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Jane Galt

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HYDROGEN

JANE GALT

Twelve was a terrifying age for me. It was the year that everything became open to doubt. That year I questioned all subjects from God to gravity. My friends seemed unreliable so I ostracized myself, avoiding all intimacy and any semblance of amiability. I stopped listening in church because my Sunday School lessons brought up more questions than I could deal with. Instead, I concentrated on the two constants in my life: school and family. Education and love became the two pillars my world was balanced on.

I especially enjoyed chemistry. I loved that laws governed the universe. I loved knowing nuclei were made up of protons and neutrons, that electrons were negative, and that opposite forces were attracted. These facts were undoubtedly true. It was such a relief to go to class and be told how and why the world worked.

I was particularly fascinated by hydrogen. Although it's the smallest atom on the periodic table, hydrogen plays a key role in life on earth. Hydrogen holds just about everything together. It's so easy to take it for granted, but without it none of us would survive. Hydrogen bonds connect everything. When scientists draw diagrams of molecules, they don't even write out the hydrogen, they just make a little dash on the paper. It's so constant and so

obviously there that they don't even worry about naming it. Hydrogen, the duct tape of the universe, would always be there. How could I not love hydrogen? To a twelve-year old girl it was more reliable than God.

When I was not studying, I was with my family. I talked with them, played with them, and if I was feeling very safe, I might ask them one of the questions that constantly haunted me. But mostly I would just be with them, basking in their unquestionable love and comfort.

Though I gave my family constant attention, it was a selfish attention that concentrated solely on my need for them. Because of my self-absorption, I didn't see what was going on right in front of me. I knew, of course, that my father had lost his job. I noticed that he was not looking well, that he had gained weight and went days without shaving. Looking back now, I remember his laugh becoming short and sardonic when he laughed at all. I remember how he hardly ever met our eyes and never met my mother's. Whenever my home seemed less than secure, I disappeared into my room with my chemistry book. I never thought anything was seriously wrong.

It was a huge shock one night to enter my mother's room and find her sobbing on her bed. My mother never cries except at sappy movies and weddings. She never sobs. She's a strong, brave woman. Seeing her crying upset my carefully guarded universe. I rushed to her, willing to do anything to comfort her and to put my world straight.

She tried to compose herself and failed. With tears sticking her hair to her face, she said, "I'm sorry, I've tried. I've tried so hard! But I can't, I just can't!"

"What's wrong, Mom? Tell me what happened!" I sat on the bed, enfolding my mother in an awkward hug. Her tears soaked into my shirt.

"I just don't love him. I've tried, but it's no use. I stopped years ago, but he's gotten so much worse. I don't even like him anymore!"

I released my mother and moved back to see her face. “What did you say, Mom?” My voice was quiet.

I will never forget what followed. She told me that she had stopped loving my father soon after I was born. She had been disillusioned, she said. In all those years she had wanted to leave, had almost left several times, but had stayed because of her children and because of her religion. Remembering who I was, she wiped her eyes and said, “It’s not so bad. You don’t need love for marriage, just commitment. Love would be nice, but you can’t count on it. That’s life.” I numbly gave my mother a hug and told her I loved her. I went quickly to bed, but I didn’t get much sleep.

The next day I was particularly silent in all my classes. Chemistry came around and I took a seat in the back of the room. About halfway through a lecture on scientific method, I raised my hand. The teacher was using the overhead projector, so the lights were off and she didn’t see me for some time. Finally she called on me.

“Can we talk about hydrogen for a minute, Ms. Michelski?”

“Um, okay, Jane. What’s your question?”

“How do we know it’s there?”

“What do you mean? How do we know it exists?”

“Yeah, how do we know it’s not some big joke?”

“I’ve explained this before, Jane. Hydrogen bonds hold us all together. Glucose would not be able to stick together without . . .”

“But how do we know that? How do we know we’re held together by anything? What if we are all just kind of floating around?”

“Well, if we had the right equipment I could show you . . .”

“But we don’t, do we? No one really knows, do they?”

“Jane.” My teacher was becoming annoyed. “We’ve been over this. I am right in the middle of a lecture and I don’t have time for joking around. For everyone’s sake and your own, I wish you’d just pretend to believe in hydrogen so we can get through this, okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered. Under the cover of darkness, I buried my face in my arms so that my sweatshirt would hide my red eyes, and I took her advice. I’ve been pretending ever since.