

Alexia

She left home when she turned 33, and the Browns settled into the hollow joys of the empty nest.

“It’s time that I found myself,” she said, or something like that, and Alex, her father, said, “When did you first realize it was missing?”

Alexia didn’t laugh. Instead, she stamped her foot and declared, “Dad, for chrissake, why don’t you ever take anything I say seriously? It’s so bloody annoying.”

Alex frowned and looked hurt. “Where was the last place you saw it?”

Alexia gave a little shriek and ran up the stairs to her room, a maneuver she had employed for just over a quarter century. Alex shrugged and returned to the kitchen, where he was preparing kale in the super-blender. He dumped in a few tablespoons of sugar, and flicked the switch.

The next morning, when Alexia left the house for California, as Alex and Alexia and Doris finished the parental hug, Alex whispered, “It’s always in the last place you look.” Alexia didn’t react, but later, when they waved at her as the cab drove away, she rolled her eyes. Alex and Doris did the daughter-actually-left hug, and went back inside their beautiful house.

At 53, some twenty years later, Alexia returned with her husband and several children. Alex and Doris met them at the front door and they all did the meeting-grandparents hug, which took a few minutes. “Wow,” said Alex, standing back to admire the crowd in his front hall, “Looks like you found it.” Alexia may have heard his remark, but she didn’t look up from marshalling most of the children toward the living room.

There were so many of them that neither Alex nor Doris could keep track with any certainty. Some were boys, and others were girls, with names

that all seemed familiar but were hard to keep straight. “My goodness,” was all Doris could say, for the first few hours, but she hustled to and fro, offering cookies, mopping spills, filling plastic sipping cups, handing out Hershey kisses, and mixing drinks for the grownups.

Alex stood still while some of his grandchildren pulled at his pant legs and demanded things in words that were too high-pitched to comprehend. He patted their heads and emitted grandfather quips in his deepening old voice, while other children of more advanced age prowled the house, opening cupboards and drawers, examining knick knacks, calling to each other as they discovered something of interest or amusement. Alexia and her husband dealt with the kids with an efficiency born of great experience with crowds.

As the afternoon waned, Doris and Alexia and her husband gravitated to the kitchen and engaged in making-dinner-at-the-parents'-house, while children of different sizes wove in and out among the legs of tables and adults, chirping and squabbling and tugging at pant legs or skirts. The older children came and went mysteriously, carrying things and signaling to each other with eyebrows and discreet head movements.

Alex drifted into the living room and stood for a while on the rug by the powder blue spinet piano. One of the children, whose name rhymed with “funnel,” strode up with a contraption of chrome and leather, shaped like a glove. He held it under Alex’s nose and said, “What the hell is this?”

“It’s a gauntlet,” said Alex. “You throw it down.”

The kid shook his head. “What? Why? What’s a gauntlet actually for?”

“Well,” said Alex, wondering why it was so important, “You can wear it in battle, on your right hand in this case, or you can throw it down to challenge someone to a duel, or you can run between two lines of soldiers while they whack at you with their gauntlets.” By the time he finished, the boy had already dropped the thing on the rug and run off to see what else he could find. Alex picked it up and replaced it on the display stand by the gas fireplace.

Before dinner, most of the children brought things to Alex to identify, keeping him engaged in a spectrum of talking-down skills he had never before needed. Each item was then deposited nearby, like an offering or a baby shower gift, and Alex would put them back, or at least move them to an end table in the appropriate direction. The smallest child, seeing what

was going on, had dragged the umbrella stand all the way from the front door, teetering precariously like a rigid quiver full of oversized arrows. She wheezed and struggled, pushing and then pulling, unable to get her tiny arms all the way round the base, until it was standing in front of Alex, bristling with handles and ferrules and flaps of nylon and rubber tipped ribs. “Waaaba zoo?” she asked.

“Umbrella stand,” Alex explained. She crouched at his feet, looking up, wide eyed and open mouthed. “It’s for umbrellas,” he said. “You use them when it rains.” The girl turned to face the towering bronze cylinder and used it to climb back to a standing position, her feet wide apart beneath a puffy vinyl diaper. She craned her neck to look up at Alex. “Ba ba ba ba ba?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s right. Um, brella, stand. Not terribly interesting, is it?” said Alex.

