

LESSON 1

HOW TO TALK ABOUT FAMILY MEMBERS

The alarm clock went off at 6:45, the same as it does every weekday. I rolled over and stared at the ceiling for a few moments as the clock kept blaring.

So this was what eighteen felt like.

I wiped the crud from my eyes and slammed the snooze button before flopping back into bed. In a few minutes I'd have to get up and get ready for school, but for right now I just wanted to lie in bed and wallow for a bit. Alex Lee, eighteen-year-old. It sounded strange, and I wasn't exactly sure how I felt about it.

The phone rang just then. Good old Janet, I thought. Wanted to be the first to wish me a happy birthday. I fumbled around for the handset, which had somehow gotten buried under a pile of laundry wadded up at the foot of my bed.

"Morning, darling," I mumbled, sleepily.

"Good morning, *Lee*," the voice crackled, underlining my last name gooiily. "I hear it's your birthday."

"Ew, Walter? Walter Chen, is that you? Get off of my phone, you freak!" I clicked the phone off and tossed it back under the pile. Great, I thought. Now my big eighteenth was jinxed for sure! Walter Chen had been my nemesis since the eighth grade, when I beat him in the school spelling bee and he cried like a baby. Underneath all that slime is a great guy, I'm sure, but I for one have never had the benefit of witnessing it. With all the time he spends bothering me, I'm amazed he's able to keep up that 4.0 he's so proud of.

I stumbled down to the kitchen, briefly noting my appearance in the hall mirror. Fantastic. A wake-up call from Walter and a cowlick the size of the former Soviet Union. I tried to slick it down, but my hair was obviously having none of it. Ever since I shaved my head about a year ago, my hair had been growing back all weird and spiky (and no, not hot-supermodel spiky, more like eight-year-old-with-ADD spiky).

When I came down to the kitchen, my family was already there. Dad was standing, as always, at the kitchen counter, his daily cup of coffee (three sugars, splash of milk) halfway drunk, his English muffin crisped to perfection, the newspaper folded with razor precision to the business section. My twin brothers, Mike and Wayne, were sitting at the table, taking turns stuffing bananas up their noses.

"That's disgusting," I said, as I took out the orange juice.

"You're disgusting," said Mike. Wayne burst into laughter and high-fived him.

"Ew, are you *nine*?" I said as I rolled my eyes.

Mike and Wayne proceeded to pretend to sneeze out bananas in my direction. If only all those freshman girls could see them now, I thought.

"Morning, princess," my dad muttered distractedly.

I started to tell him that I was probably too old to be called "princess" any more when he looked at his watch. "Shoot," he exclaimed. He gave me a quick kiss on the top of the head and ran out the door. "I'll be home late tonight, so you kids figure out dinner yourselves: Mike and Wayne high-fived each other again-dinner ourselves usually meant pizza from Papa John's pizza and a liter of Coke each-and then ambled upstairs to get their stuff for class.

Oh, perfect. Just perfect. My eighteenth and no one remembered. Someone tell me, quick-when did my life become the plot of a bad Molly Ringwald movie?

I sighed, polished off my orange juice, and headed upstairs to brush my teeth.

WORDS ABOUT ALEX

Like everyone else, I have a lot of **attributes** that make me who I am.

attribute (*n*): a quality, property, or characteristic of somebody or something

RELATED WORDS

My brother's greatest **idiosyncrasy** is that he sometimes likes to bite his toenails.

idiosyncrasy (*n*): an attribute that makes you different from other people

I have an **acerbic** wit: My grandmother used to say that if my tongue were any sharper, I'd cut myself on it.

acerbic (*adj*): bitter or sharp in tone, taste, or manner

Some close synonyms for acerbic are **sardonlc** (*adj*): disdainfully or ironically mocking, and **mordant** (*adj*): sharply sarcastic or biting

critical.

I like to think of myself as an artist, with a keen sense of **aesthetics**.

aesthetics (*n*): how something looks, especially when considered in terms of how pleasing it is

I've been a **prolific** writer ever since I was young-I've filled eight binders, three shoeboxes, and countless restaurant napkins with poetry.

prolific (*adj*): highly productive

I'm **discerning** when it comes to literature, but apparently not when it comes to clothing. I like to put together crazy outfits, like ski parkas with tuxedo pants and pigtails. I told my friend Janet that that particular look was just **eclectic**, but she didn't buy it.

discerning (*adj*): showing good taste and judgment

eclectic (*adj*): made up of elements from various sources

I'm proud to dress the way I do! I'm not embarrassed to be an **iconoclast!**

Iconoclast (*n*): someone who challenges traditional beliefs, customs, and values

My fashion sense is definitely **heterodox**, but only boring people dress like they just stepped out of a J. Crew catalog.

heterodox (*adj*): going against established or accepted beliefs or theories (traditionally used in terms of religion)

My room is usually completely **disheveled** - papers everywhere, laundry not folded. I'm amazed I can even find myself in all this mess.

