

Dear Alex

When autumn showed signs of fading into winter, I knew the cold wouldn't be too far behind. And each year seemed to get a little colder. It was a late Friday afternoon when I made the short walk to the thrift store down the street from my apartment. The kindly married couple who owned the store had bought the place before I was even born, deciding that it was better to do some good for the community than to sit around in retirement. The bell chimed as I pushed the door open and waved to the couple's son behind the counter. It was a warm welcome from the chill outside. The shop mostly sold clothes, though on the odd day you could find pieces of furniture or books. My microwave came from this place.

"Hey Alex. Looking for anything special today?" Lewis called. It was easy to pick out his short, dark brown hair in the back of the store, right underneath the novelty singing fish that hung on the wall. He was skinny and had eyesight bad enough to require reading glasses like his parents. He minded the shop when his parents took the weekends off. I'd gotten to know him during the three years I'd lived in the town. The wooden floorboards creaked as I moved towards the racks of clothing.

"Sort of. I don't have much in the way of winter clothing, so I figured I should pick something up before it gets really cold." I replied, glancing through the rack of jackets and sweatshirts. A splatter of red caught my attention as I moved another shirt. I raised an eyebrow and unhooked the shirt from the rack to examine it. "I'm fine" the shirt read, with a large stain of red at the side. I touched it hesitantly, only to find that it wasn't real blood.

I rolled my eyes and continued my search. That was when my hand landed on a varsity jacket. The body was wine-colored while the sleeves were white. The color sold me on it. I was reminded faintly of a time when my mom used to tease me that the only thing I inherited from my father was his favorite color.

"How much for this jacket?" I asked.

"That? Uh," Lewis said as he navigated his way through the racks of clothing, "It's been here a while... We'll say \$5."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't think anyone else had plans of taking it. Are you ready to check out?"

“Yeah.” I said and followed him to the checkout counter. My wallet was a raggedy thing: some of the stitching was coming loose and the color was a little faded. Not surprising for something I’d had since high school.

I handed him a five-dollar bill and placed another five dollars in the tip mug by the register. Lewis gave me a look, though he couldn’t manage it seriously.

“You never said I couldn’t.” I shrugged with a smile.

“You got me there.” He returned the smile and it lit up his light brown eyes. “You want a bag?”

“Hmm. Nah, I’ll wear it out. Thanks, Lewis.”

He waved to me after he gave me the jacket.

I pulled the jacket around my shoulders before I left the store, the bell chimed as I went. It definitely wasn’t a woman’s jacket, as the sleeves were longer than my arms, but I didn’t mind. It smelled faintly of dust, like it had been tucked away in someone’s attic for a time before the thrift store got it as a donation. I wondered how long it had been on the rack for.

The walk back was more refreshing now that I wasn’t cold. Everywhere I looked, there were people store-side, either window shopping or buying something and chatting away with the seller. The leaves that hadn’t already abandoned the trees were warm colors. Reds, oranges, yellows... Maybe raking leaves was a pain, but for that kind of beauty, it was worth it. It felt like I’d lived in this town my whole life, rather than just a few years.

Before I knew it, I was at the door to my apartment with keys in hand. I unlocked the door and shrugged off the jacket, leaving it on the sofa in the living room. My stomach growled and I remembered I hadn’t had dinner yet.

I stopped to look at the take-out menu pinned to my fridge and considered it. There was still a stack of empty pizza boxes still in my recycling bin. I tried to keep myself to a maximum of once-a-week takeout order. Thoughts of dinner were put on hold as I looked over at the jacket.

If I was going to wear it tomorrow, I should probably wash it before then. I’d have to check the washing instructions, if it still had those, before I could throw it in the washing machine. I reached into the pockets out of habit, then withdrew my hand in surprise when it touched something. Felt like paper or something crinkly. Probably a receipt, I told myself, as I reached back in and grabbed it.

