

# A Futile Request

Alexa waited at the school entryway, anxiously scanning the line of cars jostling for position at the curb. It was five after 3:00 on Friday and the school week was mercifully over. Today Alexa's father was scheduled to pick her up along with Doug and Caroline, the two other kids in her carpool. Alexa was fervently hoping that her dad wouldn't be late. It was so awkward to wait when Doug and Caroline were impatient to leave.

"Is your mom coming?" Doug asked pointedly.

Alexa shifted uncomfortably and adjusted the wayward straps of her backpack. Doug was the star of both the junior varsity soccer team and the lacrosse team. In the social hierarchy<sup>1</sup> of Ithaca High School, Doug reigned with a status and popularity unmatched by his classmates. Alexa was far too shy to pursue a friendship with a boy like Doug, but the proximity of their houses made it natural for them to carpool together. Caroline was the third member of their group, and her picture-perfect

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<sup>1</sup> Hierarchy: the classification of a group of people according to ability or to economic, social, or professional standing; pecking order, chain of command

appearance and popularity made her a more natural counterpart for Doug. “My dad’s coming today,” Alexa answered, as she stood on her tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the end of the line. “There he is!” Alexa couldn’t hide the relief in her voice as she spotted her father’s red Chevy Suburban.

Alexa slid into the front seat next to her father while Doug and Caroline hopped into the back. They must have been sharing a private joke—Caroline was giggling incessantly.<sup>2</sup> Alexa silently speculated<sup>3</sup> that the two would probably begin dating this summer and would end up being homecoming king and queen. The two of them just seemed to emulate<sup>4</sup> the conventional<sup>5</sup> image of popularity-contest winners, she thought with disdain.

Alexa greeted her father with a quick kiss on the cheek. She was genuinely happy to see him because she hadn’t seen him since last weekend. Her parents had separated recently, and the process of finalizing the divorce was currently underway. It was still a fresh and painful wound for Alexa, exacerbated<sup>6</sup> by this shuttling back and forth from her childhood house to her father’s apartment.

After dropping off Doug, they continued on in silence to the exclusive<sup>7</sup> cul-de-sac where Caroline lived in a large, pretentious<sup>8</sup> Tudor-style mansion. Caroline left with a quick “thanks” and Alexa breathed a sigh of relief. Caroline’s haughty<sup>9</sup> attitude and disdainful<sup>10</sup> glances were tiring. It wasn’t that she felt jealous of Doug and Caroline, nor did she feel

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<sup>2</sup> Incessantly: non-stop, never ending

<sup>3</sup> Speculate: to review something idly or casually and often inconclusively

<sup>4</sup> Emulate: try to be like, imitate

<sup>5</sup> Conventional: according with, sanctioned by, or based on convention (a principle or procedure accepted as true or correct); ordinary, conformist, predictable

<sup>6</sup> Exacerbate: to make more violent, bitter, or severe

<sup>7</sup> Exclusive: restricted in distribution, use, or appeal because of expense

<sup>8</sup> Pretentious: making usually unjustified or excessive claims (as of value or standing); showy, ostentatious

<sup>9</sup> Haughty: blatantly and disdainfully proud; snooty, conceited

<sup>10</sup> Disdainful: full of a feeling of contempt for what is beneath one; scornful

particularly miffed<sup>11</sup> that the two of them often didn't include her in their conversations. It just seemed that they perpetuated<sup>12</sup> an aura of superiority that Alexa didn't aspire to.

Alexa pulled the visor down and flipped open the mirror, studying her reflection. She pulled the rubber band out of her ponytail and her shiny, shoulder-length brown hair came tumbling down, covering her green eyes. Growing up, Alexa had always been a bit of a tomboy—she was not inclined<sup>13</sup> to obsess about her looks the way so many of her contemporaries<sup>14</sup> did. Her attitude had begun to change only recently, when she realized that it was not incongruous<sup>15</sup> to be both athletic and concerned with your appearance. This past year, Alexa's first year of high school, was really the first time that she started feeling good about the way she looked. She had started running on the track team and it was as if she had undergone a transformation<sup>16</sup> from an awkward, shy tomboy to an attractive and confident 16-year-old.

