

Giving Voice | Off Course

a project to raise awareness of the gender challenges in STEM environments,
written by students, postdoctoral scholars,
faculty, and staff at Caltech.

More information at givingvoice.caltech.edu

The Caltech logo, consisting of the word "Caltech" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font, is centered within a light orange rectangular background.

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Kitchen area of an academic research building. Bobbie rummages in refrigerator as MORGAN leans against the mailbox.

Ohhhh.

BOBBIE

What's wrong.

MORGAN

This frigerator stinks.

BOBBIE

Bobbie closes door.

Almost as bad as my summer.

BOBBIE

What's wrong with your summer?

MORGAN

BOBBIE

This is my first summer doing research and honestly, I'm scared. You can always find some answer with a problem set, but not with these group projects. I just want to work alone.

That sounds lonely and difficult.

MORGAN

Sometimes collaboration feels more like humiliation.

BOBBIE

Humiliation?

MORGAN

Yeah if you don't know, you don't want to ask. If you do ask, everyone looks at you like you're an idiot. Like you don't belong.

BOBBIE

Ahhh, the impostor syndrome.

MORGAN

Bobbie sits.

Right...

BOBBIE

MORGAN

I don't know, this is my third summer in the lab and sometimes I get nervous when I don't know something,

MORGAN crosses up the top of the table.

MORGAN (To Bobbie)

But that's what it takes to make great science. Trust me, you will get the hang of this and you'll learn a ton.

BOBBIE

Trust you? Yeah, right, like the time you set me up with your roommate.

MORGAN

It was one time. I thought you were compatible.

BOBBIE

Compatible. Zero chemistry, dude. Not a single bit.

Sydney enters.

SYDNEY

What's going on here?

Sydney crosses to the table.

MORGAN/BOBBIE

Nothing. What's up with you?

Sydney crosses to table and sits.

SYDNEY

So I was just meeting with my research group.

BOBBIE

How did it go?

SYDNEY

Everyone was nice and I really like the research they're doing, but I miss the people from last summer.

MORGAN

Feeling out of place, huh?

BOBBIE

Tell me about it. Yesterday my mentor asked me if I knew how to turn on the oven. I felt like an idiot.

SYDNEY

I know how that feels.

MORGAN

Yesterday my mentor seemed thrilled when I knew how to run the experiments, or maybe she was just relieved.

SYDNEY

I don't want to ask my mentor anything.

MORGAN

That is what a mentor is for.

SYDNEY

Actually my mentor is part of the problem.

BOBBIE/MORGAN

Oh.

BOBBIE

That's not good.

Bobbie rises and moves to mailbox. MORGAN takes the chair.

MORGAN

Speaking of problems, I complained to the postdoc in my lab - to be clear, I thought she was one of my mentors - about a sketchy joke that I heard. She just brushed it off and said that I should get back to my experiments.

SYDNEY

That's not okay either.

MORGAN

The whole in-group dynamics totally messes with my head. (To Bobbie) I must have ticked someone off because last night they all went out drinking without me.

Bobbie crosses to other side of table.

SYDNEY

Last night my mentor asked me if I was busy and suggested that I would have fun going out with the group.

Bobbie sits

BOBBIE

That's cool.

SYDNEY

I told him I couldn't go because I had to meet my boyfriend.

BOBBIE

So what's the problem?

SYDNEY

Yesterday when we were working, I got all these really weird personal questions like "How you'd land a job in this lab?" "How long have I been with my boyfriend?"

BOBBIE

No one's ever asked me those questions.

MORGAN (To Bobbie)

You have a boyfriend?

BOBBIE

What? No. I mean personal questions.

MORGAN (To Sydney)

Yours sounds creepy. Unless he's really cute.

BOBBIE

So if one of your grad students is really cute, you'd be okay with him asking you out?

MORGAN

Yeah, we're both consenting adults...

SYDNEY (Losing patience.)

Hello?! I wanted to tell you what happened to me.

MORGAN (To Sydney)

You have my attention.

SYDNEY

He texted me last night asking me whether I'm living with my boyfriend this summer.

Bobbie sits down at table.

BOBBIE

Maybe he's just trying to be friendly.

MORGAN

What are you going to do?

SYDNEY

I don't know what I can do, just pretend nothing happened?

BOBBIE

That's an option. No one gets in trouble.

SYDNEY

But I feel weird working in the lab with him.

BOBBIE

We are here to do research.

SYDNEY (Slowly.)

I really don't think you get it: I need him to run the laser, but the laser is in a small space with just him and me.

BOBBIE

You told him you have a boyfriend. He must know you're not interested.

MORGAN

That's not the point. Is there anyone in the lab you can talk to about this?

SYDNEY

Look, telling someone will ruin my entire summer.

BOBBIE

You could try to avoid him, but he's in the room...that is a problem.

SYDNEY

He repeatedly texted me at 2am! I don't want to cause trouble. But I don't want him thinking about me at 2 in the morning. That makes me nervous, and I don't want to be alone with him.

MORGAN (Thinking this out loud.)

Texting at 2 am crosses the line. This is not okay.

BOBBIE

We should do something about this.

SYDNEY

Thanks for listening. (Sydney stands.) But right now I gotta get back to the lab for a meeting.

Bobbie stands.

BOBBIE

We can come with you.

MORGAN stands.

MORGAN

Don't be weird. What are you going stand there like a sentry and battle him with "Jedi jitsu."

Morgan and Bobbie chuckle.

SYDNEY (Super frustrated at lack of clarity)
Guys stop!! Don't worry about it, I'll figure something out.

MORGAN
Wait, is there something we can do?

SYDNEY (Definitive.)
Please don't tell anyone.

Sydney leaves. Bobbie and MORGAN look at each other. Bobbie sits.

BOBBIE
Wow, this really is harder than problem sets.

MORGAN sits.

MORGAN
Welcome to the real world, buddy.