It was paper, but too large to be a receipt. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone had just discarded the crumpled-up paper in a place no one would look while they were shopping in the thrift store.

It was likely junk, but curiosity told me I should look anyway. I opened it up and tried to smooth it out a little on top of the table. It looked like a hand-written letter from a notepad.

Goosebumps crawled along my skin as my attention caught on the header for the letter. “Dear Alex,” it said.

“Just a coincidence.” I said out loud, trying to convince myself. “Alex is a common name. It’s not me.”

The tingling feeling in my arms didn’t go away, so I decided to read the letter entirely.

Dear Alex,

I know I haven’t been around much. That’s entirely my fault. I didn’t want to leave you and your mother, but the cost of rent was much more than I could make at my job. A part of me thinks I should have stayed and tried to make it work, but I can’t change the past.

If you’re reading this, it means I’ve moved out of state. I found a job in Minnesota where I can make almost twice the salary I had where I lived. It hurts me to say this but you have every right to hate me. It’ll seem like I left without saying anything.

But if you ever want to see me, I would be happy to catch up and talk with you. You deserve better memories than the ones we had together. My address is

It ended there. The sentence remained unfinished and the letter unsigned, but I was shaking by that point. I dropped the letter onto the table and took a couple steps back. I took some deep breaths that didn’t help.

My dad had left without a word while I was in high school. He’d already been divorced from my mom for about a decade before that, but he’d stuck around trying to find a place he could afford with his job that he hated. The idea of therapy had been suggested to me by a school counselor a couple of times, though my mom and I lacked the money to even consider it.

It had to be a joke. I didn’t know how much I believed that, but I would’ve preferred it to my hands going numb. I was living in Minnesota. If the letter was fake, and I still wasn’t convinced either way, then someone had really gone out of their way to snoop around my life just to play a

creepy joke on me. Did they know I shopped at that thrift store? Could they even predict that I would buy that jacket?

I paused. The jacket was a shade of purple, my favorite color. It was also my father's. Did they know that?

"God damn it." I sighed to no one. The palms of my hands pressed over my eyes and I exhaled again. When he had left, I'd spent a few days trying to find him online. He was never one for social media, so that search came up fruitless. I tried his phone number, but it'd been changed. Google came up with more than three dozen different "Anthony Wallace"s and none of them were him. It was like he disappeared into the void and didn't want to be found.

He could've changed his name entirely, for all I knew.

It was then that my phone rang. I could count the contacts I had on my phone on one hand, so I wasn't surprised to see my friend Isabelle calling.

"Hey, Isabelle. What's up?" I answered.

"What's up?" She repeated after me. "I had my job interview today!"

"Oh, right, right. Sorry. How did it go?"

"They hired me on the spot! They said I blew everyone else out of the water."

Isabelle and hyperbole went together like peanut butter and jelly, but I didn't doubt it went well.

"Congratulations! We should go out and celebrate sometime."

"We really should. When was the last time you left your house for anything besides work?"

Isabelle teased.

"Today, as a matter of fact. I went to the thrift store." I'm sure she could see my eyes roll even through the phone.

"I meant, when was the last time you left your house *for fun*." I opened my mouth to argue but she continued. "But fine, I guess that counts. Did you get anything good?"

I was reminded of the letter on the table. "Yeah, I bought a jacket. But there was this letter in the pockets... I'm feeling weird about it."

"Weird how? Was it a love letter? Ooh, did Lewis write you a letter and stick it in the pockets?"

“I don’t know what your obsession with my love life is, but no. It was addressed to me, but I’m... not really sure who it’s from.”

“You don’t even sound sure about not being sure.” Isabelle stated, matter of fact. “What was the note about?”

I tried to mentally prepare myself for the words I was about to speak. “Well, it was addressed to me. Just my first name. And this is going to sound crazy, but it’s like my dad wrote it. To me.”

Isabelle was quiet for a few moments. Just as I wondered if she was going to laugh at me, she spoke. “But you haven’t seen him in years, right? Do you know if it’s his handwriting? Was there a name at the bottom?”

