Eagles and Mice

By David Rathmann-Bloch

When I was little, my parents used to take me to the Coyote Point Museum, in San Mateo, California. We watched the skunks loping around their cage, the otters chomping the fish, and the light glinting off the rainbow display of water bottles, newly recycled and filled with food coloring. Inside one of the dimly lit rooms, we walked up and down, looking at models of the different habitat biomes, talking about how each animal had a unique role in the ecosystem. My father answered all my questions.

In the center of one room was a great golden eagle, soaring over a small, grey mountain. If you were to walk up to the mountain, you would realize that it was made up of many kinds of small animals. Stuffed snakes, birds, squirrels, rabbits, and rats were piled from the floor almost to the ceiling, like an altar. It wasn't until later that I realized what this signified.

Last month, I toured a groundbreaking research company. It manufactures medicines and chemicals, including anti-cancer agents that save lives. I remember the man in the publicity poster, how he smiled, defying death, free of his lymphoma and glad to be returning to coaching soccer. I walked into the lab and watched a giant yellow robot lifting protein samples in order to test their chemical makeup. I looked, fascinated, from the controlling computer to one of the churning, reddish containers of genetically modified cells--cells that would create the drugs that saved lives.

I turned a corner, and the smell of mouse food, a little like duck soup, wafted into my nose. Hundreds upon hundreds of mouse cages were wheeled around in carts, on their way to be cleaned or to have their bedding changed, or just to transport mice from one room to the next. I went with the mice into one of the rooms, and a young scientist told me about her mouse-scanning technology. "And we can put a mouse through all of these tests a hundred times without hurting it. We have the biggest rodent MRI-scanner magnet in the world, and some of the most powerful ultrasound--all for an animal as small as a mouse!"

When we finally saw the MRI scanner, which consisted of a metal disk the size of a washing machine with a tiny tunnel that was only the size of a matchbox, we were amazed. "It's too small to put an arm in. The biggest animal we can fit is a small rabbit." She told us about how all the mice were genetically identical except for whatever gene the scientists were studying.

We said goodbye and went to the next room, a starkly lit laboratory with two cages full of mice. Some were black and some were white; all were small, furry, and gentle. I noticed that the food was sitting on the ceilings of the cages, with about half of the mice jumping up and climbing around, trying to find a good cube of plant matter to nibble. The rest of the mice just sat listlessly in corners. When we asked about the food, the scientist told us, "They love to climb, and it keeps them healthy and fit." She said that scientists in her lab were studying the effects of ALS in mice. Those that could not move were suffering from--and had been specially bred to contract--ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. I wondered how many generations of mice had been wheeled through these doors, paralyzed.

I looked back through the crisp, glass window and watched the sunlight dance on the picture of the smiling soccer coach. Then I turned again to look through the plastic bars of the mouse cage, at a thin little mouse with watery eyes. I realized that the scientists, the coach, and I were the eagle.

Mr. Rathmann-Bloch wrote "Eagles and Mice" when he was in the sixth grade at The Nueva School, in Hillsborough, California.