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Mr. Lentiger's Microscopes

by Stepan Chapman

There was once a man named Mr. Lentiger. He lived in Milwaukee with his wife and two children. More than anything else, he loved to look through microscopes.

During the day he worked at a printing company. After work he'd drive to his apartment building and eat dinner with his family, saying little. Then he would vanish into his study, shut the door, and pursue his hobby, which was cellular botany.

Mr. Lentiger mail-ordered prepared slides from a catalog of educational supplies. His happiest hours were spent in scrutinizing stained and sectioned plant tissues under glass. He delighted in making meticulous drawings of the cellulose architectures preserved inside his boxes of clear rectangles.

Mr. Lentiger loved organization and detested all forms of confusion and clutter. His wife confused him constantly. His children mystified him. He therefore avoided his family as much as possible. He much preferred his stable silent world of stomatic vacuoles, microtubules, and rhodophytic chloroplasts.

Unfortunately for Mr. Lentiger, microscopes were murder on his eyes. He wore thick glasses, which corrected for astigmatism, and which he had to remove in order to stare down the barrels of his microscopes. His eye doctor had warned him repeatedly about doing close work with his glasses off, but he persisted. As a result, every few years he would return to his eye doctor's office for a new prescription and thicker lenses. A stubborn middle-aged man sacrificing his vision for his hobby.

Eventually, when he tried to renew his driver's license, the examiner tested his vision and classed him as legally blind.

"I told you this would happen," said his eye doctor.

"You were warned," said his wife.

Mr. Lentiger could have adjusted to retirement.

What depressed him was that he couldn't get his microscopes to focus. All his precious slides had turned to mush on him.

His wife got sick of having him moping around the apartment all day. She signed him up for a course of classes for the blind and drove him, five days a week, to the far side of Milwaukee. Mr. Lentiger met many other blind people. They soon dispelled all his romantic notions about the spiritual wisdom of the blind. Blind people were just as erratic and confusing as his family. Nonetheless, Mr. Lentiger did well in his classes because he enjoyed learning new skills.

He learned to memorize floor plans and how to count his steps when exploring unfamiliar public spaces. He learned to envision aerial photographs of city streets. He grasped his lessons quickly and retained them well. He learned to use a sonar cane that beeped at various pitches through an earphone. But he refused to adopt a seeing eye dog. Dogs were untidy and overemotional.

He bitterly missed his botanical slides. Some nights, he dreamed of them and woke up contemplating suicide.

His wife read him an article about artificial corneas. Mr. Lentiger wished that medical science would hurry up and perfect eye transplants.

As it turned out, new eyes weren't necessary. One April afternoon he roused himself from a nap in his armchair and discovered that his blindness had suddenly left him. His eyes were working better than ever before, working perfectly. Better than perfectly, in fact, because they now *magnified* by a power of one thousand. Mr. Lentiger had become a human microscope. He stumbled to his study and looked at a cross-section of some geranium roots. He could see every cell wall and all the fine structures of the cytoplasm. Then he stared at his fingertips for a while.

This sort of vision didn't help him to navigate,



of course. But he didn't care about that. He'd just spent a year learning to do without normal eyesight, and now he was used to it. And he was retired. His life was now ideal.

He wandered the cosmos of his apartment all day and half the night, just looking at fascinating things. Things like window sills, dust balls, drapes, his children's shoes, or scouring pads. He examined these things closely for hours. Sometimes he thought he could hear his eyes making tiny whirring sounds when they focused.

His wife tried to ignore him, even when he lay on the kitchen floor to watch the dust mites in the cupboard under the sink. She'd been ignoring him for years, but it was getting harder. Ignoring a man who lived in the same apartment was driving her to the brink of madness.

"Look at *that*," he'd say happily, gazing at the bathroom wallpaper.

Mr. Lentiger's children avoided him as usual. They'd never had a clue as to what made their father tick, and lately he hardly seemed human.

One balmy night in June, Mr. Lentiger lay in bed beside his wife and studied a crack in the ceiling, moving his gaze gradually along a groove as deep and as complex as the Grand Canyon. At midnight he dozed off. At two o'clock he fell into a dream.

In the dream he was a puffball spore, a dense but weightless sphere, just drifting through a rift in the puffball's brown shell, floating free.

As he dreamed, he sat up in bed. He stood up without waking, moved to his closet, and put on his clothes. *All* his clothes, everything in the closet, shirt after shirt, pants upon pants, coats over sweaters, until he was a ball of clothes with two bare feet.

Mr. Lentiger left the apartment and slowly drifted to the staircase, bouncing gracefully from wall to wall. Carried by the air currents, he gradually slid down the stairs and into the street.

Still dreaming that he was a spore, he wandered the lamplit streets. He was the only pedestrian to be seen. Cars drove by occasionally. Mr. Lentiger ignored them. He assumed that they were skin flakes

or luminous pollen grains or midges. He tumbled steadily along the sidewalk of Madison Street, watching for a good spot to sprout mycelia.

