

February 22

Alex,

I am going to try really hard in this letter to be more like the Zoe we all know, and it might even be close to being genuine. :)

Your letter helped a lot, actually. Thank you for being so supportive. And understanding, and apologetic. and so you.

I'm okay with the lack of puzzles right now. Not that I don't love your puzzles, but I don't want you to go to the extra trouble, or send Emma to the extra trouble.

You do have a very nice voice! I like listening to it. In a weird way, it helps me know you better. It also makes me want to record myself for you, to put us back on even footing! But I don't have the savvy for that, so I'm afraid that will have to wait.

There is a weakness in this kind of communication, though. It's far easier for me to hear you start to say something and change your mind than it was to read through your scribbles, and I'm very curious about what things you were planning to say before you worded them differently.

~~Cute? I wasn't cute, why on earth would you think~~ I don't know what you mean, actually. I certainly didn't feel cute writing that apology. I felt like I had monumentally screwed up, which is not a feeling I enjoy. If I do something wrong, and the other person just brushes it off and I think I deserve worse, I feel like I'm forgiven too easily? Like, I worry constantly that the confrontation is being avoided to avoid unpleasantness, but that something is still lingering beneath the

surface. That's what scared me with us – I was afraid that you were just saying we were okay over my screw up to keep me from feeling worse, but that ~~secretly, you were just~~

I don't know. It's stupid. I'm trying to get past it.

I can actually hear you smiling. I like it.

Don't be frustrated with yourself on my account, okay? It's not your fault that this happened when it did, ~~and you're not responsible for as much of my decision to step back from Lissa and everything as you think you are.~~ It's not your fault it happened at all.

I was so afraid that if I had to step back from the Lissa situation, Mom or Joe or Gabe ~~or you~~ (no, sorry. Not you), would say, "I told you so." Not in so many words, but in attitude or subtext. None of them have, though. You've all been unbelievably supportive, and that's helped more than anything. I think I'll be ready, come next Tuesday, to take it all up again.

I did take the time to call Lissa last week, because I didn't want her to think me taking two weeks off was because of anything she had done. We talked on the phone for almost an hour, and I'm taking her to see Merchant of Venice on Friday. Mom and Joe are also coming, and I can't wait to show off my lobby display. It looks amazing, and I'm so proud of it. I wish you could see it, too.

Alex Carter, are you telling me that when you eat a banana pepper, all you can taste is banana pepper, even when you're done eating the banana pepper??? What kind of horrible food is this? Why are you so keen to send me to the tenth level of hell? (Yes. Tenth, This

is one Dante didn't know about. I don't know what you do to end up there, and I'm not sure I want to!) But fine, if I ever decide to put myself through that kind of torture, you can have a front row seat. But only if I get to drown you in caramel or marshmallow fluff after.

Alex, I want to meet you, of course I do. I talk about it all the time, don't I? ~~I just, I'm afraid you won't like me in person.~~

No, Zo. Go ahead and say it; it's the truth.

I'm afraid you won't like me in person. Which is dumb, I know that. But that's my fear. Like, what if my voice drives you crazy? What if you can't stand how much I talk with my hands? What if my personality is overwhelming in person rather than endearing or cute or anything else you've called it in your letters? I have been told that I am intense, and at the time, I didn't care, but with you, I do. I don't think I could stand it if you walked away from the encounter going "This is the girl I thought I knew and liked so well?" and not wanting anything more to do with me. I do want to meet you. I just, I know it's irrational, but I keep dwelling on all the things I could do wrong to make you never want to see me again. You're not the only one in this friendship with an anxiety about people leaving. Remember who my biological father is, after all. But please understand that despite those fears, I can't imagine a life without you and your letters in it anymore, and I don't want to. So I hope that's answer enough.

(Also, Alex, please don't call yourself a jackass, okay? You aren't, and you've never acted like one. Please don't take one of the things I most regret writing and use it to beat yourself up. Please.)

You're right. I didn't tell you very much about that week. ~~And it's not too much to ask, but everything that~~

Alex, I've never kept anything from you. But this is going to be the first. I am okay, no one hurt me (or at least, not deliberately or in any way they could control), and no one needs to beat anyone up. I just feel like an idiot. The whole thing was my fault, I put myself in that situation, and I just feel like a total imbecile, and I don't want to relive it. It's nothing about you, it's just that it's already all I can think about, and I want to stop thinking about it, but I don't know how. I just think that talking about it more isn't the answer. I appreciate that you want to help. It means a lot. But I am okay. Or I will be.

