

A Field Guide to Awkward Silences

By Alexandra Petri

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***Washington Post* columnist Alexandra Petri turns her satirical eye on her own life in this hilarious new memoir...**

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Not Alexandra Petri.

Afraid of rejection? Alexandra Petri has auditioned for *America's Next Top Model*. Afraid of looking like an idiot? Alexandra Petri lost *Jeopardy!* by answering "Who is that dude?" on national TV. Afraid of bad jokes? Alexandra Petri won an international pun championship.

Petri has been a debutante, reenacted the Civil War, and fended off suitors at a *Star Wars* convention while wearing a Jabba the Hutt suit. One time, she let some cult members she met on the street baptize her, just to be polite. She's a connoisseur of the kind of awkwardness that most people spend whole lifetimes trying to avoid. If John Hodgman and Amy Sedaris had a baby…they would never let Petri babysit it.

But Petri is here to tell you: Everything you fear is not so bad. Trust her. She's tried it. And in the course of her misadventures, she's learned that there are worse things out there than awkwardness—and that interesting things start to happen when you stop caring what people think.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for Alexandra Petri and *A Field Guide to Awkward Silences*

“Alexandra Petri is the funniest person in Washington. This is all the more impressive when you consider that Congress is also located there.”—Dave Barry

“Alexandra Petri is so hilarious and brilliant, she's like the love child of Oscar Wilde and Dorothy Parker.”—Megan Amram, author of *Science…For Her!*

“How awkward is Alexandra Petri? I know a man who, in the presence of others, once slammed a car door on his own head. Compared to Petri, he is Astaire. I’m just saying.”—Gene Weingarten, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *Washington Post*

“These tales of surviving spectacular awkwardness are endearing and hilarious. Petri is the brunch date we want every Sunday. We loved this book!”—Lisa Scottoline and Francesca Serritella, co-authors of *Does This Beach Make Me Look Fat?*

“The *Post*’s go-to writer for laughs.”—*Washingtonian*

“Washington Post columnist Petri nails the travails of being a young adult by saying it feels like you’re a group of cats in a coat pretending to be a person. She brings her distinctive voice—honest, relatable, and laugh-out-loud funny—to this collection of essays that read like missives from your best friend...She’s able to tackle serious issues like feminism with a fine balance of humor and sharp-eyed commentary. This is not only a memoir but also a rousing call to young adults to shake themselves out of their ironic torpor and actually try to do something—no easy trick, of course, if you happen to be a heap of cats in a coat.”—*Booklist*

About the Author
Some people are born awkward. Some achieve awkwardness. Some have awkwardness thrust upon them. **Alexandra Petri** is all three. She is a *Washington Post* columnist and blogger, an International Pun Champion, a playwright, and a *Jeopardy!* loser, and she’s been on your TV a couple of times. She is also a congressman’s kid, if that will make you buy this book! When she remembers, she does stand-up comedy too, but she’s been locked in her apartment for the past nine months making this book for you and hissing when exposed to sunlight.

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FLOPPER

I am afraid of many things. Drowning, fire, the disapproval of strangers on the Internet, that I’ll be hit by a bus without having had a chance to clear my browser history, that one day everyone else on the subway will suddenly be able to hear what I am thinking and turn on me. You know, the usuals.

One thing I’m not afraid of? Looking like an idiot.

See, I knew I was a writer. That was protection. No matter where I went, no matter what I did, I could turn it into a story. Fall through a hole in the sidewalk? Story. Make the worst Final Jeopardy! wager of all time? Story. Anger the lord of the ocean, stab a one-eyed guy, and get very, very lost on my way home to Ithaca? *Epic* story.

Those were the two things I knew about myself: that I was a writer, and that I didn't mind looking stupid. Growing up, you figure out pretty quickly which of your friends is the person who doesn't mind looking like an idiot, and that was me, hands down. I was the one going over to strangers and asking if the mothership had landed. I was the one standing in an airport with a giant foam cow hat on my head, accordion open, ready to greet friends as they landed, and not even because I'd lost a bet. Mortification was a poison to which I had built up immunity after years of exposure. Besides, it was much less embarrassing to *be* me than to have to stand next to me and admit you were *with* me.

