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GIVE AND TAKE

D. Graham Burnett

His name was Bradford. Or Bradley. Or Bradman. Maybe even Bradforth. He lived “a little more out that way.” Up somewhat. Beyond 48th Street. The wave of his hand suggested north of Chestnut; even, perhaps, north of Market. Because he wanted to be a doctor, he needed to borrow the concentrated hydrochloric acid.

Things make sense if one does not suspect they don’t. And suspicion must be learned. What follows is the story of how I learned mistrust. Also, there was theft.

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It would have been the winter of 1983, making me twelve. My family lived in West Philadelphia at that time, in a row house between Pine and Osage on South 46th Street—number 409. This was the edge of “University City,” a neighborhood defined by proximity to the University of Pennsylvania. My parents were academics—my father a dean, my mother a lecturer in the French department. We had only recently moved from grassier bits of the country: Indiana (where the backyard of our white clapboard Cape Cod gave onto the wide expanse of the neighboring cornfield); North Carolina (where the momentum of my soapbox racer down the long, steep driveway could almost carry me to the edge of a small pond, wherein lurked lunker largemouth and bluegill keen to rise to a spider with rubber legs). West Philadelphia was very different. I recall arriving at the end of the road trip up from the South, seated in the back of a red Pinto flashed with a *Starsky & Hutch* stripe that bent like a hasp across the hatchback. There was graffiti. A boy about my age, seated on a basketball at the corner of Baltimore Avenue, eyed me, unblinking, as the car idled at a light. Then he gave me the finger—slowly, deliberately, holding his hand as still as the rest of him. I was frankly shocked. And genuinely hurt.

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Snow fell. A dump. No school. I suited up to shovel the sidewalk, steps, and stoop: long johns, sweatpants, corduroys tucked into rubber boots that closed with funny hooks—a metal tongue that could be folded

around one or another rung of the little ladder-clasp. Within the boots: thick socks, then a plastic bag, and then a second pair of tube socks over all that. And above: sweaters, parka, gloves, scarf, hat. Already by mid-morning, the two-toned gong of the doorbell chime had rung several times—men from the neighborhood presenting themselves as willing to do this work for a flat fee of ten dollars. My mother politely turned them away. Her son was upstairs, she explained sociably. He’d be down in a moment. He was getting his warm things on. And then (perhaps going a little further than was strictly necessary in the context of the racial and economic discontinuity convoked across the threshold of our sun porch at that moment) she took a brief turn into the importance of a young man learning to work—manual labor being essential to a proper upbringing, etc. Not that her feint in this direction was high-handed or preachy. My mother wasn’t like that. It was rather that she was seeking the common ground. Awkward common ground, yes, in the face of the men whose cold work was less moral-ritual than subsistence-scramble. But her intentions were of the finest water.

Down the steps I came, shouldered the shovel, and made my way out into the snow. And I shoveled. I had been at it for a time when a young man approached, and asked if I needed any help. I said I didn’t, but thanked him for the offer. I had to do it myself, I explained. My mother wanted me to do it. He understood; said that he had already done the same for his mother, and now was out making a little pocket change. He didn’t say it quite like that. But that was the gist of it. I shoveled.

. . .

Twelve is a “between” sort of age. I was a boy. Yet when I looked in the mirror, I could see—now and again, depending on the light and my mood—the shape of a man. My arms were different than before. My chest too. But all this meant little, practically speaking. I had some downy hair on my nuts. I could ride my bike around by myself—but only on the sidewalk, and only within a three-block radius of the house. It was autonomy, of a sort, but extremely limited. I took a school bus to school, with my little sister—

and we wore uniforms (hers a blue polyester kilt, white shirt, gray sweater; mine gray slacks, navy blazer, and a rep tie of gold and blue). Sometimes we slept in the same bed, still, like children—but less and less, as I had begun to feel a bit odd about it. I had recently written away to a mail-order address in the back of a magazine, sending a check for \$14 to secure a long-sleeved T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of the Canadian brewery called Moosehead, and featuring the racy slogan “The Moose is Loose” in cursive down one arm. I treasured it, because I felt it made me look very grown up.

