

Test tube love

by Peter Goddard

He held up the test tube. There it is, fifteen milligrams of love."

She stared at the blue powder and there, staring at her was his eye, magnified in the curve of the glass tube.

"Strange ... that's all it is." She said, but it hadn't really sunk in.

"It's as I suspected, it is a chemical." He held the tube up higher to admire it.

"And it's all thanks to you that I've discovered love."

Suddenly, he shut up and went red.

She felt like laughing but blushed instead and couldn't think of anything to say.

He placed the tube carefully into his pocket. "Uh..I think this calls for a celebration."

For a moment, she thought he might have something alcoholic stashed away in a dark alcove of the laboratory. Instead he filled up a beaker with water and placed it on a stand above a Bunsen burner. Even making a hot drink was like conducting an experiment. The blue tip of the flame licked at the air as he turned up the gas.

"Look!" He pointed at a rack filled with test tubes, each containing a blue potion. "I found it in every single one of those couples."

It seemed to her such a long time since those couples had been standing in front of her.

Today, months of research were over. She'd realised yesterday that he was on the verge of discovery. She'd offered to work last night, but he'd insisted that she went home.

She felt somehow cheated at not being there for the discovery. After all, she'd helped right from the outset.

She let her brain lapse back.

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WITH SOMEONE WHO IS
MADLY IN LOVE WITH YOU?
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She thought back to the ad she had written for the local paper.

He'd tried advertising before. To be precise, he'd gone around to newsagents with tatty bits of paper, on which were written in his scrawly handwriting, in poor English, his complex advertisement.

Her's had worked. People had phoned to find out more.

She would explain that they only needed to give a little blood, requiring a pin prick on the thumb. Nothing too painful.

The volunteers had been a curious collection. She'd taken samples of each one's blood, but later, discretely, she'd poured down the sink the blood of those couples that hadn't passed her test. Somehow she had known which couples were truly, deeply in love. She had felt it - felt like an intruder.

He was looking at her. "Last night, I tested the process on blood from the control group."

The control group, the control group... the words seemed to echo in her head like the clanging cell doors she'd heard closing at the lunatic asylum; there, zombies incapable of experiencing any emotion, let alone love, had been selected as the control group.

He'd waited and waited, poised eagerly to give his answer. "And I didn't find a trace of blue in any of them." He murmured to himself.

Her brain was clogged with snippets, sparks, clouds.

Love. She thought about love; thought hard. What is love? You had to experience it to know the warm feeling inside and the lump in your throat. At the thought, her Adam's apple seemed to bobble up and she gulped it back down again.

She thought of all those couples joined by that one thing - love. She envied them, that their love was mutual and wondered how many people were madly in love with someone who didn't love them.

"Coffee or tea?" Came his voice across the benches.

"Coffee would be lovely, please." The smile set on her face like a photograph of someone saying 'cheese'.

Instinctively, he licked the thumb of his left hand where a scab had almost hardened.

He reached into a cupboard for a bottle of brown granules. Scrawled on the oblong white label was the complicated chemical name of what ordinary people call instant coffee.

In the shadow cast between the shelves, his hand was shaking.

She shook her body, but rather than shrugging off her anxiety, this merely seemed to worsen it. She loved him. She swallowed with an effort.

Splang! The retort of breaking glass. He'd gone and dropped the coffee.

"I'll get a brush." She offered, starting to move.

"It doesn't matter," he said softly. "Leave it there. We'll have tea."

She loved him, but why couldn't she tell him she loved him? Once she had tried, rehearsed the words inside her head, turned them around and upside-down until they were ready to tumble out.

Come the moment, they had stuck in her throat, just as sure as if they'd been engraved there. She gave a little cough.

She couldn't flirt with him or give him the eye. He wasn't that kind of man. He was peculiarly gentle and shymysterious. Another time, she'd plucked up the courage and asked him if he would like to come to a pub with her.

He'd gone read and made a garbled excuse.

She wondered if she would ever find an opportunity of reaching him.

A noise tapped on her ear - the grunt of shattered glass, the grinding of granules; the sole of his shoe, a huge press fixed to the end of a leg making its awkward progress towards her.

He mumbled something to the floor; something about brushing the mess up later.

She wondered how he managed to look after himself and had visions of him going to bed in his white lab coat.

She fetched the cleaning things from a corner.

The white lab coat shuffled towards her up the aisle and like cablecars they passed; him carrying a jar of tea, her carrying a dustpan and brush.

She loved him. Was he good looking? She didn't rightly know. He just looked ... familiar. He was older than her. She couldn't work out how much older. It was that boyish look that scientists have.

As she was emptying a cascade of bits into the bin, a red sash pricked her vision. She looked twice. There was already broken glass in the bin. Strange, a large piece was bloody.

"Have you cut yourself?" Words issued from her mouth.

"Oh!" His left hand went stiff.

"Uh... I don't think so. Oh... Uh ... Yes. Yes. I took a sample of my blood."

"With that." She exclaimed. "That's not the way to do it." He was silly. She could just picture him gouging his hand open with that jagged edge.

She blinked. Why did he want... "Why did you want a sample of your blood?"

"Well ... Uh ... Uh. The control group, they could have given misleading results. This blue stuff could be a chemical special to sane people. You never know. That could be why it wasn't found amongst the lunatics."

Sheepishly, he went on. "I thought I'd better put my own blood through the process. Just as a final check."

So, his own blood had sealed the matter. She automatically assumed he'd found no blue powder there.

"It definitely is love then." She said flatly - half question, half statement.

He nodded.

