

Aldrich Academy

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It was nearing the end of August. The humidity and triple digits gave no hint that summer would end within a matter of weeks. Standing at the gates of Aldrich Preparatory Academy, today would be the day of my fresh start. Despite the name, my family has no wealth of any sort. My father works as a Grade 9 Geometry teacher there, and my mother is a waitress at a casual diner three blocks from our apartment. The only reason I was even accepted into the school was because of my father's occupation. They could still fit one more student into the oncoming freshman grade after a kid moved to Dubai for his dad's new finance job, and I was fortunate enough to be selected.

Gathering myself together, I exhaled out my worries, calming my shakily body, and I stepped into the school.

My first class of the day was Homeroom, in which my father was our teacher. Adorning their school uniforms, all the kids in my class wore golden wristwatches strapped around their wrist, or the latest trending accessories from Balenciaga and Prada. In my case, the school uniform itself cost half a year's salary from both my parents, so accessories were out of the picture. Some students huddled in groups, shooting side glances at me from time to time. I stared at the marble white Italian flooring, hoping to disappear. My father pretended to shuffle a few papers on his desk.

I walked up to the wealthiest looking kids. The ones with 24 karat golden rolexes strapped around their wrists, sprinkled with diamond specs and shining with the sun's glare. The ones with Jordans creased at just the right spots, as if a legendary basketball player once wore them too. The ones who immediately upon seeing that I was approaching them, fell awkwardly silent and faced some other direction. I walked closer, inserting myself into the circle. A few seconds passed by, their eyes glancing at one another, and then at me, and then at each other again. Finally, when they realized I wouldn't be leaving, they resumed their conversation.

"So whose house are we hosting that party at?"

"You mean the one for the whole school? It's probably gonna be Jacob. He has a whole football field in his backyard and an NCAA standard swimming-"

"What party?" My lips moved before my mind could think. Their eyes held a gaze with mine, not letting go, until I broke their contact, staring at my worn leather sneakers. My ears swelled with a fiery sensation.

"Yeah definitely. Jacob has a pretty nice house too, right? Besides the backyard he has a staff of 20 people."

"What party?" I repeated myself. This time with purpose, as if asking that question would make me visible to them.

The same silence polluted the air, this time longer, until a student broke the silence.

“It’s at my house..333 Jacob Street. But it’s gonna be really boring though. We won’t do much so...”

“No it’s fine, I’ll still go, if that’s fine with y’all...”

Their eyes fell upon me again, hoping that I would change my mind. Before any one of them could speak a word, the bell rang, and all the students exited the classroom. I watched as they left, Jacob’s friends bugging him for spilling the party details to me.

I arrived in flamingo floatie swim trunks and a college T-shirt. My father dropped me off in his 2005 Honda Civic. Everyone else was assisted with drivers and arrived in luxurious sports cars or limousines. We stood out like a sore thumb. In fact, one of the staff members from Jacob’s house came up to my dad and told him he was late and he should be helping to prepare the dishes. I tried my best to avoid any association with my dad or his ride, so I lowered my head, put my hands in my pocket, and walked swiftly to the wrought iron gates.

Jacob’s house resembled an 18th century English castle, with buttresses and mosaics plastered to the fourth story, seven balconies accompanying seven bedrooms peering out onto the street—three on the fourth level and the other four on the third. Two limestone chimneys stretched out from the grey-blue roof to the far left and right, and three triangle-shaped windows stretched out horizontally in between. The driveway was circular, with a porte cochere in the center. Several cars parked in the driveway, presumably the friends closest to Jacob.

I approached the double doors of the entrance, carved out of walnut wood. Two doormen dressed in white linen shirts and navy pants awaited my arrival. They bowed deeply, and held the ten-foot tall doors open without a word. Inside, servers and waiters scurried about, their smart dress shoes clacking and echoing against the checkered tile floor, which reflected pure light from the three gold plated chandeliers, topped with radiant cut crystals that illuminated its own blinding light. The front lobby itself matched the size, if not larger, of my apartment complex. Two spiraling staircases matched each other 10 yards in front of me, the railings covered by 24-karat gold and white chocolate balloons that varied in size. Between the two staircases was a glass double door, fortified by three black mullions and one muntin, that led to the entrance of the pooldeck. I straightened my shoulders and puffed out my chest slightly, like the hurried businessmen my waitress mother served, and I strolled toward the glass doors into the poolyard.

The yard was positioned in the middle of the house, hotdog style, with the rest of the castle surrounding the poolyard. I stood in place, speechless and unblinking, as I stared out into the yard.

An NCAA standard pool sprawled across the bottom right of my vision. Its lanelines were removed and stored off to the side. Each lane had its own starting block, with the surname *Andres* imprinted on each. To the left of the pool was a football field packed with artificial grass, and a blue and red inflatable slide sat in the corner. To the right of the yard was an outdoor

kitchen, the glint of stainless steel appliances flanking a neutral-colored brick pizza oven from Italy. Chefs in doubled breasted white jackets and loose grey pants worked away at the grill. The flames rose quickly above their *tope blanche*, and then dissipated just as fast. Hands trained from years of cooking expertise skewered a cylinder shaped chunk of raw steak into a vertical spit. Every now and then, when a guest approached the table, one of the chefs would cut out from the cylinder a slice of steak, nimbly chop the pieces up, and grill it on fire. They would then wrap the steak in a tortilla, place it onto a porcelain dish, and hand it to the guest. Four bowls of salsa and guacamole, each one with a gold-faced spoon, sat on top of a white cotton tablecloth that covered a foldable aluminum table, where the guest could add the fresh condiments onto their tacos if desired.

