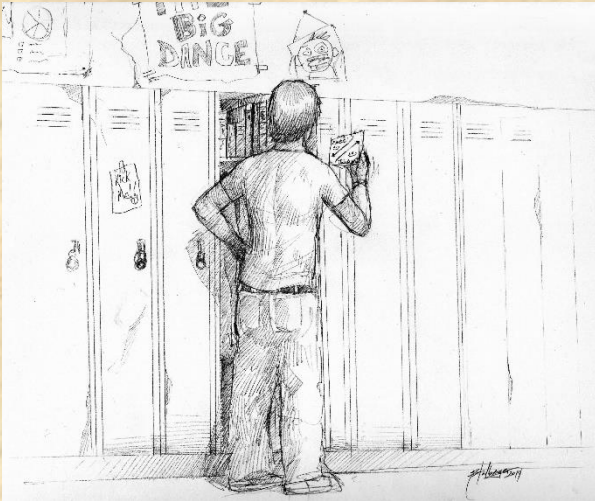


Convergence, divergence, avoiding subduction...how's a guy to ever please a girl?

Plate Tectonics and Non-Platonic Relationships

by
Alicia Cole



I waited until Wednesday before pinning a note on Ches's locker: Can we try transform?

"Our relationship is too convergent," Chesapeake announced to me over lunch. "I'm getting subducted."

The cafeteria was crowded, students jostling in line to pick up food from one of

the three lunch counters. The clack of hard plastic trays

reverberated over the noise of laughing and talking, the shuff of trash being thrown away.

Ches leaned across the table so I could hear her.

I stopped mid-spaghetti bite, a meatball waiting temptingly on my plate. Placing my fork down, I narrowed my eyes at her.

"What do you mean?" I wasn't sure how to react, but the words "too" and "subducted" couldn't be good.

She rolled her eyes and explained, "We're really close together."

I gave her a blank look. I still wasn't quite sure how to react, but eye-rolling couldn't be good either. "We're just...close," I responded, my voice rising hopefully.

Ches huffed. "Whatever. See you after class." She stood, slung her backpack over one shoulder and grabbed her tray in one perfectly manicured hand.

I slumped over my own tray, no longer hungry. I felt defeated. What had I done wrong?



Mr. Johnstone handed me a set of blocks labeled 'plate 1' and 'plate 2'. "Please illustrate convergent plate movement for us, Jackson," he instructed.

Mr. Johnstone was big on authentic assessment. And assessment in general. His room was designed for it, in fact. "Mr. J's Clues" were posted around the room, reminders of basic chapter facts that he covered up on review and test days. My eyes quickly found the illustration for convergent plate movement as I took the blocks from him.

I gritted my teeth. Of course Chesapeake had already had science today. We were on different schedules. She was trying to be clever, as usual.

Separating my hands, I moved them together until the plates touched, meeting at the trench. Then, I slid one plate under the other to show the subduction zone. Was this what Chesapeake was feeling like? A plate of earth sliding dimly into obscurity, subsumed by me?

It made no sense to me. We were perfect together.



I IM'd Ches that night. She sent a frowning emoticon back.

I'm studying, came the message soon after.

Can I study with you?

We always studied together. Before school; sometimes over break; even in between classes.

Maybe tomorrow. I want to study alone right now.

I stared at the screen, my heart sinking.



The next morning, a hand-drawn diagram was taped inside my locker. It was labeled: divergent boundary.

A big, black arrow pointed to the rift, with 'Jackson' on one side and 'Chesapeake' on the other. Little arrows showed our 'plates' moving away from each other. In glitter pen she'd written: *this is what I'm looking for.*

Divergent? I hadn't had today's lesson on plate tectonics yet, but divergent couldn't be good. My heart sank a bit further, like a subducted slab of crust.

She avoided me during break time.



At the end of a miserable day, after flunking two quizzes I'd studied hard for, I saw Ches waiting by my locker.

I slumped against it, ran my hand through my shaggy brown hair, and frowned at her. "What am I doing wrong?"

"I need some space, okay. We're together all the time!" She sounded mostly hurt. When she looked at me, her eyes were pleading.

"Are you into someone else?" My voice remained steady while my insides trembled.

She rolled her eyes and my heart lurched. Maybe that guy in her math class... I knew she had a thing for glasses...

When her eyes stopped rolling, she smiled at me. The sweet smile she'd worn the week before. "No, Jackson, I just need some time to myself. I really feel like I'm losing me. Why don't you study my picture?"

My shoulders slumped as she tapped my locker and turned, her long strawberry blonde hair turning with her. She smelled like bubblegum and shampoo. And she was breaking up with me.

I wouldn't cry.

When she'd walked two lockers away, she turned and said, "See me next weekend?"

The entire hallway seemed to grow brighter, then dimmed as reality sank in. Two weeks? Maybe she wasn't breaking up with me after all, but this was going to be really difficult.

Opening my locker, I took the picture out and shoved it into my backpack.

Hopefully, my grades weren't going to suffer too badly before my independent study was up.



I studied Ches's picture. For two whole days, I memorized her picture. I passed my first science quiz on plate

tectonics because of my absorption in that picture and her glitter-penned writing.

I felt I'd waited long enough.

"I was thinking about ways to...make our relationship divergent." I was determined to talk to her no matter what I had to say. I didn't really have any idea what I meant by that, but if it would fix things up with Ches then that's what I wanted.

I leaned against Ches's neighbor's locker. The small sixth grader who owned the locker looked nervous and annoyed as he tried to reach around me to retrieve his last period books. My eighth grade frame refused to move.