And the writer in me had noticed that the bigger of an idiot you appeared to be, the better the story was. Nobody wants to hear, "And everything went smoothly, just exactly according to plan." Something had to go wrong. You had to trip up. That was where the excitement lay.

I collected experiences the way some people collect old coins or commemorative stamps.

One year, for fun, I called the ExtenZe male enhancement hotline every day for a month, with different voices, just to see what would happen. (What happened, if you want to know, was that Phoebe, who worked the dinner shift, got annoyed when I identified myself as Franklin Delano Roosevelt (a fun fact about the ExtenZe male enhancement hotline is that they make you identify yourself before you start your call) and threatened to transfer me to the police.)

All of this seemed to be leading to some kind of grand adventure. I sat there, glumly, waiting for a wizard to drop by the house and invite me to steal dragon-gold, or a wise old man in a brown hoodie to offer to teach me the ways of the Force. But no one showed. I would have to strike out on my own.

What was a field in which a willingness to look foolish might come in handy?

Of course! Reality television.

Like anyone growing up after 1980, I always had the dim, nagging sense that I was supposed to be famous for something. A certain measure of fame just seems like our birthright these days, next to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Food, shelter, Wi-fi, and the sense that someone's watching; these are the modern requirements for survival. The only thing more terrifying than the feeling you're being watched is the feeling that you're not. Privacy is just an uncomfortable reminder that you're not a celebrity.

My portion of fame, I knew, was waiting somewhere, neatly labeled in a holding facility. To claim it, all I'd have to do would be fill out some sort of form and show up in the designated audition city. And until that moment it was my right, as an American, to stare at the television and mutter, "I could do that."

If I were being really honest with myself, these people I saw competing on television all possessed skills that I lacked—whether on *American Idol* or *America's Got Talent* or even *America's Most Wanted*. I could hold a tune, but only the way you hold a stranger's cat: not closely and not long (not to mention the strange yowling noises). I Got some Talents, all right—excellent grammar, for one—but they weren't the kind of thing that would exactly sing on the national stage. Whenever I tried to "smize," model-style, people asked if I'd been possessed by an ancient and evil spirit. I had never murdered anyone, to the best of my knowledge,

and if I did I would certainly not elude capture for long.

But there are always two ways of making it on the air: to be spectacular, and to be spectacularly bad. The second group was more fun to watch anyway. Why be Kelly Clarkson or Carrie Underwood or that one ventriloquist guy whose puppets all seemed oddly racist (get new dummies, Terry Fator! Then you won't have to sit there with a pained expression while they rant about the people taking our jobs), when you could be short, sweatshirted William Hung, wrangling his painfully earnest way through "She Bangs!" or Leonid the Magnificent, dropping his equipment as the big red X's buzzed above him, weeping profusely and promising that "next time, I will be perfect"? Sure, on one path lay Kelly's international fame and Terry's bucket loads of gold, but on the other lay William's Christmas album, *Hung For The Holidays*. Now *that* was what I called a career trajectory. *That* was a story!

And that was going to be my way in.

I was going to seek failure out— n the national stage, with a glowing neon X attached.

The plan was simple. I just had to become dramatically, unquestionably, horrifically bad at something. I had to get myself in front of the judges and flop like no one they'd seen before.

Maybe, if I worked hard, I could become just as earth-shatteringly terrible as my idols and wind up on the air. It certainly seemed like my best shot.

My trouble was that I'd had little practice failing. I came up during a very specific era of child-rearing in which everyone seemed to believe that if Little Sally ever failed at anything, ever, she was going to be completely wrecked for life. Dutifully they set about sanding off the sharp edges of existence and childproofing all possible scenarios against hazards of choking under pressure. Trophies for everyone! A part for everyone in the school play. No failure. No rejection. You are a golden snowflake. Have a sticker.

For someone who hoped to make a career of rejection, this was a considerable setback.

I had no opportunity to pursue failure in high school either, where, distressingly, I kept succeeding at things. By senior year, I had been appointed president of four clubs and had mysteriously become captain of the volleyball team, even though I never left the bench. As a flop, I was a failure.

College was a different story. With a clean slate and thousands of people who didn't know that I was doing it on purpose, I could begin my training for the big bomb.
I began collecting rejections.

