

December 22

Zoe,

You're lucky there wasn't a tic-tac-toe set on that playground. (Okay, not lucky, you probably knew. But I like giving you a hard time.) I thought high school was supposed to be all drama. That's why they're writing all these novels about us, right? Of course, that's only the protagonists of the stories, and I never would have seen myself as a protagonist, so I guess that's not the best analogy.

I feel like I should clarify that I want happy-peppy Zoe when it's appropriate. If you need to be serious that's okay. I just don't want you to be permanently that way. You always see the best in everyone, even if those things don't deserve it much, and if you lost that, you wouldn't really be Zoe anymore, would you?

I am not entirely sure what to say about your fight with Gabe. I mean, I'm not sure I even have the right to say anything. He does have a point - you've been friends with him for forever compared to me. I don't want to be the reason you fight with your best friend. I'm not excited about the fact that you guys had a fight and Gabe is kind of being a jealous ~~jackass~~ jerk but -

You say you've worked it out, and okay, I'll believe you because I don't have any choice, but if our friendship becomes a problem, you will tell me right? I'm selfish and I want to continue being friends with you, but realistically, your friendship with Gabe is way more important than that. That's pretty much all there is to say.

You say I'm giving conflicting advice. Maybe I am, but A) the situation has changed since Lissa's first letter, and B) even if it hadn't,

this latest was hypothetical advice, given to show that it didn't have to be done the way you did it.

I find it interesting that we are spending so much of the serious portions of our letters completely misunderstanding each other - interpreting any vagueness in entirely opposite ways. It's starting to get in the way. Any ideas for fixing that?

Letters from your cousins? Bring it on! I will totally write them letters and get all the dirt on you to use for future blackmail! (Just kidding, I wouldn't do that. But the experiment of writing to you was such a success that I am actually open to the possibility. I guess you could say that was your doing - you changed me, Zoe Ballard.)

Ok, hang on! The list of ten I wanted from you was something you could observe, something you wanted, something you should have already known. What makes me an "amazing friend" is totally subjective, and not something I can observe! I mean, okay, I can probably come up with a few things, but what makes me a good friend is literally different for every person. It depends on what that person needs or wants from their friends more than what comes from me. I'll write the list as best I can, because I can't very well get you to stop writing yours now but don't think I'm happy about it. (And like I say, you'd be better at writing that list than me.) ~~Judging by my past experience, I must not be a good friend because everyone always~~ And I'll do the list because I know if I don't then probably our correspondence stops here.

1. It takes a lot to win my trust, but once you do, it takes a lot to lose it again (so I'm loyal?)

2. I'm dependable. If I say I'm going to do something, I'll follow through, even if it takes me a while.

3. I look out for my friends. I guess that kind of goes with number 1, but if I see one of my friends being mistreated, I tend to go after the one doing the mistreating.

4. I can keep secrets? Again, that probably goes with number 1 (you see how stuck I'm getting? And I'm barely even halfway through).

5. I'm a good listener. It's part of what makes me good at settling arguments.

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That's it, I can't do this. It took me an hour to come up with those five and I am now reduced to using my phone to search "What makes a good friend" just to see if there's anything I can add that I just can't think of, but that defeats the purpose, doesn't it? I'm sorry. I can't do this. I tried. (And we can take number 2 off the list, because obviously, I don't always follow through).

Yeah, assuming he was asking you out was a pretty silly mistake to make. See what I mean, though, about the same words leading to completely opposite conclusions in our letters? It's good, in a way, because that means we're such completely different people, and that is the purpose of pen pals. But it does have us talking at cross-purposes a lot, so we should probably try to be clearer.

Zoe, honestly, you shouldn't do something for my birthday. It's never a big thing for me, and it's only my 17th. They happen every year, and it's not--

Let me try that again. In general, after so many years of placating gifts from Rachel and Dad (or rather, thinly veiled attempts to win my affections with money from the former and thinly veiled attempts to make up for not really being a Dad from the latter) I don't place much value on receiving gifts. I know there are people who do really thoughtful presents that are much more than that, and let's face it, you're probably one of them, but most gifts are attempts to fill in the void of things you can't or don't want to say with something that doesn't actually do so. I'm sure that's not what it's like with you, but the cynic in me just doesn't like gifts much anymore.