Alexa took her hairbrush out of her backpack and fixed her ponytail as they drove past Alexa's house high on the hill overlooking Cayuga Lake. "It looks like the lawn could use a little work," Alexa's father noted as he glanced at the house the three of them had shared up until two months ago, when he took a modest<sup>17</sup> apartment in downtown Ithaca. Alexa maintained her silence as she wondered what her father was thinking. His demeanor<sup>18</sup> didn't reveal anything, but Alexa wondered if he could really feel that detached<sup>19</sup> from the house they had all shared for so many years.

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<sup>11</sup> Miff: to put into ill humor; offend

<sup>12</sup> Perpetuate: to make perpetual or to cause to last indefinitely

<sup>13</sup> Incline: to lean, tend, or become drawn toward an opinion or course of conduct

<sup>14</sup> Contemporaries: one of the same age or nearly the same age as another

<sup>15</sup> Incongruous: lacking congruity, not harmonious, incompatible

<sup>16</sup> Transformation: the act, process, or instance of transforming (to change in composition or structure)

<sup>17</sup> Modest: unassuming, unpretentious; limited in size, amount, or scope

<sup>18</sup> Demeanor: behavior toward others, outward manner; conduct

<sup>19</sup> Detached: exhibiting an aloof objectivity; disconnected, removed

Alexa's father, David McCurry, was a venerated<sup>20</sup> professor of molecular biology at Cornell University. He taught the rudiments<sup>21</sup> of DNA technology to lecture halls filled with aspiring pre-med students. "The Inner Machinations<sup>22</sup> of the Cell" was the title of his popular graduate-level seminar, attended by scores of serious-minded scientists in the making. He was highly regarded by his colleagues in the research community for being at the forefront of emergent<sup>23</sup> technologies in the rapidly evolving field of genetics.

Alexa was proud of her father and treasured the time they spent together during her childhood, as brief as these interludes<sup>24</sup> were. Alexa's father was also busy running a molecular biology laboratory, where he and his graduate students studied DNA in endless detail. He studied the DNA of a worm called a nematode, which was so tiny you needed a microscope to see it. Alexa would often go to the laboratory with her father on weekends, where he would inevitably become embroiled<sup>25</sup> in deep and lengthy discussions with the graduate students who, it seemed to her, appeared to live in the laboratory.

It was Alexa's mom, Helen, who was always there for her with abundant time and an unswerving<sup>26</sup> devotion to managing the details of her daughter's life. Helen was also a scientist, but as she liked to characterize it when the subject of vocation<sup>27</sup> came up, she was an "unemployed marine biologist, landlocked in the middle of upstate New York." Helen had forgone a scientific career, citing the fact that it was next to impossible to have a career in marine biology so far from the ocean.

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<sup>20</sup> Venerate: to regard with reverential respect or with admiring deference

<sup>21</sup> Rudiment: a basic principle, element, or fundamental skill

<sup>22</sup> Machination: a scheming or crafty action or artful design intended to accomplish some usually evil end

<sup>23</sup> Emergent: newly formed or prominent

<sup>24</sup> Interlude: an intervening or interruptive period, space or event; interval

<sup>25</sup> Embroil: to involve in conflict or difficulties

<sup>26</sup> Unswerving: not swerving or turning aside; steady

<sup>27</sup> Vocation: the work in which a person is regularly employed; career, occupation, profession

Meanwhile, Alexa's father had a burgeoning<sup>28</sup> scientific career and he had successfully climbed the academic ladder. Alexa had begun to suspect that the chasm<sup>29</sup> between her parents had something to do with the conflicting requirements of their careers. Alexa's mother wanted to move to an academic setting near the ocean, while her father was reluctant to move away from the successful laboratory he had created at Cornell.

Alexa and her dad arrived at the small apartment that he now called home. She followed him inside and settled in at the desk in front of a giant-screen computer. Her father was clearly inept<sup>30</sup> at decorating, Alexa thought as she looked at the lurid<sup>31</sup> green curtains that the previous occupants had left. Or maybe he was just indifferent<sup>32</sup> to the aesthetics<sup>33</sup> of his surroundings. Alexa reconsidered and thought that was probably it. To Alexa, her father seemed adept<sup>34</sup> at everything he put his mind to. But he abhorred<sup>35</sup> spending time thinking about such mundane<sup>36</sup> things as decorating. Her father was an archetypal<sup>37</sup> professor—his mind was always on his studies.

“Do you want a soda?” her father asked.

