



*(extract)*

The boy asks the girl a question. It is a question of marriage. Ask me again tomorrow, she says, and he says, That's not how this works.

Diamond is no longer the hardest mineral known to man. *New Scientist* reports that lonsdaleite is. Lonsdaleite is 58 percent harder than diamond and forms only when meteorites smash themselves into Earth.

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The lab mate says to make a list of pros and cons.

Write it all down, prove it to yourself.

She then nods sympathetically and pats me on the arm.

The lab mate is a solver of hard problems. Her desk is next to mine but is neater and more result-producing.

Big deal, she says of her many, many publications and doesn't take herself too seriously, is busy but not that busy, talks about things other than chemistry.

I find her outlook refreshing, yet strange. If I were that accomplished, I would casually bring up my published papers in conversation. Have you read so-and-so? Because it is quite worth your time. The tables alone are beautiful and well formatted.

I have only one paper out. The tables are in fact very beautiful, all clear and double-spaced line borders. All succinct and informative titles.

Somewhere I read that the average number of readers for a scientific paper is 0.6.

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So I make the list. The pros are extensive.

Eric cooks dinner. Eric cooks great dinners. Eric hands me the toothbrush with toothpaste on it and sometimes even sticks it in my mouth. Eric takes out the trash, the recycling; waters all our plants because I can't seem to remember that they're living things. These leaves feel crunchy, he said after the week that he was gone.

He goes that week to California for a conference with other young and established chemists.

Also Eric drives me to lab when it's too rainy to bike. Boston sees a great deal of rain. Sometimes the rain comes down horizontal and hits the face.

Also Eric walks the dog. We have a dog. Eric got him for me.

I realize that I don't have any cons. I knew this going in.

It is a half-list, I tell the lab mate the next day, and she offers to buy me a cookie.

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In lab, there are two boxes filled with argon. It is where I do highly sensitive chemistry, the kind that can never see air. Once air is let in, the chemicals catch fire. It is also where I wish to put my head on days of nothing going right.

On those days, I add the wrong amount of catalyst. Or I add the wrong catalyst.

Catalysts make reactions go faster. They lower activation energy, which is the indecision each reaction faces before committing to its path.

What use is this work in the long run? I ask myself in the room when I am alone. The solvent room officially, but I have renamed it the Fortress of Solitude.

Eric is no longer in this lab. He graduated last year and is now in another lab. A chemistry PhD takes at least five years to complete. We met when I was in my first and he was in his second.

Now I walk around our apartment and trip over his stuff: big black drum bags and steel pots and carboys with brown liquid fermenting inside. Eric plays the drums and brews beer. One con is how much space these two hobbies take up, but this is outweighed by the drums that I like to hear and the beer that I like to drink.

My pro list grows at an exponential rate.

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We had talked about marriage before. Can you see yourself settling down, having kids? Can you see yourself starting a family? I didn't say no, but I didn't say yes. We had these talks casually. Each time, he thought if actually proposed to, I would say something different.

At least now all my cards are on the table, he says. But please don't take too long to decide.

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It has been the summer of unbearable heat. At the Home Depot, we go up and down aisles looking for a fan. Our last fan broke yesterday and next week it is supposed to be hotter. Then next month, a hurricane.

When Eric sees the hurricane report, he wonders if the people who wrote it are just screwing with us.

Why would they do that? I ask.

Because it's funny.

Oh, right. Then a minute later, I laugh.

Patience is Eric's greatest virtue. He will wait in longer lines than I will and think nothing of it. He will smile, while holding a heavy fan, at the older woman in front of him who has brought a tall stack of lampshades and at the moment of payment is having second thoughts. She asks the clerk for his opinion. She asks Eric. Do I need the magenta? Me, she doesn't bother with, because I am the one with the furiously tapping foot. The woman considers some more, turning each lampshade in her hands, but in the end purchases nothing.

I tell Eric in the car that if I were to reimagine Hell, it would be no different from the line we were just in. Except the woman would never decide on a lampshade and the line would never move.

Can you imagine? I say. A worse punishment than pushing that thing up the hill.

A boulder, Eric says.

I realize what a hypocrite I'm being, to make him wait for an answer and then dwell on a twenty-five-minute line.

Once home, Eric sets the fan up and the dog goes crazy.

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Bad tempers run in my family. It is the dominant allele, like black hair. Eric has red hair. Our friends have asked if there is any way our babies will turn out to be gingers. Gingers are dying out, and our friends are concerned about Eric's beautiful locks.

I say, Unless Mendel was completely wrong about genetics, our babies will have my hair.

But our friends can still dream. An Asian baby with red hair. One friend says, You could write a *Science* paper on that and then apply for academic jobs and then get tenure.

Eric is already looking for academic jobs. He wants to teach at a college that primarily serves undergrads.

Because they are the future, he says. Eager to learn, energetic, and happy, more or less, as compared with grad students. With undergrads, I can make a real difference.

I don't say this but I think it: You are the only person I know who talks like that. So enthusiastically and benefit-of-the-doubt-giving.

But the colleges he's interested in are not in Boston. They are in places like Oberlin, Ohio.

I am certain that Eric will get the job. His career path is very straight, like that of an arrow to its target. If I were to draw my path out, it would look like a gas particle flying around in space.

The lab mate often echoes the wisdom of many chemists before her. You must love chemistry even when it is not working. You must love chemistry unconditionally.

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