

The Chemist

After careful observation, it can be concluded that the Chemist is certifiably mad.

Based upon qualitative evidence, he is not physically similar to a normal specimen of the Homo sapiens species. He is bigger in length though smaller in width than most, with arms that are longer than they should be. Three perfectly even strands of hair cross his otherwise bald scalp horizontally, giving his head the likeness of a three-stringed guitar when seen from a bird's eye view. The Chemist is an unusual individual straddling the line between antiqueness and middle-age, with a possible history of youth.

His habitat is a lab that though big is filled with outdated, rusty and just barely functional equipment. He has a little office and a fume hood, and he's personally in charge of all the chemicals stored in the back room. But the head honchos that sign his cheque never give him enough money, and this year they're cutting back even more to pay for the Olympics. Any scientist in their right mind would fight for their rights to obtain higher grade elements, but the Chemist isn't angry, just mad. He calculates his chances, and decides that there's nothing he can do.

Year after year, he does the same experiments, but yet every time something still goes wrong. He blames it all on his assistants' ineptness, and it's usually true, they are at fault, but he tries hard not to be angry because they're young and precocious and want so badly to please him.

The problem lies in the fact that he doesn't have the power to pick his assistants. The powers that be simply give him around sixty new ones every year, and he has to work with what he's got. Sometimes he gets to keep one or two for a year after that, but he doesn't consider that a good thing, since they're always the least helpful ones. Still, his assistants are always late, either breathlessly running in with little pink slips of authorized excuses or sauntering in with a devil's smirk, smelling of smoke and weed. They're always so late that the Chemist doesn't bother coming in on time for his own labs either. He's done them more than fifty times over and over again anyways.

This year as always he's got sixty new assistants. There's brilliant Sydney who takes neat little notes diligently with coloured pens and neon post-it notes. The Physicist next door says that Sydney's going far; that girl's the one to watch. But Alex is giving her a run for her money this year. He mouths off constantly and prefers to argue over concepts than listen to the Chemist talk about the labs and results. The boy frustrates the Chemist to no end, but also shows more promise than anyone has in years.

Sydney and Alex like to trade barbs, and it often gets vicious enough to draw blood. The Chemist has his own theories, but he only knows he's correct when the insults begin to be uttered with lips that twitch upwards.

One week in the first term, Sydney begs off Monday and Tuesday so she can compete in an Olympic swimming tournament in Saskatoon. The Chemist frowns, but she's his favourite, even though he'll never say, and so he lets her go. Promptly the day after, Alex says he has a dentist appointment on the other side of town and so will be missing Tuesday too. The Chemist knows Alex is planning to meet up with Sydney in Saskatoon, but he doesn't say anything and lets Alex go too. Who is he to crush the dreams of the young?

The Chemist continues the experiment with his fifty-eight remaining assistants, and even with his protégés gone it shouldn't be a difficult ordeal. The magnesium is supposed to react with the diluted acid (3.0 molar since safety measures were becoming increasingly tight and ridiculous, not that the Chemist doesn't care about safety). Unfortunately at the end of it all, even though a Bunsen burner isn't involved Sasha manages burn her hands anyways.

Sasha is really terrible at Chemistry, so terrible that the Chemist actually fears that she might be the one that stays with him for the next year. He really doesn't want that. So the Chemist takes Sasha aside and asks her with brutal honesty why she ever decided on a career in chemistry to begin with. Sasha shrugs and says that her parents made her; there's money to be made in science, and biology makes her nauseous while physics is too confusing. Sasha says that her real love is art and pulls out her battered sketchbook with difficulty as to not aggravate her burnt fingers.

Sasha is good at drawing. She's actually amazing with a pencil when not required to work out an equilibrium reaction. The Chemist concedes that she will be great someday and hums in appreciation as he flips through the leather bound book. There are many portraits of a boy with messy hair and a lazy smile. That looks like Alex, he says with a waggle of his eyebrows, not meaning to harm, only to tease.

Sasha is quiet, and the Chemist knows that he's right, but he's said the wrong thing. It is Alex, she concedes after a while, and the Chemist doesn't know what to say but makes a joke that he knows is distasteful but makes Sasha smile anyways. He knows his experiments by heart, knows everything that could possibly go wrong, but his assistants are young, they always find ways to make things more complicated than they should be.

The following Wednesday, he sees Sydney and Alex holding hands at the side of the table. Sydney is pouring over a riddle and Alex's smile is not so much lazy as stupidly in love. That day, even though there's no experiment to be done, Sasha somehow falls and then rises with hands full of broken glass. Sydney makes snide remarks about elephants and shoes, and Alex laughs loud and bright. The Chemist has seen this story play out a hundred times.

Then something goes wrong, Yale doesn't want Sydney, and there's heartbreak and tears when she breaks down and cries. Alex says all the wrong things while trying to make everything alright.

And just like that it's over.

In the back Sasha looks on with trepidation and hope, while the Chemist despairs and mentally wrings his hands as yet another experiment goes awry.

Things spiral down after that. Sydney was always prickly, but now she bares her teeth, and she's a girl with fangs. Alex can't look at her in the eyes, and it's obvious by the weakness of his rebuttals he still fancies himself in love. Sasha follows him like a lost puppy, setting up her own inevitable heartbreak.

On a March morning, the Chemist hears the news, and he isn't so much scared as shocked. Sasha is in the hospital recovering from twenty five sleeping pills. The Physicist doesn't like to gossip, but the Writer on the other side of the institution does, so the Chemist hears all about Sasha's family, and her brother, and all the little things that pushed her over the edge.

During the experiment that day, Alex's hands are shaking when he receives his solution, his face pale and guilty. Sydney is made of marble, and the rest of the assistants twitter more nervously than usual. Unlike a good sane logical scientist, the Chemist is not concerned about a data table of results, and he calls off the experiment and to give a talk he hopes will help. By the end, Sydney's marble wall is still impenetrable, and Alex has walked out of the room.

After that, a normalcy sets in. There are fewer mistakes during experiments without Sasha, and the Chemist is pleased with the results he's getting. Sydney and Alex reach something akin to civility, though Alex will probably love Sydney a little for the rest of his life.

In spring the results roll in. Sydney's going to Boston just to prove she can, Alex is going to Montreal to get away from all the drama, and Sasha, she'll be fine. The Chemist doesn't see her much anymore, but the Artist three doors down signs her praises during lunch. Because the Chemist is crazy, he doesn't care how good his assistants are at chemistry, he wants them to be happy.

As the June rain paints his windows, the Chemist prepares himself for next fall. This year is over, but the next will inevitably come, and every year he feels older and older. Life isn't a lab; there isn't a formula to predict a result. Every year different experiments go wrong in different ways. His assistants can leave the aftermath behind, but he stays and does his strange job in a way only he can. His unwaveringly loyalty can rival Tesla's genius.

The Chemist is insane, not enough to be forced into a straightjacket, but enough so that he'll stay in this hell hole known as high school. He's seen many Sydneys and Alexes and Sashes pass through his classroom door, and he'll guide many more through in years to come.