

Seeing Stars

By

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FADE IN ON:

INT. GARAGE SCIENCE LAB - DAY

A FROG basks in a water filled PETRIE dish. Underneath: a dish towel. Around both: plastic walls.

The frog breathes in. Breathes out. Blinks. Serene.

Until: a PENCIL intrudes, and pokes the poor amphibian's side. It hops to avoid the sharp point.

The Pencil hesitates, re-aims. Before it can strike again, a voice rings out:

ANDREW (O.S.)

Stop!

ANDREW CULLIN (30s) grabs ROBERT ESCKOW's (50s) arm.

A white science smock billows around Andrew's thin frame. Stocky and world-weary, Robert has no uniform. For him, plaid shirt and khakis is enough.

Around them, a science lab BEEPS. The tech's cobbled together: old PCs, and duct tape. A FURNACE in the corner testifies - this space used to be someone's garage.

Robert pulls free of Andrew, glares.

ROBERT

Don't you want to finish this test trial?

ANDREW

That's why I asked you here. But don't poke Kermit so hard!

Robert rolls his eyes, groans.

ROBERT

You had to name him, didn't you?
"Kermit"? Real creative, bro.

ANDREW

I didn't. Bobby did.

Robert taps his pencil against "Kermit's" cage, causing the frog to jump. Long and thin, the cage extends the length of the table it rests on.

ROBERT

You let your son see the test subject?
Why?

ANDREW

He wanted to see what I've been doing every day. Who am I to tell him no?

ROBERT

No responsible father would let their kid in here. Didn't you say his condition's getting worse?

ANDREW

Bobby loved the visit! There's no harm.

ROBERT

Harm's not the half of it. You said these days he could barely walk!

Grabbing Kermit's foot, Robert fiddles with the cord to ensure it's snug.

ROBERT

Okay, Test Sub - I mean, "Kermit". Show us humans what you got!

Flipping the pencil to the eraser side, Robert pokes the frog again. This time, in the head.

The annoyed amphibian jumps.

Feet away, a PC BEEPS and spits out paper, like an EEG. Andrew picks it up - reads.

ANDREW

Shit. Zero difference.

Robert raises an eyebrow.

ROBERT

You sure?

ANDREW

It properly registered pain occurred. But as to *where*, the sensor isn't picking up.

ROBERT

Maybe there's a minimum threshold?
(to the frog)
Everything's riding on your green back.
So brace yourself, buddy - go!

Robert pokes Kermit in the butt. Pointy pencil side.

ANDREW

I told you - be gentle!

The frog hops towards the far end of the cage to escape.

The PC spits more paper out. Robert grins at Andrew,.

ROBERT

Don't keep me in suspense. Did the
goosing work?

Andrew reads, shakes his head no.

ANDREW

Sorry, I'm calling it. This experiment's
DOA.

MOMENTS LATER

Robert arranges BEAKERS at a counter.

Andrew refreshes Kermit's cage with new towel. Detaching the cord from its toe, he fondly scratches between the frog's bulging eyes.

ANDREW

Sorry 'bout all that grief, Kermie. As
Bobby's pet, I promise I'll buy you a new
tank tomorrow. The fifty-five gallon
type. With a pond, sand and ferns. Better
surroundings than this place...

Andrew's voice trails off. He's talking about the garage for himself, too.

Robert furiously wipes TEST TUBES. Glass clinks.

ROBERT

You can't put our test subject out to
pasture. We're nowhere near done yet!

Andrew glances up from the cage, resigned.

ANDREW

Yes we are. Your algorithm didn't work!

ROBERT

Bullshit! We recorded the test subject's
sensation of pain. That's half the
distance, right?

ANDREW

That glass is half empty, Rob. We need to
be able to record the *source* of pain in
any patient, avoiding subjectivity...

ROBERT

Even if they can't talk. That's the goal,
and we can't quit now. There's plenty
more modalities to try!

Robert holds up a glass bottle, filled with BLUE LIQUID.

ROBERT

Remember your theory about how pain
signals might be translatable to skin
pigmentation? Since the sensor's a bust,
why don't we give this goo a shot?

ANDREW

"Theory's" the operative word. We have no
idea how poisonous that stuff is!

ROBERT

Which is why Kermit's our valued guest.

Robert strides towards the frog's cage. Andrew jumps up,
blocks his way. The argument escalates... Fast.

