

My Friend Alex

It had been a couple months since I last saw my friend Alex, so I suggested we meet at our favorite watering hole Friday after work. He looked the same as always. Handsome, casual, impeccably dressed, and seemingly at ease with the world. He was one of those guys who always seemed to be in great shape, even though as far as I knew he never worked out. He was also one of the smartest people I've ever met. We ordered a couple beers and caught up on how things were going at work.

"How's Emily?" he asked, changing the subject.

"She's fine," I said. "Still teaching third graders and still loving it. We're going skating in Franklin Park tomorrow night."

I hesitated a moment before confiding "I'm thinking of giving her a ring for Christmas."

"That's great!" Alex said enthusiastically. "She's a wonderful person. I think she's the right one for you."

"And how about you?" I asked. "Met any beautiful women lately?"

"Oh, sure" Alex said. "Dozens. Seems like I run into a new one every week." Then the smile faded and he looked serious. "But I haven't met anyone special, not like your Emily. I go out on a date with a girl and she seems great, but then she gets busy. She never has time to go out again and she stops returning my calls."

"Maybe you're trying too hard," I suggested. "Coming on too strong. Before I met Emily I was really trying hard to start a relationship, but it seemed like the harder I tried the less dates I got."

"Fewer," Alex replied.

"Fewer?" I asked?

"If it's something you can count, the word is 'fewer.' If it's something you measure in bulk, the word is less. Like there's less beer in my glass now than when we sat down."

"But you could count the molecules of beer in that glass," I countered. "Well, maybe you or I couldn't, but a scientist could."

"Yes, and that's why there are fewer molecules in my glass, but there's less beer. You can't count beer. You can count molecules of beer, cans of beer, or glasses of beer, but not beer itself. What would your reaction be if I told you I had fewer courage than you did?"

"That just sounds wrong," I said.

“Well, trust me,” Alex said. “It sounds just as wrong when you say you had less dates.”

“What about the express lane at the supermarket?” I argued. “They have a sign that says, ‘twelve items or less.’ They’re obviously counting the items.”

“You must be going to a low-class supermarket,” Alex said. “At high-class supermarkets the signs say, ‘twelve items or fewer.’”

I decided it was time to get back to the original subject. “Well, anyway” I said. “That doesn’t effect what I’m saying.”

“Affect,” Alex said.

“Isn’t ‘affect’ a mental state?” I asked. “Like somebody has a ‘flat affect,’ whatever that is?”

“That’s the noun ‘affect,’” Alex said. “The verb ‘affect’ means to influence or change. It’s similar to the word ‘effect,’ but there are subtle differences. The noun ‘effect’ refers to the result of something, like ‘the net effect of his action was scare away the burglar.’ The verb ‘effect’ means to bring about a change, but it’s not the action that actually caused the change. Like, ‘to effect a change in the committees’ actions, he rewrote the bylaws.’ ‘Rewrote’ is the action verb that tells what he did. ‘Effect’ means his action brought about a change.”

I wasn’t certain I understood the difference. “So you can effect change but not affect change?” I asked.

“Well, if you bent a quarter you’d be affecting change,” Alex said, “but that’s a different use of the word ‘change.’”

Now I was more confused than ever. “You’ve literally lost me on that one,” I said.

“Maybe I figuratively lost you,” Alex said. “I’d have to put you someplace and then forget where I put you to literally lose you.”

“I guess I’ll have to except your word for that.”

“Accept,” Alex corrected.

“Accept for what?” I asked.

“Not ‘except for.’” Alex said. “The word you should have used was ‘accept.’ When you accept something you receive it or agree to it. When you except something you exclude it.”

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wasn't trying to infer that I was rejecting or excluding your explanation. I was trying to say that I trusted your explanation. So, I guess I should have said I *accepted* your word for it. Is that correct?"

Alex closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Yes," he said, "except you should have used the word 'imply' instead of 'infer.'"

"Let's stop discussing obscure rules of the English language," I suggested. "There's a reason we threw the Brits out in 1776."

"Actually, the Brits didn't start leaving until after the battle of Yorktown in 1781," Alex corrected. "And even then, they had troops stationed in several cities through 1782. The war didn't officially end until the Treaty of Paris in 1783."

"Okay," I said. "We threw the Brits out in 1783."

"They came back in 1812," Alex reminded me.

"Only for a year," I said. "It ended when General Jackson whupped their ass in the Battle of New Orleans."

"Which was fought in 1815," Alex added.

"The War of 1812 was fought in 1815?" I asked in astonishment.

"Well, the war lasted from 1812 until December of 1814," Alex said, "but news of the peace treaty didn't reach New Orleans until a few days after the battle. In 1815."

I decided to get back to the subject that had started all this. "Anyway, what I was trying to say was that maybe you're trying too hard to impress the women you date. Maybe if you just relax and be yourself, things will work out. You've got a lot going for you, you know. You're smart, you're handsome, and you've got a good job. If you let women see that, they'll flock all over you."

"Thanks," Alex said. "Maybe I am trying too hard. I'll try to relax and be myself."

"After all," I said. "You don't want to wind up as a bitter old man. Sitting alone at a bar, crying into your beer and telling the piano player to 'play it again, Sam.'"

"Actually," Alex said. "That's a common misconception. Bogart never said 'play it again, Sam.' He just said, 'play it.'"

We finished our beers and went our separate ways. I hope I gave him good advice. I was just guessing. I really don't understand why women seldom go on a second date with him. He's so smart.