But you want a long letter, and you want to hear what happened this week, so I'll tell you. It may not be what you want me to talk about, but it's something.

I saw young love bloom and wither and die in about three minutes on a playground. A boy and a girl, maybe five, were playing tag, only instead of tagging the girl, the boy grabbed her hand and started walking her around the swings. It was picturesque -- until another little girl ran up and kissed the boy on the cheek. The first girl threw a handful of mulch in the boy's face and stormed off, their love affair tragically cut short.

Mom and I went out for a girls' night, because we haven't had one in a while. I got my nails done – bright blue. I talked to her about a lot of things, which was good, really good. She likes Lissa. Says they've gotten on really well this week, and I'm glad. I asked her if it was awkward, seeing Thom, and she said that the hurt of everything was so

long ago, and she's such a different person now, that it hardly even affects her anymore.

Joe proposed again. On Valentine's Day. Mom said no.

I reconnected with Caela Worthen. She and I were close when we were younger, but in junior high, she chose sports and I chose not-sports, and we drifted apart. But Jimmy got her to audition for Merchant, and after my presentation, she asked if I would work with her one-on-one, so we spent a lot of time together the last couple weeks. Sometimes we would talk Shakespeare and sometimes we would talk boys and other, you know, girl stuff, and I haven't had anyone to do that with for a while, so that was nice.

Gabe keeps having to postpone prom dress shopping (because of course I'm going prom dress shopping with him, I'm pretty sure I signed a contract in blood) because he's so swamped. Which is fine. I mean, there's no rush yet. And I don't think I want to go to prom with anyone this year. Like, I want to go – I have to go – but I'm going to be so busy on prom night with tickets and with Grand March, that I'll make a lousy date. ~~Besides, the only person I~~ I'll have more fun with a big group of friends.

I went back to the park, to climb your tree again and see if I could do it better the second time. I couldn't. Someday, when your arms have fully healed, you will have to take me there, and show me the finer points of tree climbing. Somehow, I missed that lesson in my childhood.

I'm getting my stripe redyed next weekend. Tell me what color to do.

I'm running out of things to say. But I already feel better, I think.

I had two questions I asked and never answered. Sorry about that. As to my superhero, well, I thought I had an answer, (~~Aurora Borealis—weather manipulation~~) but I don't like it anymore. I don't think it fits. I think I'd like to be able to heal? I could be The Doctor, just to confuse everyone ("No, I can't take you through time and space, but I can cure your cough!").

If I could experience one day in history, it would be the Christmas Eve truce of 1914. Do you know that story? The English and German troops stopped fighting and lay down their weapons for the night. They sang Christmas carols together, and played a football match in No Man's Land. For one night, they came together and had peace, and I want to see that.

Now for your questions. The silliness made me smile, so thank you.

1) What's green and has wheels? (Answer in the post script — don't you dare look ahead!)

2) I don't know! This is such a mean question! I am fascinated by the Great Depression and how it changed societal norms and political expectations in the country. I also love the Salem Witch Trials, and the evolving nature of religion in general (the eleven-year gap in England's monarchy is also fascinating for this reason). But I also really like looking at the juxtaposition of history -- like, what was happening elsewhere in the world during events that seem all-consuming to us, like the Civil War?

Mean question.

3) My favorite compliment is any of the myriad you've given me over the course of our letters.

4) I love the smell of sycamore trees, random as that is.

5) My bedroom, lamely enough, is probably my safest space. I've worked really hard to make it into a place where I feel completely comfortable. Three of the walls are this gorgeous burnt-orange copper color, and the last wall is dark blue, but it bleeds off the wall into the orange at the corners, and then we splattered over the blue with copper and bronze and gold, so it looks like the night sky. And Gabe helped me take all these little origami stars that I fold all the time and thread them and hang them from the ceiling. Anything that makes me feel good about life -- quotes, song lyrics, pictures, photographs, etc -- gets tacked to the wall above and around my desk. And, yeah. That's my safe space.

Alex, it sounds like Emma is starting to recognize what an amazing friend she has. I'm glad. You deserve to have friends who know what you're worth, and how lucky they are to have you in their lives. So I'm happy for you.

Thanks for everything.

Your Friend,  
Zoe