

Linda Woodbridge

## The Science Fair

Jessie was honing the adjectives in her fourth mental draft of a letter to the editor when the first apples detonated. All through the stencilling and scissoring from magenta construction paper of the letters PROGRESSIVE LOSS OF FLUIDS IN SUPERHEATED FRUIT, all through the nine attempts to hinge poster board into a triptych (masking tape, carpet tape, book-spine repair tape, coat hangers), stinging phrases had pulsed within her. And now the sinister ploth! ploth! of exploding superheated fruit announced a set-back to science.

*Dear Sir or Madam: My unremitting appeals to the Superintendent of Schools having fallen this many a year upon the ears of the hearing impaired, I write to the **Edmonton Journal** in the hope of touching the hearts of such readers as are parents of children in the public school system. Does any other tormented parent annually revolve in her angst-ridden soul that existential question. Why the Science Fair?*

When bombs went off in the oven, two nine-year-old heads snapped up sharply from their chart of apple weights. Framed in four pony-tails were two little anxious faces, one freckle-faced expatriate Yankee, one Japanese Canadian: two small scientists dreaming of Fame in the garb of selection for the Regional Science Fair. The three of them mobbed the oven; Jessie opened the door upon a cavern with applesauce stalactites. The little girls were stoic; but their faint unison "oh" bespoke despair.

*First: Science Fair projects are left entirely to the children, with parental guidance. Some parents have enough science background to make that guidance mean something: most of us don't. The Science Fair blatantly discriminates against children of less educated parents, favoring children whose parents know some science and have access, through university connections or labs where they are employed, to equipment such as microscopes or sophisticated measuring devices.*

Jessie had studied no science herself since high school biology, and the melancholy memory of winter afternoons deployed in futile

*Second: no attempt is made by the School to prepare students for their projects, to define science or distinguish it from technology, or to distinguish scientific experiment from manipulation of lab gadgetry or from mere report-writing. Thus annually we meander through corridors of poster board, beset on all sides by the mournful prospect of model volcanoes spouting clouds from concealed dry ice, tedious demonstrations of the special powers of dry cell batteries or litmus paper, and neatly-lettered reports copied by painful industry from the How and Why Book of Dinosaurs, with laborious tracings, in cobalt blue pencil-crayon, of Triceratopses and Pterodactyls. This is science? Balderdash! Beshrew the editor who would almost certainly strike "balderdash" as an archaism: "balderdash" was a fine, explosive, swash-buckling word which, like the threat to horsewhip a scoundrel on the steps of his club, deserved reviving.*

"I still think it's too bad the kitchen scale is in ounces," Katie reflected bleakly. "We were supposed to use metric. But I guess it doesn't matter now." She spoke more in sorrow than in anger.

*Third. Why are parents given no more than a week's warning that the Science Fair looms? Here are we, limping through the desolate wastes of a Canadian February, when a milk-sodden School Newsletter emerges from depth of lunch box to threaten, "Dear Parents: Remember what an outstanding success last year's Science Fair was?" and presto! You're facing an eight-day gestation period between conception of the experiment and the Big Night. If the experiment is a failure the first time—as which is not?—there's little time to repeat it: the temptation to cook the results is overwhelming. The main truth the offspring glean from this exercise is the clay-footed venality of their parents: useful information, perhaps; but is it Science?*

"I think we had enough data before the explosions to draw some conclusions about dehydration, girls." They didn't. But by morning they would: creeping out after Katie was asleep, like a felonious Santa Claus, Jessie would doctor the data sheet. She would feel a scoundrel, fit for horsewhipping on club steps, especially if she descended to the moral nadir of mimicking the kids' writing; but even forgery would be less morally soiling than recruiting the little girls as fellow-conspirators. Though they had muffed the attempt to discriminate finely among juicy apples, the Science Fair did sharpen one's awareness of degrees of tackiness: to lie for one's children was less odious than making them complicit in the lie. Time enough for them to learn cheating: they'd be Science Fair mothers themselves some day.

The ringing of the phone, just as she was winking the broiler pan out of the ruined oven, startled Jessie into slopping scalded apple pulp

over her Inuit mukluks. She swallowed the curse: Katie grew indignant if Mother uttered "swears" in front of her school friends.

Helena Frucht calling. A neighbour and fellow parent. Jessie's swallowed curse threatened to regurgitate itself. Helena would want her to bake cookies for tomorrow's Science Fair. Helena never gave more than a day's notice for baking, a tardiness which she invariably excused by claiming she had been phoning Jessie all week.

"Oh Jessie," she nasalled now. "I wonder if you could bake some cookies or bars for the Science Fair tomorrow."

"It's a little late to get started on that now, Helena. If I'd known sooner."

"I've been phoning you every morning and afternoon all week, Jessie. You never seem to be home."