There was an art, I quickly learned, to flopping. You couldn't just be bad. Half the art is knowing how to go too far. You must keep a straight face. If you're auditioning, you must sing badly, but feelingly. You must put the emphasis on the wrong syllable, read comedy as tragedy and tragedy as comedy. Overact, overgesture, pause for no reason midsentence and open and close your mouth like a bewildered carp. You must, in a word, turn in a whole performance.

I began my training in my freshman year, auditioning for plays under a false name. You could be more convincingly terrible, I discovered, when you had a backstory, so I crafted a character. Her name was Gloria Nichols. She had recently lost a lot of weight, loved to make bold gestures where no bold gestures were called for, and was polite to excess, striving to please an unseen vocal teacher who told her she had great promise.

“Any talents?” the student directors asked.

“I have heart!” I wrote. “And kidneys!”

Gradually, I broadened my scope. I auditioned for the Women in Science Players Ensemble. It was the first audition I’d seen listed that was on campus but involved no one I could conceivably ever have met. For my monologue, I recited Yoda’s death scene from *Return of the Jedi* in its entirety, doing all the voices. It was a natural choice; as a *Star Wars* fan, I already had the dialogue memorized.

“Lu-uke,” I croaked. “There is another s-ky-wa-kk-errr.”

When it was over, they looked at me. They seemed to be deciding whether to be angry or confused.

“What possessed you to choose this as your monologue?” they asked.

“*Star Wars* is science,” I said.

It was a start.

Later that fall, when I saw a Craigslist ad for Halloween Dancers, I knew it was directed at me . . . even though my dance experience was restricted to the five miserable years of ballet that gets foisted on every girl of a certain demographic too timid to play soccer.

To give you an idea of how good I was at ballet, when we performed *The Nutcracker*, I played the Girl with the Butterfly Net. There is no such character in *The Nutcracker*. After each scene of the real ballet was finished, I ran across the stage holding a butterfly net.

The Craigslist ad was for “Pussycat Doll–Style Dancers.” As far as I could tell, it did not require prior experience, and it paid.

The audition was all the way out in Quincy, Massachusetts. I took the subway there from Cambridge, since I somehow had the naive idea that everything in Quincy was located conveniently on top of the T stop. This turned out not to be the case. Having decided to look the part, I found myself walking along Massachusetts State Highway 3A in leopard-print leggings and a tank top. Cars kept slowing. I waved them on.

The ad listed the audition location as My House, which I assumed was a bar because of the capital letters. But bars usually don’t have doorbells.

Another thing I realized when I finally arrived was that I had forgotten to choreograph the requested five minutes of dance. The only song on my iPod of more than four minutes was “Will You Be There” by Michael Jackson. That would have to do.

Despite the doorbell, My House was, in fact, a bar. (I can tell you this definitely only because I Googled it later, but there were some clues on arriving.) The overall aesthetic inside was sort of like a gentrified barn, whose previous cow occupants had all been forced to become leather couches or leave. Everything was dark wood. The main room gave off a vaguely baffled vibe, like it didn’t quite know whether the party theme was Hip Happening Club Scene Place, Man Cave With Leather Chairs, or Old- timey Stage Set and was trying to split the difference.

On getting inside, I discovered a large stage area cleared away. There were a few unenthusiastic colored spotlights on the ceiling that seemed to have been laid off from a job at a strip club to which their talents had been much better suited. Near the dance floor, at a table, sat two judges, a black man and woman who looked to be in their mid-thirties, both of whom seemed friendly and encouraging.

“I’m here for the dance audition,” I told them. They gave me a still-friendly but mildly perplexed look, the kind of look I assume you would give someone if you crawled out of the desert starving on hands and knees and that person handed you a jar of pickles. It was the kind of look you get when someone unwraps your gift, and there’s a longish pause, and then the recipient starts to tell you that it was a Really Lovely Thought.

“I brought my own music,” I added.

Five minutes is a much longer time than you think it is. Having run through my entire repertoire of dance moves in the first minute, growing from a seed into a tree and then back, Flowers-for-Algernon- Style, I decided that I would repeat each movement eight times while turning slowly counterclockwise.

This was when the male judge burst into smothered laughter and darted from the room.

