

WILLIAM D. SHUNN

KEVIN17

i. From the diaries of Richard L. Metcalfe, Ph.D.

MONDAY, APRIL 7, 2025. It's the first day of public school for my little flock of Kevins, a landmark date in our experiment -- and for some reason I'm unable to put away the gun.

Looking back through these diaries, I see that it was August 13, 2018 -another Monday -- that my predecessor used this gun to splatter his brains across the plate-glass window opposite this desk, like some mad expressionist splashing housepaints across a giant canvas. I've never much liked Mondays, either, actually.

Before me rises majestic Mount Timpanogos, possibly the most striking mountain in Utah, the mythical Indian maid who sleeps atop still shrouded beneath her sparkling mantle of snow. The sky is a deep azure, the same color as my little Kevins' eyes, and the mountain's flanks are swathed in a brilliant pine green.

I find it difficult to believe that anyone could kill himself in sight of such splendor, but Jacob Kellerman did. As if to spite Nature herself.

He called himself Jacob Kellerman, but today I can think of him only by his birth name -- Lawrence^[sub 1]. Today . . . as the twenty-three boys we cloned over the summer of 2013 venture into the world for the first time. The day he anticipated for so long, but in the end was not strong enough to witness.

Today . . . as I regard what to the Utes is a sacred mountain . . . as I toy with the .38 automatic that took Lawrence^[sub 1]'s life.

I expect Lauren Atwater any time, condemning this newest cruelty of mine. The boys were farmed out over the weekend, and she wasn't told they were going. She

won't be happy.

But she's a scientist. She'll follow this phase of the experiment closely, despite herself. She takes an interest in the boys already that's more than clinical. I wonder how much she knows? I'm sure she suspects more than she lets on. I wonder. I wonder . . .

I wonder how the barrel of this gun would feel pressed against my temple? A cold circle of death . . . an icy kiss . . . ? I wonder what we'll learn about Barkakati's malady, the disorder that killed Jacob Kellerman. I wonder what we'll learn from our scrawny little towheaded Kevins.

No one will take a greater interest in the answers than I. That much I know, if nothing else.

ii. Kevin^[sub 17]

"Class," said Mrs. Fripp, "today we'd like to welcome a new student."

Kevin stared at his smooth, dully reflective desktop, a slow terror building

inside him. He could feel the eyes of the forty other students. His cheek burned where his new mother had kissed him when she dropped him off at school, and he was sure it had left a mark that everyone could see. He had never had a mother before, or a father either. He didn't think he liked it. He knew he didn't like this school. It was in Camden, New Jersey, across the Delaware from Philadelphia-- twenty-one hundred miles from Orem, Utah. Too far, too far . . . he'd never see home again . . . never see his brothers . . .

"Will you write your name for us, please, Kevin, so we can get to know you?" said Mrs. Fripp. Her face was grainy with too much makeup, and blue mascara clotted in her eyelashes. She was old. Kevin thought she might be as old as Dr. Metcalfe, the oldest person he knew -- mid-forties. "Your stylus is inside your desk."

Kevin sat in the next-to-last row. Children were craning to watch him, whispering. Fighting the urge to flee, Kevin found his lightpen. It was an old model, too fat, like the kind he and his brothers had used when they were three and first learning to write. He wrote his name quickly but with care, not looking up when he finished. From habit he had almost written "Kevin Seventeen," but then he remembered how Dr. Metcalfe had said he should write his name from now on. The neat letters glowed on his desktop.

Mrs. Fripp touched a button at her console, and Kevin's writing appeared on the matte-black viewboard at the front of the room, amid silhouetted ducks and rabbits cut from holographic foil. "Kevin Severton," she read, smiling to the class with dark red lips. "Kevin has just moved here from Utah. Who can tell us where Utah is? Yes, Felicia?"

"It's way out in the boondoggles," said a dark-skinned girl with straggling black hair. Kevin had never seen anyone with dark skin back home at the Institute.

"Well, hmm, I suppose," said Mrs. Fripp, still smiling. "Perhaps we should study Utah in our next geography unit, hmm? But class, Kevin is a special child, and I hope you'll be ultra-nice to him. Help him feel at home."

