

[Zoe's writing, spaced out and messy:]

Dec 26

Happy Boxing Day

[Gina:]

Yeah, okay, so that was my precious puffball of a baby cousin's attempt to prove to us that she is fully capable of penning your letter on her own, but that took her about a full minute and is barely legible, so, yeah. Gina's takin' over!!

Alex! My main man Alex! (Okay, Zoe's main man Alex, but I'm assuming a tone of familiarity). Alex of the Cute Soul.

You are wondering what happened to dear Zoe, I imagine. Well, my adorable little cousin thought she'd make everyone tea two nights ago, bless her little heart, and long story short, she poured boiling water all over her hand because she's a precious puffball, as I may have mentioned. She'll be right as rain in a few days, but she just insisted that this letter get written now, and since Nurse Joe has expressly forbidden her to do the writing, we are stepping up to the challenge.

She is also insisting that she gets to dictate exactly what goes into this letter, and that she reserves the right to scribble out any "funny" comments that we might choose to add. ~~Has she told you that we have dozens of home videos of Disney concerts she put on when she was four and five and six that she made us all sit through? Like, not even make us sing in — she wouldn't let us participate. It was all~~

[Allie:]

Hi there, Alex. This is Allie. Zoe is of the opinion that I am more likely to stick to her dictation than Gina, which is pretty silly of her. I may be the most mature sister in this house, but that doesn't mean I'm above tangents to tease my dear cousin. But c'est la vie.

Merry Christmas, Alex, from me as well as Zoe. I may not know you, but everyone deserves a merry Christmas. I hear you have a new sister. Good luck with that. I lived through two of them. It sucks a lot.

[Gina:]

(I resent that remark.)

[Allie:]

Okay, Zoe has forcefully informed me that she has begun her dictation, so I'd better try to keep up.

She says that she just loved your poem (yes, the underlining was dictated as well), and that it's a fantastic Christmas present and you are under no obligation to get her any other. She says to stress that gifts are not given to get gifts in return (Side note from me - she means this, too. She pours her heart and soul into finding the perfect gift for others, but doesn't want anyone to stress in any way about the gifts they give to her.)

[Gina:]

Also, Zoe is the Gift Master. She'll get it perfect every time, and you'll never match her. Never. Seriously, dude, don't even try.

[Allie:]

She feels I am not adequately expressing her point. She wants me to write down what she's saying word for word. ~~I have promised not to communicate my eye roll.~~

Ahem. Zoe says:

“Alex, I just loved your poem” (Allie would like to point out that she wrote exactly that. Allie also just got swatted by Zoe, but she used her bad hand, which was very silly of her).

“You finally sent me something you wrote, and I want to thank you so much for sharing it. It was everything I could have asked for in a Christmas present. Don't you dare worry about “having” to get me anything - that's not how gifts work.”

Allie again. It's time to decorate Round Three of Christmas cookies (Mama Rae goes a little nuts, but no one is going to complain), so in the interest of not covering your letter with frosting, we're going to take a quick intermission, but we will be back shortly.

[Cate:]

Alex!!!!!! Hi!!!!!! It's Cate, and I declare it to be my turn!!!! Gina says she declares that I have used up all my allowed exclamation points for the month, but I'm ignoring Gina because this is Zoe's letter, not hers, so there.

And I don't think Gina and Allie should discourage you from giving Zoe a Christmas present if you want to. As long as it comes from the heart, there shouldn't be a problem!

Okay, but Zoe says I have to write what she's saying now.

She wants to know if she can join you for a 2am coffee outing if her cousins get too - and that's not a very nice thing she's saying, so I refuse to finish writing that sentence, and she's just gonna have to deal.

She's threatening to revoke my Christmas present. Fine!

If her cousins get too "wrapped up in their own twisted version of being my voice." She says it's the only way she can ensure that her meaning is made clear to you (and she wants me to make sure you know that she's mostly joking).

~~She says she's skipping that part for right now because she's not sure what to say to it yet, and~~ Apparently I wasn't supposed to write that down. She says I would have made a horrible scribe, since I can't even tell when she's dictating and when she's just muttering to herself. I say, it's more authentic this way!

Hang on! There are carolers at the door!

[Gina:]

Ah, the joys of having a sister with an extremely short attention span. I was cut off so ungraciously at the start of this letter, wouldn't you say? You've been deprived of my amazing presence for almost three pages?? How have you stood it??

Nothing from Zoe at the moment; she's over in the corner, frowning at your letter and muttering. She looks perplexed.

So, I don't know if she keeps you updated on her hair stripe color, but it's currently forest green. That's a Christmas present from yours truly. I tried to convince her to do a red stripe on the other side, but she vetoed that idea. Says two stripes will look like she's trying too hard, or something weird like that. Who knows.

Oo, okay, interesting development. I think she's figured something out. You can always tell when Zoe is beginning to get an idea, because her eyes narrow, and she

Ha! Yes! Okay, this is hysterical, I'm gonna try and get this down as she's saying it.

"I don't believe those two! Are they honest-to-God having a Protective-Off?"

Crap, she's notic

Zoe is now dictating.

She says to inform you that she finds both you and Gabe to be utterly and thoroughly ridiculous, and she wants to know if you've got one of those "You hurt her, I hurt you" things going on in your secret communications. If so, she says, she wants to make sure that the both of you know that if one of you hurts her, it will be a "You hurt me, I kick your ass," situation. (That's a direct quote, though the laughter is hard to replicate in text).