As I walked around, inspecting the whole yard, I caught the furtive glances of a few of my classmates. They chuckled almost silently, turning their head away from my view so I would not be able to see their face. Cheeks blushing, I headed for the water slide.

There, I tried starting a conversation with my classmates in line. They all ignored me, which I tried to play off by then looking down at my shoes. Sometimes, a group of friends would cut in front of me without a glance, knowing I wouldn't say anything. I stayed quiet and enjoyed the view of the yard, daydreaming about what it would be like to have all that wealth. The slide was steep and thrilling though, so I spent the rest of my time at the party there, avoiding conversation with anyone at all.

The next day at school, no one would sit near me in class. I guess I failed to make a good impression at the party: wandering around enthusiastically, fawning at the opulence, and then my awkward attempts at starting conversation. The dreadful feeling weighed my heart every time someone walked past me, like stacks of bricks piling on top of a thin wooden plank. Somewhere around the sixth block of the day, the loneliness, the very possible imminent future without anyone to support me, shattered my heart. Outcomes started swirling inside my head, each one resulting in a situation where I was alone and mocked. Each thought sped my heartbeat, until all I could hear was my blood gushing in my ears. I resisted the stinging sensation swelling from my eyes, until my resolve was all but certain.

The last block of the day, right before the dismissing bell rang, I walked up to that spoiled group of kids again. Faking a smile that shone brighter than the sun, I tried to counter their apparent disdain at my presence.

“Do y'all wanna come to my house next month for my birthday?”

I don't know why I said that. My birthday was months away in April, but they couldn't possibly know.

Their feet shuffled, minds searching for an excuse.

“Sorry I can't go. I've a soccer championship tournament the entire next month. Maybe another time.”

“Yeah same, I have a lot of homework. You know, since school’s just started.”

“Come on, it’ll be so fun. We can golf on my private course and then take a ride on my helicopter to enjoy the city from above, and then when we’re tired we can dine at any of my restaurants while watching my private sea animal exhibit. We can stay there for one or two days and then come back in time for school.”

I spat out my fantasy weekend, my daydreams from watching the wealthy enjoy their time. Now, those classmates’ eyes were fixed on mine, their eyelids opened wider than normal, and mouth slightly agape.

Then they broke into uncontrollable laughter.

Heat swarmed my face, lighting my cheeks red as I sensed sweat accumulating on my hairline.

“Do you not believe me?”

Then Jacob spoke, impatient that I was dragging this out any longer.

“No dude. If you were really that rich your dad wouldn’t be a teacher and you wouldn’t dress like a millennial.”

His words stunned me. I grasped for the right words to say, but every answer slipped out of my hands, until desperation was all I had.

“It’s true. I swear it’s true. If you don’t believe me you can come to my house today or tomorrow or whatever time works for you, and I can prove to you that it’s really true.”

Casting doubt, Jacob’s group of friends exchanged irritated glances with each other. Finally, to settle this ordeal once and for all, so they wouldn’t have to listen to my nonsense any longer, Jacob responded.

“Alright man. We’re pretty busy today and Friday, so maybe sometime on the weekends. We’ll text you the time when we know, alright?”

The school bell rang and the students filed for the door. Before they could ask for my house address, I packed my backpack and ran for the exit.

“Sorry I’m in a rush. Here I’ll text you my house address. See y’all there!”

At home, I sat at the edge of my mattress, in the bedroom that I shared with my parents, digging my fingernails into my scalp and squeezing the hair strands that were in my way as I bit my lower lip. Certainly my school life was doomed for. If I don’t tell them the address, they’ll know I was lying. If I tell them the address, they’ll arrive at a measly apartment complex smaller than their closet. Either way, the next day when I go to class, everyone will laugh at me behind my back about the fool I made of myself.

I searched my brain for excuses to make: “Sorry I didn’t know we had guests over this weekend”; “Sorry my dad’s out of town so they don’t want any guests over”; “Sorry I have a lot of homework I need to study.” But all of them were nowhere near adequate, and at most, they would postpone my eventual embarrassment.

With every failed outcome running through my mind, the anxious thump of my heart grew louder, with an ever increasing beat against my ribcage. Tears wet my eyes with hopelessness, dripping down my face, stinging my cheeks and accumulating on my chin, and then onto my blanket without a sound. For about five minutes I sat with myself and the pathetic whiffles of my sniffing. My parents were still at work somehow, so I was all by myself. Finally, I brushed away those tears with the inside of my forearm, and as my vision started clearing, I noticed an object in the far top right of my sight.

