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Try. Try. Try Again.

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try again

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Alisha Roeder was on summer vacation, working as a camp counselor in Connecticut, and trying her best to enjoy the summer while she waited to hear the news. Just a few weeks earlier, Alisha applied to the graphic design program at ISU, and any day now a letter would arrive at her parent's house in Dubuque, Iowa, telling her if she was accepted. One evening as the sun was setting, Alisha sat on the steps outside the counselors' cabin. It was her turn to use the phone. She brushed back her short brown hair and pressed the receiver to her ear. Her mom answered. "Did you get the letter?" Alisha asked excitedly. "Yes," said her mom. "You didn't get in."

Each summer, about 100 students in the college of design, like Alisha, get rejection letters from programs like architecture, interior design or graphic design. They all start the same—"I'm sorry to inform you..."—but not all students take the news alike. For most, it means changing majors and starting over. For a few, a rejection letter is only a minor hindrance on the long road to earning a degree.

Tears welled up in Alisha's green eyes as her mom read her the letter. By the end, Alisha was sobbing and near hysterical. But there's not much a parent can say over the phone to cheer a wounded child. Especially when the child's heart is crushed, her dreams trampled by way of an impersonal letter she couldn't read herself. Alisha stood, wiped her tears and opened the door, unsure for the first time in her life of what she was going to do next.

Joe Geddes was at home in Kansas City for the summer waiting for his letter. He struggled to relax, trying to stay calm but not doing such a great job. Joe got up in the morning with mail on his mind. He sat around all day thinking about mail. Then he went to bed to dream about it.

The Geddes' mailbox creaks and scratches when the mailman drops the envelopes in and it was a sound Joe had grown to hate. Each time he heard the scratching, his stomach turned. One July morning, Joe heard the creaking and rushed to the door to collect the mail. The letter had finally come. Joe sat down at the table and stared at the envelope for a full minute before he pulled the letter out. He took a deep breath and read it calmly to himself. "I'm sorry to inform you..."

But Joe wasn't surprised. He'd been preparing himself for rejection for months. "I knew where I stood when I applied. But I was still hoping 'Maybe God will get me in just this once. Somehow.'" He decided not to tell his parents the bad news. They'd be too disappointed.

To apply to the college of design, prospective students build a display of projects they've accumulated throughout their freshman year. Faculty members critique each display during finals week in order to select the students who get into the programs. Each student is assigned a time and an area inside the College of Design to set up their projects. Student's names are not posted on the displays. Although the numbers vary each year, usually around 100 students apply for about 50 spots in each program within the college of design.

A few weeks prior to getting the rejection letter, Joe was in the design building on the eve of his critique, getting ready to set up. Joe's friend Josh, who'd offered to help organize the display, worked in the College of Design computer lab, so Joe hung around waiting for him to get off work. Finally, about 3 a.m., Josh punched out and the two went out to the car to get the supplies. But they weren't there. Frantically, they returned...
to the building, totally confused. Suddenly, Joe remembered he’d brought the materials into the lab earlier. They went back in and tried the door. Locked. Joe pressed his face to the window in the door and saw his bag of materials under a desk. Then the panic set in. Missing his scheduled time was a guarantee he wouldn’t get into the program. Joe and Josh jogged the hallways of the building searching for someone who could unlock the door to the lab.

Just before 6:00 a.m., they found a janitor and Joe grabbed the materials and rushed upstairs to begin. Although he finished the slipshod display just in time, Joe was aware of the quality of his work. He glanced around, secretly comparing the other displays to his own. He didn’t feel confident. Joe went home for the summer to wait for his letter, not quite sure what to expect.

Alisha had problems setting up her display, too. The night before her scheduled time, Alisha gathered her materials in her dorm room in Linden Hall. To make sure she brought everything she needed, Alisha placed each item into the hallway outside her door as she checked it off a list. Then, she snatched up her materials from the hall and left. At the design building, Alisha spent about 15 minutes setting up her display before she realized some materials were missing. “Who stole my stuff?”

