

Alex!

This is not my response to your letter. This is the note I am leaving with the baristas telling you how to get my response to your letter. I have gotten to know Eddie quite well, as he also participated in my social experiment. He's the shift manager here, so he has agreed to store your letter safely behind the counter. This note is to be given to the first person named Alex to order a cappuccino, everything bagel, and orange juice, and if you can then provide the barista with the code word, your letter will be awarded to you.

The code word is my name, so I hope you remember it.

If you are utterly confused by this note, then you are clearly not my Alex, so if you could return this to the barista intact, please, I would greatly appreciate it, good citizen Alex!

October 10

Alex!

Can I just say how pleased I am to hear from you? Really, I am thrilled that you have decided to write me a letter! You may absolutely call me Zoe!

You asked me how I know you aren't telling me a pack of lies, and honestly, I don't. I have absolutely no way of knowing whether or not you're being truthful, but that isn't my experiment. My experiment is to see how many people will write a letter to a stranger.

So far, you are one of the few! I assumed that I would send the letters to return addresses provided to me, but in the wake of your letter, I can see that was a foolish assumption. After all, if I'm not willing to share my address with you, why should I expect you to be willing to share yours with me? Personal bias, I suppose. I consider myself trustworthy, but you have no way of knowing that – or perhaps stated better, you have no reason to believe that? You're right – I could be a serial killer for all you know (I'm not, but I don't expect you to take my word for it; I know that's just the sort of thing a serial killer would say).

But! I will do everything in my power, ~~Miss Alex—Mr. Alex? I don't even know if you're male or female, do I?~~

Sorry. No identifying questions. And even though I didn't technically ask one, I'm aware it was implied. I beg you, ignore my momentary lapse of manners.

As I started to say, I will do everything in my power to earn your trust, and so, I will now answer the questions you have posed to me.

1. My standard order at Cuppa Joe's is a white chocolate latte with amaretto syrup. It is delicious.

2. My quest is not, as you indirectly asked, to live. It is, rather, to make other people happy. Life isn't worth living if we aren't happy.

3. Ha! So you were paying attention! I will play off my writing of pigeons instead of swallows as a deliberate choice to test your Monty Python knowledge rather than an error on my part which you and every other person who has written me a letter so far has pointed out.

4. Regarding my best friend: He's tall, huge, athletic, black, slightly terrifying, and fabulously gay.

5. Horoscopes are for suckers? I think they're hilarious. I don't personally put any stock into them, of course, but I like to read mine before I go to bed and see what kind of day I was supposed to have had.

6. There is no such thing as too sweet, Alex. Hot fudge, whipped cream, and sprinkles are the way to go with ice cream.

7. I am very much an extrovert.

8. This is my first social experiment, too, though I'm interested to see what my classmates do.

9. I placed letters at Cuppa Joe's, Stansell's Sporting Goods, Harrison's Books, the Leaf and Kettle, the UCSD campus library, and two branches of the San Diego Public Library.

9b. The greatest person of all time? My mother. Now, I know what you might be thinking. "Your mother, Zoe, really? Greater than Mahatma Gandhi or Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Teresa?" To me, yes.

Because my mother wanted to be a mother more than almost anything in the world, but at 27, two years after getting married, she was diagnosed with Stage 1 ovarian cancer. And they caught it early enough that they were pretty sure they could get it all with surgery and chemo, but the treatments meant it was unlikely she'd ever have kids of her own.

But Mom didn't accept that. She and her husband had some of her eggs fertilized and frozen so that they could have kids later on. And then the sniveling cowardly wretch of a man walked out on my mom in the middle of her freakin' cancer treatment because he "couldn't handle it," and that is why I only ever refer to him as my biological father or, more commonly, The Cowardly Douche-Weasel.

Mom beat her cancer, got her divorce, and once she was officially cancer free, decided to have her kids. The first three eggs they planted didn't take. I was in the second batch of three. Only two of us took hold, and then I ate my twin in the womb, but Mom loves me anyway.

She worked so damn hard to have me, and she stayed strong through so freakin' much, so yeah. She's the greatest person in the world, and I don't care how cliched that answer is.

I look forward to hearing your answer to the question you posed, and in addition, I would like you to expand upon your relationship with your best friend who kicks your butt at every game known to man. I would also like you to tell me a secret. It doesn't have to be a huge, earth-shattering secret. It can be a very small, insignificant secret.

In the interest of honesty, I will tell you that I am curious about your identity, largely because you've built such an air of mystery around it, but that you have my word that I will not actively sleuth out any personal information about you. I will also try my hardest not to speculate.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Zoe Ballard