

December 30

Alex,

Okay. First of all, sir, I did not put my hand in boiling water. I am easily distracted, less ambidextrous than I thought, and unwilling to break my grandmother's china by dropping it on the floor, but I am not stupid. The boiling water was poured over my hand. Accidentally. Okay? Okay. :)

My family is going to give me grief on this one for years. It used to be "Remember when Zoe cut her hair with safety scissors?" and "Remember when Zoe narrated everything happening in the house in case there were reality TV cameras hidden in the walls?" and "Remember when Zoe sat on the lap of that bearded stranger in the park to tell Santa what she wanted for Christmas?" (I'm trying to briefly reference the most embarrassing stories of my youth before Gina can get to them) Now it's gonna be "Remember when Zoe gave herself second degree burns trying to make tea?"

And it's barely a second degree burn! There's just one tiny spot on my hand that blistered, the rest is just red and sore. But yes, thank goodness for Nurse Joe, because otherwise, I would have had to go to the ER on Christmas Eve, which is not my idea of a good time.

Can I just say how much I loved your directions for this letter? Knowing that at the exact same moment, you and I were doing the exact same thing? It almost felt like we were sitting side by side, instead of miles apart. If my calculations are correct, you will get this on the 31st. At midnight exactly, when the ball drops to usher in the new year, will you raise a glass to me? I'll be raising one to you.

I'm glad you liked your Christmas gift. If I have anything to say about it, it will be the first of many. :)

Okay, I'm still supposed to be "taking it easy" in terms of writing, so Nurse Joe has instructed me to pass the notebook around and let Allie and Gina and Cate fill up some pages now. I'm glad their utter ridiculousness amused you. And don't worry, they only read what they were permitted to. :)

[Allie:]

Hi Alex. This is Allie, but let me give you a better introduction.

My full name is Alison Naoko Lancaster, and yes, that is Lancaster, not Lancastle. Common mistake, but we're used to it. I am 26 years old. I have a Bachelor's in Psychology and a Masters in Counseling from the University of Portland, and I am in the process of completing my two years of supervised clinical experience so I can get my license. I'm working toward becoming a Marriage and Family Counselor.

Let's see, what else? I am currently dating a lovely guy named Eric, and our three year anniversary is right around the corner. I am the very obviously adopted sibling, as my mother was Japanese-American and my dad was white. My favorite color is green, my favorite food is sushi (yes, I'm a walking cliché), my favorite season is autumn, my favorite flower is the daffodil, and my favorite coffee beverage is a café au lait, or a café miel if I can get it (espresso, steamed milk, honey, cinnamon, and pure deliciousness). I spent a year abroad in France during undergrad, and I find my cousin's lack of French-speaking skills appalling.

It is true that poetry-writing probably won't pay the bills, but you could always double major or major/minor with a Business degree of some sort. That's a universal focus that will always come in handy. But there's no stress on you to decide right now. Hell, there's not even stress to decide when you're actually in college. You can be Undeclared for ages if you want. Core classes usually take up two or three semesters just on their own, after all.

I'll leave you with that. I can't find Gina, so I will pass this along to Cate.

[Cate:]

Alex!!!!!! Did Zoe tell you my age?? Because you got it exactly right!! I am 16, and thank you for saying I am more mature than Gina. I've been saying it for years, and now I have proof.

How would I introduce myself? My name is Cate, short for Catelyn (my middle name is Veronica), and I am 16 years old and a junior at Sammamish High School (yeah, the name's awesome, I know. /sarcasm).

I am a varsity cheerleader for the football team (GO TOTEMS!!!!!!) and I'm playing varsity tennis in the spring.

I can tell you're a poet. "I think my favorite place to visit is one that I haven't found yet." I like that! Can I write it down and hang it in my locker??

Zoe told me about your dad, which is pretty cool. I mean, I guess technically, the most famous person I know is Aunt Lindsey, but I always forget about her. Have you ever read any of her novels? She

writes as Eleanor Garrison, historical fiction books? But I also met Bill Gates once!

Lemme go see if I can find Gina.

[Zoe:]

So it turns out that no one can find Gina because she is sulking because you identified her as thirteen when she is, in fact, nineteen. But as Allie said so well, if you act like a thirteen-year-old, you're going to get mistaken for a thirteen-year-old.