ANDREW

Don't poison my son's pet!

ROBERT

You're prepared to throw away years of
work? Buy a new frog. Bobby'll never
know.

ANDREW

On the long shot my pigmentation theory
works, then what? It'll take years of
human trials before it reaches market. By
then-

Demoralized, Andrew plops down - hugs Kermit's tank.
Robert's face melts, too.

ROBERT

By then, Bobby will be-

ANDREW

Gone.

ROBERT

(sighs)

Look, Drew - both our worlds ride on
this. You have Bobby's... condition. And
I have -

He sets the bottle of blue liquid down.

ROBERT

Nothing left to look forward to. Two
Ph'd's, and where am I?

He waves hopeless hands around the room.

ROBERT

I can't get a research grant. The best
space I can rent is this?!? My mortgage
is overdue, for Christ sake. My kid's
graduating high school next week! He
wants to be a research scientist -

(makes a face)

Like his dear old dad. But why would he
want *this* life? I can't even afford to
send my kid to school!

Robert chokes back a sob. Andrew zeroes in for a hug.

ANDREW

I understand. Really, I do.

Robert stiffens. He pulls away - eyes hard.

ROBERT

No, you don't. You're young enough to
still have options. Just wait 'til you're
old, like me. I'm stuck between a hard
place and the grave.

INT. GARAGE SCIENCE LAB - NIGHT

The PCs are dark, powered off.

Kermit RIBBITS, nocturnally content in his cage.

The GARAGE DOOR rolls up, just a foot.

Dressed like a movie burglar, a dark clad Robert slips
inside. Given his bulk, it's a clumsy move.

Robert flicks on a flashlight. Spotlights Kermit. Smiles.

He tiptoes to the table. The bottle of blue liquid's
still there.

Robert picks it up, raises a finger to his lips.

ROBERT

Shhh. This'll be our secret. If it works
the way I *suspect* it will, I bet you'll
love the way it feels.

Reaching into Kermit's cage, Robert dumps water from the Petrie dish - fills it with blue liquid, to the brim.

He picks up Kermit. Puts him in.

ROBERT

Go on, little guy - soak it up.

(giggles)

And whatever you do, don't croak. I've got a lifetime riding on you and this work!

A door CREAKS behind him.

ANDREW (O.S.)

What the hell?

Robert whirls around.

ROBERT

This isn't what you think.

Andrew storms over to Kermit's cage, looks down.

ROBERT

Okay, well, clearly it is. But I'm doing this for both of us.

ANDREW

Breaking into my home's a *gift*? This excuse I've got to hear!

Andrew yanks Kermit from the blue liquid. He dabs him gingerly with a towel, shakes the excess off.

ROBERT

He's got to absorb the protein into his epidermis. Put him back in. Just five minutes, please!

ANDREW

Not even a second. Robert, leave!

ROBERT

Even if you won't do it for me, think of science. Avoiding an experiment which has promise is blaspheme!

Robert grabs for the frog, pinches Andrew's arm.

Andrew YELPS and drops Kermit on the table.

ANDREW

Ow!

Guilt ridden, he glances down at the frog.

ANDREW

Sorry, little guy. You OK?

Kermit RIBBITS as...

...its stomach emanates a BLUE GLOW.

Andrew rubs his eyes with the towel. Realizes the blue residue that's on it.

ANDREW

Ew.

He double takes at Kermit. The blue glow's blossomed into tiny blue dots, which seem to hover off the frog's skin.

ANDREW

Did I just poison myself? Or are you seeing what I'm seeing?

ROBERT

Shit, yeah!

Robert grabs a pencil. Andrew moves to stop him. But with his blurry vision, Robert's faster.

He jabs the eraser into Kermit's side. Eliciting MORE tiny blue dots. They puff into the air like neon dust.

ROBERT

Holy Hannah, the solution worked! What are those fucking things... stars?

Robert jabs Kermit a third time: in the leg. More dots puff, at point of impact.

Andrew snatches the pencil back.

ANDREW

I won't let you do that anymore!

ROBERT

No need. Go on, let Bobby take him now. What matters is: our pigmentation projection's a success!

Robert seizes Andrew's arms, a huge grin on his face.

ROBERT

You know what this means, right?

ANDREW

I... I think so, yeah!

