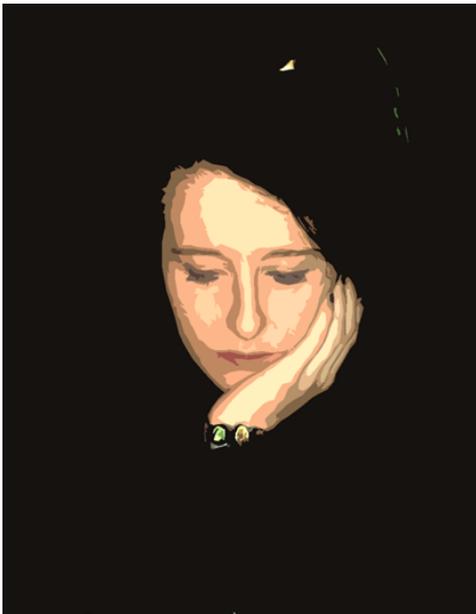

A Tale of a Life Lived for Science from an Unlikely Narrator



By Emily Sheridan

Prelude:

I shouldn't be where I am today.

Let me tell you why.

Act 1: Finding my way into Science

If you could meet my old school teachers, they might say I am smart, but I don't apply myself. They would say I mess and don't take anything seriously. When I found a topic interesting I was enthusiastic, while other subjects would lose my attention. I could do well in tests, but my submitted assignments were lacklustre. My only memory from my early years spent in my school chemistry lab was an incident of lunchtime detention where I had to fill the dishwasher with test tubes. Prompted by my "laid back" approach, my maths teacher made a bet with me that I would fail the leaving certificate honours maths exam. Luckily, I won that bet.

The idea of science was what I was interested in, more than the day to day reality of my science lessons at the time. I watched documentaries on epigenetics and forensics, read the selfish gene and a brief history of time. Darwin came in audiobook. I wanted to skip to the point of hearing the big stories in science, not slave away with the seemingly unconnected lessons I received. I decided that in the future I needed a job which would allow me to learn something new every day, nothing else would be worth my time. First, I had decided I would become the state pathologist. I would have the qualifications just in time for Dr Marie Cassidy to retire. It turned out even a rat dissection turned my stomach. Genetics it is! Enough chemistry for me.

Interrupting my great plans, I spent the final two years of school in bed, arriving in school for a day every two weeks to collect homework.

Unbearable depression and anxiety prevented even the social aspects of my life from cheering me up. I spent these years in agony, the anxiety magnified with the knowledge that everyday it lasted, my goal of a career in science was getting further away.

In the last few months of my school days, an access scheme came to my rescue. They recognised the toll of my illness on my education and gifted me a lifeline. If I had been healthy in my final years in school, I might not have applied myself enough. I might not have been so lucky, so I grabbed it with both hands. I could not let myself stand in my way now.

My mother cried at the news. So did I.
I was off to Trinity.

Act 2: Finding my Voice in Science

Before starting university, I came across a Tedx talk by a man named Shawn Achor who got a scholarship to Harvard. He, much like myself, felt grateful and amazed at the opportunity he had been given. To paraphrase his talk 'Even if he was in a classroom full of people smarter than him, he felt grateful just to be in that classroom'. Later he found from working with new Harvard students, that they felt differently, after the initial delight at their acceptance, students became wrapped up in exam pressure and impending deadlines. They no longer remembered their excitement and achievement. They forgot that a younger version of themselves was exactly where they wanted to be. I was determined to always remind myself of that.

After a few years in university it became time to specialise, genetics by now seemed too constricting. Biochemistry would give me a chance to study it all. I loved the intertwined networks and the complexity of design of the cell. I wanted to know how to follow a molecule from gene to modification to function, and once it completed its role, its degradation. I wanted to understand how it was shipped through the cell in cargo trucks

driving along the intracellular highways. And from here, I wanted to see the roadblocks added in disease.

I never forgot to remind those I met that I was heavy on the bio side of biochemistry. Again, I knew that would be the last time I took a chemistry module. It kept following me like a bad smell. I could soon be ready to research the world which fascinated me so much.

By now there was so much media available to consume. Not just in science journalism, and documentaries, but in handy podcast form. I found myself getting gripped by stories, which at first, seemed not to my interest, but were told so beautifully I could not help it. I wanted to become a science communicator. Unfortunately, my anxiety wasn't shaken off through willpower alone. It followed me through university and arose in time for every presentation. I wanted to become a good science communicator, but I first needed to be able to communicate. To tackle my fear, I volunteered to give talks to the public, and to students. I even attempted stand-up comedy, I was either funny, or they were very nice. I pretend it was a bit of both. I took opportunities for science communication when they arose. Still room for improvement but it was a start.

The final years in university were my favourite. All the years spent learning small corners of science, now they finally started connecting. The bigger picture came into full view. I finally started to see the branches connecting both in my area and to those of the other sciences, my passion only grew.

Eventually I survived the last exam in university, I was now ready to take on research. I was excited to work in the real world of science, outside of lecture theatres, and textbooks. The research lab I chose was known to be tough, the long days and tough work I expected. The personal attacks I did not. I tried to cope, this was science, this was how to be a success. I could not lose the chance to discover stories for myself, hidden in the secrets of the molecular world. There was no alternative path for me. I held on.

Luckily, after a few months, I got an extremely important piece of advice. It came from a Professor I respected. She told me that staying in that lab meant losing my love for science. Now it became clear, losing my passion was not something I could live without. I found the courage to leave and start again.

Act 3: Living for Science

Here I am today, a year into a PhD.

I'm a student of a Chemistry department. I research bio-nano interactions. I get to work on the molecular and nanoscale. I get to walk into the dark spots of the cell and shine a light. I still make a point to highlight I am on the bio side of the work, though I admit I'm starting to like chemistry. My school teachers would laugh, I would never admit it to them.

I still carry mental health struggles, I have learned how to manage and look after myself. I don't let it stand in my way. I love research and sharing my passion for science. Science has given me great friends and colleagues, allowed me to meet great thinkers and makers across all disciplines. Science has opened the world to me.

I don't know where my life and love for science will take me next.

In the meantime, I stop to remind myself that I am exactly where I want to be.

Finale

I shouldn't be where I am today.

But I am, and I love it.

By an unlikely narrator.