



Dear Elena

Hope and Sadness



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Editors Cut

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THE GIRL WHO COULDN'T SAY PLEASE

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Most of the time Elena was the easy going, agreeable child.

She would cry and get upset, but you could jiggle a shiny object near her and distract her. She would come running in, usually complaining about her sister. She'd say, "Maggie isn't letting me use the computer."

"Elena," I'd answer, "what did I say about telling on each other?"

"You don't like it."

"Right. Go work it out."

"But, she won't give me my turn."

"Tell her it's your turn."

And so, from the other room I'd hear Elena say what any six year old would say, "Dad says it's my turn and you have to let me use the computer now or he's going to put you in time out."

And so it goes.

She might come in crying because she'd fallen off of something. The easiest way to quickly find out if she was hurt was to suggest another activity. "Want to help me measure the ingredients for vanilla ice cream?"

The crying would stop immediately and she'd look at me and ask, "can we use the vanilla that has the little dots in it?"

For the most part, it was easy to get her out of any emotional dead end that children get themselves into.

Maggie, on the other hand, would get mad and wouldn't know how to stop from doing things that would get her in more trouble. Maggie spent a lot of time in time out. I have a hard time disciplining the girls without laughing.

They know that they're still punished but sometimes what they've done is so pitiful, transparent, or just plain stupid that I have to laugh.

Maggie has taken to talking meanly to Kim and me when she has a friend over. We knew this was coming some day but we figured she'd be a teenager and impossible in many ways. It's not acceptable and we don't mind putting her in time out and letting her friend continue to play.

The other day, Maggie couldn't bring herself to say "I'm sorry."

I sent her to time out and told her that she could get out of time out as soon as she felt ready to say she was sorry.

After ten minutes I wandered out to check on her and asked if she was ready yet.

She just glared at me.

At a half hour Kim went to check on her to see what the problem was. Maggie explained that she could say she was sorry but she knew she couldn't do it in a nice voice and that I wouldn't accept her apology. She was waiting until she could say "I'm sorry" in a nice enough voice that I would believe her.

Elena seldom got herself in the same rut. Sometime in January she snapped an order at me from the dinner table. She looked at her popcorn chicken and called into the kitchen, "bring me the ketchup."

"Say please," I answered reflexively.

Silence.

"Elena," I prodded, "say please."

Silence. She couldn't possibly think this was going to end up well. She had often come in when Maggie was in time out and asked "why doesn't she just say she's sorry and be done with it?" But somehow it was different. She was not going to say please.

So, I came back to the table. Elena made gagging noises as she tried to eat her chicken without ketchup. Forget about the fact that she'd eaten it that way many times. She was out to make a point.

"Maggie," Elena said, "can you please get me the ketchup."

Maggie looked at me for permission. I shook my head and told Elena that she needed to ask me and she needed to ask me nicely. This was no longer about the ketchup for either one of us.

I went to the kitchen to make tea and heard Elena say to Kim, "please, Mommy, please can I have the ketchup?"

Kim answered, "of course you can, you just have to say 'please' to daddy."

"I can't," she cried.

"That's silly," Kim pointed out, "you've said 'please' to me and you said 'please' to Maggie."

I returned to the dining room. Elena gritted her teeth and kept her lips stable as she glared at me and said "hhhhleeze".

"What?" I asked laughing.

And then magically Elena laughed too. "Please, can I have the ketchup?"

"Sure," I said and got it for her.

"Daddy," she said, "now my food is cold."