

## THE FERRIS EXPERIMENT

In late April of 1997, an unusual news flash on radio and television piqued José's curiosity when the name Craig Rabinowitz was mentioned. The next day pictures of him followed in the newspaper, further arousing Jose's suspicions that, because of his resemblance and physical demeanor, this man might somehow be related to a Henry Rabinowitz who worked briefly for José in the mid-1950's. All of this brought back recollections of an unusual situation.

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Early in 1955 a technician of José's left to be married and he needed a replacement immediately. In those days the Personnel Department of the V.A. Hospital, because of the great shortage of qualified technicians, insisted on selecting replacements from a very narrow pool of applicants from the Civil Service files, all of them to be appointed at the tenth step (the highest position for that grade). Soon a very tall, slightly plump, awkward and clumsy fellow appeared. He seemed to satisfy the requirements as a technician, although he did not have much experience. After several weeks of training, he was able to begin performing minor procedures in the laboratory alone. Before long, however, he started disappearing frequently for extended periods of time and it would be very hard to locate him. Upon his reappearance, he claimed to have been in the Clinical Laboratory of the hospital, at the V.A. Library, or at some related facilities at the University. These absences he adroitly justified as having occurred while he tried to improve his skills to make himself more useful in the lab.

It was around this time that the Ferris Clinic became active in helping in the artificial insemination of women having problems becoming pregnant. The specialty of the clinic was to select suitable donors who would, for a fee (\$25 to \$35) undergo a rigid physical examination and blood tests and then, upon acceptance into the program, offer their sperm when it was called for. These male donors were carefully classified by height, color of eyes and hair, and other physical and ethnological characteristics. They were also specifically coached not to yield a sample more often than every three to four days. Samples were tested for number, mobility, shape and size of their sperm. Women who wished to avail themselves of these services were usually those incapable of conceiving primarily because their own mates generally had either very low sperm counts, defective sperm, or sperm of low motility. The exact time of ovulation was determined by continuous

temperature measurements and other endocrinological tests. Unfortunately some of the sperm, even though abundant and having no obvious malformations, would fail. During a biochemical lecture of José that Dr. Ferris attended, José mentioned in the discussion that perhaps a new assay would be useful to determine sperm activity. He suggested that labeled fructose (the known sugar ingredient of sperm) be used by assaying labeled CO<sub>2</sub> formed, and that this would indicate the active usage of sugar. The idea behind this was that a normal sperm might more actively utilize the fructose than would a defective sperm, and that the total utilization would also directly indicate the total number of sperm.

To investigate if these biochemical tests could be useful, the Ferris Institute then began to supply José with unused material of different unknown potential. A telephone call from the Clinic would be made when specimens were available. José was then to dispatch a technician to the Clinic (about a mile away). Upon the messenger's return, the sperm would be placed in respiratory tubes and fed the labeled sugar, and the labeled CO<sub>2</sub> assayed. Although the test proved to be good, it turned out to be too time-consuming and expensive and, eventually, the decision was made to drop it.

During these studies several interesting developments occurred. The first involved a tall handsome physician named Roscoe, who had previously worked with José at Sam Gurin's laboratory and who prided himself on being very much of a rake and a ladies' man. One Monday morning, after a weekend of heavy carousing with a nurse whom Roscoe had picked up the previous Friday and spent the past seventy-two hours with, he appeared at José's lab bleary-eyed and exhausted. Moments after his arrival, the telephone rang. It was a call relayed from the Ferris Clinic, requesting Roscoe to appear immediately, since a patient who had selected him from the long list of donors was now ovulating. With a sigh Roscoe wondered if José might consider substituting for him at this particular session, since he was unsure that he himself would be able to perform. When José refused, Roscoe dragged himself out of the laboratory and over to the Ferris Clinic. Later he told José that he had invited one of the nurses at Ferris to come into the room and help him, but she had refused and told him that this was, as she put it, a "one-man operation"!

Another situation concerning the Ferris experiment involved José's technician Ohla, a provincial Ukrainian girl who had managed to slip into José's employ by having her sister use Ohla's name to interview for the position, present her sister's own European credentials, and then disappear while Ohla herself showed up for the job. On one particular day Ohla suddenly realized that the material she had been pipetting for the past couple

of months was human semen. (In the 1950s no automated pipetting devices were available at the hospital, and therefore all pipetting was done by mouth.) A tiny sliver of cotton was usually placed on the mouth-side of the pipette to prevent the possibility that any of the substance might pass through. Although she had been instructed repeatedly about this, Ohla was often especially careless in neglecting to use the cotton.