Okay, questions:

1) I have to admit I might consider jumping to the future, just because it would mean finally getting away from the uncertainty of high school and the looming terror that is the future. But it would mean losing you, and Emma, so probably not. Besides, you would be pretty worried if I just disappeared one day, right? I wouldn't want to do that to you.

2) It's not blasphemy, it's a thought exercise! And you're right, that is a very Zoe answer. I really should know better by now than to give you questions that I don't have my own answers to, even if they are fascinatingly good questions. (The internet knows everything, I'm telling you!)

I think I would spend my day doing little things - you can never see the consequences of your actions long term, especially if you're God for only one day. I wouldn't want to give somebody a fantastic day and then have them be depressed the rest of their life because no other

day could ever measure up, you know? (Not that I'm saying that's what would happen with your wish!) So, something like making sure a waitress who is about to spill a tray full of food catches it, or tightening the knot that is about to let go on a balloon a child has tied around their wrist. The littlest things can make or break a day, after all.

3) I don't actually listen to much music. It's not that I have anything against it, it's just not something that I'm that attached to. If I'm stuck in the house while somebody is having a fight, I'll turn on something loud to drown them out, but if I can escape, I'd much rather go for a walk and enjoy the sounds of nature. Which sounds weird, I know. Everyone is obsessed with their music. I just, it's not a thing for me. I guess if I have to pick a band to like, Imagine Dragons does some good stuff.

4) Oh, cooking is a good one! It is definitely a good life skill to have! I think I would go with gardening. I've always thought eating something you've grown would be cool, but I just haven't had the opportunity.

5) I actually really like your answers on this one! I would substitute a few things though: A coffee table book with pictures of various modern cultures around the world, including large cities, major landmarks, and minority cultures (because who knows what will actually survive until then, and a picture is worth 1000 words, right?) instead of your journal of day-to-day lives, and some written music instead of the iPod (because there's no guarantee it would A: stay charged and B: be playable in 500 years).

6) I would most like to visit the Pacific Northwest, and the far Northeast, like Maine. There's something about rural America that

fascinates me, since I've never really been there, and I like colder climates, so North, rather than middle.

7) Yes, alright, I took your questions out of order. Can you tell I'm stalling? Mostly because my holiday so far has been odd, uncomfortable, and busy. John's flight was delayed because of a snowstorm in Chicago, so he got home this morning. Everything was great before that, other than the minor annoyance of Rachel's whining which I have gotten used to. Will drove, so he got in yesterday, and we had a great time going out back and playing catch. It's not really my thing anymore, but it's something we always did together, so I'm glad to do it.

Anyway, John got in this morning, and things were fine for about ten minutes, before he and Dad started arguing about something (who knows or cares what... I think it was something about how John didn't bring his girlfriend because he's ashamed of us or something, which is not true, she has some kind of family tradition every year that she can't get out of, so she never comes at Christmas.)

The ten minutes before they started arguing though, that was where it was weird. I went with Dad to pick John up from the airport, which in hindsight was my first mistake, but anyway, I went in to meet him while Dad sat with the car so he wouldn't have to pay a fee to park. John came out of the gate, smiled widely and hugged me. We did all the niceties, how is everyone etc., and then he said "Mom says 'hi'." As if it wasn't a big deal.

I haven't heard from my mother in almost twelve years. She said "Goodnight, see you in the morning" one night and then she wasn't there. I've always suspected that John was in contact with her, but I

figured if she wanted to talk to me, she would ask. She always knew exactly where I was, and she never did anything about it.

It took maybe five minutes in the car for John and Dad to start arguing, which they did for the entire half hour drive back from the airport, and when we got home, Rachel was screaming something about how the baby was coming so we all piled back into the car and drove her to the hospital, and we've been here for hours. How long does having a baby take?! I finally made my excuses to get out of the waiting room (where Dad and John had resumed their argument, mostly out of habit, though I think Dad is just relieved to have something to think about besides the fact that his wife is in labor) and snuck outside to the park across the street where I finally got a chance to read your letter. I haven't really had time to think about it yet. I don't even know what to do with it. I mean, what do you say to the woman who raised you for five years and then just... left? And "hi"? That's all she has to say?

Anyway, that's my holiday so far. How is your holiday with "the girls?" I'm hoping it's less stressful than mine has been so far.

Alex

P.S. I was going to write you clues, honestly I was, but with all the other things going on, I just don't have the energy. At this point I'm going to owe you so many puzzles that maybe it's better to stop counting. And yes, plenty novel-like, thank you.