

# looking for alaska



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looking for alaska



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to john green



one hundred thirty-six days before



THE WEEK BEFORE I left my family and Florida and the rest of my minor life to go to boarding school in Alabama, my mother insisted on throwing me a going-away party. To say that I had low expectations would be to underestimate the matter dramatically. Although I was more or less forced to invite all my "school friends," i.e., the ragtag bunch of drama people and English geeks I sat with by social necessity in the cavernous cafeteria of my public school, I knew they wouldn't come. Still, my mother persevered, awash in the delusion that I had kept my popularity secret from her all these years. She cooked a small mountain of artichoke dip. She festooned our living room in green and yellow streamers, the colors of my new school. She bought two dozen champagne poppers and placed them around the edge of our coffee table.

And when that final Friday came, when my packing was mostly done, she sat with my dad and me on the living-room

couch at 4:56 P.M. and patiently awaited the arrival of the Good-bye to Miles Cavalry. Said cavalry consisted of exactly two people: Marie Lawson, a tiny blonde with rectangular glasses, and her chunky (to put it charitably) boyfriend, Will.

"Hey, Miles," Marie said as she sat down.

"Hey," I said.

"How was your summer?" Will asked.

"Okay. Yours?"

"Good. We did Jesus Christ Superstar. I helped with the sets. Marie did lights," said Will.

"That's cool." I nodded knowingly, and about exhausted our conversational topics. I might have asked a question about Jesus Christ Superstar, except that 1. I didn't know what it was and 2. I didn't care to learn, and 3. I never really excelled at small talk. My mom, however, can talk small for hours, and so she extended the awkwardness by asking them about their rehearsal schedule, and how the show had gone, and whether it was a success.

"I guess it was," Marie said. "A lot of people came, I guess." Marie was the sort of person to guess a lot.

Finally, Will said, "Well, we just dropped by to say good-bye. I've got to get Marie home by six. Have fun at boarding school, Miles."

"Thanks," I answered, relieved. The only worse thing than having a party that on one attends is having a party attended only by two vastly, deeply uninteresting people.

They left, and so I sat with my parents and stared at the blank TV and wanted to turn it on but knew I shouldn't. I could feel them both looking at me, waiting for me to burst into tears or something, as if I hadn't known all along that it would go precisely like this. But I had known. I could feel their pity as they scooped artichoke dip with chips intended for my imaginary friends, but they needed pity more than I did: I wasn't disappointed. My expectations had been met.

"Is this why you want to leave, Miles?" Mom asked.

I mulled it over for a moment, careful not to look at her.

"Uh, no," I said.

"Well, why then?" she asked. This was not the first time she had posed the question. Mom was not particularly keen on letting me go to boarding school and had made no secret of it.

"Because of me?" my dad asked. He had attended Culver Creek, the same boarding school to which I was headed, as had both of his brothers and all of their kids. I think he liked the idea of me following in his footsteps. My uncles had told me stories about how famous my dad had been on campus for having simultaneously raised hell and aced all his classes. That sounded like a better life than the one I had in Florida. But no, it wasn't because of Dad. Not exactly.

"Hold on," I said. I went into Dad's study and found his biography of François Rabelais. I liked reading biographies of writers, even if (as was the case with Monsieur

Rabelais) I'd never read any of their actual writing. I flipped to the back and found the highlighted quote ("NEVER USE A HIGHLIGHTER IN MY BOOKS," my dad had told me a thousand times. But how else are you supposed to find what you're looking for?)

"So this guy," I said, standing in the doorway of the living room. "François Rabelais. He was this poet. And his last words were 'I go to seek a Great Perhaps.' That's why I'm going. So I don't have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps."

And that quieted them. I was after a Great Perhaps, and they knew as well as I did that I wasn't going to find it with likes of Will and Marie. I sat back down on the couch, between my mom and my dad, and my dad put his arm around me, and we stayed there like that, quiet on the couch together, for a long time, until it seemed ok to turn on the TV, and then we ate artichoke dip for dinner and watched the History Channel, and as going-away parties go, it certainly could have been worse.



the last day



THE NEXT MORNING, the first Monday of the new semester, the Colonel came out of the shower just as my alarm went off.

