

Chapter 1

I wake to the sound of raindrops tapping on the window of the tiny room in Pollock Halls of Residence. Situated on the edge of Holyrood Park near the foot of the dramatic little mountain, Arthur's Seat, this should be a sweet awakening. But I'm soaked in feverish sweat, my stomach is cramping crazily with every little movement, my head is pounding like a gong and my back feels like I've ridden a camel across cobbles all night.

The mattress I am lying on is hanging through the bed frame as if something weird and dramatic has recently occurred here, such as two sumo wrestlers having torrid sex. It resembles lying in a toaster rather than a bed. The wooden desk, attached to the window sill, looks askew on just one twisted hinge. I am not sure if it really is, or if my vision is distorted by the weird bed. From the outside, Pollock Halls is a beautiful and renowned student residency, which is rented out during semester breaks as a B&B. From the inside, it's like a slapdash sitcom set – at least the room I'm staying in.

For a few minutes I lie in silence, wondering how I will ever get through this day. In three hours I am expected at King's Buildings, the university campus where the School of Chemistry is located, to interview for a PhD position. Since coming back to Europe one week ago, after almost a year working for Unilever in China, I had been at my parents' place in the North East of the Netherlands. In the last seven years, I hadn't spent more than the occasional night in the village where I grew up, but for now I had nowhere else to live. My childhood bed had been binned long ago and my room converted into a guest room. I didn't want to stay in the village for a

week, but I had been ill. At first I thought I was suffering a prolonged hangover from my goodbye-to-Shanghai night out. When the hangover hung around all evening and even seemed to intensify with ibuprofen and coffee, I wondered if I had perhaps caught a virus. It was not until I was pretty much hallucinating and loosing litres of sweat that I started to fear a strange Asian parasite was flourishing within me.

I had postponed my flight to Edinburgh for a couple of days, cutting out the tourist part of my trip. The sickness had subsided to a flu-like condition, but it had drained me; I feel exhausted and defeated. And I want to collapse, for days. But cancelling such an important appointment was never an option. I am not sure if postponing would have diminished my chances of getting a PhD but I didn't want to risk it. Now there was nothing for it but to haul my woozy body out of the godforsaken bed and pretend to be sentient for the duration of an interview. I convince myself that painkillers and fever blockers will get me through.

I applied for this PhD position – conducting research on cystic fibrosis – just a few weeks ago, after reading about it on a job portal for scientists. In fact I don't really have any particular interest in cystic fibrosis but during the previous years I had learned that it doesn't really matter to me what I work on. It could just as easily have been Alzheimer's or cancer or some strange single cell organism no one really gives a damn about. Of course there are scientists obsessed with finding a treatment for one particular disease. But I am not. I am not sick myself, and nobody close to me suffers from a strange illness to get emotionally attached to, or even a mainstream disease to get particularly zealous about. In the area that I graduated you zoom in tight on the tiniest details, like single proteins or molecules. The relevant illness is very distant and abstract. However, the larger picture is important in order to avoid social isolation at parties. Being a cancer researcher draws interest and respect. Studying complex fluids in an inexplicable matrix that no one has ever heard of is everything but glamorous and makes you an intellectual freak.

For me, however, the main appeal is contributing to fundamental know-how that might find a future application. It was only after I spent time in a couple of industries, and had several unconvincing job interviews, that I decided my future would be in science, nowhere else. I had never been more than a trumped-up intern in the "real world" though I enjoyed many aspects of it: I found it extremely cool to sit on the 23rd floor of a skyscraper in Shanghai and video-interview with the Boston Consulting Group in

Amsterdam. I felt important and wanted when Unilever paid for someone to chauffeur me around town. On top of that they provided a salary and spoiled me with a ludicrously large and luxurious flat in Shanghai. But I didn't belong in that world. I don't care about optimising returns, extensive and allegedly important meetings, developing shampoos that make your hair shine EVEN more (oh wow, how interesting, well worth several years study...) or producing milk with additives no one really needs. I hate cutlery etiquette. And I hate people talking for the sake of talking. I don't want to spend my holidays skiing with colleagues, pretending to be part of a happy, smug family. I don't want to smile for the sake of the customer. I'm not a team player. I am an individualist, content to sit in an office working for hours upon hours alone. I am a scientist...

When opting for academia, I fully understood that from a financial and quality-of-life perspective I was taking a step back. From living like a queen in China, I would go to mashed potatoes and peas. A Unilever secretary would book me business class flights. If I'm lucky Dr. McLean might cover a self-booked EasyJet ticket. But if it means I can advance science and do what I love, so be it.

The position is at a famous and prestigious university – good credentials for the future. And as the cherry on the cake, it means working in a country I have never been to, yet am keen to live in. When I sent my CV and cover letter, the last thing I was expecting was an invitation to present myself. I graduated with good marks, but the competition at this university, ranked in the top ten in Europe, would be fierce. Plus, my background wasn't exactly what they were looking for. I had been thrilled when the email came in from Dr. McLean, my potential PhD supervisor, telling me I had made it through initial selection and would be welcome to fly to Scotland for an interview. And here I am.

I slowly get up from the toaster bed, hearing my spine crack and reposition. I have to concentrate all my energy on not throwing up. Slowly I bend over to my backpack and get ibuprofen, a diarrhoea blocker and Vomex. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to take these drugs together but I feel too weak to open my laptop and research the matter. *Why would I care? It couldn't get worse?* After swallowing the three meds I set my alarm for an hour later.

There is no way my back will accept another nap in the bread toaster position, so I take the sheets off the mattress, resplendent with old sweat circles, and carefully lay them on the tiny bit of floor space between the bed and the wall. It is hard and cramped but comparatively luxurious.

When the alarm goes off, and I believe I've only watched the roof of the room for the last hour, I feel better. I down an old bottle of Coke; it's flat but I get the caffeine rush. I take clothes out of my backpack which my mum had packed while I was crashed sick on her couch. She assembled and ironed an outfit for the interview based on wishes I had muttered, rather deliriously I now suspect. I put them on and conclude that the ensemble doesn't work; light brown trousers and a cream-coloured top – neither are items I would ever be likely to wear and they don't go together. Admittedly, they do come from my stack of clothes, and I'm not sure what clothes would best present who I am anyway. But I hope it's not this prim, dull clobber...

I feel a weak spark of adrenaline going through my body, like a vibrator on its final stripe of battery. I stand in front of the mirror stuck on the cheap built-in cabinet, and conclude that I look awful, sort of Kate Middleton's junkie cousin trying to look posh. My face is pallid; even the freckles have faded to grey, and I've got comically puffy eyes. *He is not going to take me. I look much more like a lost extra from The Walking Dead than a groundbreaking research scientist...*

I turn away from the mirror and tell myself to concentrate on my interview instead. Worries shoot through my head about the presentation I have to give in two hours. I have managed to put some PowerPoint slides together, about my previous experiences and research projects, but I didn't really get round to the words part. I need something to accompany the smile and slides, the "Hello, I'm great" show. I open my laptop, call up the PowerPoint presentation and start to talk. It's terrible, I think, I presume, I don't actually know, my head is spinning...

In my hazy state I decide I have to refine my detailed, scientific presentation whilst walking to campus, though I don't even know the way. I check on Google maps and have a last glance in the mirror at my mismatching clothes atop the mismatching shoes I just added. *Yip, I look like prime shit.* I pull my hair back into a ponytail, a last touch of general awfulness, and walk out of the door feeling visually offensive.

It's merely drizzling now. The cold drops on my face are enlivening, the adrenalin is going up a bit and the dizziness I have been feeling for days is suddenly on the backburner. It's almost half an hour's walk – with an extra small loop because I'm lost – and I believe I have rehearsed my presentation twice. I arrive at the old building with a modern sign in front of it: "School of Chemistry."



I open the thick wooden door and step into the entrance hall, which looks like an old train station with a curiously undecorated roof. Beautiful memorial plants with thick, wooden stems climb up to the first floor. On the left side is a counter for a receptionist, but the seat is empty. The big modern flat screen in the corner – announcing the school’s programme – draws the eye, mainly because it is horribly gaudy.

There is a long wide corridor leading all the way to the back of the large building. On one side of the corridor there are lecture theatres and a coffee room with couches – a space called *The Museum*. I vaguely wonder from whence that name derives because cheap cotton couches with spindly legs hardly constitute exhibits.

Though I printed out a plan of the school, and even marked the right office with a pen, I struggle to orientate myself. The dizziness is returning and I am devoured by the desire to lie down and sleep, maybe on one of those cheap cotton couches, anywhere really... Quickly, I follow a sign to a toilet where I get two 400 mg tablets of ibuprofen out of my bag and swallow them.

“Are you okay?” enquires a short girl with gorgeous gold curly hair.

She is washing her hands at the sink next to me. “Yes, just a bit sick, that’s all,” I say, forcing a smile which possibly looks rather eerie, from a ghost.

“Can I do something for you?” she asks, with a look of deep concern.

“Do you know where office 221 is?”

She looks nonplussed: “Who are you looking for?”

“Doctor McLean.”

She points to the left. “Take the stairs, turn right, first on the left and it’s one of the offices in that corridor.”

“I’ll find that.”

“Are you here for your PhD interview?”

“Yes.”

“In the McLean group?”

“Yes.”

She nods as if this has satisfied all the interest she might have had in my predicament. While opening the door, she says: “Apparently, he is not the easiest to work for.”

My antennae pick this up but before I can ingest it and formulate a question, she leaves me at the sink. *Who needs it easy? It doesn’t matter for now, I’m here anyway...*

I follow her directions, nerves rising within me. Hesitantly I knock on the door and a loud voice beckons me forth. With the enthusiasm of someone who has just placed a red hot pepper between his arse cheeks, Dr. McLean is jumping up from his chair to introduce himself. His outstretched hand is extremely masculine and the handshake suitably vigorous. “Mark,” he says.

His eyes are large, and they radiate energy. Of course I googled him and he is indeed as young as he looks – late thirties I think. He’s wearing jeans, sneakers and a simple shirt, all quite fashionable and fitting his age.

He enquires if I had a good trip and how I like Edinburgh so far?

“Great!” I lie, rather smoothly I think.

In fact I haven't seen anything of Edinburgh. I took the bus from the airport to the main train station then a taxi to Pollock Halls. But the last thing I want to admit is that I have been too sick to travel here earlier. I don't want to look feeble. I want to look like an alpha female, whatever that is...

He takes a keychain from his desk and grabs a laptop. "Let's go to the lab straight away!"

He strides through the doorway and along the corridor at a merry clip. I struggle to keep up. He halts in front of a lab door numbered 262, in remarkably large digits, opens it very quickly and just as speedily shows me around the three small rooms within. I don't really take anything in except that most of the equipment is old and the lab is very messy. The contrast is striking: coming from the new, ultra-controlled and clean Unilever R&D labs with super-expensive equipment to a lab in an old academic building, run by a young group leader clearly not floating money. I swallow hard and try to hide my faint alarm. Mark may have sensed my disappointment. "It's a bit messy here, but don't worry, we're in the process of cleaning it."

He introduces me to the few people, all around my age, working on the benches. I can't remember their names, if they even registered at all; my brain feels as if it is being run by a virus rather than by me. Mark makes a few jokes with the people in the lab, which only an insider would understand, but it doesn't really persuade me that everything is chummy here. The atmosphere is somehow guarded. Mark then loudly announces I will be giving a presentation in five minutes which they are all to attend.

He isn't intimidating as I had expected after the comment from the girl in the toilet. He talks a lot and doesn't ask me many questions about myself. I am vaguely aware that normally this would feel odd but today it feels like a blessing.

He guides me to a small seminar room down the corridor and opens the laptop he has been carrying.

"Please upload your presentation; I'll just fetch the projector from the reception."

I can't recall entering a seminar room in recent years where a projector was not part of the everyday furniture. Apart from a few tables and chairs, and a blackboard with a dried-up sponge lying next to it, this room is empty.

"Ideally I am looking for a chemist, and you are a biologist," he says when he returns with the projector.

"I like chemistry," I say, while transferring my presentation from the USB to the laptop. "I am looking forward to learning more of it."

"Good, your background seems impressive enough. You will learn the chemistry."

There is a knock on the door and an old man enters.

“Hi, great you could make it,” Mark says enthusiastically, shaking the man’s hand. “This is Karin, all the way from the Netherlands. Karin, this is James. He will be co-supervising the project and he is THE expert when it comes to cystic fibrosis. We’ve been collaborating for years now.”

“Hi Karin, nice to meet you,” James says, offering a warm hand.

He exudes an air of old school reassurance; partly just by wearing his long service very visibly in his demeanour. He is grey-haired, with a round face and grey, watery eyes; a biologist who somehow fulfills all the stereotypes of a biologist of a bygone generation.

“I won’t be able to stay long I’m afraid. I’m expected back in the hospital in less than an hour. I’m sure you guys will be fine without me.”

His voice is less energetic than Mark’s, but it sounds confident and calm. “Yup,” Mark says.

Six other people filter into the room, mainly from the benches of the lab I think. Mark introduces me with a few friendly words and invites me to start my presentation. I stand up and tell them about my previous research projects, in industry and academia. Due to confidentiality agreements I had to sign in industry there are not many details I can share about what I did exactly. But it doesn’t matter. I feel much more confident than I felt two hours ago, and for a moment it seems that there is no virus living in my body.

After my presentation, Mark invites the audience to ask questions. James has a clarifying question about the research on dandruff I have conducted, which is easy to answer. With the second call for questions, they all peer at me but don’t ask anything. After a few seconds the silence is awkward, but more grim seconds pass before Mark finally thanks everyone for their attendance and calls the end of the meeting. That was weird, not encouraging.

“Great presentation, Karin,” James says. “I don’t want to be rude, but I have to make myself scarce now.”

“No worries, it was a pleasure to meet you,” I say, forcing a smile.

James talks to Mark briefly about a project they are working on and leaves the room. “Nice work,” says Mark, stuffing the projector back into the black bag.

We drop the projector back at administration and walk to his office passing an open toilet door along the way; I glimpse myself in the mirror. *I still look really shit.*

I sit down on a chair in his office and Mark starts talking to me about the project he has in mind. “I’ve just been talking to Mike Wood in Canada, we’re really on the right track to publish everything about this pathway... No it isn’t easy, but we’re getting there... privilege to work with Mike

Wood, excellent scientist, a wonderful person. I visited him last year with my fiancé on our holidays in Canada... You could go to his lab! You can learn so many different techniques... We can explore KdtA... very interesting protein... not only one glucose to Lipid A, but actually two, very strange mechanism, almost like a polymerase... and all those proteins that lie in the inner membrane, it can explore all of them... we have an excellent postdoc here in the hospital as well, Brian, he can help you with all your research..."

He is a lively and enthusiastic person but he talks with a strong Irish accent so it took me at least ten minutes to get to grips with what he was saying. And by then I had entirely lost the general thrust. He rambled on for over an hour about things I did not really understand. I noticed he talked about people as if they were the most famous scientists in the world, and looks surprised when he sees I have no idea who they are. But it doesn't seem to matter. He throws in names of people in his lab as if I would know who they are and what they are working on. He shows me incomprehensible paper after incomprehensible paper and – thank God – does not really bother asking me anything. By now I could feel my medication losing its power, though I had recharged by secretly swallowing a new load of pills after the presentation. My eyelids have never felt so heavy and I'm scared they will fall shut but – hallelujah! – Mark finally wraps up.

"Hanna will take you for lunch," he says.

Oh no! I desperately want to curl up and sleep for a week. I need to go back to bed. And who the hell is Hanna anyway?

Mark had mentioned her name several times during the last hour, and apparently her PhD project is similar to mine, not that I understand either yet. Probably Hanna had been one of the girls sitting in the presentation, one of the names I failed to register.

Mark walks me to the lab and indicates to a black-haired, brown-eyed girl with thick red glasses that it is time to take me for lunch. She has a soft expression on her beautiful girlish face. She looks innocent somehow. Mark shakes my hand with the words, "You will start the first week of September. I very much look forward to working with you. Look for an apartment in Leith, it's a nice part of town and not too expensive. Give me a shout if you need any help."

He gives Hanna money to buy lunch for us, says goodbye and walks back to his office. *Does that mean he offered me the job? Without officially offering it to me? He seems to assume that I will be taking it, I suppose he's right, I think, I can't think...*

Hanna and I walk out of the Chemistry Department and cross campus. She points at a two-storey building opposite of us. "That is the canteen we

normally go to, but today we'll go to the Darwin Building canteen. It has a lovely view."

She tells me what is being hosted in the different buildings we pass. "It is all old here, but you get used to that. The only thing you won't get used to is the darkness in winter and the food."

Hanna tells me she is about to start the last year of her PhD, which usually takes a total of three years in the UK. She did her undergraduate biology degree here as well, though she is Norwegian. "I'm a biologist, not a chemist and, to be honest, I never wanted to work for Mark. I wanted to do my PhD with James Ainsley. But James is nearly retired, and does not supervise PhD students anymore, so I ended up with Mark. You will like James very much."

"That's odd, because I think Mark told me that if I got this position, James Ainsley was going to be my second supervisor and would be very much involved in the project."

"No worries. He is one of those professors who will never retire, just officially."

At the University of Groningen, where I got my undergraduate degree, we had a couple of professors who were both well over eighty. They could barely walk, but they would come to the university every day. They shared an office on the second floor next to the teaching labs. No one knew what they were doing but clearly they were devoted to science. I liked seeing them, slowly making their way through the long corridor, being overtaken by students who were less than a quarter of their age. I loved their expression of passion, the fact that they gave their lives to science. *What an experience it would be to work for one of them.*

"Are you going to accept the position?" Hanna asks, in the elevator.

She just pressed the button to go to the seventh floor; I feel trapped and bound to answer.

"I'm not sure. I'm a bit confused. It just sounded to me that he offered it to me, but then he wrote a few days ago that there are other candidates as well."

"No, there are no other candidates. He might have received more applications but I haven't seen anyone else here."

"Would be difficult to say no, it's an amazing opportunity."

She rolls her eyes, but avoids eye contact as if she was about to tell me something. Eventually she speaks, "I don't know about that," she says cautiously. Then she pauses for a few seconds. "But you will be very lucky to have James as your second supervisor. The other students don't have him."

I'm awake enough to pick up the ominous note but not awake enough to care terribly much.

The canteen has a beautiful view over Edinburgh but food-wise it is horrific; a few unappealing salads and muffins seem to be all there is on offer. Maybe it's because it is well past lunchtime. I'm not hungry anyway and opt for a coffee. After a few large gulps of the black liquid which, at best, is only analogous to coffee, I feel newly energised. We chitchat about Norway, the UK and the Netherlands. It's a nice and friendly conversation but, thankfully, Hanna keeps it short. She needs to go back to the lab and I need to go to bed or at least to the sheets on the floor. She shakes my hand before the chemistry building and closes with: "Whatever you decide, don't move to Leith. You really don't want to be there. It's a shithole!"

I head back to Pollock Halls, exhausted, legs wobbling as if I'm drunk. By the time I arrive I feel weirdly dehydrated, so I drink three large glasses of water before tumbling to the floor and into sleep, in seconds.

When I wake it is still light outside, but clearly evening. My face has some colour again though my hair is a comical mess. I am hungry. I haven't eaten since the banana I forced into myself just before the interview, at ten this morning, and my phone tells me it is just after 9:00 p.m. I get into a pair of jeans and head out into the street where it is still raining. I ask a guy, roughly my age, for directions to a takeaway. He points me to a local kebab shop. I thank him and give him a friendly smile. He smiles back and for a short moment I feel the physical attraction between us, like two magnets coming too close. *Thank God, my body is functioning again.* The moment passes and we set off in opposite directions. Just before reaching the traffic lights I need to cross, the guy taps on my shoulder and hands me a piece of paper with his telephone number. "Give me a ring if you fancy." I take the paper from him and give him another smile. "I might do," feeling kind of guilty that I didn't say straight away I have a boyfriend and I know the chances of me ever phoning him are infinitesimal. And yet, one day in the unknowable future I will phone this stranger, and not by accident.

I slip the paper into my jeans pocket. The guy heads off as quickly as he arrived and I'm crossing to the other side of the street.

I walk to the kebab shop broadcasting caterwauling music in an unknown exotic language. There is a guy behind the counter in shorts and a polo shirt that sits tight around his biceps. I order myself a chicken wrap with tomatoes, salad and garlic sauce, and take a pack of cigarettes from the counter and a can of coconut milk from the fridge. All of it I take back to Pollock Halls where I sit in front of the building under a shelter.

It seems deserted here, and just at the moment I finish my wrap and start to believe I am the only guest in this residence, a grey-haired guy joins me under the shelter. He's got bowlegs, a bent back, and a hawk nose. We both light a cigarette, and just to punctuate the silence I ask what brought him here. He tells me that he is a medical biologist, a Professor from Israel, and has just attended a conference in Glasgow, an hour away. He wanted to see Edinburgh before flying back to his home country. We talk a bit about everything and nothing – his research, my PhD interview, his wife and his daughters, his first grandchild, my boyfriend. It is a pleasant enough conversation. He fetches a couple of beers from his room that we drink under the shelter while we smoke another cigarette. Then another two...

It is almost midnight when I finally stand up.

I say, "I very much enjoyed talking to you, but my bed is calling. I still want to see a bit of Edinburgh before my flight tomorrow."

"You want to join me in my room?" he asks.

Knowing the size of my room, which is basically not more than two walls with a tiny desk and a bed in between, I'm pretty sure that I know what he wants to do in there. *Does this guy, who is even older than my dad, and who has just told me he recently got his first grandchild, really believe that I would want to have sex with him?* I stare at him in disbelief.

"Are you proposing to have intercourse?" I ask with wide open eyes.

"Yes, that is what I'm proposing."

"I don't want to have sex with you!" I say very loudly and, I suspect, looking disgusted.

He swallows, and seems disappointed. "Some girls say yes."

"Are you joking?" I ask, genuinely stunned and truly unable to imagine anyone wanting to have sex with Quasimodo.

He looks surprised. "What about a blow job?" he asks

"No," I say very clearly, wondering if his dick is as warped as his nose, and his scrotum as crumpled as his forehead... but feeling far from keen to find out.

"Too bad. Well, I had nothing to lose."

"What about dignity?"

I had felt good about the young guy giving me his number. And now Quasimodo says I am actually in his league. It's always yin and yang with sexual self-esteem. But, hey-ho, the signals are lively in Edinburgh...