When the music finished, the remaining judge suggested I try something “more upbeat.” I gyrated futilely to Justin Timberlake while she made notes. On my way out (“Don’t call us. We’ll call.”), I leaned over her notebook and glimpsed the phrase “Good enthusiasm.”

They didn’t call.

But that was perfect. I had flopped, big time, with earnestness and a straight face!

I was ready to move on to bigger pastures.

That summer, I signed up to audition for *America’s Next Top Model*.

It has always been my unwavering conviction that I would make a great After model. I’m okay looking, but if someone told you I had just lost sixty pounds, I would look *incredible*. This, I figured, would be my “in.”

In order to appear on *America’s Next Top Model*, you have to fill out a thirteen-page form detailing such things as “Have you ever been so angry you threw something?” (“My back out, one time,” I ventured.) “What would bother you most about living in a house with nine to thirteen other people?” (“Not knowing more specifically the number of people in the house.”) “What in the past do you regret?” (“The Holocaust.”)

The audition itself was brief, but the afternoon entailed a *lot* of waiting around in heels. I befriended one fellow auditioner who had also failed to print out her demo shots in time, and we commiserated at the Rite Aid as we tried to coax the digital printer into submission. I had had some friends take shots of me posing in what I hoped was a model-like fashion the night before, but when I tried to print them out on my parents’ printer, it did that thing that printers do where they insist that they Absolutely Physically Cannot Print Unless All The Colors Have Been Loaded, Because Black Just Doesn’t Feel It Would Be Right To Take This Big Step Without Cyan Present.

It was unnerving to be waiting for my prints to come next to someone who actually wanted it. She kept talking about her strategy for winning, pointing out the flaws and weaknesses of the other girls in line. I couldn’t see any flaws or weaknesses, other than maybe that they were too skinny and attractive and might

blow over in a high wind. I couldn't tell her I was there to lose. Instead, I stood there smiling amiably and murmuring that everyone "looked like a model," which seemed safe.

When you got in front of the judges you had to walk your model walk, which, since I was in heels, was difficult. In heels, I always look like something that is walking on land for the first time—less Ariel than some kind of recently evolved amphibian. I teetered boldly from one end of the designated Walk space to the other, trying to be Fierce like Tyra said. I handed them my photos.

They asked us to tell a video camera the craziest thing we'd ever done to win a contest. I told them about the time I had crashed a dog show and run the agility course myself. "It wasn't really about winning the contest," I admitted, "but it certainly seemed to unnerve the other dogs." (This had occurred in Bermuda and had, I realized, been good practice for making an idiot of myself. As a general note, if you ever want to run a dog agility course, just tell the organizer that you need to do it in honor of your deceased dog, "Topanga." This is what I did, and to my total surprise, they cleared the dogs off the course and let me run it. It may have helped that I was wearing a helmet at the time. I had recently gotten off a moped, but the organizer had no way of knowing that and it probably looked to her as though something ominous was the matter with me. P. S. Dog agility courses are hard, especially if you are not entirely sober.)

They seemed pleased by the story, but months passed, and I heard only silence. They get in touch with you only if you make the show. Otherwise, you just find yourself on several e?mail lists of Style Products and Promotions. I still get e?mails from time to time with New Way To Add Volume To Your Hair and New People Eager To Judge Your Outfits.

But I was getting pretty good at this whole rejection thing.

Finally my moment arrived: the auditions for *America's Got Talent*.

I signed up to audition with a spring in my step and a slight twinge of remorse at having to use my own name. This was something for which I had not been entirely prepared.

Most of my practice (*America's Next Top Model* auditions aside) had been under the guise that I was someone else. One of the advantages of this system was that I got to weather rejection after rejection, flop after flop, without ever feeling the sting of actual failure. Every time, I was venturing out under a protective shell. Everyone else was climbing out of trenches to face the barrage unprotected, but I was neatly secluded in the turret of a tank.

I was putting myself out there, all the time, without actually putting myself out there at all. I was, in fact, putting someone else out there. She had her own name and e?mail address and everything. And if I failed, well, that was because I was trying to fail. Not because I wasn't good enough. It was a neat system, really.

None of these baffled judges had ever seen me trying my best. They had no conception of what that would look like. So I could preserve the illusion of myself intact.