As I pulled on my shoes, Kevin knocked once and then opened the door, stepping inside.

"You're looking good," the Colonel said casually. Kevin's now sported a crew cut, a small patch of short blue hair on each side of his head just above the ear. His lower lip jutted out—the morning's first dip. He walked over to our COFFEE TABLE, picked up a can of Coke, and spit in it.

"You almost didn't get me. I noticed it in my conditioner and got right back in the shower. But I didn't notice it in my gel. It didn't show up in Jeff's hair at all. But Longwell and me, we had to go with the Marine look. Thank God I have clippers."

"It suits you," I said, although it didn't. The short hair accentuated his features, specifically his too-close-together

beady eyes, which did not stand up well to accentuation. The Colonel was trying hard to look tough—ready for whatever Kevin might do—but its hard to look tough when you're only wearing an orange towel.

"Truce?"

"Well, your troubles aren't over, I'm afraid," the Colonel said, referring to the mailed-but-not-yet-received progress reports.

"A'ight. If you say so. We'll talk when its over, I guess.

"I guess so," the Colonel said. As Kevin walked out, the Colonel said, "Take the can you spit in, you unhygienic shit." Kevin just closed the door behind him. The Colonel grabbed the can, opened the door, and threw it at Kevin—missing him by a good margin.

"Jeez, go easy on the guy."

"No truce yet, Pudge."

I spent that afternoon with Lara. We were very cutesy, even though we didn't know the first thing about each other and barely talked. But we made out. She grabbed my butt at one point, and I sort of jumped. I was lying down, but I did the best version of jumping that one can do lying down, and she said, "Sorry," and I said, "No, it's okay. Its just a little sore from the swan." We walked to the TV room together, and I locked the door. We were watching The Brady Bunch, which she had never seen. The episode, where the Bradys visit the gold-mining ghost town and they all get locked up in the one-room jail by some crazy old gold panner with a scraggly white beard, was especially

horrible, and gave us a lot to laugh about. Which is good, since we didn't have much to talk about.

Just as the Bradys were getting locked in jail, Lara randomly asked me, "Have you ever gotten a blow job?"

"Um, that's out of the blue," I said.

"The blue?"

"Like, you know, out of left field."

"Left field?"

"Like in baseball. Like, out of nowhere. I mean, what made you think of that?"

"I've just never geeven one," she answered, her voice dripping with seductiveness. It was so brazen. I thought I would explode. I never thought. I mean, from Alaska, hearing that stuff was one thing. But to hear her sweet little Romanian voice go so sexy all of a sudden...

"No," I said. "I never have."

"Think it would be fun?"

DO !?!?!?!?!?! "Um. yeah. I mean, you don't have to."

"I think I want to," she said, and we kissed a little, and then. And then with me sitting watching The Brady Bunch, watching Marcia Marcia Marica up to her Brady antics, Lara unbuttoned my pants and pulled my boxers down a little and pulled my penis.

"Wow," she said.

"What?"

She looked up at me, but didn't move, her face nanometers away from my penis. "It's weird."

"What do you mean weird?"

"Just beeg, I guess."

I could live with that kind of weird. And then she wrapped her hand around it and put it into her mouth.

And waited.

We were both very still. She did not move a muscle in her body, and I did not move a muscle in mine. I knew that at this point something else was supposed to happen, but I wasn't quite sure what.

She stayed still. I could feel her nervous breath. For minutes, for as long as it took the Bradys to steal the key and unlock themselves from the ghost-town jail, she lay there, stock-still with my penis in her mouth, and I sat there, waiting.

And then she took it out of her mouth and looked up at me quizzically.

"Should I do sometheeng?"

"Um. I don't know," I said. Everything I'd learned from watching porn with Alaska suddenly excited my brain. I thought maybe she should move her head up and down, but wouldn't that choke her? So I just stayed quiet.

"Should I, like, bite?"

"Don't bite! I mean, I don't think. I think—I mean, that felt good. That was nice. I don't know if there's something else."

"I mean, you deened't—"

"Um. Maybe we should ask Alaska."