“I don’t remember what his handwriting was like, and the letter wasn’t finished. It’s like whoever was writing it just gave up and crumpled it, so there wasn’t any signature. That’s why I don’t know if it was him or if I have some stalker I don’t know about.”

“Well, if you said you got it from the thrift store, then Mr. or Mrs. Aisner should know about where it came from. Why not go back to the store and ask?”

“Good idea. They don’t work on the weekends, and,” I pulled the phone away from my ear to check the time, “the store is closed by now, but I’ll stop by tomorrow and see if Lewis can tell me anything. He could ask his parents.”

Isabelle laughed. “Of course it’s a good idea- it came from me! Anyway, after you do that tomorrow, do you want to get coffee with me?”

“Sure, I’ll call you when I’m done. See you later.”

“See ya!”

I spent the rest of the night working and trying to get the mystery off my mind. Talking to Isabelle made me feel a little better, but I didn’t think I could relax until I knew who the letter was from. But there was no point in worrying about something I couldn’t solve until tomorrow.

“Back again? Did you want to return the jacket?” Lewis asked, clearly surprised to see me.

“No, I have some questions for you and your parents, if you don’t mind.” I replied. I pulled out the letter from my bag and laid it on the counter between us. “When I went home, I discovered

this in my pockets. I don't know who it's from but it's addressed to me. Do you remember who donated the jacket?"

He scanned the note, then flipped it over to look for writing on the back. He placed the paper back down when he found none, rubbing his chin.

"This was... jeez, I want to say a couple years ago. All I remember is it was a guy, and he came in with a cardboard box of clothes and my parents took it."

"I'm guessing you wouldn't remember what he looked like, then. Did he give his name to your parents?" I pressed.

"I'm not sure if they remember it, but at the very least his name should be on our files." Lewis drummed his fingers on the counter. "What's with the questions? Think you know the guy?"

"I might. Sorry for the trouble, I just really need to know."

"Not a problem." Lewis chuckled. "Are you going to track him down?"

"Yeah, probably... I, uh," I paused, "I think that guy is my dad."

"What, seriously? That's..." He trailed off to try and find the words.

"Weird? Unlikely? Insane? It probably is." I finished for him.

"Hey, let me call my parents and ask them if they remember. Their memory isn't what it used to be, but it's worth a shot." He said.

I nodded and turned to lean back against the desk. How many times had I been in this store? Could my father have been in this same place? I heard Lewis describe my situation to his parents, answering a few questions here and there.

"Alright," he said and pocketed his phone, "They do remember a little about him. They said they hadn't seen him before the day he donated that box and they don't think he's been back since. But they keep a copy of the donation receipts at home, so they're looking through those for you right now."

"Thanks. I feel like I can't leave this problem alone until I know for sure who it is."

"Well, look, I'll let you know when my parents find the receipt. It'll have the signature of whoever that was that donated the box. And if I can find any of the other things he donated, I'll pull them aside for you so you can take a look at them."

“Thanks, Lewis. I owe you one.”

“Not at all. Good luck on your search.” Before I headed out the door, he spoke up again. “And if the note is from your dad, it sounds like he really cared about you.”

The café Isabelle decided on was in the middle of town. A white-bricked building with large, arched windows and unlit lanterns at this time of day. Isabelle had a habit of trying out a new place every time we saw each other. This one, the “Busy Bean Café”, was pretty busy in the early afternoon that I saw her.

She dressed like usual: blonde hair tied up and out of the way and work professional enough to fit in easily amongst the other busy writers and artists in the café. It was a small comfort that even though Isabelle quit her freelancing after working with the editing company I worked for, she was still happy to make time for me.

“Still thinking about your dad?” Isabelle asked over her cup of black coffee.

“After all those years without a word from him, I thought I’d gotten over it. But I guess I’m not.” There were far too many thoughts whirling around in my head at the moment and I wasn’t eager to talk about any of them.