“Sure,” Alexa replied, sensing her father was making an effort to make her happy in this awkward new routine.

“What do you say we go to Zeus' for pizza tonight?” her father asked as he set the can of soda down next to the mouse pad.

“OK, but I'm supposed to go to Laurie's tonight to watch a movie with my friends,” Alexa said as she typed in her e-mail password.

“No problem, I'll drop you off there after dinner.”

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<sup>28</sup> **Burgeoning:** growing and expanding rapidly

<sup>29</sup> **Chasm:** a marked division, separation, or difference

<sup>30</sup> **Inept:** generally incompetent; bungling

<sup>31</sup> **Lurid:** causing horror or revulsion; ghastly

<sup>32</sup> **Indifferent:** apathetic, unconcerned

<sup>33</sup> **Aesthetics:** a pleasing appearance or effect; beauty

<sup>34</sup> **Adept:** thoroughly proficient; skillful

<sup>35</sup> **Abhor:** to regard with extreme repugnance; loathe

<sup>36</sup> **Mundane:** characterized by the practical, transitory, and ordinary; commonplace

<sup>37</sup> **Archetypal:** classic example, model example

“Can I stay there until 11:30?” Alexa asked in her sweetest tone, which she hoped wasn’t too cloying.<sup>38</sup> She had gotten her driver’s permit when she turned sixteen last month, but she was still unable to drive unaccompanied by an adult.

Her father made an exaggerated pained expression. He liked to be in bed by 11:00, but Alexa could plainly see by his smile that he would let her.

Alexa saw a message from Laurie in her inbox. This past year they had become best friends, and this had changed Alexa’s life immeasurably for the better. All throughout junior high, Alexa had felt like she didn’t have a close group of friends. It wasn’t like she was totally bereft<sup>39</sup> of friends, but she hadn’t formed any friendships that felt particularly meaningful and enduring.<sup>40</sup>

This past year, everything had changed when Alexa entered Ithaca High School and met Laurie. Laurie was editor of the school newspaper. She was bright, funny, and gregarious.<sup>41</sup> Alexa had joined the school newspaper this past year and her easy camaraderie<sup>42</sup> with Laurie had grown into a deep friendship. It was so easy to talk to her—Alexa confided everything to Laurie. Laurie, in turn, was a solid friend. She always included Alexa in her close circle of friends, a group of girls Alexa really liked. It was as if Laurie’s endorsement<sup>43</sup> opened up a whole new existence for Alexa. It felt so good to finally find a group of friends she liked and trusted—friends she cherished<sup>44</sup> and wanted to keep forever.

Alexa opened the message from Laurie, which read:

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<sup>38</sup> Cloying: excessively sweet or sentimental

<sup>39</sup> Bereft: deprived or robbed of possession of something

<sup>40</sup> Enduring: lasting

<sup>41</sup> Gregarious: marked by or indicating a liking for companionship; sociable

<sup>42</sup> Camaraderie: a spirit of friendly good fellowship

<sup>43</sup> Endorsement: backing, sanction, approval

<sup>44</sup> Cherished: to hold dear; feel or show affection for

“Hi Lexxie!

Are you home yet?? Call me ASAP! You’re not going to believe my unbelievable luck! I got an internship with CNN this summer! Can’t wait to tell you all about it. I’m going to be the assistant to the reporter who works right in downtown Ithaca. I’m soooo excited!! Are you coming over tonight? Call me! :-)

 Laurie

Alexa smiled at the thought of Laurie’s elation.<sup>45</sup> Laurie was such a go-getter. She had an easygoing demeanor, yet she approached challenges with enthusiasm and ardor.<sup>46</sup> Even when she faced imminent<sup>47</sup> failure, Laurie persevered<sup>48</sup> with her positive attitude. After receiving a stack of rejection letters, she had scored the internship of her dreams. Her persistence had paid off spectacularly.

While Alexa was happy for Laurie and her great summer job, she had been brooding<sup>49</sup> about her own uncertain plans for the summer. She desperately wanted to stay in Ithaca and spend her vacation with Laurie. However, Alexa was cognizant<sup>50</sup> of her mother’s plans to spend the summer in Nicaragua, and Alexa had the perception<sup>51</sup> that she was expected to go with her. But since the final decision had not yet been made, Alexa hoped that she could cajole<sup>52</sup> her father into letting her stay in Ithaca with him.