So we went to her room and asked Alaska. She laughed and laughed. Sitting on her bed, she laughed until she cried. She walked into the bathroom, returned with a tube

of toothpaste, and showed us. In detail. Never have I so wanted to be Crest Complete.

Lara and I went back to her room where she did exactly what Alaska told her to do, and I did exactly what Alaska said I would do, which was die a hundred little ecstatic deaths, my fists clenched, my body shaking. It was my first orgasm with a girl, and afterward, I was embarrassed and nervous, and so, clearly, was Lara who finally broke the silence by asking, "So, want to do some homework?"

There was little to do on the first day of the semester, but she read for her English class. I picked up a biography of Argentinean revolutionary Che Guevara—whose face adorned a poster on the wall—that Lara's roommate had on her bookshelf, then I lay down next to Lara on the bottom bunk. I began at the end, as I sometimes did with biographies I had no intention of reading all the way through, and found his last words without too much searching. Captured by the Bolivian army, Guevara said, "Shoot, coward. You are only going to kill a man." I thought back to Simón Bolívar's last words in García Márquez's novel— "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!" South American revolutionaries, it would seem, died with flair. I read the last words out loud to Lara. She turned on her side, placing her head on my chest.

"Why do you like last words so much?"

Strange as it might seem, I'd never really thought about why. "I don't know," I said, placing my hand against the small of her back. "Sometimes, just because they're funny. Like

in the Civil War, a general named Sedgwick said, "They couldn't hit an elephant from this dis—" and then he got shot." She laughed. "But a lot of times, people die how they live. And so last words tell me a lot about who people were, and why they became the sort of people biographies get written about. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Yeah?" Just yeah?

"Yeah," she said, and then went back to reading.

I didn't know how to talk to her. And I was frustrated with trying, so after a little while, I got up to go.

I kissed her good-bye. I could do that, at least.

I picked up Alaska and the Colonel at our room and we walked down to the bridge, where I repeated in embarrassing detail the fellatio fiasco.

"I can't believe she went down on you twice in one day," the Colonel said.

"Only technically. Really just once," Alaska corrected.

"Still. I mean. Still. Pudge got his hog smoked."

"The poor Colonel," Alaska said with a rueful smile. "I'd give you a pity blow, but I really am attached to Jake."

"That's just creepy," the Colonel said. "You're only supposed to flirt with Pudge."

"But Pudge has a *giiirrrrrllfriend*." She laughed.

That night, the Colonel and I walked down to Alaska's room to celebrate our Barn Night success. She and the Colonel had been celebrating a lot the past couple days, and I didn't feel up to climbing Strawberry Hill, so I sat and

munched on pretzels while Alaska and the Colonel drank wine from paper cups with flowers on them.

"We ain't drinkin' out of the bottle tonight, hun," the Colonel said. "We classin' it up!"

"It's an old-time Southern drinking contest," Alaska responded. "We's a gonna treat Pudge to an evening of real Southern livin'!" We go'n match each other Dixie cup for Dixie cup till the lesser drinker falls."

And that is pretty much what they did, pausing only to turn out the lights at 11:00 so the Eagle wouldn't drop by. They chatted some, but mostly they drank, and I drifted out of the conversation and ended up squinting through the dark, looking at the book spines in Alaska's Life Library. Even minus the books she'd lost in the mini flood, I could have stayed up until morning reading through the haphazard stacks of titles. A dozen white tulips in a plastic vase were precariously perched atop one of the book stacks, and when I asked her about them, she just said "Jake and my's anniversary," and I didn't care to continue that line of dialouge, so I went back to scanning titles, and I was just wondering how I could go about learning Edgar Allan Poe's last words (for the record: "Lord help my poor soul") when I heard Alaska say, "Pudge isn't even listening to us."

And I said, "I'm listening."

"We were just talking about Truth or Dare. Played out in seventh grade or still cool?"

"Never played it," I said. "No friends in seventh grade."

"Well, that does it!" she shouted, a bit too loud given

the late hour and also given the fact that she was openly drinking wine in the room. "Truth or Dare!"