"I work all day, Helena," They had had this conversation quarterly for some five years. Helena routinely professed astonishment that a woman with young children would work outside the home. She lowered her voice when she came to the words "work outside the home," as if alluding to a social disease. You phone at the last possible minute to punish me for being a working mother, Jessie grumbled inwardly. Aloud she said, "I'm afraid my oven is out of commission at the moment." Damned if it wasn't the truth.

"Well, you can just bring Oreos, then, dear." Malice crackled over the wires. Jessie usually furnished store-bought cookies for school functions, though she had never sunk to Oreos. On these occasions she would skulk along, cookies in a plain brown bag, to the table resplendent with Coconut Swirls and Nanaimo Bars over which the statuesque Helena presided like the high priestess of an Aegean mystery cult; secreting her disgraceful bundle behind somebody's brownies, Jessie would slope off, as if in the act of disposing a bastard babe upon the doorsteps of the rich; and Helena habitually brought forth Jessie's Pride of Safeway with an ostentatious flourish, centered it upon the altar among Pecan Clusters, Bon Bons Brilliance, and other offerings, and projected her nostrilly voice across the gym to hail the miscreant with a hearty, "Thanks for the Nabisco, Jessie!"

Jessie couldn't understand, with all the working mothers in the world nowadays, how her daughter had fetched up at a school where—on the evidence of Pecan Clusters and Nanaimo Bars—all the other mothers but Jessie were full-time homemakers. Or had Helena Frucht shamed them all, one by one, into staying up till dawn the night before the Science Fair, swirling their chocolate chips, blanching their pecans? Was Helena the only non-working mum in the school? Were all the rest impostors? The school was out of their neighborhood, and Jessie knew little about the mothers. If she could make friends with

them, she could find out the truth; maybe they could organize—down tools in revolt against La Frucht. But Science Fairs left so little time for friendship.

A film of sweat coated the telephone receiver where Jessie's furious fist gripped it. How many fathers have you invited to bake cookies for the Science Fair? she itched to inquire; but with Helena, what was the point? "I'll bring my Oreos," she growled.

Aisles of exhibits, each exhibit a cenotaph sacred to the memory of untold parental agony, had transformed the gym into something very like a trade fair. A curious commercialism prevailed, Jessie noted: many youngsters had decorated the white spaces of their poster board with splashy advertising culled from glossy magazines; the several petrochemical projects (a popular subject here in Alberta) were short on student diagrams of rock strata and long on stapled-up brochures courtesy of Petro Canada. Some exhibits actually resembled television commercials—WHICH DETERGENT CLEANS THE WHITEST? was one subject for scientific inquiry, while another child had investigated which cake rose higher, Duncan Hines or Betty Crocker. *Fourth: In the absence of any guidance from teachers about the nature of scientific experiment, students fall back on the only "experiments" they have ever witnessed—the bogus science of TV commercials. Can we expect breakthroughs in brain chemistry, astrophysics, molecular biology from students suckled upon notions of Science on the level of the Pepsi Challenge?*

The gymnasium seethed and pulsed with overstimulated children: a school, so mundane to a child by day, becomes a place of mystery and glamour by night, those rare evenings when the parents attend and the worlds of home and school miraculously intersect. This very afternoon, the younger children had played Pom Pom Pollaway here: at the sight of the familiar room transfigured into this fairyland the children's eyes widened with wonder, and all around the gym, among stencilled displays, the smallest scientists were pogoing into the air.

Threading her way cautiously through the carnival of science, Jessie bore a rectangular baking dish whose square of masking tape (ostensibly for dish-identification purposes) would cast into Helena Frucht's teeth the identity of the baker, JESSICA PADDOCK. There was no need, however; Helena herself manned the refreshment table like a battle station, her blush applied in perfect circles, as if stencilled. Jessie thrust her refreshments forward dashingly. "Applesauce bars," she grinned. "We cooked our results."

"Hi, Mum," said seven-year-old Eve Frucht, tagging along with Jessie. Jessie had given Eve a ride to the Science Fair, since Helena had

her tennis lesson just before. Jessie suffered from just enough working-mum's guilt to be taken advantage of by every full-time housewife in the neighbourhood when it came to chauffeuring; as a non-working mother Helena had no need to prove she didn't neglect her children, and never drove the kids anywhere. Now here she stood, aglow with tennis and blush, graciously accepting the offerings of her votaries like Ceres blessing the fruits of the earth.

Jessie surveyed the fair. What a word for it! A fair was supposed to be prize lambs and fat pigs, not titration and electromagnets. Among the exhibits, the primary youngsters bubbled and percolated, but most children over eight stood at attention beside their projects, sober and anxious, eager for adult notice. When adults stopped and questioned them about their experiments, the children's eyes shone. But mostly, the children stood searching the faces of passing adults: will this one stop? Too few stopped. How poignant, such yearning for recognition! The world was so populous a place, identities jostling: how early in life it started, the need to be recognized, to be thought worth remembering.

"May I have your attention, please." The school principal, at six foot five, commanded attention easily enough. Jessie had been delighted when Ray Burton had been named principal, but chagrined when Burton proved as egregious a purveyor of principalese—the cookie dough of oratorical styles—as any of her male predecessors.