The boy who watched me shovel was less of a boy than I. He said he was fifteen. And he may have been. He was physically taller and a good deal thicker, and the stuff of a mustache could be seen above his upper lip. He sat on the step. After a while, he stood up, and explained that since he didn’t have any work to do right then, he’d help me out. Just for fun.

I saw no harm in that—nor can I quite imagine what I would have done if I had. So we shoveled together. For a while. The resonant scrape of the blade on the sidewalk. The arresting *whump* of that blade striking suddenly on a cleft or crack beneath the wet powder: the smooth push-and-plow slammed to a stop; the rounded butt of the shovel shaft striking the ribs; the sharp kick stunning cold hands. Thrown snow left delicate traces on the sycamore trunks, for all the world like a *bûche de Noël* sprinkled with soft sugar.

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I know, now, what my mother thinks she was thinking when she brought us hot chocolate. Because I have asked her. She recalls how pleased she was by the idea that I might be making a friend. And it was not insignificant to her, then, that this was a *black* friend. Neither of my parents had ever lived in an actual city or in a racially diverse community of any kind, and they were both excited (and a little trepidatious) about their big decision to reject the leafy suburbs and move the family to Philadelphia proper. My mother had gone to great lengths, back in Indiana, to avoid letting us go to the nearby swim club in the summers (which was effectively white-only)—driving my sister and me to the YMCA closer to Indianapolis, as a show of her left-Catholic/progressive distaste for Midwestern semi-rural bigotry. So, looking out from the kitchen, what my mother saw mattered to her.

To me less so—or at least not in any conscious way that I can now recover. I didn’t know many boys my age in the neighborhood. (We’d only moved in the year before.) Here was someone to play with. Bradford (or Bradley, or Bradman, or Bradforth) and I threw a football around in the snow after drinking our chocolates. After this brief interlude, we took up our shovels and tromped the radius of a few blocks, knocking on doors and volunteering to shovel walks. Ebony and ivory. Fresh-faced youths. We got quite a bit of work, split our gains fifty-fifty, and parted fast friends.

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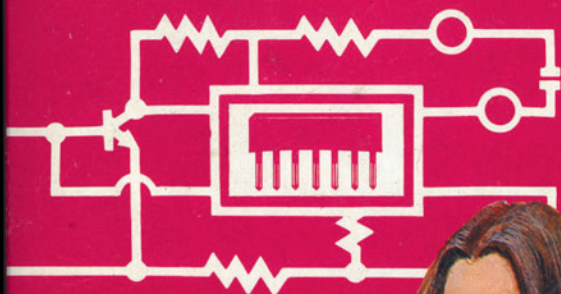
I had hobbies at this time. I could do some elementary programming in BASIC on a RadioShack TRS-80 16k “Color Computer” wired to the RCA television in the family room. (I made a game in which you could bomb, from a spaceship-like aircraft, a glass-enclosed city; it was schematic.) Data storage consisted of an audio cassette player that plugged into the back of the computer. I had a microscope and a chemistry “lab” arranged on a pair of low tables in the basement laundry room. (I attempted to mutate paramecia by bubbling cigarette smoke through their small aquarium; I made gunpowder-impregnated coffee filters which burned in interesting ways; I wrested, by means of a makeshift still, a few drops of noxious liquor from a funk of yeast-fermented flour and sugar.) I possessed, and loved, a “150-in-1” electronics kit: a tray of electronic components (photoelectric cell; speaker; relay; various diodes and transistors) that could be linked by short wires strung between springy contact posts to create various simple devices (a doorbell; an AM radio tuner; a Morse-code transmitter).