Something hit Kevin in the back of the head. "You're special, huh?" whispered a sneering voice from behind him. "What are you, some kind of disfunk? You a crack baby, or what? They give your mother the chair, crack baby? That why you're here?"

The boy thumped Kevin again with his lightpen. Kevin didn't dare tell him to stop. He didn't understand what the boy was saying, but the mention of a mother made him think about Dr. Atwater. He missed Dr. Atwater a lot. He missed Dr. Metcalfe, too, though he wasn't always a nice man, but most of all he missed his

brothers, especially Kevin^[sub 9]. He was never going to see them again, any of them. He felt like crying.

"Kevin has a birthday later this week, class," said Mrs. Fripp. "He's going to be eleven, so you can all look forward to cake Friday during our social-skills unit. Now, let's all bring up our current math unit on our desktops, shall we? We were learning about unions and intersections of sets when we left off last week."

Kevin closed his eyes, his lower lip beginning to tremble. He and his brothers had been learning integral calculus a week ago. He wondered where his brothers were, if they were as scared and lonely as he was. He wished he were away from this place. He wished he were anywhere but here. Even being dead would be better than being here . . .

The lightpen struck him again. "Happy birthday, disfunk," whispered the sneering boy.

iii. From the diaries of Richard L. Metcalfe, Ph.D.

Wednesday, April 9, 2025. As the initial reports filter in this morning, my thoughts are troubled. Lauren's been in to see me at least twice a day since Monday, and her ravings about how I plan to kill the boys off haven't helped matters any. Perhaps a brief review of this experiment and its objectives will help impose some order on my thoughts.

Barkakati's malady is a psychological disorder first described in the late 1890s by Dr. Salahuddin Barkakati of Calcutta. It manifests itself shortly before puberty, when its victims begin to develop a profound sense of despair and self-loathing. Attempts to injure themselves are common. The victims are invariably male, as Barkakati noted, and rarely survive into adulthood unless institutionalized. The disorder runs in families.

We know today that Barkakati's malady is transmitted via a recessive gene, and that penetrance for the trait when a recessive-recessive pair is present runs close to 98%. We also know that regular applications of estrogen seem to ameliorate the affects of the disorder somewhat.

In 1972 Dr. Ian Rodgers, together with his widowed sister, Dr. Enid Rodgers Lawrence, both biologists, embarked on a clandestine and highly unethical experiment. The Barkakati gene seemed to run in their family -had killed an older brother, in fact. Their object was to study the course of the malady, and possible cures, under controlled conditions.

They repeatedly collected ripe oocytes from Enid's ovaries hours before she was due to ovulate. These barely mature eggs were then fertilized in vitro with Ian's sperm. The resulting embryos were frozen after two or three cell divisions, with a DNA sample taken from each.

Ian and Enid each carried one of the recessive genes, so it followed that a quarter of their embryos would end up with the recessive-recessive pair. When they had isolated such an embryo, they thawed it, allowed it to progress to the 32-blastomere stage, then dissociated these thirty-two cells with applications

of a protein-digesting enzyme.

The other frozen embryos were thawed, and their inner-cell mass removed. A Barkakati-carrying cell was inserted into each of these enucleated blastocysts, where it began dividing like a freshly fertilized embryo. These cloned embryos were frozen, then thawed one by one over the next several years and introduced into Enid's uterus via the cervical canal.

Only four of these genetically identical embryos were carried to term. The first, Lawrence^[sub 1], was born in 1978, the last-- and certainly most unusual -- Lawrence^[sub 4], in 1985 All but Lawrence^[sub 3] survived to adulthood.

The Rodgers Institute, which began with a tiny lab in the University of Utah's Research Park flourished in the 1990s with the development of several patented strains of waste-consuming bacteria. Lawrence^[sub 1] had almost unlimited funds at his disposal when he inherited the Institute in 2007-- and recruited Lauren and me to help him repeat Ian and Enid's initial experiment.

Now Lauren wants us to abort. I can't let that happen. She doesn't understand the importance of our work, the necessity of duplicating the conditions of the original experiment as closely as possible. In fact, she doesn't even know about the original experiment -- though she's a good enough scientist to suspect something, I'm afraid.

The Kevin series are genetically very similar to the Lawrences. We are using them to learn whether environment wields any influence on Barkakati's malady, or if its effects are exclusively hereditary.

This end overrides any other concerns. It must. My hands are shaking. This office is three stories up. I've polarized the plate glass so I can't see out, can't contemplate my mountain and its sleeping maiden. I hate to do it, but I had to. Sometimes I really despise myself -- and it's a long way to the ground.

iv. Kevin^[sub 17]

Kevin trudged through the dirty snow at the edge of the playground. It was his third day in Camden, and his new mother had laced his boots up so tightly that morning that he had been unable to undo the knots when he arrived at school. When he asked permission to use the restroom, he had clunked down the aisle like Paul Bunyan in seven-league boots, then clunked back while the other students whispered and tittered behind their hands.

Now it was the morning recess, which meant only three-quarters of the day remained. Three-quarters of six-and-a-half hours was . . . four hours, fifty-two minutes, and thirty seconds. Too long, too long. He wanted to lie down in the snow . . . pull it over the top of him . . . just go away until school was over
. . .

The electric buses the brought the preschoolers had arrived, and the smell of ozone was heavy in the air. Kevin was watching the small children scurry into the building when something cold and yielding and metallic hit him in the side

of the head.

"Hey, disfunk!" It was Jeremy Jones, the boy who sat behind Kevin in class. Jeremy caught the Mylar playground ball on the rebound. He was standing on the wet blacktop about ten feet away with several of his friends. "You're supposed to catch the ball, crack baby. You flunk recess. Better get inside with the other babies."

Jeremy's friends laughed. Kevin wanted to run, but he couldn't move. Dirty water trickled down his cheek. "Lookit the crack baby cry!" someone said, pointing.

"Mrs. Frizzhead says we're supposed to be mega-careful around you, disfunk," said Jeremy, advancing, casually dribbling the Mylar ball. "Says we're not supposed to hurt you. Whatsamatter? You on the skids or what?"

Kevin knew a lot of things. He knew how to integrate nth-order polynomials. He could describe the economic forces strangling the region's steel industry. He even knew all about the virulent SKIDS epidemic --suppressokinesthetic immune deficiency syndrome, the first symptoms of which were loss of motor sense in the joints and limbs --and could describe the most common vectors by which it was transmitted.

But he didn't know why these boys hated him-- and he didn't know why he felt frozen, like he couldn't move.

Jeremy heaved the ball suddenly, two-handed, and it struck Kevin in the face. Kevin fell and landed on his butt in the slushy snow. Real tears trickled down his cheeks.

"We're gonna get you, skid kid," said Jeremy viciously, while all around him his friends laughed.

A tone sounded the end of recess. The boys left Kevin sitting in the snow, crying, where he could think only of blackness, and how lovely it would be to visit it.

v. From the diaries of Richard L. Metcalfe, Ph.D.

Thursday, April 10, 2025. Lauren Atwater just left, but I can still hear her voice as she came barging into the room: "Kevin⁹ is dead, you bastard. Kevin²¹ is in intensive care. Kevin³, Kevin¹⁴, and Kevin²⁰ have all been hospitalized as well. I hope you're satisfied."

I knew this already, of course, but I was definitely not satisfied.

Our foster families file daily reports on their new sons' moods and temperaments, and we get detailed reports from their teachers on any incidents that may take place at school. We've paid well for this information -- \$250,000 grants to each district hosting a Kevin, plus assurances that our boys carry no blood-borne diseases such as SKIDS. We both follow the reports closely.

But Lauren knows the big secret now. I see it by the cold flashing fury in her eyes. Her maternal instincts are beginning to surface -- and they're doing it with a vengeance.

She's not their biological mother, of course, but rather their genetic mother. Every woman employed at the Institute has contributed ova over the years, just as the men donate their semen. Acquiring Lauren's genetic material was a routine matter, and carrying her cloned children to term in artificial placentae only slightly less so.

Lauren -- whose birth name is Lawrence⁴ -- is unique among Ian and Enid's offspring. She was created as a contingency, by bathing the embryo in Enid's womb with estrogen before the onset of its sexual differentiation, to provide a reliable source of Barkakati-carrying eggs for future experimentation.