On the wall mounted shelf not far above my parents’ bed, there was a safe: nothing shiny or expensive, but solid enough to prevent burglary. The password to the safe was my birthday, and inside the safe was a debit card for emergency funds. Every month, they told me, they had stored some portion of their salary into the debit card, ever since I was born, in hopes that one day they could retire early far far away, maybe in the Bahamas or Italy.

Was this my one hope to the life I wanted?

I rose slowly from my bed and took a step toward the safe. Then, morality sank into my heart, liquifying my knees as my legs shook uncontrollably. I tried to take another step, but my body would not let me. Every inch of my being was begging me to stop before I got in trouble.

I stopped thinking entirely, and abandoning all logical reasoning, I forced my march forward, one foot in front of the other, each step feeling as if I was pulling a car.

I crawled onto my parents’ bed toward the safe. Every movement seemed to happen in slow motion, like my mind was giving me time to rethink. The thump against my ribcage grew louder the closer I got, and the rhythm of my heartbeat now reached the tip of my fingers.

Arms trembling, I entered the code into the safe. My shaky left hand kept on typing the wrong digits, so I grabbed my forearm with my right hand to steady it, and I finally opened the safe on the fourth try. There was a click, and then the door loosened.

I waited there for a few moments. Secretly I hoped my parents would come back and catch me, or a delivery guy would knock on the door. Someone to stop me. But no one came.

So I snatched the debit card and stashed it in my right pocket. I slammed the safe door shut and re-entered the digits. I tilted my head down and walked briskly through the front door toward the ATM at the bottom of the complex.

There was some trouble processing the debit card through the ATM, but in the end I withdrew as much as the machine would allow. The \$100 bills flew into my hand. Never had I seen so much

money before. The grainy texture rubbing against my fingers made me feel so accomplished, until I remembered what I did to get the money. Then the smile faded from my face. Completing my mission, I went back upstairs.

I tracked all available mansions on short-term rental websites. Some cost tens of thousands of dollars per night and appeared even more grandiose than Jacob's house. Some were next to the bayou, and others were next to the forest. Finally, I found the perfect house.

"Accompanying an outdoor tennis court, basketball court, and a NCAA-standard football field, the Winston's manor features an 8-line swimming pool built into an indoor water park. With six master bedrooms and a servant quarters, this mansion also provides a helicopter landing pad. The mansion also includes a Swiss-style living room of two acres blended in with 15 other miscellaneous rooms. All services and butlery are included, and meals are served at least three times a day, along with any other snacks desired. Transactions for less than three days will be handled in person. First come first serve."

The cost for one day was just below my quota, and the owner was fortunately on a trip to Africa, returning next week. I hurried downstairs once again and ordered a ride-share service. Within forty minutes, I stood before the mansion.

The moment I saw the manor, the guilt that had panged me before dulled, its sting numbed. The butler was waiting at the front door in the distance, behind gold-bronze gates and a front yard bigger than my house, even bigger than Jacob's courtyard. The butler had an even hairline; the sun glared off the top of his shiny head, and the hair remaining along the lower half of his head was silvery white, along with a slick, slim gray mustache. He stood with his legs together and hands in front, and when he saw the car, he bowed. At the same moment, the double gate opened to our arrival.

My driver pulled up to the butler. He drove around the porte cochere, 20, no 25 meters in diameter. Interlocking concrete pavers lined the perimeter around the porte cochere, along with natural grass perfectly trimmed and perfectly green. As we came to a stop, the butler approached the car.

"Greetings, sir. How is your day?" He recited to me as he helped me get out of the car.

I cleared my throat, and with the confident, leisurely voice I hear almost every rich person use, I respond.

"Pleasantly enough. I assume the owner is not here today to discuss our business?"

"Exactly right sir. If I am right sir, an esteemed man has scheduled to rent this house for the weekend, a foreigner from another nation. However, as he has not come yet, can I presume that you are his son, whom he sent to complete his wish?"

“Yes you are correct. Now, my family is distinguished, especially my father. We are busy people. Please let us not waste time, as I have other tasks at hand.”

I said this to prevent him from asking any confirmational details about my “father.”

“Very well sir. Now then, if you have the money, preferably in cash, we can perform the exchange and you can be on your merry way.”

“Yes, yes, here you go.”

I gave him the cash, adding on a little extra as a tip. In return he handed me a set of keys, 5 in total.

“If you have any guests in your stay, please talk to any one of the housekeepers. They will be happy to show them to their room.”

With that, he bowed to me, hands behind his back. I nodded and returned the bow, and made way for the rideshare.

The guilt that drowned me earlier faded. Rather, it turned into determination. There was no going back now.

When I sat in and closed the door, the rideshare driver tilted the rearview mirror down, and he spoke.

“Wow kid. Didn’t know you that rich. Then why er you livin’ in that shabby apartment place?”

Without a skip in the beat, I articulated perfectly.

“I am simply the landlord’s son. Now drive, don’t waste my time asking petty questions.”

My brain cleared itself from those endless, unreasonable possibilities that clouded my judgment earlier, and my heartbeat restored its normal rhythm. Now, only one possibility that deluded my mind: the absolute best memories this weekend so I won’t die with regret.