The girl pushed on the umbrella stand, rocking it back and forth. “Now, be careful,” said Alex. “You don’t want to tip that thing over. It’s pretty heavy, you know.”

She shifted her position, still looking up at Alex, and gave her best shove, and the thing tilted on its round base, swung away from his reaching hands, and crashed to the floor. The girl fell over backwards with a look of pure horror, and began a long shrill scream of terror that seemed to last half-way through dinner.

The children continued milling around throughout the meal, and their range was roughly proportional to their age. The older ones never sat down in chairs, but there probably weren’t enough chairs in Doris’s dining room for everyone. The youngest ones sat in tiny tilted lounge devices, out of which they squirmed every few minutes, dragging towels and blankets and plastic food dispensers that dribbled various colored gels. The older ones came and went as before, munching selected foods while they walked, still engaged in rearranging things throughout the house.

After dinner, the grownups piled the debris in the kitchen, covering every surface with stacks of plates and platters, cups and glasses and bowls and utensils, napkins and handi-wipes. Alexia leaned against the refrigerator and surveyed the room. She gestured, and her husband went to stand beside her. Doris and Alex convened at the sink. There was a moment of silence, as the children, having discovered the upstairs, fanned out to

fill all available space, and only their distant cries and footsteps could be heard.

Alexia's face darkened. "I just want to say," she said, "that it wasn't very funny." She stared at Alex.

"What wasn't?" Alex said. He glanced at Doris, and she did the tiniest of shrugs.

"You know damn well," said Alexia.

"No, dear, I really don't," said Alex.

"You said, 'Looks like you found it.'"

"I did?"

"When we arrived. You looked right at my husband—my husband—and you said that to him." She paused. "And I think you owe him, us, all of us," she gestured upwards toward the children foraging on the second floor, "an apology."

Alex and Doris looked at each other. Alex looked at Alexia's husband, but he was staring across the kitchen at the Kit Kat Klock by the pantry. "Well, then I do most certainly apologize. I was only trying to make a joke about what you had said."

"What I said?" Alexia made her lips thin and tilted her head. "What the hell did I say?"

"Don't you remember? You said you were leaving to find yourself."

"I what?"

"And I said, 'When did you realize it was missing?'"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"And later I said, 'Where did you last see it?' He paused and Alexia shook her head and pressed her lips even tighter so her mouth was a thin red slit across her face. "And when you left," Alex continued, "I said, 'It's always in the last place you look.'"

Alexia stared at him.

"When you left," Alex said. "When you drove away in the cab."

Alexia's face changed. "When I left? Twenty years ago?"

"Yes," said Alex, frowning. "When did you think I meant?"

"Oh Jesus Christ on a crutch," said Alexia. She looked up, not toward the children upstairs but at the very heavens above, and maybe at Jesus or his crutch. "You are so, so, so..." Then she gave a familiar little shriek and rushed from the kitchen. Her feet pounded up the stairs and the faint cries

of children grew louder. Her husband looked away from the Kit Kat Klock and drifted back into the dining room. Alex and Doris stayed at the sink for a while, and then they heard Alexia's husband slowly climb the stairs, and a door open, and a door close, and after some time the children could no longer be heard.

Doris and Alex walked into the living room and returned a few items to their correct locations without talking. The house was very quiet. Alex dropped into the recliner and fingered its electronic controls. As it tilted back, lumbar vibrators softly thrumming, Doris flopped down into her matching recliner, but she left it fully upright without turning on any heat or vibration. The TV remote lay on the arm of Alex's chair, untouched. They watched the TV panel for quite some time, without speaking. Doris heaved a great sigh. Alex glanced over at her. "America's Got Talent?" he said. Doris closed her eyes. Alex tapped the remote and the TV panel booted up. The DVR directory swelled onto the screen, displaying a long list of *America's Got Talent* and Alex scrolled down past decades of re-runs and clicked on the oldest show in the list.