“Who could blame you? A message out of the blue like that would freak me out.” When I didn’t say anything back, she sighed airily with a soft smile. “But it’s probably better than having to spend Thanksgiving with my parents.”

“Don’t like spending time with your family?” I replied, taking a sip from my latte. I appreciated the warmth that reached my fingers through the mug. “You could always come stay with my mom and I during the holidays, when I travel south next year.”

“Appreciate it, but I can’t get out of seeing them.” She rolled her eyes. “It would be more bearable if they could stop asking if I had a husband yet. Or when they could expect grandkids.”

“Maybe next year you can bring home a fake boyfriend.” I shrugged.

“Maybe. But even lying about having a partner is a lot of commitment.” A mischievous smile comes to her face. “How would you feel about being my partner for a day next year?”

I stirred some more sugar into my mug, sticking out my tongue at her as she raised an eyebrow. “We don’t all drink coffee plain, you know.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone put as many packets in as you. But you’re dodging the question.”

“I wouldn’t mind, but would your parents be mad if they thought you were bisexual or something?”

“I think at this point they’d be happy to see me with anyone.” Isabelle said. As the waiter came over to hand us the check, I wondered if it bothered her as much as it bothered her parents. Isabelle snatched the receipt from the table before I could say anything.

“It’s my turn to pay.” I reached my hand for the paper, only for her to draw it closer to herself.

“Nope. I’m paying.” She replied. “You’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

I sighed. “I’d refuse, but we’d be sitting here for the rest of the day...”

“I’m glad we can agree on that. And keep your chin up, Alex. You’ll get it figured out.”

I nodded back at her unconvincingly and left the café, dialing a number while I did so.

It wasn’t the first time I found myself wishing that my mom owned a smartphone. She still owned a landline and drove the same car she bought when I was born. The habit of saving money wherever you could never died for either of us. “As long as I can have a nice enough TV, I don’t care about having any of the newest things.” She asserted. I was kicking myself now for not buying even a used, older model smartphone for her.

“Hello?” She picked up on the third ring.

“Hey mom, sorry for calling so suddenly.”

“I love hearing from you, pumpkin. You sound distressed, what’s the matter?” I eased slightly at the nickname.

It took a couple minutes to explain everything, but she stayed quiet until I was done. “I don’t really know what his handwriting looks like, but I honestly think that note is for me, mom. I wish I could send a picture to you so you can look at it.”

“It’s okay. If you said that you believe that the note is for you, then continue to believe that. You have me and your friends supporting you, no matter if it is your father or not. Even if it isn’t, we can keep looking, if you want to. Okay?”

“Okay.” I agreed. My phone beeped, signaling that someone else was calling me. “I have to go now, mom, sorry to cut this short. I’ll call you later; I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The caller ID came back with only a number I didn’t recognize and I considered letting it ring. Still, I answered.

“Ms. Wallace?” An older woman’s voice came from the other end. “It’s Mrs. Aisner. Lewis gave me your number.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble, Mrs. Aisner,” I replied. “Were you able to find anything regarding the box?”

“Yes dear, my husband found the receipt in our books.”

“May I ask who signed it?” I forced myself to focus on taking deep breaths, though it didn’t calm my heart like I’d hoped it would. But I couldn’t solve the problem if I didn’t know who wrote that note.

“My son filled me in on your situation, so we wanted to help you. As for the receipt, it looks to me like this says Anthony Wallace. Is that who you were looking for?”

My arms and hands felt numb, but it was from the words she spoke, not the weather outside.

“Y-yes, that’s... that’s him.”

“We have a policy that requires donators to give us their phone number or email address just in case there’s an issue with any of their donations. I’m going to give that to you as well.” Mrs. Aisner’s voice was steady and warm and I had to repeat her words in my head to get them to make sense.