I don't think I'm alone in believing that I secretly carry a really wonderful person around inside me at all times. This person is genuinely good and smart and talented and kind enough to do all the things that real me fails at. This person is a bang- p performer and stays in touch with all her friends and puts together coordinated outfits and when she writes the sentences that sound perfect in her head land on the page just right and she uses the correct bins for glass recyclables and doesn't say "uh" or wave her arms around when talking.

You would think I would be a little concerned that she has never once appeared in twenty- ix years, but I feel convinced she's in there somewhere, just waiting for her moment. The only difference between her and Failure Gloria is that people have actually seen Gloria.

It had seemed courageous, before, this bold determination to fail, as splashily as possible. Now it felt a little cowardly. What if my worst wasn't bad enough? Then I'd just be on record as an actual failure.

What if, all this time, I should have been trying to be my best instead?

No. I was prepared. My training would pay off. I was going to be so wincingly bad that I'd make it on the air. I was going to join my idols. All I had to do was seem sincere. As the saying goes, if you can fake that, you've got it made.

I pondered my shtick. I would be a performance artist, I decided. Gloria had tried this once before at a Christian talent agency, offering a triple-threat combination of mediocre monologues, bad song, and worse dance. "Come back to Earth, Gloria," the organizers had gently urged as I aimlessly roved the stage, staring off into the middle distance. This approach seemed ripe for a broader audience.

I would rap and mutter and speak in tongues and shout the names of the Founders and sing snippets of "I Dreamed a Dream." I drilled myself into the wee hours of the morning, then waited in line all day, going over the routine.

It was almost, a nagging voice suggested, as much work as developing a real skill.

I smothered this voice quickly.

I glanced around the roomful of hopeful people waiting to audition at the Ronald Reagan Convention Center. Either they were serious, or they had taken the pursuit of rejection to a whole new level.

A young man with a melon-shaped head and diminished interpersonal skills approached me and sang a few snippets of Usher, spitting into my face. Old men plied their banjos, ineptly. A girl and her entire family waited in front of me, humming "Grenade" by Bruno Mars, thumbing her iPod in flagrant defiance of the rule against singing to recorded accompaniment. A tiny young rapper got stage fright after the organizers formed a circle around him and tried to make him rap for the camera. One man cornered me and told me about his plans for an evangelical book set on another planet where everyone had more than five senses.

They had glanced over my application form and decided, for some reason, that I belonged with the Vocalists. I saw myself as more of an all- round threat, i.e., Russia rather than North Korea, but I dutifully joined the line.

When I got into the audition room, I gave it my worst. I sang. I twitched. I shouted. I turned in what would have been the performance of Gloria Nichols' lifetime.

I didn't stand a chance.

As I flailed and gyrated—I dreamed a dream in time gone byeeee . . . Aaron Burr Aaron Burr"— caught the woman judge looking at me. We made eye contact, and I could tell she knew.

So *that* was what actual rejection felt like.

My worst wasn't bad enough.

All this time, working hard to be terrible, and—nothing.

"If there is one thing I've learned from this afternoon," I typed on my phone, after Melon-headed Spit-Singer asked for my number and offered to pray over me, "it's that no amount of concerted effort can make you seem weirder than people who are just being themselves."

I'd been overlooking one thing, I realized. The best bad movies aren't the ones that try to be bad. They're the ones that try to be good.

If I really wanted to fail spectacularly, I should have been trying to succeed. For the most spectacular rejections of all, you have to believe. You have to go out there and give the performance of your life.

Only then does the ax really fall.

Failing, it turns out, is easy. You don't have to be *trying* to fail. It's a part of life. It sucks. It will come and find you whether you seek it out or not, like women who want to talk to you on long airplane flights.

I'd always thought I'd be all right because I was a writer. Words were a bright thread that could lead me out of any labyrinth; I just had to keep them pinched carefully in my fingers as I walked. Nothing could hurt me as long as I kept hold of the thread. I could seek out anything— awkward, odd, novel, even a little dangerous—and cage it up in sentences, put it on display, its teeth still sharp, maybe, but the bars too thick to bite through. But in trying not to be hurt, I was missing the real story. I was still afraid of jumping. I didn't want to fail for real. I wanted to be a secret success.