Sabotage was her first thought. The stress of fierce competition, and more than that, the notion of wondering “Am I good enough?” can force the human mind to bend in peculiar ways. On top of that, the rumors that float around the design college about sabotages, conspiracies and mysterious plots against hardworking students can force even the most sensible people to fall victim to paranoia. The pressures are tremendous.

She tried retracing her steps, thinking that maybe she’d dropped the missing materials somewhere in the building. No luck. Alisha went back to Linden Hall in hysteria. She ransacked her room searching for the missing supplies to no avail. Bewildered and sobbing, Alisha wandered into the hallway and fell into a crumpled heap. Grant, her neighbor down the hall, heard her crying and came out to see what was going on. It turns out Grant and his roommate were playing a prank on Alisha and had hidden her materials in their room. Seeing it had gone too far, he spilled his guts. Alisha jumped up and punched

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I really matured and realized that if I was going to get into the program, I couldn’t make the same mistakes I made my freshman year.”

There were nights during Joe’s freshman year when he’d be watching TV with his buddies and suddenly remember he had a project due the next day. It happened so often, Joe’s friends would burst into laughter when he jumped up and ran out of the room with no explanation. But his sophomore year was a different story. Instead of staying up late watching TV, Joe stayed up late studying at the design building. Instead of putting projects off, Joe tackled them with a new enthusiasm and confidence. Instead of dreading assignments, Joe was eager to get them done.

When Alisha returned to campus for her sophomore year, she felt adrift and without purpose. Alisha was almost sure she wanted to stick with graphic design, but she didn’t know what she could do to change that would help her get in. The first week of the fall semester, Alisha went to see Lisa Fontaine, associate professor in art and design.

Ms. Fontaine helped set Alisha on the right track. Alisha studied the basic graphic design principles to sharpen her work. In addition, she worked hard on improving two essays that accompanied her projects. She also studied to boost her GPA. Instead of going to the bars with friends, Alisha went to the library. In fact, she was at the library studying most nights so often, she memorized the recording the library plays just before it closes at midnight. That second year, Alisha forgot what “free time” was. She devoted every spare moment to working on graphic design.

When it came time to reapply in the spring, both Alisha and Joe were confident in their work. They’d come a long way. Joe brought his GPA up from 2.75 to 3.33, and Alisha now felt certain she’d mastered the graphic design principles. And this time, neither of them had any trouble setting up their projects.

Joe was back in Kansas City when he heard the scratching from the mailbox. The letter had arrived, and it was thicker than the one that came last summer. Joe went downstairs to his room to open it. But this time, there was no half-hearted prayer. Confident, he ripped it open. “Congratulations…” Joe smiled. “Wow. I’m finally a graphic designer.” This time, he told his parents the good news.

Alisha stayed in Ames for the summer. The day her second letter came, she walked into her apartment building with Grant, still her friend despite the prank, and headed straight to the mailbox. She pulled the letter out. They went upstairs to her apartment to open it. “Here, Grant,” she shoved the envelope at him. “You do it.” He shoved it back. She nervously thumbed the corners of the envelope. She finally opened it. “Congratulations…”

When Joe returned to campus the following fall, he wasn’t sure where his life was headed, let alone his sophomore year. He even gave some consideration to changing his major to advertising. Joe headed to the office of Frank Bell, a student service specialist in design administration, to get some advice. Mr. Bell’s office is clean and organized. A shelving unit full of books and pictures rises to the ceiling behind his desk. Like most other offices on campus, a few paintings and awards are hung on the walls. A beach ball (seemingly out of place in the meticulousness) rests in one corner. The word “opportunity” has been scrawled across the ball in bold letters.

Mr. Bell looked into Joe’s eyes from behind the desk and said, “Our goal is to get you in the program.” Joe nodded. “What needs to change for that to happen?”

Over the next hour, Joe and Mr. Bell identified Joe’s weaknesses and then formed a plan that would help bring his work to the level it took to get in. Joe needed to refocus—no more staying up late watching TV, procrastinating or blowing off assignments—and, above all, seize the opportunity.

The meeting turned Joe’s life around. “I knew what I had to do. I really matured and adapted that second year. I realized that if I was going to get into the pro-