"Jackson, it's not next weekend. Go away!" Chesapeake seemed relaxed and her voice was light and teasing, but she pushed my shoulder so I stepped aside. The sixth grader scrambled to grab his needed materials.

The first bell rang.

A litter of papers fell out of the kid's locker. He shoved them in with a sound of crinkling and ripping, and then dashed down the hallway.

"Hey, you dropped this."

Ches bolted after him and handed him a worksheet that had dropped from his binder.

He grinned, muttered a squeaky 'thanks', and continued his pell-mell sprint to class.

When I laughed, Chesapeake turned on her heel and scowled at me, her shoulders tensing up.

"What?!"



Chesapeake avoided me for the remainder of the week.

I played basketball with my friends for most of the weekend, hoping to distract myself.

"He was just a sixth grader!"

I shot a three-pointer from the middle of my friend Marcus' driveway.

“Maybe she’s into him.”

He grabbed the ball on the rebound and dribbled around me, laughing.

Our other friend Sahil stole the ball from him and bounded down the court, making an easy layup.

“Or maybe she just wants you to be more sensitive!”

It was as though the sun rose and smacked me in the face with one of its rays, pointed and jabby like a crayon drawing made by my little brother. I’d been so caught up in my own hurt I hadn’t thought of Ches.

Sahil cradled the ball under his left arm, pivoting to keep Marcus from grabbing it. “Ches is really smart,” he said. “Why don’t you try reaching her on her level?”

Marcus snagged the ball and made one last shot that bounced off the rim with a desolate clang when his mom poked her head out of the front door.

“Boys, come in for pizza!”

Marcus slapped me on the back as we headed inside.

“It’s good to see you, man! It’s been awhile.”

“Chesapeake, Chesapeake,” Sahil said in a high-pitched teasing voice. He entered the house before I could grab him.

Something clicked internally. I nodded, eyes widening. So this is what Ches was talking about.

“That’s bunk,” I said in agreement. “Let’s play again next weekend!”



It might have been the green peppers and extra cheese that gave me the brilliant idea. Maybe if I got out ahead of Ches on one of the plate tectonic comparisons she’d be impressed. I decided to do some advance reading.

I waited until Wednesday before pinning a note on Ches’s locker: *Can we try transform?*

I’d badly scrawled two bodies of land sliding past each other, touching while heading opposite directions as indicated by sharpie arrows.

We passed each other in the hallway, she giving me a sideways glance. I steered clear of touching her, only

moving in conjunction with her movements. When we came too close to brushing shoulders on the way to recess, I sidestepped out of the way, knocking into a student council poster that tore from the wall on the top left corner with a rip.

“Hey!”

Mrs. Arnold, one of the math teachers, yelled out as I stopped to study the damage I’d done.

Ches watched me as I tried to smooch the poster back on the wall with a bit of used tape. She disappeared when Mrs. Arnold handed me a tape dispenser and, laughing, said, “Try this.”

When I stepped onto the blacktop for recess, Ches was playing foursquare with three of her friends, the ball pocking back and forth as it hit the pavement. She waved to stop their game and came over to me.

I pretended to watch some of the guys play basketball. She wasn’t going to make me wait until the weekend!

“How’s the poster?”

“Perfect shape,” I grinned. When she grinned back, I felt warmth spread from my head to my toes.

“That was really sweet of you.”

“What, fixing it?” I shrugged. “Yeah, sure.”

She studied her new purple sneakers.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the game continue. When she didn’t say anything else, I suddenly laughed. I’d been feeling awkward for so long; now, it was her turn!

I heard the net swish and Sahil called out, “Jackson, get out here!”

“Well, see you later,” I said.

I bolted onto the court, leaving Ches to watch me go. The warm, hard rubber hit my hand with a thunk as I intercepted the ball, the hot concrete beneath me sizzling in the midday sun.



Mr. Johnstone was writing notes on the whiteboard, the class either daydreaming or copying his notes. I was in the latter category.

He pointed to the vocabulary term ‘transform boundary’ on the board.

“A transform boundary is when two plates slide past each other, not affecting each other as severely as in a convergent or divergent boundary. Like this.”

He placed his marker on the board and held up his hands, clapping them together like a convergent boundary then slowly sliding his right and left hands in opposite directions, still touching.

Success! My advance study had worked out. Hopefully it would impress Chesapeake. Plus, I was going to ace this next quiz.



That Friday, I showed up at Ches’s locker before school with two pink roses.

Her friend Tanya blushed and giggled before giving us some space.

“Okay,” I said. “I really think we need to talk about our relationship.”

I pushed the roses together. They collided, making a larger formation of petals. “We don’t want to be convergent.”

I pulled them apart. One petal fell to the floor. “Or divergent.”

Finally, I had them slide past each other, my eyes catching Ches’s over the pale curve of a flower petal. Her eyes were wide and bright. “But what about transform?”

Ches took one rose from my hand. “Well, I prefer the word transform,” she admitted.

The first bell rang. I sidestepped to let the smaller sixth grader have easier access to his locker.

Ches noticed and smiled sweetly. More sweetly than she had in two weeks.

“So we can do our own thing and still stay together?”

She nodded. "Exactly. But maybe we're in need of ...some...convergence?"

I felt a surge of hope well up in my belly, but I didn't let it take my thoughts away from what Ches wanted. "But more equal, like continent-continent convergence," I said, "so no one gets subducted."

Ches leaned towards me and took the other pink rose from my hand. Then, she leaned in further. For a moment, I was certain she planned to kiss me.

A sharp, adult cough sounded behind us.

Mrs. Arnold, her arms crossed, cleared her throat. "You two need to be getting to class, don't you?"

Today, I love science. But I still hate math.



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