

MARK ROGERS

## THE LARGE MOUSE COLLIDER

NO, THE MICE ARE OBVIOUSLY SMALL: 7.5 centimetres is ideal, with weight as close to 0.028 kilograms as possible. It is the underground tunnel, the concrete ring in which we orchestrate the collisions, that is large. 24.4 kilometres long, though necessarily narrow, polished. 140 metres under the ground.

There are open questions about their skeletal and muscular integrity. Their connective tissues, all the elastic fibres, blood vessels, nerves, and fatty cells. Their 231 bones, well recorded in the literature. At first we flung them too fast. Their terminal velocity is 56.3 kilometres per hour, and it is much better for the mice to be alive on impact.

Each rodent is tethered in place on a rubber hammock. 3 centimetres of pliable cushion to protect in the catapult phase. A system of magnetic springs and stainless Luer locks for instant release. At launch, blood pressure and pulse are observed to elevate abruptly, and they remain high for all 800 seconds of the journey. Cortisol and epinephrine levels are 11 to 18 times higher than in non-stressed conditions.

Mila, who assists with fixing the subjects into their slings and rinsing the tunnel afterwards, has two pet mice at home. Midge and Twink. She continues to take great care, plucking specimens from their trays, taking measurements, recording observations. When she first joined us, she imported a singsong style into the lab. She chatted and hummed as she worked, tapped the stylus against her handheld with miniature flourishes like a musician. She's good with data.

We have solid funding. Belgium, Norway, France, Yugoslavia (when it existed), the United Kingdom. Governments, organizations, companies. Pharmaceuticals you would not be surprised. All the large bioindustry bodies. But charities, including the better-known ones. We have racked up spending of more than 13 billion (name your currency). Spain, Switzerland, Germany. Bulgaria, though with a pause during the '90s due to training and

personnel deficiencies. Southern Slavs, you see, have only an erratic interest in the murids.

I say to her, "What's the matter?"

She says, "Nothing's the matter."

Her hair is pulled into a dry, tight bun and is receding. Its thinning has accelerated over the past 17 months. That little groove under her nose, once so elfin, has protruded to form ridges, like cartilage. The song has gone. The melody in her work.

I say to her again, "What's the matter?"

There are 11,412 pads placed around the collider, some of sponge or leather and some of semi-hard polymer. There are 4 crossing chambers containing all the detectors, counters, sensors, torsion trackers, laser calipers, gears, magnets, vibrational monitors, and taps. The launch sites are situated next to the chambers, providing for 96 varieties of impact.

"Something's the matter," I say.

Her lips are pale. Her eyes are big.

Behind the trolley with the stacked trays of mice, in a corner, are the cleaning products. Giant plastic buckets in hospital shades of green, pink, and yellow. Rolls of cloth like in a carpet warehouse. Firm-bristled brushes and stainless steel scrapers. Although the events we prepare often take place on the other side of the tunnel, under another country, there is a procedure to clean identically, regardless of station or stage of experiment, no matter if the local chamber contains detritus or not.

I have several publications to my name. On the Extensive Influx of Calcium Following Blunt Force Tissue Deformation of the Brain. Trabecular Bone Microarchitecture at Sub-Terminal Accelerations. I am usually in a celebratory mood.

"Did they die again?" I ask.

She nods.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Her face is sallow, cheeks thin, eyelids puffy. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

Each month, one or both of her pets dies. She replaces them, names them Midge and Twink, and starts over. Always Midge, always Twink.

"You're keeping the water fresh?"

She is, of course.

"And no change in diet?"

She scratches the back of her hand vigorously. The top tray is still open, pulled out on its sliders. It erupts like a bush full of starlings rattling, chattering, and squeaking. Eek! Eek! Mila pushes a button and they glide back in, vanishing with a soft, efficient click. Silence restored.

When Mila says the word “button” she stresses the second syllable, as if it is hyphenated: but-ton. She has her back to me. The trolley, sleek and black, with its array of blinking lights, has the appearance of a deck of computer servers. It purrs quietly. She just stands there.

Today we are investigating ocular damage, the gradient of injury between anterior and posterior poles. I take the specimens, strapped flat on their pouches, noses twitching, and drop them into the chutes.

I listen to the tunnel. I hear nothing—or, rather, the eerie echo of nothing. The way a deep cave states, implicitly, its enormity.

I consider what’s happening. It gets like this every 4 years, part of the cadence of our work. At first I thought the names enabled a sort of distance, dissociating them from the subjects in the lab. We don’t even give the mice numbers. But then she returns with the same cute diminutives each time. That seems to me no different than no names at all.

Knowledge accretes in increments.

She picks up a bucket and a brush. Before her, there was a tall Nordic girl, Milena, from the University of Science and Technology at Trondheim, who was also pleasant and talkative at the start. In the late ‘10s we had a Dutch assistant. Lena? Camila? It is no matter.

With a whoosh and a ping the email comes in, a data file attached. It’s just a string of digits for now. Mila, startled, knocks her bucket against the trolley. Algorithms will run across the numbers, imprinting their first layer of shape and structure. Until then, our activity is simply meaningless.