What else? My sister’s room was in the back of the house, and overlooked the alley. She played with dolls and stuffed animals. One day we made blowguns together, fletching straight pins with a tuft of orange thread and puffing them through a drinking straw. I could hit a grapefruit at four paces, the darts sticking fast in a perfect and satisfying silence. My mother had an office in the finished part of the basement, and she worked on a book that dealt with foreign language learning. One night, after my sister was asleep, she

Overleaf: The enlightenment project. The Tandy Corporation’s 150-in-1 electronics kit, mid-1970s.

Science Fair[®]

150 in

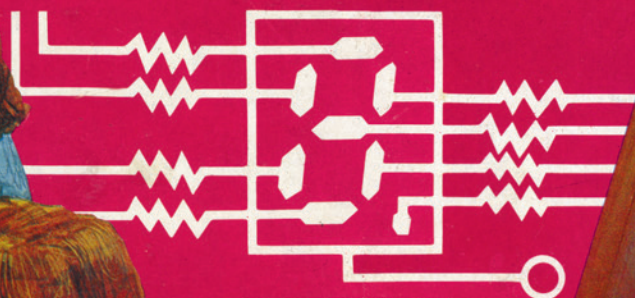


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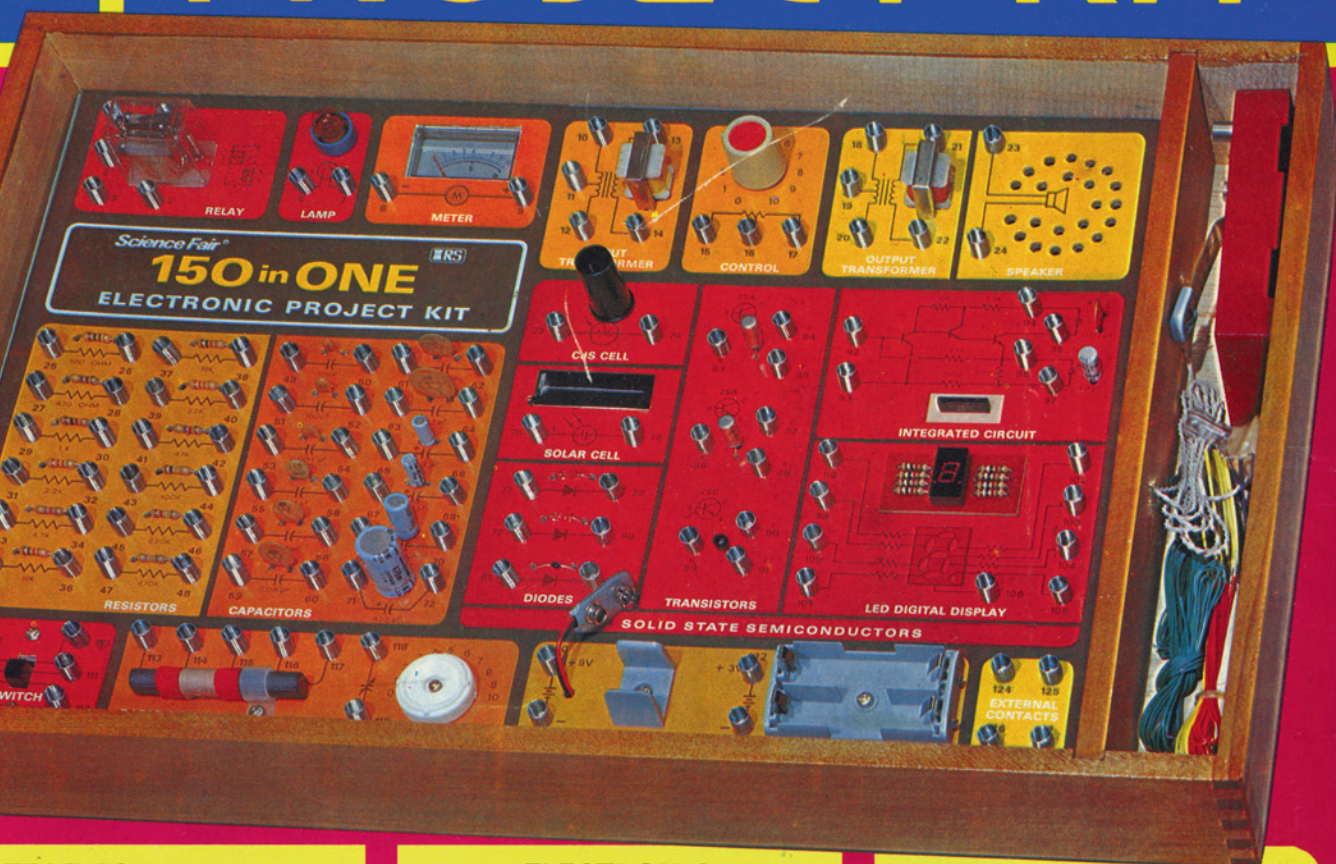
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ELECTRONIC PROJECT KIT