The two men dance around in a "triumph" circle, arms linked. Their excitement grows.

ANDREW

It means I'll be able to isolate the source of Bobby's pain. Which possibly also means...

ROBERT

A cure! After all these years, I've finally made my mark on medicine. Secured my legacy for the history books!

ANDREW

This is gonna be bigger than the polio vaccine. Or the discovery of insulin! When we give this away to the world, think of how many people with chronic pain will be cured!

Record scratch. Robert stops dancing. Cold.

ROBERT

What did you just say?

ANDREW

Bobby's going to be cured!

ROBERT

No, slightly after that. The part about "giving away" our monumental discovery.

ANDREW

Yeah - isn't it epic?

Andrew beams. Robert frowns.

ROBERT

You want to *give away* this amazing cure we've sweated over, sacrificed for and pioneered?

ANDREW

Absolutely! Remember the "bigger than Polio or Insulin" part?

ROBERT

I'm not deaf. I heard that much. Your point?

ANDREW

Well, Salk didn't patent his vax. And Banting gave away insulin for free. We're gonna be medical heroes, just like they were!

ROBERT

Fuck the charity BS. You know damned well I deserve my cut!

ANDREW

(beat)

Pigmentation was *my* theory. And this is *my* garage. What I say goes!

ROBERT

I worked with you for *years*. You get a cured kid. And I get - squat?

Enraged, Robert grabs the bottle of blue liquid and SPLASHES it in Andrew's face! Andrew sputters.

ANDREW

How dare you?

ROBERT

Oh, I do dare. Now, watch this!

Robert shoves Andrew. BLUE DOTS rise from Andrew's chest - right where Robert's palms hit.

ROBERT

Wow, that worked fast. I guess the human trial's a success, too?

ANDREW

I should've known you were in this for glory, not truth. You may have two Ph'd's, but you'll never be a *real* scientist, Robert. It's not in your heart!

ROBERT

(growls)

You can't see my heart. But I can sure as shit see your pain. And for me, that's enough.

ANDREW

Get out of my garage. Or I'll have you charged for assault!

ROBERT

You think so, huh?

Robert shoves Andrew again. The younger man stumbles back. More blue stars rise from his chest.

ANDREW

Look at me, then look at you. You're trespassing. They'll throw the book!

Andrew trips on a BATTERY. Almost falls down.

ANDREW

Ow!

Blue stars rise from his ankle. Andrew glares at his colleague, hatred in his eyes.

ANDREW

You think you're financially hurting now?
Hit me just one more time and your kid
can be a janitor, for all I care. I'll
sue you for everything you got!

Robert howls - PUNCHES Andrew in the jaw.

The thin scientist falls back, hits the furnace. With a very loud CLANG.

Blue stars rise from Andrew. All over, now.

Kermit fidgets, distressed.

As Robert stuffs a now-limp Andrew into the furnace.

Grabbing RUBBING ALCOHOL off a counter, he douses Andrew's face and clothes.

From far away, a child's voice - BOBBY - cries out.

BOBBY (O.S.)

Daddy, where are you? I heard something.
I'm scared!

ANDREW

(groans)

Robert, stop and think.

ROBERT

You said I'm "not a scientist". So why
bother thinking, right?

ANDREW

You want to end our partnership and your
research in jail? End this madness while
you still can!

Robert looks around in panic. Grabbing a BUNSEN BURNER, he turns to Andrew with an evil grin.

ROBERT

I'll just say you were so depressed by our recent failure, the burden of raising a sick child wore you down. You gave it all up, ran away.

Andrew raises a weak hand.

ANDREW

Please. Don't.

Robert slams the furnace door on Andrew. Raises the burner to his face.

ROBERT

I'll make sure Bobby's cared for.

He pulls the trigger... PHHHHFFFFOOOM.

Andrew and the contents of the furnace blaze. Blue stars fly out the iron grates.

BOBBY (O.S.)

Daddy, are you in the garage?

ROBERT

(whispers)

Good thing you can't walk well, Bobby.
Best you stay in bed for this part.

Andrew's shrieks die out; in sync with a cloud of fading blue stars.

Robert steps back, lifts Kermit from his cage.

ROBERT

Shhhh... Kermie, you're safe with me.

Driven insane, Robert laughs. He cradles the amphibian - watches the flames.

FINAL FADE OUT: