

Chapter 35

“I seriously don’t even know the names of the different types of glassware which chemists use,” I say to Logan, crossing the glass bridge to the new part of the chemistry building, to the teaching labs. Logan laughs. In the lab he has been mostly surrounded by females for the last one and a half years of his life. He has become accustomed to faint hysteria about stress.

“It’s just redox reactions you’re teaching. You’ll be fine.”

“That’s my problem, I might as well teach ballet. I don’t know anything about redox reactions!”

Logan laughs even louder. “You know more about them than the students know.”

During the previous two semesters I taught biological chemistry to first year students. Perhaps that went a little too well because this time I’ve been signed up, by Mark, to teach chemistry to second year students instead. Following my first year exam, I put in an effort to get to grips with chemistry but if this qualifies me as a teacher then God help the future of chemistry. I am, after all, a biologist. Rationally, I know I probably have nothing to worry about; undergrads don’t ask much. But even so, I fear some overly enthusiastic student could shoot me down in flames.

We manoeuvre through the hallway, between groups of students sat on the floor. They are waiting for the class to start. As soon as I see them I feel less nervous. None of them looks terribly motivated and the course

manuals are peacefully sitting in colourful backpacks – if indeed they are even here.

“Why did Mark sign me up for this?” I ask before entering the large, new teaching labs.

“To bully you.”

Logan is teaching at a bench near the front of the room and I am right at the back. The two ladies running the teaching labs give us a few more instructions before they open the large white doors and let the students in.

The students shuffle in slowly, as motivated as a herd being hounded to an abattoir. They search the lab quite leisurely, looking for the number on the bench which indicates where they are supposed to be taught. During the next few weeks they will circulate in groups of ten throughout the room, ensuring they partake in all the experiments. As PhD students in teaching roles, we will stay at the same bench running the same experiment every week for a full semester. Gratifying, it is not.

“What did they smoke?” whispers Rostek, a tall Polish guy, doing his PhD in the inorganic chemistry section.

“They probably had a party last night,” I say.

“Yes, too much vodka.”

It takes several minutes for the students to accomplish the apparently Herculean task of changing into lab coats and putting on safety specs. I explain in three sentences what we are going to do this afternoon and how long the experiment is supposed to take. Logan, who taught the experiment last semester, told me that my group should be finished first. That prospect pleases me enormously. As both the students and myself are keen to get this over as soon as possible, I encourage them to start pipetting the mixtures together straight away which, in fact, they do with commendable obedience.

While I wait till the students on my bench complete their work, I hear Rostek talking in an engaging manner about the experiments. Bursting with enthusiasm and passion, he writes chemical structures and experimental set-ups on the whiteboard as if there is nothing more interesting in this world. He is a born teacher, a born chemist. It is right and fitting that he is here. It is wrong and ill-fitting that I am here. I wish I could be as happy and passionate as Rostek, but this subject simply isn't my bag...

My students are making quick progress, as Logan predicted, and no one comes up with the idea to ask me about the theory behind what they are doing. The first couples are packing up to leave within two hours of us starting. Just as the last two are finishing, one of the ladies running the lab appears at my bench with two more students. Their eyes are red and

they walk as if they just stepped off a boat after a long voyage in stormy waters.

“These two gentlemen are in your group,” she announces.

“It’s too late now, we’re finished,” I say, sort of knowing I probably won’t get away with it; I will be penalised with an extra two hours of teaching, for this pair partying too hard to get to class on time. “Let them come back another time.”

“Tomorrow the groups are full,” she says, at length, as if presenting me with a problem I should care about.

“Maybe there is a spot free next year,” I say, knowing the pair will never be sent back a class.

The students stand there with eyes wide open. It is obvious they are accustomed to being treated as valued customers at the university, and have never come across such outrageously shoddy service before.

“I’m afraid they have to do it now,” says she, pointing at two empty seats on my bench before striding off. *Learning that it is fine to behave like useless brats; that’s “education” in this charade...*

I sigh and regard the students with much derision, but they don’t know or care. They change into lab coats slowly, like we have all the time in the world, and conduct the experiment. I’m sitting, waiting and looking around a bit. Rostek walks around very actively, answering all kinds of questions. There are two students standing at the fume hood, and Rostek decides they need help too. He takes the separating funnel filled with solvents out of one student’s hand and says: “You really have to shake it properly with two hands; not just swaying, like you just did.”

He holds the funnel at both ends and shakes it vigorously in all directions to mix the solvents. “Like this,” he adds, before handing the glassware back to the undergrad.

“But Rostek,” says the girl. “I only have one hand.”

My eyes and Rostek’s eyes move down at the same time, me observing her from a more comfortable distance. The girl indeed only has one hand, the other arm stops just before her wrist. *What on Earth...*

Rostek stares at her in disbelief, not knowing what to say. I’m sure he is wondering how someone with only one hand can be sent to an organic chemistry lab class. He looks in my direction as if I might have a clue how to handle the situation. I shrug my shoulders and shake my head slightly. “What is happening to this world?” he says in a much stronger Eastern European accent than he used before. “That is quite dangerous,” he adds, after a few seconds of silence during which he took the funnel back out of her hand.

There are audible traces of shock in his voice and manner, "What are you doing in a chemistry lab?"

The girl looks crushed, but anger creeps into her expression. "Ever heard of equality laws?" she squeaks as if she has been properly offended.

"Equal rights is all good and fine, but a blind person can't become a bus driver. And in my opinion someone with only one hand can't go into a lab without help. Theoretical chemistry, yes, but enrolling for a strongly lab-based chemistry degree is not only endangering yourself but everyone around you. Did nobody tell you this is not a good idea?"

"No," she says upset, but she sits back in her chair and awaits her study buddy finishing their experiment.

Around 5:00 p.m. all students, apart from mine, have finished. I am still sitting at the bench, with Loser One and Loser Two, when Mark walks in to fetch the attendance sheet. When he sees me sitting at the bench, he walks towards me. He is smiling in a jolly way, as he usually does when there are "outsiders" around. I haven't seen him for over two weeks; I had been in Canada and then he had been at a conference in Turkey.

"Hi, how are things going?" he asks enthusiastically.

"Fine, those guys just decided to sleep in so we aren't finished yet," I say, pointing at Loser One and Loser Two.

"Hmmm, next time you come in time, will you? You are wasting the time of my PhD students."

Mark speaks in a tone that brokers no objections. They nod and continue the experiment like two beaten dogs. *Wow.*

"How was the Toronto conference?"

"Yeah, I enjoyed it, thanks. Weren't many people there; about sixty I think."

At the start of the conference I had hooked up with two girls I didn't know before, both late stage PhD students, and we had a good time together. None of us was overly fussed about attending the sessions. We were there for a break, from daily lab routines and our dragging PhD projects. One of the girls got upset when she saw her own data being presented by a different research group on the first conference day.

"That is my data," she whispered during the talk.

"Huh... how come they have it?" I asked.

"My boss gave it away in return for collaboration on a different project."

"What about you?"

“I wasn’t asked, and now I have to stay on for another year to generate other data for my PhD thesis,” she said, with watery eyes.

“Great boss.”

“Yeah, he’s a dick.”

Tears were running down her cheeks. It was unexpected and sad, but an excellent excuse to skip the next session and spend the rest of the day in a pub instead. We partied hard and discovered all three of us were passionate scientists who are being demotivated by ropy PhD experiences. We had fun, and we realised we are not unusual. That’s oddly comforting – yet distressing from a neutral point of view.

“You travelled with Brian?” Mark asks, leaning on the bench of the two undergrads. *Was too dangerous – we might inspire the other to jump out at 30,000 feet.*

Being at the same conference was one thing, but actually sitting next to him on a long flight was unthinkable. I don’t tell Mark that Brian and I merely said hi in Toronto and thereafter cold shouldered each other until the flight home. We were on the same flight, and we dutifully sat together in the airport. And we both sighed with relief when we could finally board and take a seat far away from the other.

“No, unfortunately not. I took the opportunity to see the city and Niagara Falls, so I travelled two days earlier.”

“You liked the Falls?” *No, this natural-wonder-gone-Disneyland sucked big time.*

“It was impressive,” I say, wondering if Mark and I have ever before had such a normal conversation?

“Okay. Any news from the conference?”

“Well, the presentations were like in Venice, mainly research that has been published, but Prof. Clark and Prof. Green took their collaboration to the next level,” I say, smiling.

Mark raises his eyebrows, clearly awaiting elaboration; Clark and Green are two of the most eminent researchers in the field of cystic fibrosis. “He banged her,” I add.

Mark expresses a mixture of shock, confusion and worry as if I had just used a bad word that the little boys at the bench should never hear. “How do you know?” he whispers.

“With two other PhD students, I bumped into them. We came back from the pub, heard some strange noise coming out of a meeting room and had a look to see what was going on. And there they were; on top of the piano – a grand piano of course.”



Mark looks entertained yet unsure how to react. Apart from some drunken comments during our Christmas night out, our lab is bereft of erotica when Mark is around. The guys at the bench definitely overhear the conversation, but pretend to be absorbed in the work they obviously prioritised lower than yet another beer in the pub the night before. “We’re just collaborating’ Prof. Clark said when he saw us standing in the doorway. It was a plausible statement since he had both hands on her

ass and she had lifted one leg onto the piano – they were jointly committed to the project, indeed.”

“Okay, okay, enough!” *He must be visualising Prof. Green with one of her dwarf legs on the piano. I liked that I had furnished him with sufficient detail to do this.*

Prof. Green is small and has chubby legs that she likes to pack into a tight leather skirt. I had previously seen her at the conference in Venice. She is an excellent researcher, no doubt, but also the perfect personification of academia as a drip can of eccentric species. I love watching her; how she laughs, how she dresses like the hotty of the local flea market, how she endeavours to be sexy. I remember her pausing during a lengthy monologue at breakfast to dart to the buffet, grab a sausage soaking in fat and slide it into her mouth in one go. Prof. Clark, by contrast, is tall, handsome and well-dressed. He is also married. And he had proudly announced at the start of the conference that his wife had just given birth to his third daughter. They are the two professors who did, after some talks, get a good discussion going. However, the day after their piano sex scene they both sat through the sessions looking red-faced and ashamed.

Loser One and Loser Two are slowly packing up their stuff, and Mark and I follow them out, locking the door behind them. The guys leave the building through the nearest exit and Mark and I walk back to Lab 262.

“You happen to know where Lucy is hanging out?”

“She is still writing up, at home.”

He shakes his head. “Tell her to come in! She is *not* finished yet.”

“She is still working weekends,” I say, not mentioning that she picked this time schedule to avoid Mark, who spends weekends with his girlfriend in Stirling.

We cross the glass bridge back to the old building. When we have almost reached the end of the bridge the first safety door swings open. A young handsome guy is walking toward us, smiling at me; it is Alex. I freeze in mid-motion. *What the hell is he doing here?* My mind works fast enough to realise how ridiculous I must look to both Mark and Alex, but my knees seem immobilised for a few seconds. Alex is a step closer and I can smell the triggering mixture of cologne and body odour. He lets his eyes roll over my body and I instantly regret wearing my jeans. I am looking at his face, but I can't stare at him too long because I am flustered and Mark is examining me. *Move! Move!*

“Hello,” Alex says, unclear if he is greeting me or Mark or both.

“Hello,” both Mark and I reply, and I tentatively take a few steps towards the door.

Mark is looking at me, puzzled, "You know Alex?"

"Not really. I know one of his PhD students."

After the Oxford Alumni Party we had met only once. Alex had proposed we spend an afternoon together in the seaside town of North Berwick, which we did. I had been excited to go there with him and left work around lunchtime. Alas, when we had finally strolled over the beach and climbed over rocks, I could barely talk. I felt such a need to impress him, find the right words, contrive the perfect message for the perfect man, but I was simply too drained of energy to do so. Though he still failed to mention it, I knew from both Chris and Greg he was dating someone else. This should have taken the pressure off me, but it didn't. He did his best, but his mere presence stifled me. I had stayed at his place another night, and we had a lively chat at the breakfast table about university policies, particularly around lectureships; how they become more and more like administrative jobs and forever move away from research, how the percentage of time he spends on each activity is monitored non-stop for everything he does, how alarmingly spoiled and spoon-fed students are becoming, and how tragically much time is invested in parenting them. Research became a "hobby" for your "leisure time," but one that you're appraised for, which translates into promotions. We had talked a bit about Mark, and Alex had confirmed he has a bad reputation at the university. After that day on the rocks of North Berwick beach we had some email contact, but that was it. I guess we both silently concluded that it would not work between us; no bad feeling, maybe in another life... but not now.

We walk through another set of doors and enter the dark corridor where Mark's office is located. We smell cigar smoke, permeating from Prof. Gilton's office. Occasionally, he smokes outside and we have a friendly chat between the chemical containers. Other days he doesn't feel like walking downstairs and we see the smoke billowing through the slit of his doorway. To so completely and utterly neglect the rules and policies in a place where you are supposed to be a role model to students is appealingly cavalier, at least to me. I came to like him in the last year. After my first year exam he enquired a few times how I was getting on and explained that the exam had been a "normal procedure." He seems to care deeply that the people in our lab can finish their PhDs. He hardly ever enters our lab, but he talks to the Lab 262 inmates in the corridor, offering his help whenever he can.

Mark unlocks his office door and I can only hope he is not inviting me in to continue our conversation.

"Did Brian tell you he found a lectureship position in Cork?" he asks, standing in the doorway.

“He didn’t.”

“You can join him to Cork for a few months to help him set up his lab.”
Are you really this clueless?

“I would like to finish my PhD first, have a nice evening,” I say hurrying off to the lab, though just to fetch my coat and backpack.

It is still early but the office is dark and silent. Until two days ago the fossil autoclave had been hissing around this time of the day but an inspector had recently done some inspecting and – to absolutely nobody’s surprise – closed the old beauty down. Now it just stands there, waiting to finally rest in the knacker’s yard where it has long belonged. I lock all doors and cycle home.

I say hello to Lucy, who is sitting at the desk typing on her laptop. I sit on the sill, stare out of the window and light a cigarette. “Mark wants you to come in and do lab work,” I say.

“I bet. He writes me emails all the time. I actually found a teaching position in Senegal today. I decided to take it. I’ll write up till I go.” *Noooo!...*

She is excited but I’m sad. I knew she was looking around for jobs to get away from Edinburgh. Of course sleeping on a mattress in my living room is nice for a slumber party but in the long run it is poor testament to a full life for a functioning adult. I just didn’t think she would find something so quickly.

“I guess I should be happy for you. When are you leaving?”

“In a month. I still have about four weekends of work to finish and then I should be ready to leave.”

“So soon?”

“You’ll be fine. You have Felix... and William.”

I know. I’m a big girl. But still, the best thing about my PhD is going to West Africa, and work looms large in life when empty spaces appear. I sometimes think Lucy is one of the main reasons – even *the* main reason – I do not suffer from depression during my PhD.