One day, with a shock, she discovered the nature of what she had been pipetting. Jumping up, she vigorously threw away the pipette, ran to the sink, and gargled with several disinfectant solutions, repeating the gargling eight or ten times. She swore to everyone around that, although she hadn't swallowed anything, her religious beliefs required that she employ extreme caution in protecting her reputation.

Around this time Ohla was preparing for her wedding. The groom had been selected for her by her family in a prearranged agreement, entered into with the concurrence of their local church elders. A week before the marriage Ohla came to see José, requesting a private interview with him. After they entered his office and he had closed the door, she began to cry. Weeping, she begged José to write a letter to her church elders. In it he was to explain that she would be unable to get married, since he could not grant her time away from the laboratory to go on a honeymoon. Her continuing presence would be required for the research in progress, namely the Ferris project (helping women become pregnant) along with other work which was of the greatest importance and could not be interrupted. There was nobody else, the letter was to say, who would be able to replace her. Taken aback, José calmed her as best as he could, but refused. Shortly thereafter, Ohla's wedding took place against her will and, around that time, she left José's employ.

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Meanwhile Henry Rabinowitz was often being assigned to bring specimens when the Ferris Clinic would call, and then José's staff would take care of the assays. On one very nasty day, with low temperatures and sleet falling, the telephone rang with such a call, and José sent Henry to the Clinic to pick up a specimen. Two hours later Henry was still not back, and the department had prepared everything to do the assay. Finally after three hours had gone by, Henry finally appeared. It was already almost five o'clock in the afternoon. Impatiently José asked Henry for the specimen, hoping to do at least a hurried analysis before the testing materials spoiled.

Henry looked about himself askance, suddenly realizing that he did not have the sample.

"What happened to it?" José asked, dumbfounded.

"I must have left it on the counter in the cafeteria when I stopped off for coffee!" Henry replied. "It's really cold outside, you know, and I had to stop off somewhere to get warm!"

"But don't you worry," he continued, a sudden flash of inspiration crossing his face. "Just wait here."

With that he disappeared into the bathroom, grabbing a beaker on the way. Fifteen minutes later he returned carrying the beaker, now full of semen. "Here is your sample," he shouted. "Everything's O.K. now!"

Of course the sample was useless, as the usual required data, both microscopic and clinical was not there.

José called Henry into his office. After a lengthy conversation, Henry explained that he came from a very poor family, that his father maintained a pushcart on the Camden waterfront from which he sold tobacco in order to support his family. Since Henry would be entering medical school in a couple of weeks (something José just learned from the present conversation) Henry needed more money for his expenses. It turned out that at the same time that he had first appeared for work at José's lab, he had gotten himself another job at one of the University laboratories, which he had also been working out of at the same time as he worked for José. For the past couple of months, since graduation, he had been juggling both positions, and he planned to continue doing so for the next two weeks, at which time he intended to quit and enter medical school. During his frequent and lengthy absences from José's laboratory he had been, he admitted, at the other job. He had never even gone to the Ferris Clinic that day.

José instructed him to leave immediately, advising him that he would get two weeks' pay and that he was never to return. Upon hearing this, Henry then demanded a letter which, he claimed, would enable him to get unemployment compensation. After all, he explained, José was firing him and he should therefore be entitled to collect! José pointed out that Henry had another job and that he must have lied there, too, because he had never originally mentioned that he had intended to work for only ten weeks. Had the Civil Service known of this, they would never have hired him in the first place, considering the expense of training him. What Henry told José about his father, about his second job, about going to medical school, about his previous experience in laboratory work – none of this could ever be confirmed.

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The 1997 newspaper pictures of Craig Rabinowitz who had killed his wife, along with those showing him on television, chin jutting forward, similar facial features, lumbering walk, all strongly resembled what José remembered of Henry Rabinowitz some forty years earlier, even before he heard the name. It was all enough to bring back many recollections and associate the two. At the time of this present writing, José was still inquiring to see if Henry might, perhaps, have been Craig's father or at least some other relative.