And you didn't have to pay any attention to her nonsense, Alex. I crossed out those comments and questions so you could ignore them. She's like that with everyone – she flirts with anything that breathes, and she's always trying to sniff out romance where there isn't any. Just yesterday, she was convinced that Eddie from Cuppa Joe's had fallen madly in love with Allie because he gave her a café au lait on the house because Shawn messed up her order. So, yeah. Just ignore her? Lord knows the rest of us do.

But since she won't get herself out here to write her own introduction, I'll have Allie do it.

[Gina:]

I'm here, I'm here. I don't need an older sister to write my introduction for me! And I was not sulking, Zoe, overdramatic much? I was just . . . off. Doing things. And stuff.

Anyway! I am Gina Rose Lancaster, I am 19 years old (thank you very much!), student of the University of Washington (and life!), marine

biologist to be, bisexual, punk rock chic, and all around awesome individual who does not flirt too much because there's no such thing..

(Zoe says I have to make it clear when I'm joking because I don't always come across that way, and I need to be more aware of communicative tone in purely text-based interactions. So, yeah, dude, I'm joking. It doesn't do to take me too seriously. Though there is a part of me that resents the implication that Catelyn is more mature than I am. Dude. Really? Did you see the excess of exclamation points? (YES, Zo. I'm kidding. Yeesh, Alex, you aren't the only protective one in this friendship. Oi vey))

And it's not that I think Zoe's not sharing things. Forthcoming is an excellent word for her. But as her family, it's my duty to tell embarrassing stories about her to all her friends. She stole my best material, though. ~~I'm gonna have to dig up some photos for you, Alex, because Zoe with a safety scissors haircut is one of the best things I've ever~~—

Okay, she's threatening to take the notebook away from me again. She wants me to stress that she was six and one of her cousins was egging her on, though I have absolutely no idea which cousin that could possibly be . . .

Peace out, Alex! Live life to the utmost, dude, and I will see you later! - G

[Zoe:]

Back to me, then. :) What haven't I covered?

You and Gabe aren't subtle, Alex. You think I don't know exactly what you two said to each other? Like, it's fine, and I don't have a problem with it or anything, but let's not play games here. I know exactly what this supposedly secret message was. :)

So, to unfortunately move away from the light-hearted stuff, I'm getting pretty worried about Lissa. Like, her letters, on the surface, are fine. But it seems to me that her cheerfulness is more forced each time she writes. And she won't say anything about her mom. I ask, every letter, for an update, and she writes back the next time like I didn't. I think Michelle is getting worse, and I don't know what to do about it if she won't talk about it! I thought that's why she wanted to write to me in the first place!

And I know what your perspective is on this, that you think I should just wash my hands of the whole situation, but if you could pretend like you already said that and move on to trying to brainstorm a solution with me, I'd really appreciate it. I know you said a few letters ago that I don't have to be the one to help her, that I could give her the name of a counselor, but you also asked in a letter before that one who I would rather she go to, a counselor removed from the situation or a girl close to her age who's been near where she is, so I know that on some level at least, you do think I can help her. I just need to find a way to get her to talk to me.

Now to the end of your letter. Yes, I've been avoiding it, but mainly because I wanted to wait until everyone had settled down for the night so I could respond to it without people looking over my shoulder.

Shit, Alex. I mean – holy shit. I feel blindsided by all this, so I can only imagine what you're going through right now.

You have to call her. You have to call your mom or write to her or something, even if you don't know what to say, because can you imagine what she thinks after all this time? She's sent birthday and Christmas letters and never heard back from you? She must think you hate her, that her actions were so unforgivable that you —

Sorry. I'm realizing as I'm writing how accusatory that sounds, and that's not what I mean. None of this is on you. And none of it's on her.

~~Man, your dad is a piece of work.~~

Sorry, that's not fair. I don't know him, I shouldn't say things like that. But I don't think terribly highly of him at the moment, and I kind of get where John is coming from, being pissed at him so much of the time.

~~Alex, of course it wasn't your fault that your mom~~

Alex, I hope that when you were out on your porch looking up at the stars while I was reading your letter, you could feel the hug I wanted so badly to give you. No one should have to go through stuff like this alone. Does Will know? Because he seems like someone you can talk to, and I really want you to have someone you can talk to about all this. I know you have me, and I'm happy to be that for you, but I'm not immediate.

Let me know what you decide to do, and please know that I'm here for whatever you need, okay?

Your Friend,

Zoe

PS - Happy new year. Got any resolutions?

PPS - Next letter should be back up to my usual length. I feel like I'm cheating you out of your novel-length letters, but to be fair, burned hand. :)