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read me most of the *Crito*, my head in her lap. My father, on weekends, perused the *Philadelphia Inquirer* under a green Tiffany lamp that hung in the breakfast nook of the large kitchen. Sometimes we would play floor hockey in the kitchen, with a balled-up pair of his socks as the puck, my (deceased) grandfather's cane as the stick, and me in "goal"—the doorway to the back steps—making kick saves in my stocking feet. In 1979, shortly after the death of Sid Vicious, my father went to the record store and bought a vinyl of *Never Mind the Bollocks Here's the Sex Pistols*, which he placed with the other albums we owned in a rack with sliding louver doors under the turntable. But only after instructing me that I was never to open it. It was to remain in its sealed plastic sheath forever, because it was a collector's item. I opened it in 1984, and listened to it. He was quite upset. I am not sure why I did that. It was obviously the wrong thing to do.

. . .

Obviously the wrong thing to do. My new friend came over again the next day, a Saturday, and I showed him my room. We played with my 150-in-1 kit, making a siren sound. I showed him the unopened Sex Pistols' album in its pristine sleeve. We went down to my "laboratory" in the basement, and I displayed my rack of chemicals, my cigarette-smoking device, my mutant paramecia, which swam, I alleged, in an anomalous, spiraling fashion. (I believed this then, but I do not think, now, that it was so.) My mother served us home-made chocolate chip cookies in the breakfast nook. She asked him about his family. His mother was a nurse, he explained, and that was why he wanted to study medicine.

Before he left, he asked me if he could borrow my "Moose is Loose" shirt. He thought it was cool. I went upstairs and got it for him. And could he also take, on a temporary basis, my jar of hydrochloric acid? This small, amber jar, which contained a slightly syrupy pale yellow fluid, was, from my perspective, the most sacred object in my lab. The holy of holies. The central elixir. I had secured it from a colleague of my father's at the university, and I had never used it for anything, but rather simply held the vial at times, and thought about power. This stuff could *melt gold*. It could *eat your face*.

I hesitated. But only for a moment. What profits us selfishness? And suspicion, I had none. I went down

to the basement and got it for him. We said goodbye at the front door, having made plans for an after-school playdate later that week. He would come over. I recall his asking what time was best. I said around 4:30. And I remember saying not before that, because no one would be at home.

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I never saw him again. But on Tuesday of the following week, my mother returned home from teaching her afternoon class and, upon entering the kitchen, found it decidedly cold—even frigid. It took her only a moment to realize that the door at the top of the basement steps (normally locked when we were not at home) had been kicked open, shattering the doorjamb, long sharp splinters of which lay about on the linoleum floor. Startled, she left the house and called the police from the neighbor's.

