

November 4

Alex,

That man is not my father, so do not assign that term to him. He hasn't earned it, and he doesn't deserve it. He left my mother six years before I was born, he wasn't part of the process, he wasn't responsible for any of my upbringing or raising, he did less than irresponsible teenage boys who get their girlfriends pregnant – he provided a sample to fertilize some eggs. That's it. He's a sperm donor. He is not my father.

And I don't give a damn if he feels bad or not – actually, that's not true. I do give a damn. I hope he feels bad. He should feel bad. I hope he spends most of his life eaten up with guilt over the weak-ass choices he made, because that is what he deserves.

Have the above paragraphs shocked you? Seems so counter to the Zoe you know, right? Well, this is what I meant last letter. Betray my family, hurt my loved ones? Don't come to me for forgiveness. The hardest time of Mom's life, when she most needed the love and support of the man she loved more than any other in the world, and he left her? No conversation, no expression of doubt, he promised her that he would be there when she woke up from her surgery, and instead, he left. He doesn't deserve forgiveness, and he doesn't deserve any sort of chance from me. He made his choice when he turned his back on his wife and his promise of a future family. He doesn't get to change his mind years later when Mom's healthy and the family is in evidence.

I'm still royally pissed about this whole thing. And it's like, whenever it comes up, I feel like I have to be pissed for Mom's half of it too, because she won't be. Like, she tries to say it's not a big deal, that

I shouldn't be so upset, that it was 20 years ago and she understands why he did it, and it led to better things, and she says all that, but she won't marry Joe, no matter how many times he asks. She tries to act like she's fine, but it's there in her face for anyone who knows how to read it. It takes a hell of a lot for me to hate anyone, but him? If it's not full-blown hatred, it's the closest I've ever come.

Honestly, I'm half tempted to do just as you suggest; let him take me out to dinner and then just sit there and refuse to talk. Or say the things I have wanted, on some level, to say to him my entire life. But that would not be productive on any count.

Maybe I'll write him a letter.

But there is no reason for him to take up any more of this one, so I'm gonna move on.

Oof. 4am shift for a week? Remind me not to invoke your sense of justice! Though I can certainly see how Eddie's been getting a bit high handed. He's a good guy, but oh my goodness, have you ever met anyone so pretentious? I know, I know, I shouldn't laugh at Eddie. But...

You're a Raven??? Alex, I don't know if we can continue our friendship. And I certainly didn't peg you as one of those hoity toity Academy boys...*

No, whatever, it's all the same to me. I don't really get into sports rivalries. Now, if your Marching Band beats ours at competition, we could have a crisis on our hands. You don't play in this rival marching band, do you?

So school campuses are not an option for hiding letters. But one block from Cuppa Joe's is fine, and Del Mar works too. I know the shopping center pretty well (I ought to; I work part time at Which Wich: Superior Sandwiches! Joe feels very strongly that everyone should work food service at some point in their lives, so that they better understand how to act with food service employees in the future, which is valid, but I kind of hate my job).

I totally forgot one of your questions last letter. You asked what it was like being an only child, and I never answered. It's quiet. And not lonely, exactly, but I feel a little outnumbered by adults sometimes. Like, I miss that built-in friend, you know? I know that's silly, that your siblings aren't predisposed to like you any more than anyone else on the planet is, but I've always wished for someone to share the chores with and pin misdeeds on and go off and do something teenager-y with when my other friends aren't available. (Also – I'm dumb. Gabe and I are both only children being raised by single moms – HUGE thing we have in common that I didn't even think of mentioning last letter.)

Actually, and this story is gonna make me sound nuts, but when I was little, right after I learned how I'd been born and that there could have been five others except that they hadn't worked out, I had imaginary siblings the way other kids have imaginary friends, five of them. Three older, one younger, and the twin that I would have had, but for a mild case of fetal resorption. Fun fact, as a result of this fetal resorption, my eyes are two different colors (not like, one blue and one brown, but both blue at the pupil and brown at the outside of the iris), and I was born with six fingers on my right hand (I know, I know – someone is looking for me. Well, would be, if I still had the sixth finger, which I don't).

My attachment to these imaginary siblings is what pushed Mom to enroll me in kindergarten early. She thought I needed to be around real kids some more, and she was probably right. It's a little silly to make your mom set five extra places at the dinner table every night. It worked (eventually, but things like that are why I had to repeat kindergarten), and I outgrew my imaginary siblings, but I still wish I had a sister.

Okay, I care about being a good student, but I'm not that much of an overachiever. You don't need to look out for college-age Zoe. Present-day Zoe is already working on the focus you speak of. I love history, and I know I want to do something with that, but figuring out what is the real challenge.

And yes, I am fully aware of the irony that Gabe, working off a sloppy, 20-second description, correctly pegged your gender while I, after four rounds of letters, failed to do so. Don't worry about the forfeit money. Gabe and I make bets all the time, but unlike you and Emma, we never actually collect. I think I owe him, like \$800 at this point? Technically?

I like to think I wouldn't have treated you differently if I'd known your gender from the start. I mean, I'm not treating you differently now that I know, right?

Can I give you a piece of advice on this contest with Emma? I think you're trying too hard. Like, rather than focus on an impressive costume like she did, you went with this whole big scene set up, which, while impressive in its own way, doesn't stand on its own. You made it into a production; people had to stick around to see the best part. Whereas she just went for the striking first impression. Simplicity is often its own reward. Just my two cents.

And continuing to speak of Emma . . . Alex, you're not really one of those guys who buys into the whole "friendzone" thing, are you? If you have a thing for Emma, Tell Her. Don't be one of those guys who hangs around hoping that if you're nice enough long enough, she'll reward you with a relationship. If you want one, be honest and direct and respect whatever choice she makes in the end. Don't treat friendship like it's a step below romance, okay? It shouldn't be something you get "stuck" in, waiting for some kind of relationship upgrade.

I don't mean to be judgmental, and it's certainly not my place to dictate your behavior, but I had a "friendzone" case happen to me freshman year, and it was just so upsetting on my end that my friendship wasn't enough for this guy, that he acted like he'd earned a romance with me somehow, and that I was being unreasonable for not seeing that. It got ugly really fast, and I really don't want you to be that guy, Alex.

As for me on the romance front, not much to talk about. I went to Homecoming with Darren Malik a few weeks ago, but we mutually agreed not to pursue anything further, and there's not really anyone else at the moment.

Favorite thing to do on my day off? Plan my dream trip to Europe. I've been working on this ideal trip for a few years now. I have a binder. It's color coded. For a more cliched, California girl answer, I also like going to the beach.

I feel like this letter has been a bit of a downer. Sorry if that's the case. I'll try to get back to my more peppy, upbeat self next time

around. I ask these more-than-usually ridiculous questions as compensation:

- Can you curl your tongue?
- Do you believe in Big Foot?
- How many square feet of pizza are eaten in the US every day?
- How many of those square feet include gross things like banana peppers (I can't believe you like banana peppers! I have come to the conclusion that there is something seriously wrong with your taste buds.)
- Is your name really Alex?

Your friend,

Zoe