

November 23

Alex,

I did not get a letter from you before I left for break (I'm pretty sure you wrote one, but I was too busy Tuesday to go anywhere and we left straight from school today), but it feels strange not writing, so I thought I would at least write my "Harris Burdick" challenge for you while I'm up in the air over California. What else would I do with a three hour plane ride?

The House Where the Wallpaper Lived (I'm so good at titles!\*)

Bryn knew it was crazy, but she was certain that sometimes, when she was almost asleep, the wallpaper in her bedroom moved.

They had lived in the house since Bryn was born, and the bird room had been hers since she was three. The wallpaper was dark green and covered in birds, and Bryn knew the birds were alive.

No one believed her. Her older sister Jennie told her she was ridiculous. Her mother and father feared she was crazy. Her best friend said her mother didn't like her to play those games. But Bryn knew.

It was the dove she always caught moving from the corner of her eye. It was the white wings that flapped and promised magic and wonder, if only Bryn could reach it. For while Bryn loved her mother and father and the life she had with her family, she wanted magic so desperately. She knew that the birds on her wall lived in a magical land, and that every night, when the light went away, they crossed over to her world. And she knew that she could do the same, if she could only figure out the secret.

The older she got, the less she saw them, and the idea that they were disappearing was the worst thing she could imagine. So she watched and she wished and she waited, and then one night, when she caught sight of the dove's flashing wing, she reached out and grabbed it. "Take me with you," she whispered. "Show me your world."

And in the next heartbeat, she was gone.

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"I can't believe this place has been on the market so long without selling," the woman exclaimed to the real estate agent.

"Well," the woman said slowly, "That'll be the curse, I imagine." She had shown this house hundreds of times without it selling, and she didn't expect this one to be any different.

"What curse?" the woman asked.

"That Bryn Harris girl?"

"I'm not from around here, sorry," the woman said. The real estate agent nodded. It was mostly strangers who showed any interest these days.

"It was fifteen years ago. The Harris family lived here with their two girls, and then, one night, the youngest, little Bryn, just disappeared. Vanished from her bedroom while her parents sat downstairs. And the windows into her room were locked from the inside, and her sister was just on the other side of the wall, and there was no sign of a kidnapper. Police said she probably ran away, but she

was eight years old. Family couldn't handle it; moved out a year later. I've sold it twice since then, and both families left after a month. Said they felt like they were being watched. Folks claim this place is haunted. Can't get anyone interested in it anymore."

"Well, I don't buy into such superstition," the woman said. "And this place is a steal at twice the price. We'll take it! Come on, Greta," she said, calling to her daughter, who was standing fixated in the room with the birds. As she ran to meet her mother, out of the corner of her eye, she could have sworn she saw something move . . .

That's as good as I've got. Hope you enjoyed it!

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Nov 24

Not having a letter to reply to is weird. I don't like it. I've gotten so used to writing to you that I don't want to stop for five days! So as I think of things I want to tell you, I'm going to jot them down.

So it occurred to me that you will probably ask about my break. As stated last letter, I'm up in Washington with my Aunt Laura and her partner, Rae, and my cousins Allie, Gina, and Catelyn. Allie and Gina are older than I am, and Cate is about a year younger, but also a junior, and they're basically the only family we have left since Nana passed away. We go up to them for Thanksgiving, they come down to us for Christmas, and we try to go somewhere together in the summer.

Allie, Gina, Cate, and I get along really well and always have. We call ourselves the Fatherless Foursome because

Nov 25

Sorry. I got called in to help with Thanksgiving dinner. My mom and Aunt Laura are both pretty awful cooks (they say it runs in the family, and it kinda looks like they're right, but I can cut fruit up for salad without fear of going wrong), so Joe and Rae handle the big stuff. Rae works as a chef in some fancy restaurant, not the chief chef, but the other one, the helper one. What's that called? Anyway, she and Joe run the kitchen, but they call out for help as needed from us girls, and then Mom and Laura clean up.

Anyway, Fatherless Foursome. Laura and Rae never wanted kids, but then Allie's parents (Rae's brother and sister-in-law) were killed in a car accident, and Rae got custody. They both adopted Allie, then decided that kids were pretty cool, and they wanted some after all. So they picked a sperm donor and took turns. Technically, Gina is Rae's and Cate is Laura's, but they're all just one big family. But we're all Fatherless, in more ways than one, so we bonded over that growing up.