Just then, a freak accident ended Mr. Lentiger's life. A tank truck full of liquid oxygen was plodding north along Madison, making its weary way from the freeway to the industrial district. The driver had been on the road for thirty hours straight, fighting a losing battle with sleep deprivation, and he'd recently exhausted his supply of stimulants. Seeing a man rolling along the sidewalk, costumed as a spore, might have startled him into wakefulness. Unfortunately, he never noticed Mr. Lentiger. He fell asleep and slumped across his steering wheel. The truck turned right.

The cab of the truck plowed through the display window of an appliance store, a yard or so in front of Mr. Lentiger. Spinning slowly, shards of plate glass showered to the sidewalk and burst into sparkling clouds of particles. Mr. Lentiger's clothes protected him from the flying glass.

The truck's refrigeration tank rammed the cab, and the cab flattened against the building. The tank crumpled and split at its seams. A spreading cloudbank of white vapor washed over the street and engulfed Mr. Lentiger. In a matter of seconds, he was frozen solid. A grisly death.

But the colder his flesh, the faster his dreaming brain worked. Had a silverfish crashed into a termite egg? No. Something bigger. Had a steam boiler exploded? No. This vapor was too cold to be steam.

That termite egg was an appliance store! And he was a man! And this was Madison Street in Milwaukee! And he was dying! He tried to turn, to move his feet, to run home. He couldn't budge. Paralyzed and numb, he waited for a pain that never came.

In an agony of dread, he watched the roiling layers of milky vapor, billowing like leisurely clouds, never quite still. A minute went by. Five minutes. Nothing changed. The street was deathly silent. The cold was crushing out his breath. He couldn't cry out or turn his head.

Ten minutes. His body flattened like a pressed



flower. His mind, the only part of himself that he'd ever valued, seemed to have fallen off a cliff, seemed to be accelerating without end, toward an infinite velocity. He tried to close his eyes. They shut.

He fell to his knees. He scrambled to his feet again. He was free of the fog. He was somewhere else entirely.

He was standing on blue water, on the corrugated surface of some ocean, with no land in sight. He could move now. But the water was standing still, frozen in time. The sun was shining overhead. But the clouds weren't moving. Only him.

He thought he should look for dry land. He began to walk along the trough between two waves. One direction was as good as another. He walked for hour after hour.

Looking down at the water, he noticed something moving. He stooped over it and watched it. It was a nereis worm, a creature with spiny segments, meant for sand flats under shallow water. But this one was breathing air, creeping across the surface of the sea. Mr. Lentiger decided to follow it, in the hope that it knew where it was going.

Some time later, he found himself surrounded by worms. Some of them were as big as he was. And all were creeping in the same direction. They left him alone, so he went on walking among them.

He came to a nereis as big as a freight train. It was lying on its side, unmoving. At first he thought it was dead. But it had long gray threads trailing from the spines on its huge brown shell, and the threads were listlessly curling and uncurling themselves. Then Mr. Lentiger knew that the giant worm was dying from the sun. He began to walk around it, following its belly to its head.

The head was swollen and furrowed and pale gray, like a giant human brain. The furrows of the frontal lobes had the shape of a man's face. Mr. Lentiger walked closer. The face looked like *his* face.

"Are you a worm?" he asked it. "Or are you a brain and a spinal cord?"

"I'm dying," said the huge gray face.

"Yes, I thought so," said Mr. Lentiger. "Is there

anything I can do for you?"

The worm spoke again. "Get this *thing* off my back."

Mr. Lentiger walked to the far side of the worm. A steel microscope, half as big as the worm, was bolted to its carapace.

Mr. Lentiger climbed up the worm's back until he could reach one of the bolts. The bolt was bigger than him and rusty, but when he wrestled with the bolt head, it moved. He screwed it out. It fell to the surface of the sea. He unscrewed another. The worm sighed deeply.

He removed a third screw. The worm tried to right itself.

"Not yet!" Mr. Lentiger shouted. "I'm not done!"

The microscope fell from the worm's back, crushing Mr. Lentiger beneath it.

He woke up in his bed. His wife was shaking him.

"I had a dream," he told her.

"I could tell," she said.

He looked around the bedroom. His clothes were still in his closet.

"I can see," he said. "I'm not blind."

"Of course you aren't blind. You must have dreamed it."

"That's a relief. Where are my glasses?"

"Glasses? You've never worn glasses."

"No? What grade are the children in?"

His wife looked at him strangely. "Freshman and junior."

"They're in high school? That's terrible."

"Why is it terrible?"

"I hardly *know* them," he told her.

"That's true. You don't."

"I'm going to throw away my microscopes," he told her.

She laughed. "Good luck. You don't *have* any."

Mr. Lentiger settled back onto his pillow. "I'm glad that's settled."

His wife went back to sleep.

Tomorrow was another day.