Lauren was given up for adoption soon after birth, but the Institute kept close tabs on her. When she received her doctorate in genetics --no real surprise, given the frequency with which monozygotic twins reared apart have been shown to live parallel lives -- the Rodgers Institute recruited her immediately.

The males of the Lawrence series -- unlike Lauren -- were raised knowing precisely who they were and how they came to be. They grew up in an accelerated learning environment, sheltered from the world -- until 1991, when the rest of the scientific community began asking the wrong questions about activities at the Institute. In a panic, Ian and Enid sent the three boys to foster homes.

The two older boys were on estrogen by then. Lawrence³ was due to start soon after, but his new parents didn't take the Institute's warnings, nor the medication it supplied, seriously enough.

Lawrence³ didn't fit in at his new school. He had no friends. He was picked on, persecuted, tormented. He drank a quart of paint thinner in the attic of his new home one night and wasn't discovered until late the next morning.

We've tried to raise our Kevins exactly as the Lawrences were raised. They share quarters in groups of three and four. They have been sent away at roughly the same age. What they don't know, that the Lawrences did, is that they carry the Barkakati gene.

Can any of them beat Barkakati's malady on his own? That's our biggest question.

"Estrogen treatments are not pleasant. They leave the subjects moody and ill-tempered, change the pitch of the voice, cause some breast development which makes the chest sore and tender. Is there a better way to tame the disorder?"

One of our boys is dead. Four more are injured, one seriously. And Lauren, a genetic male with runaway maternal instincts, is trying to disrupt the whole experiment.

If she knows how similar her DNA is to that of the Kevin series, then she may suspect that her eggs were fertilized with sperm from a donor genetically identical to herself. Jacob Kellerman underwent plastic surgery to reconstruct the bones of his face before Lauren ever met him, and he always kept his blond hair dyed black, but I wonder if she saw through the disguise?

I wonder how strong her own self-hate is?

She's boarding a shuttle for Philly. I can't stop her. Kevin[sub 9] and Kevin[sub 17] were unusually close. Kevin[sub 17] idolized his older brother, adopted many behavioral cues from him. I'm sure Lauren considers Kevin[sub 17] the likeliest candidate for our next successful suicide.

She's sure the experiment has failed, but she doesn't understand. The experiment will not be a failure until the last boy is dead.

Look at this hand. I'm trembling like a fault line. The slumbering maid atop Mount Timpanogos is shrouded in mist this afternoon. The Utes say the gods have placed her heart in the center of the mountain. I saw it once, years ago, before the National Park System folded -- a massive double stalactite resembling a human heart, backlit by red floodlights deep within Timpanogos Cave.

Sometimes, when my medication leaves me surly and confused, I think that I'm the maiden, that it's my heart there under the mountain. I have no better explanation for where it's gone.

Ah, well. Let Lauren do what she will. I suppose we can afford to sacrifice one boy without upsetting the experiment.

Still, I tend to doubt she'll be there in time.

vi. Kevin[sub 17]

"Kevin! Kevin!" The voice was low, urgent; a hand tugged at the sleeve of his jacket.

Kevin turned. The air was cold, but the sun shone brightly. His new mother had just dropped him off at school, and her car was humming away, puffing ozone. Kevin didn't want her to leave. He didn't like her nearly as much as he did Dr.

Atwater, but he had a terrible feeling inside and didn't want to be left alone.

It was as if something awful had happened, or would happen, or both . . . and there was darkness at the edges of his vision . . . creeping in . . .

"Kevin, I gotta talk to you!" It was a boy from his class named Erik Hofstaedtler. Erik's hair stood up in back in a permanent rocket-tail, and his eyes bulged slightly due to corrective surgery, making him resemble a bug. "Jeremy and Herve and them are looking for you. They said they're gonna crash your system, as a birthday present!"

His birthday. Kevin felt dizzy, nauseated. He was eleven today -- he had forgotten -- and he was going to die. But he found he wasn't surprised. The blackness crept in closer around his eyes . . .

"Kevin! Kevin! Are you okay?" Erik looked around as anxiously as if they were in the path of a speeding train. "Don't panic, huh? Come and sit down."

Erik led Kevin through the milling crowd of children to a bench at the side of the school, and they sat. Erik drew an old pocketknife from his coat and began

absently cleaning his fingernails, apparently a nervous habit. "You can beat them, Kevin. You're the smartest kid in class by a long launch, and they're totally wiped upstairs. You scare them. Why else would they hate you so much?"