disheveled (*adj*): disordered and untidy

My father thinks my room is **deplorable** - he always says he's embarrassed to even look at it.

deplorable (*adj*): worthy of severe condemnation

My dad thinks I'm too lazy for my own good. He sees me watching TV on the couch *once* and he assumes that I've sunk into a hopeless state of **lethargy**.

lethargy (*n*): a state of physical slowness and mental dullness

My dad deplores my **lassitude** and my **torpor**, but I always tell him I'm simply in **repose**, storing up energy to go out and be productive.

lassitude (*n*): a state of weariness accompanied by listlessness or apathy

torpor (*n*): lack of mental or physical energy

repose (*n*): state of rest or inactivity

My father thinks poetry is a waste of time; he thinks I'm **squandering** my talents.

squander (*v*): to use something wastefully

He wants me to do something more constructive with my time-and by "**constructive**," he means "something that will get me into an Ivy League school."

constructive (*adj*): involved in building, especially a foundation or base

WORDS ABOUT ALEX'S DAD

My dad once trained as an opera singer: When he turns on that big, deep voice, he seems totally **indomitable**.

Indomitable (*adj*): impossible to defeat or frighten

RELATED WORDS

My brothers think my father runs our house like a complete **autocrat**.

I think he could be a lot more **imperious** than he actually is, but I have to agree that our house is a little too **authoritarian**.

autocrat (*n*): a ruler who holds complete, unlimited power

Imperious (*adj*): haughty and domineering

authoritarian (*adj*): favoring strict rules and established authority

My father's love for us is **indubitable**. His sanity, on the other hand - now that's another story.

indubitable (*adj*): obviously true and not to be doubted

When my dad makes up his mind about something, he's totally **inexorable**. One time he decided we all had too much sugar in our diets, so he wouldn't let us eat anything but bran and spinach for a week.

inexorable (*adj*): unstoppable

I was amazed at the way my father stuck **tenaciously** to the bran-and-spinach plan. Even when my brothers threatened to stop eating entirely, he remained **imperturbable**.

tenaciously (*ad*): sticking firmly to a decision or plan

imperturbable (*adj*): not easily worried or distressed

My father is always complaining about my messy room, but honestly! He's so **meticulous** that he color-codes his sock drawer. And his shoes. And his closet. And his bookshelves . . .

meticulous (*adj*): extremely careful and precise

Some synonyms for meticulous are:

conscientious (*adj*): thorough and careful in one's work

punctilious (*adj*): being careful about small details

Immaculate (*adj*): completely clean

scrupulous (*adj*): very precise and exact

I know I should show my father more **deference**, but, after all, it's *my* life!

deference (*n*): submission to another's judgment, opinions, or wishes

My dad is a total **zealot** about getting me to go to college.

zealot (*n*): somebody who shows excessive enthusiasm for a cause (usually in a religious sense)

One of the major **tenets** of my father's belief system is that a good education will get you anywhere you want in the world.

tenet (*n*): one of a set of fundamental beliefs

Because my father is such a **zealot**-and since he pays for everything in the house-my brothers and I have to accept his ideas as **dogma**.

dogma (*n*): an authoritative stand that all believers must accept as correct

All my dad's scary qualities **believe** a very loving, supportive nature.

believe (*v*): to disguise the true nature of something

WORDS ABOUT ALEX'S BROTHERS

My brothers are typical fifteen-year-old boys: they have the most **asinine** senses of humor.

asinine (*adj*): totally stupid or ridiculous (Literally, it means "like an ass!" How's that for a memory device?)

My brothers are totally **apathetic** about my interests. But then again, I've never gone to see them play football, so I guess I can't complain.

apathetic (*adj*): not taking any interest in anything

I think it's really true what they say about twins: Mike and Wayne both get really **petulant** when the other is gone for too long.

petulant (*adj*): bad-tempered and sulky, like a child

My brothers like to rip on substitute teachers who are too **credulous**.

They love that old switching-seats-and-pretending-to-be-each-other routine.

credulous (*adj*): gullible; believing something too easily

When my brothers were just **neophytes** in high school, they used to ask me lots of questions about how it all worked. Now that they're Misters Big and Popular, they barely acknowledge my presence.

neophyte (*n*): beginner (This word was traditionally used in a religious sense; a *neophyte* was someone who had just joined a religious community – say, a monastery, -but hadn't taken vows yet.)

No matter how much I complain about them, though, my brothers are pretty **benign**; they've never teamed up on me too badly.

benign (*adj*): gentle, nonthreatening, mild

RELATED WORDS

innocuous (*adj*): harmless

My brothers aren't just popular because they like to make asses of themselves. They're also really friendly and **convivial** (Just not to their older sister).

convivial (*adj*): enjoying the company of others

genial (*adj*): having a kind, good-natured manner

jovial (*adj*): cheerful

blithe (*adj*): happy and carefree

risible (*adj*): capable of causing laughter

There's no real **animosity** between us. In general, we get along pretty well.

animosity (*n*): feeling of hostility