his back to her and his eyes closed, he could see her opening her purse, pushing aside her car keys and her lipstick and searching for her handkerchief.

"I am a misfit," he went on. "Consider my brain project. Because I am not even thirteen, it horrifies you. I was going to do everything under supervision. There would be you and Dr.

Paisley, the veterinarian from Wheeling. I have his written procedures right here."

She said, "I know Dr. Paisley very well, Kevin, but there's one thing you have got to realize. There's absolutely no way."

"He knows you, too. He told me of your work some years ago with gerbils. He says one thin wire with tiny voltage will be totally humane. We remove the wire after only one week without any surgery. I have the anesthetics and antibiotic powder, which my cousin got for me from the pharmacy. Dr. Paisley says there are absolutely no aftereffects. He himself has done something quite like this for medical reasons."

She had gotten up while he was speaking. "Please stop, Kevin. I am going to leave now. I promise we'll find a new project. I want you to come to my house tonight. We'll both be in better control, and we'll figure out something really special."

She was at the door, looking at him for his answer. He said, "Since I'm still all fired up on the brain, I'm going to convert it into a library project."

"Eight o'clock," she said.

"No, thank you very much. I prefer to work alone this summer. I can see I was being precocious."

She left. As the door closed softly behind her, he could not hear whether she said goodbye. The sensation on his neck and her afterscent remained. He lay back on the table and blocked the overhead light with his arm. He envisioned her knees as she slid

into her car. He tried, but the image did not persist, because he was tired from having been up all night.

He was not sure whether he had fallen asleep, but now he was definitely awake and definitely aware of her presence again.

He did not make a sound. He remained motionless, so that he would not have to speak with her. Then he let one eye flicker open very slightly.

She was there with her raincoat off, and she had moved her chair right next to him at the table. Her head was bent forward and turned to one side. In her arms was a little dachshund which she was petting with her cheek. As he flicked his eye open again, a sudden burst of rain splattered against the shed.

"Come on, Kevin," she said. "I know you're awake. Please get up and shake hands with DuBarry Grosskleiner." She nudged him with her elbow. "I am going to trust you to know all the correct procedures. You and I have got to be totally humane."

He sat up, dangling his legs from the table. He took a deep breath and then stretched his neck and shook his head to clear his mind. He put on his glasses.

He reached out and stroked DuBarry's paw.

The End