

Alex,

I hope you're enjoying this cold snap we're in – 58 degrees yesterday??? What is this – Nantucket?

(I don't actually know what the current temperature is in Nantucket, or even what Nantucket's average December temperature happens to be. Nantucket just sounds like a place defined by fridity.)

Well, bundle up, sir, because I am sending you out into the cold you so adore to find your letter.

There's a small-ish park near Torrey Pines High that is dominated by a jungle gym that looks like a pirate ship. It is quite awesome, and I greatly resent the fact that I get strange looks when I try to play on it.

You know what they say about pirate ships, don't you? X marks the spot where you usually find some buried treasure.

Zoe

December 21

Alex,

What is with our lives?? Junior year is not supposed to be this defined by drama, right?

You want happy, peppy Zoe? Then I shall do my best. It's the Christmas holidays (nearly), my cousins arrive in just a few days, happy tidings and good times are to be had by all, so what's not to be overly cheerful about? :)

Okay, you can tell I'm stalling, right? Which is stupid – how do you stall a one-sided conversation? Like this. Rambling, writing long, drawn out, vague sentences that don't say anything because you know that once you get to the heart of things – I'm losing track of my own sentences now. This is what I've come to.

Okay. Suck it up, Zoe. Write about the fight.

Gabe's not a bad guy. And he's not a terrible friend. He hasn't been ignoring me – I have been trying not to add to his stress, which is what the beginning of our argument was about. Honestly, you and Gabe sound so alike sometimes, it's scary. You got so defensive on my behalf when you just thought Gabe and I were fighting about how I handled Lissa, so I'm super nervous for how you're going to react when I tell you that we were actually fighting about, well, you.

We've made up. Gabe apologized for overreacting and being a dick, and I apologized for --

Let me start from the beginning.

I was so preoccupied with Lissa and your letter and trying to figure out how to respond, and I had to get out of my house, so I went to sit and write in Cuppa Joe's. Gabe happened to come in, and he felt bad because he'd been so preoccupied with the show, so he asked me to catch him up on life, and since we had the time, I told him everything. I had Lissa's first letter, and I showed it to him. He wanted to know why I hadn't said anything earlier. When I told him I hadn't wanted to bother him, he called me out on it.

"Zo," he said, and this is where he sounded just like you, "I'm your best friend; you're supposed to bother me with stuff like this."

He went on to say that when his stress is about getting costume designs finished by a deadline and mine is about finding out that the biological father I hate has a daughter whose mother is dying who wants to talk to me about it, my stress trumps, which, there's a point in there, I guess.

Anyway, he said he was upset that I'd made myself deal with that on my own rather than let him help, and I told him that I hadn't actually dealt with it alone. I'd asked you for advice.

He went all quiet and then got sarcastic and starting making these disparaging comments about you and implying that ours wasn't a real friendship because we've never actually met, and how could it be that I'd come to a penpal of three months before my closest friend of eleven years, and how could I even trust "this guy" and things like that. Which is when I told him he was being a dick, and walked out.

And like I said, he's apologized. And we talked, and I made it clear that he doesn't get to be pissed that I have other friends I can go

to for advice, and that he doesn't get to determine which of my friendships are valid.

So he and I are fine. And he and you are fine. And we talked about Lissa, and he voiced the same concerns you did, and I'm – doing my best to listen to both of you. But I've heard back from her a couple times now, and she's actually a pretty cool kid. We've barely even touched on her mom, or her dad. I think she mostly just needs a friend who at least knows what's going on. She hasn't told any of her school friends, which I totally get. How do you tell 8th graders that your mother is dying and not have them treat you like that kid, you know? So, I appreciate your concern, and I won't argue that it's not valid. But I'm okay. Really. I promise.

(And when I used Thom as an example of standing up for myself, I was referring to asking him not to talk to me, not hating him on my mom's behalf.)

I'm touched that you're worried about me. You're right, it's nice to be worried about sometimes, to know that people out there care about your well being, even if that means that they're starting to give you advice that runs counter to advice they gave you before. But between you and Gabe and Mom and Joe, happy, peppy Zoe isn't going anywhere.

Let's do lighthearted, shall we? Just to back up that assertion?