By the time my sister and I got home, my mother, father, and a police officer were standing around in the basement laundry-room-cum-laboratory looking at how the window had been jimmied. A crowbar, evidently, which had popped the small lock like a bottle cap. I remember very clearly the look on the cop's face when my mother asked if he intended to fingerprint the window frame. No. That wasn't going to happen. An investigation? Not to speak of. The police were very busy. And what would really be the point anyway? It wasn't as if they were going to somehow track him down and catch him. The cop's face said: "This isn't a Sherlock Holmes story, ma'am; this is West Philadelphia."

It was about this time that the neighbor turned up carrying our stereo amplifier. He had found it in the pachysandra under his back porch in the alley. Odd. But the man in blue didn't think so. "He just left it there to come back for it later," he explained. "He'd look pretty suspicious carrying a big stereo with a cut cord around the streets in broad daylight." The neighbor put the amp on the step. It had a case of smooth-grained wood and a linear tuner dial which I knew from experience glowed a warm orange when it was on. But not now. The clipped cord had the stubby, truncated air of a Doberman pinscher's tail.

It took time to figure out the other things that had been stolen. It was not as if the house had been ransacked, nor had any of the things that my parents considered valuables—the sterling silverware they had

received on their wedding, a few pieces of family heirloom jewelry my mother kept in a small box in her closet—been touched. The things we gradually discovered had been taken were idiosyncratic: a pair of inexpensive cufflinks my father had left in an ashtray by the front door; a battered suede bomber jacket of my father's that had been in the front hall closet, together with a leather trench coat my mother had bought as a graduate student in Paris; a crumpled wad of Italian lira banknotes that had been on top of a small basket of pocket change my father kept on his dresser. These latter became part of the lore of the burglary: there were something like 1,400 lira to the dollar in those days, and my parents surmised (perhaps wrongly, and possibly merely for the reassurance of comedy) that the thief, upon encountering bills with so many zeros on them, no doubt accounted himself instantly in possession of great wealth and hastened to make his escape. What else could explain his meager haul?

But who knows, really?

My father repaired the cord, stripping the wires, twisting them back together where they'd been cut, and taping the new joints with shiny, black electrical tape. It looked like my garter snake after swallowing a good-sized frog. Which is a little like the way I felt.

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In the wake of all this, we put a deadbolt lock on the basement door. And I embarked on what I can now understand as a strange exercise of traumatic technoparapraxis. I set to the task of making a burglar alarm with my 150-in-1 kit. If a shadow darkened the doorway, breaking a flashlight beam, it tripped a switch that ran current through the solenoid of an old doorbell that I took apart. The solenoid was positioned in such a way that when the rod sprang from the coil, it hit a small knife switch that had been wired into the power cord of the audio cassette player (which I removed from the TRS-80). Powered up, the cassette player played a recording I had made. A voice—mine—saying, in a whisper, "I think I hear someone in the hall. Get my gun ... There he is!"

Followed by a loud BANG.

. . .

I slept with that alarm set up at my bedroom door for a year or so. And about that time, I bought a Ruger .22

semiautomatic carbine, took the alarm down, and slept with the gun, loaded, tucked under my bed.

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Every theft is, first, an act of betrayal. Unless this is completely wrong. And here I remain fundamentally uncertain. On the one hand, to take what is not one's own, in secret, is to turn on anyone who trusted enough to fail to take the precautions that would have stopped this occurrence. That would certainly seem to be a betrayal. On the other hand, however, that whole world of "trusts" can suddenly feel, under scrutiny, like a charming little conjuration of the well-positioned—like downtown Aspen, say, or parts of La Jolla. It is a beautiful sort of place, but a strong odor of contingency wafts through that air.

The gun under the bed said, "I feel betrayed by this theft, and I am taking precautions." But even then I also smelled the scent of the contingent. Lying in that same bed, I once had a dream in which he wore my shirt, showing it to his friends. And that made sense to me.

I have always wondered what he did with the acid.