

October 30

Alex,

Wow. I mean, wow!!! Someone opened the floodgates!

It's occurring to me just now that that was me. I opened them.

But oh my goodness! I knew you had it in you. :) And I am going to do my best to answer every point you made and every question you asked, but this will be a long letter. You are forewarned.

You have some clout at Cuppa Joe's, hmm? This could come in handy ...

No, to be fair to the baristas, there was some debate on whether or not I had to drink the whole cappuccino. Andi (who, incidentally, got me to drink coffee in the first place by introducing me to the already much discussed white chocolate latte), tried to argue that you'd only meant for me to drink a little, but Eddie stubbornly insisted that "Alex said she could have the letter when she finished the latte." So if you will take anyone to task, let it be him (Kidding. Eddie and I have actually become decent friends).

Alex, why would I hate you? Because you think that me having a bad week makes me more relatable? Honestly, over the past week, I've been thinking a lot about the whole self-made persona thing, because while I still stand by the idea that I try to be Zoe with everyone, I have had to acknowledge recently that the Zoe people think they know doesn't account for all of me.

My shitty week? Well, this may be more information than you actually want, but last Friday, I found out that my mom has been talking to my biological father about me. I found out just after I'd made such a big deal out of me and Mom not feeling the need to hide things, and then this. He wants to meet me. He's wanted to meet me for years, actually, but Mom has always said no, and personally, I don't want to have anything to do with him, and I thought Mom was in my camp. ~~And now I find out she's been—~~

Sorry, it's getting me worked up again.

Anyway, I found this out right before leaving for school, and I was so upset that I forgot my group lab report for Chemistry, and didn't realize until I got to class. So all my lab partners got zeros because of me, and were all very quick to blame me, even though everyone was supposed to fill out their own, and I just offered to do the official copy to be turned in. And my Chem teacher then made me stay after class to give me a lecture on responsibility and reliability – me! I'm sorry, he's new, I get that, but I am in the top 5% of my class. I have had straight As since the 6th grade. I do not need to be informed of how to be a responsible student. Anyway, the conversation made me late to French and I missed a pop quiz, and because my Chem teacher hadn't written me a note, I wasn't allowed to make it up, and a zero in French is exactly what I don't need, even if it was only a ten point quiz.

And nobody would just let me have a bad day. Everyone commented on it, everyone was so concerned that happy, sunny Zoe was scowling. I mean, I'm not a robot. I'm not programmed to be perpetually happy. But somehow, in trying to be friendly and genuine, that's how I've come across. And it was just one thing after another, you know?

Also, it's Halloween, and I don't like Halloween. Masks skeeve me out.

Anyway, part of the reason it took me so long to respond was because every time I thought about writing you a letter, I was like, "But Alex is gonna expect me to be happy and peppy, and I just can't be right now," and then I realized how backward that was in light of all our conversations! And I thought, you know what, if I'm really going to be genuine with him, I have to write on the bad days as well as the good. And now to hear that you were grateful for that? It's really nice to learn that there's someone else in my life who will let me have a bad day. Like I said, I have Gabe, and he's great, and he totally gets it, but he's so busy. Even more this year than last.

You wanted to know how Gabe and I became friends, yeah? It was in kindergarten, my second year of kindergarten, actually. Between a September 2nd birthday, a mid-year switching of schools the first time around, and the fact that I was a precocious but socially inappropriate hellion at five, I ended up repeating the grade, which came complete with its own awkwardness. First week of school, all my friends were in first grade, and I felt super uncomfortable around my new classmates who all seemed so young. I hung around the edges of the playground by myself, and one day, I saw this boy from my class sitting on a bench looking upset. So I went up and asked him what was wrong.

He said the kids in the class were making fun of him because he said pink was his favorite color, and they said that was a girl color, so if he liked it, he must be a girl. Kindergarten logic at its finest. But what got me was that they were also making fun of him because he chose a princess cupcake at snacktime.

I was indignant. “Of course you chose a princess cupcake!” I said. “The princesses were chocolate! You should always choose the chocolate cupcake.” Because this was 6-year-old Zoe Fact. And I informed him that there were no such things as girl colors and boy colors, and he should go right ahead and like pink because your favorite was your favorite and you didn’t have any control over it.

We’ve been friends ever since.

We’ve discovered more that we have in common as we get older, but in the beginning it was just having someone who would stand up for you on principle. He told me later that part of the reason he was so comfortable coming out as early as he did was because he’d always had me next to him telling him it was okay to like pink and sparkles and sewing. And when he told me in fourth grade that he had a crush on Aaron Harper, I didn’t bat an eye, I just said, “Oo, me too. He’s cute.”

On my end, it was having someone who embraced my eccentricities. I was the tallest girl in my class for a really long time, with this shock-white blonde hair that was almost luminescent (sorry, no fiery red manes here, though that would be awesome). In combination with being the oldest in the class, I kinda stood out. And that made me nervous, but Gabe taught me that standing out could be a good thing.

So why are we still friends? I don’t know, why is anybody friends with anybody? It’s not always about what you have in common. Lots of times it’s about what you need in your life that another person can provide, and having someone that you know will accept you and stick up for you no matter what makes middle school and junior high so much freaking easier.

You may be smack dab in the middle of seven (SO. JEALOUS. Also, wow, that came as a shock. I was not expecting you to come from such a big family), but this new baby is a girl. Girls are different. I suppose you do have a step-sister already, but it's still different. And you never know. You two might just click. Also, I absolutely accept your babysitting offer, just as soon as the baby is in existence and you feel comfortable enough to go through with your possibly joking remark about meeting in person.

