

THE NAKED MOLE RAT EXPERIMENT

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1. *State Your Problem.*

Identify the question that your experiment will attempt to answer. Asking “how” or “why” is often a fruitful way to begin.

—*The Scientific Method: A Pedantic Approach*

“Tell me, how an eight-year-old girl *suppose* to act when her father got cancer, ha?”

That’s what Mom said to the cops when they came to our house to take back the naked mole rat I stole from the National Zoo. Mom told the cops about Da being sick. Then she explained my experiment and called me a “little scientist.” The cops called her “ma’am,” but I could tell that they thought Mom’s a weird Asian lady who doesn’t speak English properly. I gave Mugi back to them so they wouldn’t arrest me for stealing federal property.

Mugi’s the naked mole rat I stole. I knew his name because he told me what it was. Animals talk to me, I can’t explain it. Auntie Jiffy—she’s my South African Auntie, she’s always saying “I’ll see you in a jiffy” when she means “I’ll see you soon”—she thought I read the *Charlotte’s Web* book she gave me for Christmas too many times. When I first told her that I could hear animals talking, she said “Oh *shame!*” She didn’t mean I should be ashamed; that was her way of saying “Aw, that’s sweet.” Then she said, “You want to be like that girl from *Charlotte’s Web*, don’t you, so you can talk to animals too?” I didn’t care what my Auntie said. I *can* talk to animals—any kind of animal.

Except for the crab in my father’s throat.

“*Cancer* is Latin for crab,” Mom told me. At first I tried to cast out

Da's crab the way Auntie Jiffy said Jesus cast demons out of Legion. When Da was napping, I stood by his bed and yelled, "Come out of the man, thou unclean crab!" He woke with a start, all mad, and said: "Deano! What's the shouting for?"

My name's Marie, actually, after Marie Curie. Mom says she's a scientist who figured out how to use radiation to kill cancer. Radiation's something Da knows a lot about; before he got sick, he was an oncologist—that's the kind of doctor who treats cancer with a special light humans can't see. At school I'm Marie, but at home I'm Deano, because when I was little I used to sing along whenever Da played Dean Martin songs in the car, and that got Da started calling me Deano. Later, I later found out that it's Dean Martin's real first name, except he spelled it "Dino." The nickname's stuck, and now I can't do anything about it.

"Sorry, Da," I said, though I wouldn't have been sorry if the crab had left my Da alone. After that, I went searching for another crab to talk to, just to see if I could. I got my chance when Mom and I were at Jade Pagoda, a Chinese supermarket in northern Virginia. While Mom stopped by the Chinese medicine counter I went up to the bubbling tanks at the back, squashed my nose against the glass, and said to a green crab, "Hey, Uncle Crab, are you okay in there?"

The crab scuttled forward, all excited, and said I was a kind girl to ask. Then he told me to tell the supermarket staff that he didn't like having those blue elastic bands wrapped around his claws. Which is how I know crabs *do* talk.

Not Da's crab, though. I wish I could've talked to it, gotten it to stop making Da's body shrink. Mom had to buy Da new pants because he lost his round Christmas-pudding belly. He lost his hair, too. He never used to wear baseball hats B.C. (before cancer). Afterwards, he wouldn't leave the house without one. When he took his hat off, the little bit of red-gold hair he had left looked like it had been spun into yellow straw.

"Da's got cancer of the esophagus," Mom told me. This was after she and Da got back from the doctor. Da had been having problems swallowing.

I didn't know what an esophagus was, so Mom explained. I kept picturing a crab squeezing Da's esophagus shut with its claws. Soon, getting that crab out was all I could think about any more.

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2. *Make Careful Observations.*

It is essential that you observe your object of study closely and keep a record of what you see. Careful observations are the foundation of scientific discovery.

—*The Scientific Method: A Pedantic Approach*

My best friend Kerrie says I'm kind of a science nerd; a science nerd who talks to animals, that's me. I blame Da for the nerd gene. For my last birthday, he got me a book called *The Scientific Method: A Pedantic Approach* that Mom said is "Eh, too advance" for a kid who's only eight. Da and I tried out lots of the experiments they suggest in the book, but that was B.C.; after Da got sick, we switched to other activities.

