

## Thoughts of a torn scientist

There is a small teddy bear dangling from my keychain.

When I finished school, I did not to study right away. Instead, I decided on a voluntary social year where I spent two months at a gastrointestinal station at a hospital. There I met a person who changed something in me. I will call her Ivanka, a Bulgarian woman with short blond hair who was not much older than my mother. And despite her relatively young age in comparison to the average of my station, she already suffered from an aggressive gastro-intestinal cancer.

I remember entering her room for the first time. There was this frail woman, buried under a big blanket which seemed way too heavy for her, with sunken eyelids and dark shadows covering her face. I was told she doesn't know German, but luckily, due to my descent, we could communicate in Russian. From this point on, I became something like her guardian, functioning as a translator between her and the doctors and nurses. And most importantly, her only somewhat close figure between the crushing white walls. There were two critical experiences I had with her which shaped my future.

First, when we sent her, laying in the cable-ridden bed, to the operation room. She was crying silently and I held her hand, murmuring senseless phrases of comfort to her along the whole way, knowing that these concatenations of words could never alleviate the agonizing fear of this devastating disease. Secondly, when one day, I brought her a meal to her room. We were alone at that time and she took my warm, healthy hands in her cold ones. Her pale, almost ghostly face twisted in a grimace of sorrow, tears in the corners of her eyes. "Please, always drink and eat well.", she pleaded, "So that you don't end up like me."

I had to leave her room almost immediately so that she would not see me cry.

And now I am here, in my second master semester, at the HIRI, a teddy bear dangling from my keychain, next to my transponder. Together with a small card, Ivanka gave the plushie to me as a gift for supporting her. She made it, she was able to beat the curse called cancer. This teddy bear since accompanied me through all of my studies, always reminding me of why exactly I chose my path. I started very excited and motivated into my Bachelor's studies. In my young and idealistic mind, I thought that I, even though I am only a small point in the scope of the whole world, could at least contribute a bit to helping people like Ivanka, who suffer from devastating diseases. And dear lord, was I fascinated by the miniscule universe of bacteria, viruses and archaea. By the secrets lurking in my own body, the separation and combination of phenotype and genotype. Epigenetics, transposons, ubiquitin, non-coding RNA, colourful proteins, things, that my biology course in school never even touched on. I felt like I was diving head-over into a beautiful chaos and it was on me and the other aspiring scientists to sort the single threads out of this enormous ball of wool. All in all, I was euphoric.

But then, after idealism, reality hit me.

It started around the third semester, when the initial heyday of new things slowly faded into dull everyday life. I studied hard and relentlessly, taking the teddy bear of the key chain and placing it next to my working sheets to feel motivation. I forgot about the concepts of hobbies or even weekends, meals began to consist of snacks, sleep began to consist of naps. I remember considering stopping it all, starting something new, just to feel freedom again. But always, when I would look at the small teddy bear, I pushed further. Knowing that I foolishly wanted to live for something bigger

than myself. I thought it would get better after a certain exam, after a certain presentation, after a certain semester. But now, I am still waiting for the 'after'.

My initial dream of becoming a professor, dedicating myself to research, shattered like glass hit by a bullet when I made the acquaintance with the reality of academic future. Because in addition to the common life-draining stress of the education in itself, I learnt that, if I chose to continue on my desired path, my life would not differ much from what I had in my Bachelor's. In fact, like some Junior Professor once told me, it only gets worse the higher up you go. In all fairness, this sounds like a twisted, dark joke.

Recently, I read an article about how PIs are facing the issue of not finding proper postdocs. I had to suppress a grim laugh, who could have figured. Being enslaved in a system that provides you deliberately with temporary contracts, ridiculous pay, horrendous hours and, sadly often enough, a one-way ticket into burnout. Nature, Science, Cell – giants you must reach. If you don't publish quick enough, if you don't publish in the holy trinity you are nothing. And don't forget the game of 'who stays the longest in the lab' or 'who had the most cups of coffee today.'

I am one of the lucky ones. I have a great PI, a great team, a great research topic. But still, there is this relentless dispute in my head. I love science and I always dreamt of having my own students to whom I can introduce this exciting, mesmerizing world. Because I strongly believe that science is the right answer to so many questions. Nevertheless, I ask myself every day, what do I have to give up and what will I choose in the end: The seducing comfort of industry, taking a turn on my idealism, or the beauty of research?

Until then, the teddy bear remains dangling from my keychain, judging me silently.

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