Now, the full reality struck her. So here was love, no more than some blue substance released into the blood. All powerful, indescribable love explained away by science.

Love at first sight became no more than an instantaneous chemical reaction. Perhaps kissing someone you loved was a way to transfer the blue drug to them.

She felt something churning deep down in her body. She supposed that that same blue substance was flowing through her veins and in her brain, afflicting her with a hopeless infatuation for him.

Perhaps working closely together for a year had been enough to release it into her blood. Perhaps she could never fall in love again. Perhaps he'd find an antedote and cure the world of idiotic love.

"Is everything alright?" He paused.
"You look hot."
"Perhaps." She said idiotically.

He turned away, speaking with his back to her. "This morning we'll start work on analysing the chemical composition of the substance. I've got a feeling it's being secreted by the heart - one of my hunches. Soon we'll test it on..." He hesitated.
"..... animals."

He'd already done his test at home last night.

What a long night it had been. Processing blood - first a sample from the couples, then the sample of a zombie, then another sample from the couples, next a zombie, on and on; blue, blank, blue, blank ... on and on late into the evening.

He'd isolated something, but was it love? How could he be sure?

Suddenly he remembered Plato. Plato - of course, there was the solution.

The poor thing would be wondering what had happened to his din-dins.

Tonight Plato's meaty chunks came with a blue sprinkling. The effect was immediate. The old dog had become as frisky as a puppy and had scabbled at the front door as if he was trying to climb right up it.

Plato had howled and howled a serenade of howls. Soon the whole neighbourhood had erupted in a howling of dogs.

He had sneaked out by the garage door and driven back to the laboratory in the early hours of the morning.

He had just one more blood sample to do.

He rummaged in a jar of tea with a spatula and fumbled tea leaves into the steaming beaker.

His body gave the impression that it didn't quite fit. She fantasised that he'd been a test tube baby weaned on five-star petrol. But at that moment she didn't want to think of anything to do with chemistry.

He may be a genius, but there was more to life than looking down a microscope. She got the strange idea that when he looked at her all he saw was her molecular structure.

What could he know about love? He'd hardly given her a glance, let alone an ogle. What did he know about women?

"I think chimpanzees are best." He said over his shoulder.

"Yes." She mumbled, completely lost off. Her mind was dizzy. Maybe he'd take more notice of her if she was a chimpanzee. Her brain sagged, refused to think.

"They display most closely human emotions. The trouble is obtaining them for experiments is very difficult now." He continued.

She watched him stir the tea around and around. He'd found a spoon from somewhere.

He was about to say something when something caught his eye. She was cocking her head.

That was why he'd offered her the job originally - the way she cocked her head - half defiant, half accommodating.

For a long moment they stood her cocking her head him still stirring the tea leaves around and around.

Could she fancy him? He thought he'd noticed her looking at him sometimes. He had never dared to look into her eyes.

What could she fancy in him anyway? He wasn't good looking and he was much older than her.

"Is the tea ready?" she said weakly.

The cut on his thumb tingled.

"Oh!" He put down the spoon and carefully poured the tea into two mugs.

His right hand descended into his coat pocket and the fingers felt for the glass tube. Lovingly, they stroked it.

His fingers eased out of the pocket and went to hold a nearby tin of powdered milk. His left hand dug in a spoon, swivelled it across to her mug and dumped in the load. The white powder trailed down to the murky depths. He watched with interest.

He did the manoeuvre once more for his own mug. Some powder had caked on the spoon and this seemed to halt him momentarily.

Now his right hand recoiled back into the pocket and closed around the glass tube. He eased off the cork. He had his left shoulder inclined towards her so that she couldn't see what he was doing.

His plan was laid. A plan hatched only a few hours earlier. He could not have hoped yesterday that today she would be his.

Though he hesitated, he was aching to carry on.

Now his hand was hoisting up the test tube, careful not to spill its precious blue contents. He daren't look round.

Now, in his hand, his powder extracted from his blood; his love. The love he'd bottled up inside unable to express. How could he have told her? His language was chemistry, not all that sappy chat.

Love was something alien to his nature. It bewildered him. He'd done all his research to try and pin love down, to see if it really existed.

Instead, love had captured him. How else could he explain the illogical longing to be with her, the racing of his pulse when she was near. It was love and the blue powder extracted from his very own blood proved it.

Now, his love for her, tipping steadily into the mug dissolving without a trace.

This was the way, saving all the embarrassment - instant love.

The rattle of the spoon resounded like church bells in his head. As he stirred, the tea clouded milky brown. He breathed again.

Now his right hand clamped onto the side of the mug. Now ferrying to her his cup of love.

Her fingers found the handle. It was only when she safely held the mug that he felt pain on his palm where his hand had clasped the side of the boiling hot mug.

"Cheers." She raised the cup slightly. "To love." She smiled.

"To love." He winced, still feeling the pain. From behind the brim of his mug, he watched her. Her slender neck gently moving in and out. The soothing liquid slithering down her throat, down into her body, warming her. She drank slowly silently.

The steam from the tea wafted into the tunnels of her nose and seemed to sublimate her brain into vapour. The hot liquid seemed to trickle into her very blood and her heart throbbed.

Her vision blurred. She closed her eyes; patterns played on the lids; she saw red; she opened her eyes. They focused on his face and the visage filled her brain, became branded into her mind.

Things were suddenly clear. She loved him much more than she could have thought. She was hopelessly in love. She was nothing without him. Her emotions were enslaved.

Now, realising the total power he held over her, she felt deep down inside something else, something stronger than resentment, something she could only describe as hate.

THE END

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