Even though you told me about an older brother several letters ago, I still had you in my head as an only child. That's some kind of bias, I'm sure, filling in unknowns with mirrored versions of yourself? Like, in books, if a character's race is unspecified, you're more likely to automatically imagine that character as your own race? I think I was doing that with you, in more ways than one. I saw you as an only child, I saw you as a high schooler, and, yeah, I lost the bet, I saw you as a girl. Much more of a reflection on me than on you, I assure you. Gabe said guy. I owe him ten bucks.

Once he'd said it, though (and after I had foolishly, immediately taken the bet), I went back through and reread all your letters, trying to put my bias aside, and honestly, I could see where Gabe was coming from. And then I didn't know what to think. But there was a part of me that wasn't at all surprised when I found out you were a guy.

On to your very extensive (and amazing!) list of questions.

Do I keep up with any other correspondents? A few. I mean, I only got thirteen letters total, and one didn't count because it was from someone I knew, and only eight besides you were interested in me writing back. Most lasted a couple letters back and forth and then

petered out. At the moment, I'm still writing to you, a precocious seven-year-old named Kendra, and a UCSD Sociology professor, who is really interested in how this turns out.

I already talked about my week and about Gabe and me. Your next question was about my classes. This year, I'm taking Sociology, AP Chemistry, Wind Ensemble, AP American Humanities, AP Statistics, and French 2. I love my Soc and Humanities classes (and band, of course). I am ambivalent toward the others. The humanities class combines US History and Literature, looking at how they influence each other, and it is so fascinating, I am trying to rework my schedule for senior year to let me take the World Humanities class.

What makes me angry? Don't disrespect my friends and family. I will come down on you, and it won't be pretty. The only time I ever really got in trouble at school was when I punched Evan Tumrin in the nose for calling Gabe the f-word in the seventh grade. I do not forget slights made against the people I care about and I can hold a grudge like no one's business. Say whatever you want about me; I don't care. But come after someone I love? You and I are done.

And my hair.

Okay, so you know how I said above that I had this shock-white hair in kindergarten? Lots of little kids do, but it darkens as they grow older, and by the time you're in high school, the only people with hair that color are bleaching the crap out of it. Except, it would seem, for me. My hair didn't get that memo, so here I am, seventeen, with hair that practically glows in the dark. I wanted to dye it so badly, but my mom always said no, until finally about a year ago, she relented for my birthday. I made the mistake of telling Gabe.

He went mental. He said I couldn't dye my hair, I just couldn't! He was so adamant, it was actually kind of funny. See, Gabe's not just a costume designer, he's a fashion designer, and I've been his unofficial guinea pig for most of high school. It's pretty cool, actually. We go thrift store shopping all the time, and it's gotten to the point where I can call him and just say, "I need new pants," and his immediate response is, "I'm free Saturday morning." And he's got an amazing eye. Like, he pulls things off the rack that I wouldn't look at in a million years, and just holds them out to me (which means, "Don't give me that look, Zoe Ballard. Go into the dressing room and put it on"), and it either looks fantastic from the get go, or it looks fantastic once he's done.

So, when he was so against me dyeing my hair, I knew there was a reason. He said that I couldn't throw away a genetic blessing that women all over the country pay thousands of dollars to try and imitate, and if I trusted him, he had something different in mind. His something different was keeping my long, shock-blonde hair, but adding one stripe, about two fingers wide, of some bright, ridiculous, Look-At-Me color. The first was electric blue. Currently, the stripe is a brilliant purple. And I love it. Because now, when my hair stands out, it's a choice I've made, not just this thing I'm stuck with. So that's my hair.

And no, as I said before, I don't do Halloween. Just not my cup of tea. But I'm glad that you're into it. I hope that your costume (which sounds very cool) was a hit, and that you played your dramatic death scene up to the hilt, and that you finally won against your friend Emma. I hope you had fun.

And now to address the part of your letter I've been steadfastly avoiding (though I don't know if you've noticed – how much do you remember about what you've written after you send it?), not because

I'm uncomfortable or anything, but because I've been trying to figure out how to respond. It's such a small thing, just one line from this wonderfully long letter, but:

"I trust you more than most people in my life."

Alex, you stunned me a bit with that. I am very honored, and very touched, and I'm going to try and live up to that trust. And for now, I'm going to leave it at that.

What I want to know from you is the following (and some of these questions get very personal; you may choose not to answer as many as you please!):

-How was your Halloween party? (Already asked this, but I'm trying to consolidate for you)

-Do you go to Torrey Pines High School, or are you a student of another high school in the San Diego area? (I ask this only because if we attend the same high school, it is easy to extend our scavenger hunt ground, but if we don't, then school locations are out.)

-Are your biological parents divorced, or did your mother pass away? (Hugely personal – DO NOT FEEL COMPELLED TO ANSWER)

-Any romance in your life currently? Do you constantly get asked about yourself and Emma? (My friends Caela and Jimmy get this all the time)

-What should I do about this thing with my mom and the Douche-Weasel? Honestly, this is the question I most want you to address; I am in serious need of advice.

Your friend,
Zoe

PS -No hunting from me for this one, either. Let's redefine our perimeter, then start up again. I'm good with a one-block radius from Cuppa Joe's? For now?