"At this time," began Ms. Burton, "it gives me great pleasure . . ." Jessie was already tuning out. "I would like to take this opportunity . . ."

How old, how exhausted the parents looked! No doubt the Science Fair hastened the aging process, but it wasn't only that: the extreme cold, the climate's crackling dryness, and the dearth of sunlight during the short Winter days of the far north gave everyone in Edmonton a consumptive look by February. Among the slick brightly-coloured exhibits of the Science Fair, ghosts moved, with withered albino faces. In an Edmonton Winter, the snow would come and come; you wouldn't see grass for six months sometimes. The sun on that snow could be exquisite—snow that never grew slushy because it never melted and was replenished so often. The sun slicing through the corner of a copper-windowed skyscraper would reticulate the snowy streets with great glowing copper squares; and after a night of ice fog, among the gleaming towers of the Emerald City that oil had built, the bare branches of trees blessed with hoar frost made lacy the sky's deep northern blue, transfiguring the frosty metropolis into the city of the Snow Queen. But too often the sun didn't shine; the clouds got on with snowing. Early morning: no sound in the suburbs but the ringing scrape of a hand shovel, excavating the driveway again, a sharp chink-

ing sound reverberating for miles in frozen air, to be answered by another shovel and another, blocks apart, shovels harmonizing in a mournful and lonely companionship, like the howling of coyotes rendered in percussion. By February everyone ached, from shovelling, from heaving up garage doors whose lubricating oil was frozen, from hunching up shoulders against the cold. In February, your confidence in living 'til Spring began to flag.

Primitive societies, Jessie recalled, stage fertility festivals in such desperate seasons. At the Winter solstice, Edmonton had its rituals for driving back the forces of darkness—few residential neighbourhoods on the planet can boast more exterior Christmas lights than Edmonton's. (The lights in the evergreen shrubs are quickly interred in falling snow, and make circles deep in the greenery, muted gaudy glow-rings beneath the curving snow.) But where was Edmonton's pre-Spring fertility rite, where its Feast of the Lupercal? This was it, Jessie sighed. The Science Fair was as close as they got.

Was it the dregs of racial memory that prompted this yearly communal effort, this agony of family life? Was it Druids and runes, subconsciously recollected, that prompted parents so exactingly to stencil letters forming words they little understood, talismanic signs upon boards of purest white? Was it to bring back Spring that these matrons, sorry maenads, sagged here among the test tubes? If your climate didn't permit dancing on the greensward or ingathering of hawthorn earlier than July, you exploded superheated fruit in February.

Emerging from reverie to attend to Ms. Burton's paeon of gratitude to the hospitality committee (Helena, beaming, accepting applause, a beacon of virtue above the divinity fudge), Jessie grew aware of being herded with parents and scientists toward the gymnasium stage, which was veiled as always in tatty red velvet curtains so short that at operettas they invariably exposed to an audience of parents the feet of pirates, pixies, and revellers, milling about in excitement before Act I. The basketball back-board, cranked out of the way for the occasion, hovered above the curtains on a level with the white-faced clock in its protective gymnasium cage.

Jessie felt a hand slip into hers and looked down at Katie's sad face. "We didn't make it to the Regional," Katie said. "Never mind," Jessie crooned. "Next year you will."

The principal, that Penthisilea, strode from the gym floor to the stage as ordinary mortals step onto curbs. "At this time we would like to take this opportunity . . ." she began. As she spoke, the curtain drew back in a series of jerks: shoop, shoop, shoop. And there it stood revealed, some four feet high, an Everest of fissured grey papier mache

slumbering like a leprous elephant, flanked by the officious bespectacled twelve-year-olds who had fathered it. The volcano.

When the volcano was ignited, the younger children who were not too tired leapt about and cheered, for the perpetrators had gone so far as to beam a red light onto the listless clouds of dry ice vapor. Dreary unwilling Pompeiians, the parents applauded wanly. Jessie's eyes moved over the crowd, the pale drawn faces, the thinning hair, the unstitched hems, the scuffed shoes, all lurid in the merciless red glow. Was it for this that the children so earnestly strove, locking horns with mathematics, with mini-computers, with Language Across the Curriculum? (Why dost thou so earnestly provoke The Years to bring the inevitable yoke . . . ?) Was this educational steeplechase *designed* to turn pretty children into crumbling adults?

What she felt now wasn't irritation with the Public School Board or rage with Helena Frucht or impatience with Science. It was pity, and love. Pity and love for the parents, giving up their recuperative evenings for the absurd ritual of the science fair, the very absurdity of the act a test of devotion, an expression of love for their children. Upon such sacrifices, the gods themselves throw incense.

All over the gym, little hands stole into the hands of tired mothers. Modern life provides but pitiable festivals to draw families together, Jessie thought; but families will seize what festivals they have. Even in mutually surviving the science fair lay a kind of communality; mothers and daughters together in the tawdry red light of the volcano.