150 in Mouse Years

By Isaac Escovedo

Subject C57-B opened its eyes and saw the light at the end of the tunnel. The light was fluorescent and the tunnel was made of cardboard. It had been flipped on by a young and hungry researcher named Rupert. He set his clipboard down on a shiny stainless steel tabletop and surveyed the wall of 100 cages, each replete with soft straw, plentiful water, and a beautiful cardboard tube in which to hide.

Subject C57-B felt a pang in its stomach. The clawing sensation had started exactly 21 days after it had been born, when Rupert pulled C57-B away from its mother, placed it in a container on a small scale, and scratched some numbers on a paper with a pencil. C57-B curled up in a little ball and pressed itself into a corner of the container, shivering. It was cold and the lights were very bright. It weighed ten grams.

For nearly six years C57-B had lived in the small cage with the straw and the water and the cardboard. On nearly every one of those days Rupert had painstakingly measured C57-B's food, calculating every calorie to ensure that C57-B was eating just enough to function. Rupert had done the same with nearly hundreds of mice over the years. He had minutely modified their caloric intakes, run them through scales and scanners and machines that cost millions of dollars, and gently piled their little white bodies into the lab's incinerator when they died. C57-B had been Rupert's tenth mouse, and for the entirety of his professional career C57-B lived in the top left cage. Three years ago Rupert had affectionately taken to calling C57-B "Charlie".

"Good morning Charlie," he said today with a smile. Rupert pressed the tip of his finger against the bars of the cage, and Charlie crawled out of his tube to sniff it. "Happy sixth birthday," Rupert said, "I am so happy that you've been alive and healthy for so long." Charlie did not know what Rupert was saying because he did not understand English, but he liked the big hairless creature and hoped that if he ran around enough he would be rewarded with food. Rupert unlocked Charlie's cage and held him up to his eyes.

"You're a beautiful little guy," he said. "I bet you're the oldest mouse in this facility, and yet you don't look a day over three." Charlie ran in a circle on his palm and Rupert laughed and lifted the small white mouse to his lips and gently kissed it on the head. The rest of the day proceeded as normal. Rupert weighed Charlie, gently poked him and prodded him and loaded him into small machines and big ones. Then he put Charlie back in his cage and carried out the same process, sans affection, with 99 other mice. Charlie lay in his tube and watched.

At the end of the day the mice were fed, 119 calories carefully counted and gently placed in each cage. 100 mice with their heads stuffed in their bowls. After Rupert gathered his things and turned off the lights he did something unusual. Instead of leaving, he walked back to the upper left hand cage and held his lips an inch from the bars.

"Hey Charlie," he whispered. Charlie did not look up from his food. "Considering it's your birthday and all, I got you something." Rupert fumbled through his bag and brought out a small piece of aluminum foil. Inside it was a very small, very squashed piece of cake. He gingerly opened the door and placed it next to the hungry mouse. Despite barely being the size of Rupert's thumb, it was nearly as big as Charlie's head. "This technically makes your data unusable, so don't tell my boss" Rupert said. He smiled at the little white creature, then turned on his heel and strolled out of the lab.

When Charlie finally finished his meal his nostrils were met with an unfamiliar aroma. The cake sat in a dark blob and he snuffled towards it cautiously. After six seconds of investigation his nose told him it was safe to eat and he buried his face in the cake and his world exploded. Charlie's little mouse taste buds had never experienced fruit, or cheese, or anything else besides lab-refined plant-based nutrient discs. The cake tasted like mouse heaven and mouse nirvana and mouse drugs. His cage came to life with lights and colors and the stainless steel walls glowed like the sun and the straw beneath his claws felt like soft green grass and his mind floated above his body and his stomach gurgled happily. When Charlie finished eating he dug through the surrounding straw to check for crumbs and then happily collapsed on his belly. For the first time in his life he felt full.

When Rupert went to bed that night he imagined Charlie eating the birthday cake and smiled again. He hoped his gift wouldn't skew the data, felt anxiety squeeze his heart, and did some deep breathing to stave it off. 'Scientists are emotional creatures too,' he thought to himself as he drifted off to sleep. Rupert dreamt of cages, like he did most nights.

In the lab Charlie slept more deeply than he ever had before. No stomach pain woke him, even when a big truck drove by outside and the windows shook. He dreamt of cages where the walls were wide and the straw underfoot was full of food. His little mouse lungs inflated and deflated, his little mouse stomach dissolved birthday cake. His little mouse heart beat at 520 bpm. Then it slowed, and stopped, and his lungs stopped inflating and his stomach stopped working and his mind stopped dreaming.

When Rupert came into the lab the next morning he walked straight to the top left cage, poked at the bars, peered between them in confusion, and then gingerly removed the cardboard tube and poured the corpse of subject C57-B into his hand. He

weighed it, adjusted the weight so his boss wouldn't know about the cake, and indicated that subject C57-B had died of natural causes and been incinerated. He wrapped Charlie's body in paper towels, snuck him from the building, and buried him in his backyard. As Rupert put the little mouse in the ground he cried, then promised to never make the mistake of naming a lab animal again. Charlie's life consisted of six years in a small metal box. Now his corpse lay beneath the wind and rain he was incapable of even dreaming about. To the world he was an outlying data point in a medium sized study of the effects of caloric restriction on the longevity of mice. To Rupert he was a story that could not be told in fear of invalidating the findings of said study.