

February 6

Alex,

~~You can be kind of a dick sometimes, you know that?  
Like, I say this with all the respect in the world, but it took me a full  
minute and a half of panicked, and yes, slightly heartbroken self-  
loathing to recognize that “Go climb a tree. No really, I mean it,” was an  
odd way for you to tell me to fuck off, and for that 90 seconds, I was  
legitimately upset, thinking that I’d screwed up that badly and that you  
were that pissed at me. Like, it honest to God took Jimmy coming after  
me with your map of the park that had gotten pushed to the back of the  
shelf for me to figure out that this was another one of your puzzles. Just  
— bad timing, you know? I was really nervous about your reaction, and  
now I just feel like you’re laughing at me, and it’s not great, okay?~~

~~—— And there’s a part of me that wants to end that paragraph with  
something super passive-aggressive like, “See if I ever care about your  
reactions ever again!” but then I remind myself that a) I don’t mean that,  
and b) I’m seventeen-freaking-years-old, not twelve, and c)~~

It occurred to me as I was writing the above that there is a very  
real possibility — like, 99%, now that I’m actually stopping to think  
about it — that your “Go climb a tree” was not some kind of payback  
meant to make me think that you were so pissed at my lapse that you  
decided to stop writing. If I’m right and it never even occurred to you  
that said comment could be taken in that way, then please, read on as  
if I never mentioned it. But if I’m wrong, and that was your intention,  
then my scribbles shouldn’t be too hard to read through, potential  
jackass.\*

\*The word ‘potential’ is the most important part of that phrase.

Let's try this again.

I am very glad that you are not either a) upset with me or b) hurt by me. I am glad that there's a voice of reason in your head.

When Michelle dies, I will let you know. For now, she's still hanging in there, as are Lissa and Thom and me, of course. Thom and Betsy weren't exactly thrilled that I gave Lissa all the details of her mom's case, but I think Michelle talked to them, because they haven't said anything about it. I don't regret telling her at all. I regret the loss of innocence, but the situation did that, not me. I'm just trying to help her cope.

I will accept owing you a colossal favor, though, to be fair, there is the argument to be made that having to climb that freaking tree this afternoon was punishment enough. Did Gina go behind my back and tell you about the Great Tree Climbing Disaster of 2007? You asked me once to catalogue my faults for you; did I include on that list that I am massively uncoordinated and that the last time I tried to climb a tree, I ended up with eight stitches in my head? No? Well, yeah. That's a thing that happened. I bested the tree this time around, but I'm fairly certain I made a fool of myself and probably shouldn't set foot in that park ever again.

. . . Banana peppers? You would do that me? I know I agreed to any punishment you could think of, but . . . I thought we were friends, Alex.\*

Okay, I refuse to believe that you are unbelievably bad at every game. It is now my life goal to find a game that you kick ass at. Because I know there is one. Don't write off my stubborn determination.

We can start small – finding a game that I suck worse at! It shouldn't take long; a kid I used to babysit once beat me at chess in, like, three moves. I'm lousy at chess. Can you play chess? I suck pretty hard at pinochle, too, and I don't have the stoicism for poker. I bet you have an awesome poker face. We'll work our way up from there.

Okay, you and Lissa need to start a Kevin Larson & Zoe Ballard fanclub, you know that? You've got all the evidence to suggest that I like him, and she's got all the evidence to suggest that he likes me, but I have to say, neither of you are making terribly convincing arguments.

Lissa says he does all the things guys do when they like a girl, which I just — that's massively unfair, that a thirteen-year-old girl is better at figuring that out than I am. I'm really bad at it. I have a notorious track record of getting it wrong when it comes to telling if guys are interested or not.

That makes it sound like all I ever do is date guys or think about dating guys, doesn't it? Which is not at all accurate. Mostly I'm just referring to asking/being asked to dances in middle and high school.

Anyway, Lissa's pulling her evidence from yesterday afternoon. Kev wanted to sit and talk, but I told him that I had massive amounts of work to get through, which is true – Ms. Willowwick wants me to give this Merchant of Venice presentation to her cast on Friday, and dramaturgy is more in depth than I realized! So I told him I had to get work done, and I couldn't sit and talk. So he sat at his own table a few away from mine and kept flicking me notes folded into paper footballs. When Lissa came out to start her homework with me, she caught one just as it came sailing above the table and read it. Then she just gave

me this knowing, wide-eyed glance, and snarked about him liking me, which I informed her was just not true.

So then, he started flicking over notes for me and Lissa, but he got Lissa to smile at least three times, so I forgave him for being a nuisance most of the afternoon.

But yeah, you and Lissa should start a fanclub, where you can discuss this to your hearts' content, and leave me out of it.

I'm more than happy to talk about the things you brought up about physicality and romance, because this is really an interesting idea. I mean, if Tumblr has taught me anything, it's that romantic attraction and physical attraction are not the same thing. But even leaving that aside, you've also got, you know, the couple who meets online and gets to know one another that way long before they decide to meet in person, or that couple from that movie You've Got Mail, who fell in love anonymously over email before they even knew who the other person was. To say nothing of all the couples in long-distance relationships who don't have the option of even the most casual physical contact.

So yes, there is a physical part to romance, but I certainly don't think it's a requirement or anything. I think it's more than possible for a romantic relationship to grow in the same way as our friendship has -- without any in-person meeting. Which of course brings up the issue of where we do we draw the line between what constitutes a friendship and what constitutes a romance, but that is a whole different question, and I already feel like I'm rambling, so, yeah. I'll leave that there for now.

Nothing's wrong with dreaming big, but, I don't know. It's like in a kindergarten class, when you ask the kids what they want to be when they grow up, and they all shout out these huge, big, epic things – superhero, astronaut, rock star, president. You know it's not gonna come true for most of them because it can't and because the world needs, you know, garbage men and accountants and plumbers and janitors, but those aren't the jobs you hear kindergartners shouting out at sharing time. Smithsonian curator is my kindergarten shout out. And seventeen isn't about thinking big, not the way you mean. Seventeen and this close to graduation is about thinking realistically. Not that those things are mutually exclusive, but — I have no problem with aiming high, I have no problem with challenging yourself with your goals, but you also have to aim realistically, or you set yourself up for a life of disappointments, thinking you've failed if you have to become the garbage man or the plumber or the janitor.

You . . . hit things too on the mark sometimes, you know that? I think, honestly, that the prospect of picking myself up and leaving town and moving somewhere where I don't know anyone is terrifying. I know I pride myself on my ability to make friends, but it's easier when you know that there are already friends around, and if I moved, there wouldn't be. If I pursue the museum thing, if I'm gonna go for it, then I'm gonna go for it. I'm gonna head where the history is, straight for Colonial Williamsburg or Ellis Island or DC. If I go for this, I'm not gonna stay in California, and that's what scares me. That it's all or nothing. That it's here, where everything is familiar, or it's brand-new territory, where nothing is.

Maybe we shouldn't ever meet. Because if our friendship remains solely on paper, it'll never have to feel like I'm moving away from you,

or like you're moving away from me. I'm mostly kidding. But still, there's a grain of truth in that.

I'm sorry about Emma, since I don't think I said that before. It sucks, that she gave up on something that seemed so good for her, and maybe you can help. I hope you can. Maybe she just needs an outside perspective. So I hope you can help. I'm glad she has a friend like you to fall back on. And I'm glad that my forgetfulness fell so conveniently.

Anyway. Talk to you soon.

Your Friend,  
Zoe