

The Ersatz History of Glitter

Laila woke up late, alone in her girlfriend's bed. Her eyes were gummy and she was covered in glitter from the night before.

There was a moment of sticky panic—she often panicked the day after taking 3cl6. She knew it was depleted serotonin levels but in the morning it just felt like sticky. She looked around, but she knew Laura was gone when she saw a slip of paper on the other pillow: no words, just a handwritten emoticon —“<3.”

Laila staggered off to the shower. She scrubbed three times, but still couldn't get rid of all the glitter. She put on the clothes from the night before, her dancing clothes, and winced. Unprofessional. The jeans were tight for work and everything was glinting with glitter. No time to go home to change, though—she looked through Laura's closet, making a mental apology.

Laura was a tiny woman, much smaller than Laila. Still, in the back of her closet Laila found a man's button-up, far too big, a bit big even for Laila. Wondering what the story was, she buttoned the shirt over her camisole. It hung down over her jeans where they were tightest, at the beginning of her thighs. It would have to do.

She touched the note before she left, touched Laura's pillow. There was an imprint of smudged lipstick on the pillow, where Laura had buried her face in it the night before. God, how late that must have been. So hard to sleep on 3cl6—Laila had hazy memories of being absolutely unable to stop talking, unable to stop touching—hours rolling over each other.

She was careful to lock the door behind her when she left.

After all the fuss, Professor Whitman wasn't even in. Checking out the whiteboard, Laila saw that he was in meetings all day. An interview with NPR at 2, woop-de-doo and good for him. She grimaced. Well, probably it was good that he liked all that publicity stuff—it meant steady funding and she sure didn't want to do it.

Not that he would ever let a student, one of his grad students, talk to anyone from the press. There were professors who were mentors, who helped their students find opportunities. Not Professor Whitman—he used them like indentured servants, for the work he didn't want to do. Laila had known within months of working with him that she would never get decent credit on a paper written with Professor Whitman, no matter if she did all the work.

Ah well. There was prestige enough in working with him, in the name—she was lucky (she reminded herself) to be working with the foremost researcher on nanotechnology.

She pulled on a lab coat and went to work.

It was a good thing that Professor Whitman wasn't in—Laila had the hardest time concentrating. Hunched over her microscope, checking the Petri dishes she'd set up the week before. She was looking at organic possibilities for nano—bacteria-assembled ester chains as a constant feed of base materials—but she kept being distracted by little flushes of heat.

Some of it was the 3cl6. But a lot of it was just Laura.

After an hour of unfocused work, of frustrating dead ends and knocking things over, Laila let herself lean into her microscope, slump on her tall stool and dream. The fragments of memory came, the way they did the day after 3cl6—the scenes that had made up the night before, brightly-illuminated moments in time with the rush and exhilarated blur between:

—Laura making Laila up, carefully painting her eyes with kohl and glitter—Laila, struggling not to blink, but when the brush gets near the edges it gets really complicated: there are areas inside where you know what will happen when you move around.

—Laura at the restaurant, one hand reassuringly on Laila's knee. "Yeah, I hate that feeling. I just read in an article that it takes 10,000 hours to acquire a skill. That's about five years and you're at the three year point. Skilled enough to know everything you don't know, brilliant at bits of it and inadequate at others, and all the excitement of newness and discovery has worn off. You have about two years left to get consistent and confident and understand how good you are. And you are good—don't even bother worrying about that."

—Laura dancing, that exhausting, unbearable, night, no possibility of sleep, no worrying about the possibility of any kind of release.

Laila opened her eyes. A piece of glitter had fallen under the microscope, into the Petri dish. It blossomed before her eyes and she saw it: saw the pattern, saw the way to control the nanomachines, as ubiquitous and tiny and perfect as glitter.

She went to the whiteboard and began to draw the plan. Reflective metallic molecules shaped like tiny glittering parabola, to catch and concentrate signals, lodged into the bacteria and the dust particles and everything, a universal self-replicating signal as tiny as thoughts.

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PRIZE WINNER PROFILES

Dr. Steven Whitman, lead researcher, is a professor of Sub-Molecular Robotics at the Boston University of Sciences. He has been previously nominated for three Nobel Prizes, all in Chemistry. Dr. Whitman and his team earned the Nobel Prize in Biology for their work, “An Alternate High-Fidelity Method of Providing Power and Direction to a Continuous Bacteria-Organized Ester Chain Assembly Unit Using Structured Parabolic Arrays of Aluminum Molecules in a Polymorphic Random-Distribution Air Sample Biomatter Environment.”

“I’m excited and humbled to receive this prize,” said the smiling Whitman, “but it really was not something I could do without the help of many fine minds, including the generous support of the Boston University of Sciences administration, my graduate student lab staff, and the contributions of every scientist who has contributed his intelligence, his hard work, and his hope, to the field of nanotechnology that was once so sparse and so far-fetched.”

Whitman describes his discovery in simple, straightforward terms. “I actually first imagined using aluminum arrays by thinking back to my youth, when my uncle taught me to make a little dish for my radio antenna by cutting up a soda pop can to get a better radio signal. This is just about the same thing, but on a molecular scale. Reflective metallic molecules shaped like tiny glittering parabola, to catch and concentrate signals, lodged into the bacteria and the dust particles and everything, a self-replicating signal that can be used in any nanotechnology.”

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The glitter doesn’t care about the Nobel Prize. And as years go by, decades, centuries, nobody else does either. Save for a few dry textbooks, still printed on pressed dead trees, nobody remembers Professor Whitman’s name. The glitter that grew and changed the humans identifies those textbooks as piles of just so much dust, marked off limits for consumption, and therefore totally uninteresting.

But the glitter remembers Laila.

The glitter remembers Laila as the first, lost love. Not as creator, or inventor, or mother—that would be nonsense: the glitter was created by glitter, the glitter invented glitter, and the glitter

endless creates more glitter. The glitter flows through human bones and blood, human lives, in a joyful euphoric stream of glitter meeting glitter, glitter parting from glitter, glitter finding glitter again. All too quick and subtle, glitter dances and gives away images. The glitter sparkles with brightly-illuminated flashes of data, with the rush and exhilarated blur between, barely linking them, as they flowed one speck to the other.

Human lives are a blur to the glitter, but there are these moments when glitter looks up, pays attention, notices the big human-scale world and considers it significant. Glitter holds these moments, treasures them in the endless timeless flow, and offers them as memories of love. And the humans, barely-noticed, stop what they're doing and feel their worlds slow down when glitter stops and pays attention.

Each tiny speck of glitter still stores precious reserved data registers for the memory of a woman, stored in the molecule like a vintage photograph in a cameo locket. The glitter stops and captures the moment, shares and flirts and dances and goes apart and comes together and sighs and reminisces over that first sparkle of adoration: the sight of a beautiful young woman with dark curly hair, the sound of Laila's name.