

## The Fraction

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“We need to talk,” Andreus said, and Lizzie broke into a thousand pieces.

Not in the sense of a mental collapse, but in the sense of her world breaking into a spectrum of possibilities, every conceivable event happening at once, and yet every instance of her only perceiving her own slice of the probability pie.

The thousand pieces are a figure of speech; there were considerably more worlds — and more Lizzies.

“We need to talk,” he said, and in about sixty percent of her worlds she continued reading the fascinating psychology article she was engrossed in. In thirty-seven percent, she sensed that something was off about his tone of voice and put away the magazine. In two percent of the worlds, she got up and announced her intention to leave. And the remaining fraction of a percent included a staggering variety of all kinds of extremely unlikely events, such as Lizzie suddenly bursting into song or starting to eat her magazine, or her chair spontaneously catching fire.

The Lizzie we care about was one of the thirty-seven percent. She was aware of the popular connotation of the phrase ‘We need to talk,’ so she set the magazine on the table and turned to him.

“Yes?” she asked, unsure and apprehensive.

“Are you happy?” asked Andreus.

Such a question is bound to make one think. Most Lizzies thought along the conventional lines of “I could be less stressed about work, but overall not much to complain about” though a full one percent of all instances of her thought about the disappointing potato salad she had had for lunch.

Our Lizzie belonged in the majority. “Aren’t we all?” she asked in a mock-rhetoric tone.

Andreus sat down across from her. Evidently he refused to acknowledge her tone, because his reply was decisive and frank: “No. I really am not. I think we should not be together anymore.”

A quarter of Lizzies were so startled that they accidentally knocked down their mug of coffee over their well-groomed woollen carpet. About half were startled but their elbow narrowly missed the mug. One in ten just stared at Andreus. Some of the remaining Lizzies had their first panic attack in years, some excused themselves to go to the bathroom, one started baking an onion pie.

“Why?” she asked, her elbow twitching in the direction of the coffee.

“Don’t you think our life has become stale? We hardly ever speak about anything that’s not related to housekeeping or finances. Why would we be together?”

In all but a few of the infinite worlds, Lizzie considered his words. “Aren’t housekeeping and finances a normal part of marriage?” thought some, while others mentally remarked that they also sometimes jog together. Many of them began to realise that their life is about to change in a profound way, a few had the panic attack they had managed to avoid a few moments earlier.

“Because I love you,” she finally said. “Isn’t that a good enough reason?”

With no advance warning, Andreus rose violently from his chair, which was unusual behaviour from him. Presumably there were versions of him in other universes who kept their composure, but that’s not for us to know. In any case, this Andreus proverbially exploded.

“You love me? You love me? Really? Once again, you focus on your own emotions instead of giving a damn about how I feel! I’m tired of everything revolving around you — are you the only person in the world? Am I some kind of a sidekick to your story?” he yelled at Lizzie, who sat, frozen, in her seat. Some other instances of her reacted with rather colourful language, including unpleasant suggestions regarding where Andreus should stuff his emotions. But not this Lizzie, who merely sat and stared, speechless. In a few worlds, including this one, their rottweiler came in to investigate the shouting.

“Let me tell you something,” he sneered, “I have a life of my own, and feelings of my own, and aspirations of my own. And I love someone else. There, I said it. I love someone else and she is pregnant with our child. For her, I am not decoration but a real human being in a way that I have never been to you. What do you say to that?”

As he spoke, from each of his words burst an infinite number of universes and an infinite number of Lizzies, most of whom matched his tone by shouting and cursing. But not our Lizzie; she stayed calm, while worlds parallel to this one were raging with her uncontrolled emotions. To be fair to the other Lizzies, most of them were not petting dogs.

“What do you want?” she asked.

Andreus, evidently surprised at her lack of a violent reaction, seemed to calm down. He took a breath and sighed: “Will you give me a divorce?”

Once more, he was blissfully unaware of the universes he created yet managed to avoid. By now most Lizzies had gone blind with rage or desperate from betrayal, and parallel to his world were millions in which one or both of them did things they would regret for the rest of their lives. This Andreus was oblivious to his fortune and started getting impatient. “Please, Lizzie. There are only two possibilities: yes or no.”

But he was wrong; the possibilities were endless, and in fact many other responses were much more likely.

Lizzies were responding nonverbally by throwing stale coffee at him.

Lizzies were screaming at him about all the ways in which he had failed as a spouse and as a lover. Lizzies were committing acts of violence against him; some, though not all, ended up with restraining orders.

The one Lizzie we really care about did none of those things.

“Of course, if that’s what you want,” she said in a small voice.

She didn’t know she was the only one doing the right thing.