All this time I thought I was becoming a master of flops, I'd been safe inside my turret. Where was the adventure in that?

I knew rejection was supposed to be a part of life. Failure, rejection, flopping, embarrassment, all of this.

So why was it so frightening?

Easy.

Historically speaking, I have no problems. We have no problems. We live long lives surrounded by indoor toilets, penicillin, air-conditioning, birth control, smartphones. Everyone has great teeth. Consider that everything that George Washington accomplished in his life, he accomplished while experiencing horrible tooth decay. I have had toothaches once or twice in my life and they left me completely incapacitated for *days*. I could barely do laundry. Meanwhile George lost all his teeth and managed to win a war and start a country.

You would think that this lack of actual complaints would make us happier and more confident. But no. Instead, we have become allergic to things that didn't used to bother us at all. We're acutely focused on minor inconveniences. We're terrified of commitment the way our ancestors used to be terrified of mammoths. I have never seen commitment spear anyone on a tusk and leave him to bleed out slowly in a corner of the cave while wind howls around him. No matter. It scares us just the same. Embarrassing ourselves in front of strangers is literally one of the worst things that can happen to us. It's in the slot where polio used to be. Awkwardness, rejection, missing out. We've conquered everything else and these constants

of human life are all that remain to bedevil us.

Once you get rid of all the biggest problems, once you realize you can avoid them, you start to think you can inoculate yourself against the minor ones too. Phone calls are awkward? Just text all the time. Going up to people and asking them on dates is mortifying? Don't worry—now there's an app for that! Not only don't we have to deal with scurvy on a daily basis, but we don't have to actually speak to another human in order to order a pizza.

No wonder we think there must be some way to get out of life's inherent awkwardness, scot-free.

But how do you vaccinate yourself against failure?

One way is to court it. Use irony. Try without really trying.

I'm not the only one I know who grew up doing this. Dancing around awkwardness is something we do. We are vigorously, painfully, self- ware, princesses waiting to call out the pea under the mattress. Look at all those earnest people throughout history! Hippies, flappers, Napoleon! Look how idiotic they were! We would never look so stupid, unless it was on purpose.

We call attention to awkwardness as soon as it flares up so we can't be accused of being oblivious. We keep announcing to the world how little we've studied so we can't be called dumb. We put ourselves down before others can get the chance. Whenever anything seems like it's on the verge of becoming earnest, we come blasting out with snark.

Don't be too earnest. Don't look like you care. Then you're vulnerable. Life is full of opportunities for rejection, and if you start really trying, you're going to start really failing. Hard. And it'll hurt.

So we put on dopey glasses and grimace so no one can tell us we're not pretty. We drink lousy beer so no one can accuse us of having bad taste. We look stupid on purpose out of fear of looking stupid by accident. We don't even *try* to dance. Anything to postpone the moment when we are actually going to have to stand up, put ourselves out there, and be told it's not good enough.

The result of all these carefully assembled layers of irony?

We get to feel that, if we look like idiots, it's because we meant to. That we never failed, because we never actually tried. They never saw the real us, lurking inside, the ones who could have done it, if they'd wanted to.

But after a point that's a pretty thin satisfaction.

And the trade-off is brutal. You never get to know if you would have made it or not. Maybe you wouldn't have looked stupid. Maybe you'd have been incredible.

So why not take the leap? We're all weird. We're all awkward. We're all bound to fail from time to time. It's in our DNA as human beings . . . along with a certain innate wariness of mammoths.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Karole Standley:

Have you spare time for a day? What do you do when you have much more or little spare time? Yeah, you can choose the suitable activity with regard to spend your time. Any person spent their own spare time to take a move, shopping, or went to often the Mall. How about open or perhaps read a book entitled A Field Guide to Awkward Silences? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You recognize beside you can spend your time with the favorite's book, you can wiser than before. Do you agree with their opinion or you have different opinion?

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What do you think about book? It is just for students as they are still students or that for all people in the world, what best subject for that? Simply you can be answered for that question above. Every person has distinct personality and hobby for every single other. Don't to be obligated someone or something that they don't want do that. You must know how great and important the book A Field Guide to Awkward Silences. All type of book are you able to see on many resources. You can look for the internet sources or other social media.

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