

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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Institutional love: a passionate engagement, growing indifference temporarily rekindled by jealousy, followed by divorce

Ah, you must still remember that first encounter - the first blush of love, the initial stirrings of desire, the yearning to be together, the thought that this could be it, the one that would last for ever. Remember the first look - an intellectual elevator-look, the mutual appraisal, the initial coyness. The courtship, the visits and telephone calls from famous people who talked with you like you were longtime friends, the dinners in expensive restaurants, the quiet walks to explore your vision of the future, the meetings with people who told you how wonderful your lives would be together.

Then came the official engagement and the marriage contract. Yes, there had been some haggling over the details of the contract, the amount of space, the salary, the size of the start-up package. But, you had signed. Now it was official; everyone knew. There would, for the

time being, be no more rumors of other suitors, former relationships, or whether you were right for each other. Everyone saw the look in your eyes.

You moved in together. Your new home was expensively decorated with the latest equipment, and there was more money than you had ever seen before. Your neighbors dropped by for coffee, to chat, to welcome you into the larger, institutional family. As your work progressed and your reputation spread, you started a family, young graduate students to begin with, but then postdocs too. Your nurturing spirit was strong, and you had few distractions; so your young family enjoyed your attentive parental care. You were there for them, 24 hours a day. Life was good.

Gradually, however, you began to realize that all was not well with the relationship. You started to see imperfections. The institution appeared less interested in you and your work. Increasingly, you noticed that people no longer asked for your opinion and that others, particularly the new hires, appeared to get more attention. Worse, it seemed that the institution was showing favoritism to others in the allocation of space and money and that new programs

were being established in areas different from yours. You felt marginalized, of less importance, shunned, unappreciated.

And so it came about that visits to other institutions for seminars, and conversations with outside colleagues at meetings, took on a new meaning. Although previously blind to their good looks, intelligence and wealth, you now saw them in a different light. Mentally, you slipped off the wedding band prior to those meetings. You were available.

The illicit affairs began: secret assignments, surreptitious telephone calls behind closed doors, coded e-mails, and always the concern that your secret would become public knowledge. You had a number of suitors, all of whom told you how wonderful you were, how you and they would be a perfect match, how you could grow with them. It had started again - the courtship, the romancing, the dance. This was more like it, to be wanted again. Then, another marriage contract was described, even better and bigger than the first one that you had negotiated (but by this point you were more desirable, more experienced; the body of your work had filled out and matured; you knew how to strut your stuff).

It was time to confront your partner, to recall the injustices, how you felt unappreciated and taken for granted, that your opinion was no longer sought and your advice no longer heeded, that you had found someone else - even though at the time you were not looking. However, they knew how to treat you, to appreciate you, and they wanted to build a future with you. And, you had a contract. See: here it is, and it is much more than you have now. This is serious. You want to leave. You want the divorce.

To your surprise (no, pleasure), the institution is aroused once more, but this time by jealousy. It realizes that it has overlooked your qualities, the importance of your research and your reputation in the scientific community. It sees that you could be the nucleus of a new program (coincidentally similar to the one proposed by your suitor). Suddenly, it cannot imagine life without you, because you are the future (again). But, what would it take to keep you, an increase in salary, a promotion, a new lab, formation of a new program with new faculty to hire?

Promises, promises. You decline their offer because this time you have found true love. Smiling, you sit back and plan for your life with a new partner.

Of course, as in all disputes in a relationship, there is another side. Your defection was a relief to your institution. Despite being good at giving research seminars, the institution saw that you were not such a great lecturer, and the amount of time that you were away at meetings was starting to adversely affect your teaching. It had become evident that you were less willing to help out and that, more often than not, you said "No" to committee assignments. You shunned your colleagues. The work that you had started when you got married did not seem to have the same freshness, the easy (and very visible) experiments were published some time ago, and the work seemed less interesting. There have been several new hires who have appeared considerably more promising than you and who would be better investments for the future. However, the marriage contract did not provide a way for the institution to divorce you. But, now you have solved that little difficulty.

Promises, promises. The institution is happy that you declined their offer (as they expected); so they can say that you are to blame for the divorce. Smiling, they sit back and plan their life with new partners just hired.

Caveman

Letters

JCS welcomes correspondence provoked by articles in all sections of the journal. Responses to articles in the Sticky Wicket section should be sent directly to Caveman (email: caveman@biologists.com). Correspondence relating to Research Articles, Commentaries and Cell Science at a Glance should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to

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