~~Protective of my baby cousin, hmmmmm? Is there some  
luuuuuuuurve in the air????~~

[Allie:]

Gina has lost her right to the notebook, again. I can only imagine why (and I'm not sure I want to). Anyway, Zoe is giving me permission to write a quick note of my own.

It has occurred to me that you might be wondering just how much of your letter has been read by three strangers. The answer is none of it. Zoe has shared some vague details with us, but that's all. Gina and Cate have been trying to get more out of her all day, but I think she's right to respect your privacy. You are writing to Zoe, after all, not Zoe's three cousins who happen to be visiting. We know what we are able to infer from her responses, but that's it. Scout's honor.

Zoe says she asks you questions a lot of the time? So I thought I might throw in a few for you.

Do you have any idea what you want to do after high school? Any specific colleges you want to apply to or things you want to study or places you want to go? I know as a junior, you're probably sick of this question - I certainly was - but I'm curious, and I'm one of those irritating adults now, so I'm allowed to ask. \*insert wicked grin here. Possibly a cackle. I haven't decided yet\*

What are you studying in school right now, and what is your favorite subject?

How is your holiday going?

[Gina:]

Ugh, oh my God, Allie, those are the most boring questions ever. I lost my notebook rights for that? Lemme show you how it's done. I have until Zoe's out of the bathroom.

~~Do you have a girlfriend?~~

~~Do you want a girlfriend?~~

~~How do you feel about long distance?~~

~~Or hooking up with the cousin of a penpal you've never met?~~

[Allie:]

Oh, yes, Gina. You've sure shown me how it's done.

Cate would like to ask some questions now, so I will happily hand the notebook over to her.

[Cate:]

What is your favorite place to visit?

Who is the most famous person you've ever met?

~~What is your favorite band?~~ (Zoe says you already answered that one. Imagine Dragons -- I like them, too!)

Gina says my questions are as lame as Allie's, but Zoe's reminded her that only one of mine got crossed out. :)

What do you want to know about us?

[Gina:]

I am being allowed to reclaim the notebook if I apologize and promise to control myself. So, yes, fine, apologies, whatever.

Questions that you should actually answer:

Have you ever been water skiing? (Zoe's glaring at me like she's trying to decide if that's inappropriate. I ask you!)

Describe a perfect day.

What do you want to know about Zoe (and tell her she has to let us answer!)

[Zoe's writing, spaced out and messy:]

December 27

Alex,

Pardon my handwriting. I know I'm not supposed to be writing, but there are some things in your letter I want to address without sending it through the filter of my cousins, enthusiastic though they are. Don't worry, I'm being careful. It only hurts a little. It's not as bad as Gina made it sound.

[Allie:]

Be that as it may, Zoe is not supposed to be writing at all. Forgive my intrusion, but someone has to look out for the girl.

Okay. Zoe and I have chatted for about a half hour (It's approximately two in the morning, in case you were wondering), and we've come to an agreement. She's going to share a part of your letter



that's personal so that I can write her response for you, and I'm going to not mention any of this to Gina or Cate. She's actually pretty freaked about this - she's afraid you'll think she's betraying your trust. But she says that it's important she respond, and I'm not letting her write with second degree burns on her hand. So I'm hoping that you will be an understanding guy and forgive her for letting me in on a piece of your life. I promise to respect your privacy.

Now then. She wants to talk about your mom.

Zoe feels bad that she doesn't have a whole lot of advice to give that she feels would be helpful. Part of the reason she's never felt guilty about hating her biological father is because she knows exactly why he left. But you don't have that with your mom.

And she feels guilty and upset now that she's made such a big deal out of this and brought me in on the secret when she doesn't even have any advice to give you, and – hold on, Alex.

Okay, sorry. It's been a long day, and it's late, and her hand hurts more than she's letting on. And now she feels like she's failed you because she wants to help but she doesn't know how, and Zoe has never done well with that particular combination of truths. I've told her that no one expects a seventeen-year-old to be able to solve all of life's problems, and I've asked if she minds if I offer a bit of advice in her stead.

I don't know how much Zo has told you about me and my story, but her Aunt Rae is biologically my aunt as well. My parents were Rae's brother and sister-in-law, and they were killed in a car accident when I was four. I was in the car, too, but I don't remember the crash, and

apparently, I never did - trauma thing. What I remember is coming to my Aunt Rae's house and being very confused about where my parents were, because they obviously weren't there, and I felt like I was supposed to know, so I shouldn't ask. But for a long time, I thought they had dropped me off and abandoned me. It wasn't until I was six and Gina was born that I finally asked Mama if they were ever coming back. She was floored - she'd had no idea I hadn't understood that they were dead.

And to be honest, it kind of messed me up for a while. I won't get into details you don't care about, but I started seeing a counselor when I was thirteen and she was wonderful. I had all these things I wanted to say to my parents, some of which were years old, most of which were irrational, but it had gotten to the point where all of these things I would never get to say were all I could think about. My counselor did an exercise with me, where she gave me a journal and told me to just start writing to my Mom and Dad. She said not to worry about it making sense or being coherent, just to write and say all the things I wanted to say. And it sounds crazy, but it actually helped a lot.

That's my advice to you, Alex, because I think you're in a similar place. Write your Mom a letter. Not one you're going to send, don't think about her reading it exactly. Just start writing and see what comes out. It might surprise you. And hopefully, it will help, at least a little.

Zoe says she has more to tell you, about certain family things (and no, I don't know what that means), but that they can wait until she can hold a pencil for herself.

I told her I would let her write ten words to close out this letter, so this is where I will leave you. :)

[Zoe's writing, spaced out and messy:]

Merry Christmas, Alex. Don't be mad, please?

Your Friend,  
Zoe