Nov 26

They just found out about this project and have been peppering me with questions for the last hour. Gina, predictably, wants to know first and foremost if you are cute. I told her that, as I have never actually met you in person, I cannot say. I said that your essence is cute. Is that weird?

Cate, on the other hand, thinks I should be doing more to catch a glimpse of you, staking out my letter locations or your school, things like that, because she can't stand mysteries. But honestly, much as I

think I would like to meet you in person someday, there is something freeing about being only words on paper. I don't know. It's late, and I'm waxing philosophic.

Nov 27

Home again, home again. And there was your letter waiting in my P.O. Box!

Half-Latino, hmm? You're right. I did picture you as white, though I honestly hadn't thought about race much at all. There's that bias, again. We're talking a lot about biases in Sociology, and it's fascinating.

I grudgingly admit your justification for the extensive puzzle. And I found the toy store page in the end. It just took me the better part of an hour and was absolute torture.

I will admit, I suppose, to some hand in my writing talent, but – I don't know. I still don't feel like I deserve the praise. Like, you had a choice about Spanish or not – it's not something that's required. But you can't get away from writing. We have to do it all the time, in all sorts of capacities. I got practice whether I wanted it or not.

I like hearing you talk about your strengths. I think sometimes we live in a world that doesn't let us talk about what we're good at. Like, we have to downplay our skills to other people, or it's seen as bragging or vanity. So I like to hear people talk about what they think they're good at.

I can see you as a peacemaker, and hearing your examples gives me an even firmer image of your character. I take it holidays aren't

great for you? I'm sorry you have to deal with that, and that keeping the peace falls to you. That's got to be hard. I sound like I'm being flippant or, not flippant, but like I'm dismissing what you're going through? I'm not, I mean all that sincerely, but those phrases are so often used insincerely. I hope there were parts of your holiday to enjoy.

You needn't sound so suspicious of birthday preparations, Alex! Relax, I'm not going to throw you a rager; I'm just going to get you a present, which is, after all, to be expected on birthdays. I take gift-giving seriously, and I need time to find gifts that are well-matched to their recipients. That's all, I promise. (Also, some things you've said recently have given me a really good gift idea, and I need to know how long I have to put it together. But I will say no more of that here. I will just hint and tantalize.)

Do you really still see us as strangers? Because, to be honest, I've come to see you as a close friend. It's an unusual friendship, for sure, but I do still see it as a friendship.

Let's move on to the silliness, and your wonderful array of questions.

I don't think you've asked my favorite color. It is orange. Like, a golden orange.

When I was little, I wanted a pet tiger, like Princess Jasmine. I still kind of do, actually. Can you see me walking through the streets of San Diego with a tame tiger?

Speaking of which, I've thought a lot about the name I would give myself if I was not Zoe. I like the idea of choosing names by meaning.

Zoe means “life,” which I’ve always found appropriate, and I’d like another name with the same meaning, but the only one I could find that I liked even a little was Asha. So I think I’ll stick with Zoe. (Aleksei means “defender,” in case you were wondering. I was curious, so I looked it up.)

Funniest story my family tells about me. Sigh . . . okay. Here we go.

When I was six, I very suddenly and without reason (to my mother) started refusing to go to church, like, kicking and screaming, limp noodle refusal to leave the house, and all that I would say to Mom was that I didn’t want to go to the “cabinal” church. It took Mom three weeks to think to ask me what I meant when I wasn’t in a panic. I meant cannibal -- some kid at school had told me what they were, and then we went to church, where I watched a bunch of people go up and receive somebody’s “body and blood,” and I, very sensibly I think, didn’t want any part of that.

What do I wish you would ask me? I wish you would ask me about my dream trip to Europe, what I would see, why I want to go, etc, etc. And I know you said to answer it in this letter, but this letter is already excessively long, so I will let you ask officially before I give you the answer.

I would like you to answer all the questions you posed, and tell me a favorite holiday tradition of yours. It can be any holiday.

Your Friend,  
Zoe