"More *Life on Earth*, Da?" I grabbed the remote and settled on the couch beside him.

It was a Saturday evening in early fall, in Washington, the District of Columbia, the DisCo, Da likes to say whenever anyone asks where we live. Mom was upstairs taking a long bath—her usual weekend thing. Da and I were watching nature documentaries—our new weekend thing. Da loved any show about wildlife. He was born in England and grew up in Jo'burg, and he went on lots of game drives when he was little. He left South Africa when he was a "young scrapper" (Da's words) to go to medical school in England. Mom's from Malaysia; she met Da in London when she was studying to be a nurse and he was studying to be a doctor. Da brought Mom to D.C., where I was born, and where we live now. Auntie Jiffy, Da's older sister, lives just down the road, which Mom says is "*Ai-yo*, too close."

"This is the episode with the mole rats in it." Da wagged a finger at the TV screen. "We had mole rats in South Africa."

“Is a mole rat half mole and half rat?”

“Not exactly. It’s a rodent that lives underground, like a mole. There’s a naked mole rat colony right here at the National Zoo. Maybe we’ll go see them some time.”

I liked it when Da talked about things we’d do when he got well. While he was watching *Life on Earth*, I walked over to the kitchen and peered into the freezer.

“Da!” I yelled. “What kind of ice cream today?”

Da had to eat every few hours, but he’d forget if I didn’t remind him.

“Mr. Snowman!” Da yelled back, because he knew I liked making it for him.

I scraped vanilla bean from the carton, piling three scoops one on top of the other, snowman-style, adding chocolate buttons for eyes, and an orange candy corn for a nose. Then I wrote down what Da was eating in a notebook Mom used to keep track of Da’s meals. When I asked why we had to record everything Da ate, Mom said cancer patients have to count calories just like dieters, but for the opposite reason: to make sure they don’t lose too much weight. Mom’s a nurse; she knows these things.

“Last time I always tell your father: must lose weight! Cannot be so heavy, no good for you! Now all I say is: *eat, eat, eat,*” Mom said, shaking her head.

When I got back to the living room, I handed Da his snowman. He took it without looking at it, and when he was done eating he didn’t lick the spoon like I did. Right after the bit on *Life on Earth* about mole rats, Da fell asleep.

I turned the TV off, covered Da with a blanket Mom kept by the couch, and observed him for a bit, to see if he was sleeping okay. In my journal, I wrote the time Da started his nap. Mom didn’t ask me to do that—it was my idea, I tried to keep a record of how often Da napped each day, and for how long, because I thought that if he rested more maybe he’d get stronger. After making a few more notes, I wandered out into the yard. Evenings, there’s a cardinal called Lyle who swings by the birdfeeder for sunflower seeds, and if I’m around he likes to say hi. That day, he asked

me why he hadn't seen me in a while. I told him I'd been busy looking after Da.

"It's good that you're helping," Lyle said.

"But all I do is watch TV with Da and bring him snacks."

"Nothing wrong with that. You're helping in small ways."

"I don't want to help in small ways. I want to help in a big way. I want to make Da better," I said. "I just don't know what to do."

Later that night, I hung around outside the kitchen and eavesdropped on Mom and Da when they thought I was upstairs doing my homework. I heard Mom say something about a tumor, that Da was having surgery to get it out.

"At least the tumor still small. Is a good sign," Mom said.

"The question is, what's Dr. Singam going to find when he cuts me open?" Da said.

"Eh, please! Don't talk like that, John."

"I know exactly what can go wrong, that's the trouble—I know too much," Da said.

I stole upstairs to my room after that, and instead of doing homework, I curled up on my window seat. The deck lights were on outside, so I could see the leaves scattered across the pine-wood floor. There was a time when Da used to sweep the deck every day.

I asked Da once why leaves fall, and he told me that when it gets cold, trees grow these cells along their leaf stems that nudge the leaves farther and farther away from their branches, until finally they drop off. The leaves have to die once these cells start to grow. We were in the yard, and after Da went back to raking, I picked up a yellow leaf and held it up to the light. The leaf was so pale I could see my hand through it, but I couldn't see the cells Da told me about. The wind took the leaf right out of my fingers. I watched as it whirled away, higher and higher, until it was way up beyond my reach.

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