

Zoe,

We'll start with an easy puzzle to get back into it. Pick up your usual from the counter (it's been paid for), and then find the book you imagined me reading in your last letter on the public shelves in the back of Cuppa Joe's. Your letter is tucked in between pages 998 and 999.

January 11

Zoe,

I'm sorry it took me so long to write back to you, but I was trying to figure out how to say what I wanted to say without making you more upset. But I can't do it. So here's the deal. I won't talk about the situation with Lissa until you tell me I can. I can't see any other way of going about this.

It seems like the drama has decided to leave my life (finally!). The first few conversations with Mom have gone well. There's not much to tell you about them, because they're not exactly significant yet. I mean, look at how long it took for me to trust you, and with her, I have pre-existing grudges and prejudices that I need to get around. She asks me how school is, I ask her about work - that's something I can tell you, I guess. She has her own company of cleaning ladies out in D.C., and they clean government buildings! She doesn't get to do the White House - well, of course she doesn't, she's the boss, but her girls don't, and I like to imagine they make those really macho Secret Service people do it, for security reasons. Probably they give it to the new kid as hazing. Anyway she does a few offices on Capitol Hill, the Library of Congress, and a few others. It's amazing how well she has done for herself. I'm weirdly proud of her.

Even Emma seems to have ditched the drama. This boyfriend seems, well, different. It seems like a normal relationship. A lot of her previous relationships have been a constant cycle of fight and make-up, but Emma and Derek haven't actually had a fight yet, that I've seen or heard about - and usually I would, because she'd come and complain to me about exactly what he did wrong, until she finally forgives him. She and Derek are actually kind of, dare I say it, cute.

And, you know, if he continues to be the good guy he seems to be... I think I can be okay with it. I think maybe... maybe I'm finally getting past this stupid crush I've had for forever.

I suppose at some point I should reply to the content of your letter. Can you tell I've been avoiding it? I'm sorry. It's just there's lots that I want to say, and about 90% of it is stuff you don't actually want me to say.

If Gabe has seen a picture of me, then I really should get to see a picture of him, don't you think? I mean, he can approve of me all he wants, but if I don't find him acceptable, then he and I need to have a serious discussion about this friendship. ~~On the other hand, who am I to throw away the only~~ It'll be good to have a friend Emma doesn't ~~she can't~~ I suppose I can brave a few thrift stores for a friend as good as Gabe sounds.

Gabe's theme sounds fun. I think ours is going to be a cliché one, like your Tropical Paradise example. Surprisingly enough, I'm not entirely sure. Emma and I haven't been spending quite as much time together, what with the new boyfriend and all. (Have I told you she's on prom committee?) I'm sure if I asked her, she would tell me, but I haven't.

Okay, but here's the thing you don't get about my family. I said "I have a penpal, her name is Zoe," and all my relatives assumed things, not because they're like Gina, but just because I told them about you. It is not my fault that my family assumes if someone's that important to me, then I must be dating her, because that is not true. I've told them about Emma after all, and-- well, I guess just Emma, ~~I don't~~ Just because I tell them about someone doesn't mean I'm dating her, æ

~~matter how hard they might wish it did!~~ And, if you keep copies of your letters, I suggest you re-read them. Gina may have been the most obvious about it, but I don't think she was the only one who was rooting for a romantic relationship.

That's odd to think about, isn't it? We've never even met each other, and the people in our lives want us to get together. It's interesting.

I may not have seen your face, Zoe, but I have seen you. I see you in every letter you write. Your personality just blasts through every word, you can't help it. I always felt like, when I met you in person, it wouldn't matter that I hadn't seen your face. I would still know it was you. Of course, now we can't test that theory, because I'll know it's you from your picture (unless you drastically change the color of your hair between now and then - is it still green?). But, well, it's like they tell you in Kindergarten, it's not what's on the outside that matters.

I... don't know what we do if we meet unexpectedly. Honestly, I don't! You're going to be incredibly busy soon, though, so I kind of doubt it will happen unless we plan it to. Maybe we should plan it, just to get it over with? But what if we don't want to write letters anymore once we meet?? What if we drive each other nuts in person? I'm not ready to give the letters up yet, you know?

These rhetorical questions of ours feel kind of really important, even though they're rhetorical.

Alex