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<sup>45</sup> Elation: marked by high spirits; exultant

<sup>46</sup> Ardor: extreme vigor or energy; intensity

<sup>47</sup> Imminent: ready to take place; looming, about to happen

<sup>48</sup> Persevere: to persist in a state, enterprise, or undertaking in spite of challenges

<sup>49</sup> Brooding: to dwell gloomily on a subject, worrying

<sup>50</sup> Cognizant: knowledgeable about something, especially through personal experience; mindful

<sup>51</sup> Perception: the effect or product or perceiving (to come aware of through the senses)

<sup>52</sup> Cajole: to persuade with flattery or gentle urging, especially in the face of reluctance



Zeus' pizza house was the best of several excellent pizza places in the college town of Ithaca. It was always busy, and this being Friday night, was even more chaotic than usual. The clientele<sup>53</sup> was largely made up of students, one of whom waved a greeting to Professor McCurry as he and Alexa entered the restaurant. Another group of students was eyeing the esteemed<sup>54</sup> professor with reverence.<sup>55</sup> He was a minor celebrity in town, and Alexa beamed with pride. Her father waited until the pizza arrived at the table, piping hot, thick, and cheesy, to bring up the topic she'd been dreading. Without preamble,<sup>56</sup> he delved into the dreaded subject.

"You know about the new job offer your mother got for this summer." Alexa took a bite of pizza as her father spoke gingerly.<sup>57</sup> Helen had been offered a consulting position at a marine biology facility called Puerto Marino, which was located on a Caribbean island off of the coast of Nicaragua in Central America. "This would be a really great opportunity for you," her father continued. "You could work on your Spanish, see a new place, get to..."

"I don't want to go to Nicaragua for the summer!" Alexa cut him off. "I want to stay here in Ithaca! Can't I stay here with you?" Alexa pleaded volubly.<sup>58</sup> "All my friends are here, we're going to go swimming in the gorge every day, and Laurie's brother has a boat on the lake, and I applied for a job at Hansen's Department Store!" The words were tumbling out of Alexa's mouth, but she could already sense it was a losing battle.

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<sup>53</sup> Clientele: customers, patrons

<sup>54</sup> Esteem: to regard highly

<sup>55</sup> Reverence: honor or respect felt or shown; deference; especially profound or adoring awed respect

<sup>56</sup> Preamble: an introductory statement

<sup>57</sup> Gingerly: very cautiously or carefully

<sup>58</sup> Volubly: marked by a ready flow of speech

“A department store?” Alexa’s father repeated in a disparaging<sup>59</sup> tone of voice. “Why would you want to sell clothes all summer when you could work in a lab? They have a fully equipped molecular biology lab at Puerto Marino and your mother has already arranged for you to work there. It would be a great opportunity for you to have a project of your own, not to mention the fact that it may very well help you get into a good school. Colleges invariably<sup>60</sup> look for this type of thing—an interesting and educational summer experience.”

“I don’t think that spending a whole summer locked up in a laboratory sounds very interesting!” Alexa exclaimed. She was in no mood for her dad’s rhetoric<sup>61</sup> about college admissions. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to go to college. It was that her parents unending discourse<sup>62</sup> about “what you should be doing if you want to go to a good college” was truly tiring and left Alexa feeling ambivalent<sup>63</sup> about the whole subject.

Alexa’s father raised his eyebrows in a tacit<sup>64</sup> response. Her flippancy<sup>65</sup> had clearly struck a sour note with him. Alexa looked down at her pizza, seeing it was futile<sup>66</sup> to argue. Her father was resolute.<sup>67</sup> She was going to Nicaragua for the summer.

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<sup>59</sup> Disparaging: to speak slightly about; decry

<sup>60</sup> Invariably: not changing or capable of change; constant

<sup>61</sup> Rhetoric: a type or mode of language or speech; also insincere or lofty language

<sup>62</sup> Discourse: talk, converse

<sup>63</sup> Ambivalent: simultaneous and contradictory feelings (as attraction and repulsion) toward an object, person, or action

<sup>64</sup> Tacit: expressed or carried on without words or speech

<sup>65</sup> Flippancy: unbecoming levity or pertness, especially in respect to grave or sacred matters

<sup>66</sup> Futile: serving no useful purpose; completely ineffective

<sup>67</sup> Resolute: marked by firm determination; resolved