My Christmas plans have not changed, but my house will be overrun with cousins, so it may take me a bit longer to get to letters. Or maybe not. I'm kinda terrified that if I put off letters too long, one of the

girls will write back instead. Either way, I will make sure you have letters to look forward to.

Of course you're on the list! Alex, you need to stop selling yourself short, and stop being amazed that there are people in the world who want to be friends with you! I know I promised, like, a paragraph ago to be light-hearted, but I'm gonna get serious again for half a second, okay?

I want you to write me a list, of ten things that make you an amazing friend. I am also going to write this list, and we will exchange them, and then I'm going to compile them and make them into a giant poster for your wall so you can hang it in your room, and I'll have a copy, too, that I can refer you to whenever you start talking about how you can't believe I trust you or want to be friends with you or how I can be so worried about you. It's not because I "care about everyone," okay? I care about you. You're an amazing person, and you're my friend. The length of time we've known each other has nothing to do with it. You're my friend. Nobody gets to talk shit about my friend Alex. That includes my friend Alex. So knock it off, okay? (I am teasing, but I do mean it).

I'm not saying everything that's in my head about the party, because a lot of it wouldn't be productive, and some of it wouldn't be well received, so I'm putting it aside for now. I accept what you have to say. Just, maybe get your own drinks at parties from now on? And maybe get Emma's, too?

The light-heartedness may now resume.

I see the prom confusion now. No, Dylan wasn't asking me to prom, he was asking me to join Prom Steering Committee, because he's the Social Chair on Student Council, and that's what the Social Chair does this time of year – flatters and cajoles and bribes juniors into joining Prom Steering.

You've been to Hawaii? So jealous. I've been to 37 of the 50 states so far, but I haven't made it to Hawaii. Someday . . .

Question 2 was brought to you by the gremlins that like to tie my iPod earphones in knots only magic can undo. Question 3 was brought to you by the pickle jars that are the bane of my existence at work.

Now for your questions.

Go to the future, but not return? Nope. I mean, sure, I wouldn't mind jumping ahead to the part of my life where I can see if everything works out, but to not be able to come back? No. Not even if I could take someone else. How would I ever choose which person to take? Choosing my mom or cousins or Joe or Gabe or you automatically leaves everyone else off that list, you know? So no thanks.

God for a day? I feel like I should chide you for blasphemy, but I don't actually care that much and this is a fascinating question. My first impulse is to say that I would make everyone happy for a day, but I am sociologically aware enough that I know that wouldn't work. So then I have to wonder, would whatever I do be long term? Like, if I cured cancer or something, would it still be cured when I gave up my God powers, or am I limited to my 24 hours? Because if I can have a continued effect, I'd rework human brain chemistry just enough to make it easier to find cures for diseases, but if I don't, then I'd give as many

people as possible that one really good day that they'll remember for years to come.

How's that for a Zoe answer? :)

So here's the thing about me and music. I have a really eclectic music collection, mostly because when I was figuring out what kind of music I liked, I just pulled from a bunch of people's collections, and now, whenever anyone in my family gets a new CD, I snag it for my iTunes. Between Mom and Gina and Cate and my friend Jimmy Rubel (who provides me with every musical soundtrack under the sun), I listen to a lot of really different kinds of music, and I tend to like songs rather than artists. But the artists that I consistently love everything from are Sara Bareilles, Marie Digby, The Beatles, and Jonathan Coulton. Oh! And Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is an amazing lyricist and has composed some of the most brilliant music ever put on Broadway.

If I could learn any skill overnight, I would choose cooking, because I feel like it's an important life skill to have.

Oo, time capsules. Nice question. I'm approaching this as someone who studies history, so I ask myself: if I found a time capsule from 500 years ago, what would I want to find inside to help me understand how those people lived?

1. First and foremost, I would collect a book of a bunch of different people recounting the minutiae of their day-to-day lives, because my mom writes historical fiction, and that's always the hardest part of her research.

2. An iPod with this year's Top 40 songs

3. Books and movies and TV shows that show what we thought the world/universe might look like hundreds of years in our future, what would be the present or past for them

4. Examples of modern currency

5. A newspaper or news magazine or something to show the things we cared about.

And I believe I have already answered all my questions, so I will ask you to answer yours, as well as tell me how your holiday is going, and where in the US you want most to visit.

Your Friend,

Zoe

PS - Is this letter novel-like enough for you? :)