"All right," I agreed, "but I'm not making out wit the Colonel."

The Colonel sat slumped in the corner. "Can't make out. Too drunk."

Alaska started. "Truth or Dare, Pudge."

"Dare."

"Hook up with me."

So I did.

It was that quick. I laughed, looked nervous, and she leaned in and tilted her head to the side, and we were kissing. Zero layers between us. Our tongues dancing back and forth in each other's mouth until there was no her mouth and my mouth but only our mouths intertwined. She tasted like cigarettes and Mountain Dew and wine and Chap Stick. Her hand came to my face and I felt her soft fingers tracing the line of my jaw. We lay down as we kissed, she on top of me, and I began to move beneath her. I pulled away for a moment, to say, "What is going on here?" and she put one finger to her lips and we kissed again. A hand grabbed one of mine and she place it on her stomach. I moved slowly to the top her and felt her arching her back fluidly beneath me. I pulled away again. "What about Lara? Jake?" Again, she sshed me. "Less tongue, more lips," she said, and I tried my best. I thought the tongue was the whole point, but she was the expert.

"Christ," the Colonel said quite loudly. "The wretched beast, drama, draws nigh."

But we paid no attention. She moved my hand from her waist to her breast, and I felt cautiously, my fingers moving slowly under her shirt but over her bra, tracing the outline of her breasts and then cupping one in my hand, squeezing softly. "You're good at that," she whispered. Her lips never left mine as she spoke. We moved together, my body between her legs.

"This is so fun," she whispered, "but I'm so sleepy. To be continued?" She kissed me for another moment, my mouth straining to stay near hers, and then she moved from beneath me, placed her head on my chest and fell asleep instantly.

We didn't have sex. We never got naked. I never touched her bare breast, and her hands never got lower than my hips. It didn't matter. As she slept, I whispered, "I love you, Alaska Young."

Just as I was falling asleep, the Colonel spoke. "Dude, did you just make out with Alaska?"

"Yeah."

"This is going to end poorly," he said to himself.

And then I was asleep. That deep, can-still-taste-her-in-my-mouth sleep, that sleep that is not particularly restful but is difficult to wake from all the same. And then I heard the phone ring. I think. And I think, although I can't know, that I felt Alaska get up. I think I heard her leave. I think. How long was she gone is impossible to know.

But the Colonel and I both woke up when she returned, whenever that was, because she slammed the door. She was sobbing, like that post-Thanksgiving morning but worse.

"I have to get out of here!" she cried.

"Whats wrong?" I asked.

"I forgot! God, how many times can I fuck up?" she said. I didn't even have time to wonder what she forgot before she screamed, "I JUST HAVE TO GO. HELP ME GET OUT OF HERE!"

"Where do you need to go?"

She sat down and put her head between her legs, sobbing. "Just please distract the Eagle right now so I can go. Please."

The Colonel and I, at the same moment, equal in our guilt, said, "Okay."

"Just don't turn on your lights," the Colonel said. "Just drive slow and don't turn on your lights. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Fuck," she said. "Just get rid of the Eagle for me," she said, her sobs childlike half screams. "God oh God, I'm so sorry."

"Okay," the Colonel said. "Start the car when you hear the second string."

We left.

We did not say: Don't drive. You're drunk.

We did not say: We aren't letting you in that care when you are upset.

We did not say: We insist on going with you.

We did not say: This can wait until tomorrow. Anything—everything—can wait.

We walked to our bathroom, grabbed the three strings of leftover firecrackers from beneath the sink, and ran to the Eagle's. We weren't sure that it would work again.

But it worked well enough. The Eagle tore out of his house as soon as the first string of firecrackers started popping—he was waiting for us, I suppose—and we headed for the woods and got him in deeply enough that he never heard her drive away. The Colonel and I doubled back, wading through the creek to save time, slipped in through the back window of Room 43, and slept like babies.

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The type face used was Grotesque MT. Monotype Grotesque, or Grotesque MT was founded in 1926 by Frank Hinman Pierpont. It is a realist sans-serif typeface. Grotesque MT was created to be an Avant-Garde typeface to fit in with the design of the time.

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