"I . . . I don't know," said Kevin, squeezing shut his eyes. The names they called him were cycling through his head -- disfunk, crack baby, space invader, skid kid . . .

"Listen, Kevin, you can outsmart them. You've got to. They pick on me, too, but I can't stop them! You can!"

Kevin looked at Erik, and saw something that shocked him. Erik was staring at Kevin the same way Kevin knew he used to stare at his older brother Kevin[sub 9]. Erik, unconsciously cleaning dirt from his fingernails, was waiting for Kevin to save them both.

Skid kid . . . toy boy . . .

"I . . . I can't," Kevin said, his heart aching, and the blackness around him seemed to swell. It was coming to get him, swallowing him, enfolding him . . .

"Kevin, please." Unshed tears glimmered in the comers of Erik's eyes. "You've got to."

A knot of boys suddenly? rounded the corner of the school. "There you are, you little crack baby," sad Jeremy Jones, smacking one fist into the other.

Erik turned white. And the blackness in Kevin's vision seemed to harden. He found he didn't really want to die. "Give me your knife," he said under his breath.

His hands were trembling as Erik set the pocketknife in his palm.

"Stand up," said Jeremy, stopping before them with his fists on his hips and five other boys clustered behind him in a tight phalanx. Spectators were beginning to gather. "Come on and stand up, disfunk! Or are the brains in your butt too heavy?"

Crack baby . . . skid kid skid kid . . .

Kevin slashed the knife blade across the fingers of his open-palmed left hand. Then he stood up.

Jeremy stared with wide eyes as blood dripped from Kevin's hand. "Hey, what is that?" he said, shaken but trying to hide it. "Some twisted Utah crack baby ritual?"

Kevin moved as fast as he could. He ran straight at Jeremy, jumped on him, crammed the bloody fingers of his left hand into the boy's mouth as they both toppled over. Jeremy gagged, tried to scream. Kevin leaned on Jeremy's face with his free hand, forcing his fingers to the back of the boy's throat. Then Jeremy's friends were pulling. Kevin off, and Jeremy sat up, spitting blood from his mouth, choking. "You're really crashed now, disfunk."

"You were right yesterday, you know," said Kevin, struggling to free himself. He

wrenched loose his left arm and thrust forward his hand. "I have it. I'm a skid kid. Now you are, too."

Jeremy's friends released Kevin, backed away fast. The semicircle of watching children widened, too.

Jeremy didn't move. A dark, wet stain spread out from the crotch of his pants.

"Have a nice life," said Kevin and walked away. The day really was beautiful. He hadn't noticed it earlier, but it was. The sunlight felt good on his face.

Very, very good.

vii. From the diaries of Richard L. Metcalfe, Ph.D.

Friday, April 11, 2025. The boys are coming home. And here I am playing with this stupid gun again.

There's no point in keeping them away after what happened this morning in Camden. Kevin[sub 17] Who'd have thought he had it in him?

There's nothing in our literature on Barkakati's malady to explain his behavior. It's as if he just . . . decided not to give in to the gene, fought back. Won.

Lauren arrived or, the scene not long after the incident and called me. I watched her cry on the phone -- don't ask me why she did. She should have been happy. She asked if I was satisfied yet, and I said that I was. All these years, she's accused me of putting my faith in the scientific method and nothing else, and of course she's been right. I was raised on the scientific method. Growing up, it was my only religion. All my life I've known no other god.

As I gaze out at the mountain -- radiant, magnificent in the late afternoon light -- I feel pity for the Indian maid who sleeps on top. My god has returned my heart

Looking back, it seems so silly now, the way I've spent my life. Living in fear, trying to justify the fact that I'm still alive. Forever toying with this gun, as if it were a riddle in need of deciphering -- the gun that killed my older brother.

Kevin[sub 17] has shown me hope. Hope that I can be free of the estrogen that has kept me prisoner since I was eleven. Hope that I, too, can face down the Barkakati demon lurking in my DNA.

Hope that I will have many, many years to learn to deal with the guilt crashing down all around me.

I am Richard Metcalfe no longer. Call me Lawrence[sub 2].