“Thank you...” I fumbled around in my bag for a small notepad and pen, then nodded without thinking when I was ready. “I can take that down right now, if that’s alright.”

She read off the numbers slowly for me and I scribbled them down. It was a different area code than his old number. No wonder I couldn’t reach him years ago when I tried.

“Good luck, dear. We’re rooting for you.” She said before we said our goodbyes.

I stared down at the numbers on the page, then shoved the notepad into my pockets and rushed for home. I wasn’t prepared yet.

Even when I got home and looked at the phone number again, I felt the anxiety drift through my veins. A part of me wanted to ignore it for now and put it off for another day. Before I could lose what little nerve I had, I found myself dialing the number and trying not to hold my breath.

It rang once. Twice. Three times...

I got the generic answering machine and the paper in my hands crinkled as I gripped it. As the voice gave me instructions on how and when to leave a voicemail, anything I planned to say was immediately jumbled by my chagrin. The answering machine beeped and I took a shaky breath.

"...Okay, uh, my name is Alex Wallace. If the person listening to this isn't Anthony Wallace, then I'm really sorry for bothering you. It's a wrong number and you don't have to call me back. But if you are Mr. Wallace..." I paused, trying to rub the tears that were forming. Get it together, I told myself.

"If you are, please call me. Please," My voice cracked on the word but I continued, "It's Alex. Your daughter. I want to talk...I want to see you if I can, please... I found a note in a jacket you donated to a thrift store and I just want to talk..." I hung up before I could cry. I doubted I was ever "over it" like I told myself; I just buried any feelings about it where I couldn't reach them. And when the years passed, so did the emotions.

I'd done all I could. The next best thing was to distract myself until I had any other options, so I pulled laundry from the dryer and folded them absent-mindedly. My emotions had calmed about halfway through the pile and I paused on the letterman jacket towards the end. As I began to question what I would do with it, my phone rang from the table.

My heart nearly stopped when I saw that it was the same number I'd just called. I dropped the laundry and accepted the call before my voicemail could get it.

"Hello?" For a brief moment, a part of me thought I was getting my hopes up.

"Alex," A man's voice said. My breath caught in my throat. "I'm so sorry, Alex."

"D-dad?" I managed.

"I shouldn't be allowed to call myself your father. But... it's me." He responded.

The tears came again before I could catch them. I was certain he could hear me crying.

"W...why didn't you finish that note?"

“What kind of father makes his daughter cry...” My dad sighed: a tired, remorseful sound. “I should have finished the letter. It was sometime after your birthday that I started to write it. But when I went to put my address, I thought you wouldn’t want to see me. I wouldn’t have blamed you if you threw out the letter, so I never planned to send it. And I forgot about it when I donated some of my old clothes, it seems.”

“You could have left that for me to decide...” I said quietly, trying to quell the hiccups that kept coming. “You just disappeared.”

“I’m sorry, pumpkin. You’re right.” The line went quiet for several moments and I feared that that was it. All that searching and anxiety for a two-minute heartache of a phone call. Finally, he spoke up again. “Do you still live in Florida with your mother?”

“No, I’m here,” I rushed to answer, desperate to keep the conversation going, “I’m in Minnesota. I moved here after I finished university.”

There was another pause. “What made you leave the state?” He asked in mild disbelief.

“The weather.” I said, trying to pull a smile to my face even as my eyes continued to water. “And mom told me you were born here, so...”

He laughed. I thought I was mishearing things as he did so, because it was just like how I remembered it sounded. Loud and genuine. When his laughter ebbed, he sounded a little more like himself.

“If you’re here, then... would you like to come see me? I live in Saint Paul. Whatever day works for you, you just let me know. I’ll take some days off.” My dad promised.

“How about Tuesday? I can take the metro- I’ll let you know when I get there.”

“Sounds good.” He replied. “And Alex... I don’t think I can ever say it enough, but I’m so sorry I left like that. When I see you, I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

I gathered the jacket in my arms and smiled.