

February 28

Alex,

I left you in suspense on that punchline for two letters. I'm so sorry about that.

What's green and has wheels?

Grass. (I lied about the wheels).

Alex, thank you. Your last letter was exactly what I needed to hear. You're right. I haven't been myself, and that needs to stop. I've had my wallow, I've spent two weeks in self-torture, and now it's time to be done. No one ever died of unrequited love. Like everything else in the world, you deal and you move on.

I do want him to be happy, and that's what I need to keep sight of. I want him to be happy more than I want to be with him, so that's a step in the right direction, I think. Thank you so much for your amazing outpouring of love friendship and support and affirmation. (Okay, way to sound like a telethon host, Zoe. Nicely done. "Continue your generous support, and you'll receive a free "Save the Whales!" tote bag! But WAIT! There's MORE!") Seriously, though, hearing you so willing to stand up and be there for me helped more than anything.

Though there is one thing I think you got wrong. He does know how, as you put it, fantastic I am. That's just not the same as being interested. There's someone else in his picture. And I can't control that. I have to learn to let go of the things outside of my control.

I dyed my stripe hot pink, at your suggestion. I don't feel hot pink yet, but I think the pink in my hair will help me get there. That being said, I do have to take a moment to introduce some new drama. Hooray. Just what we both needed, right?

Today was supposed to be my first day back at the HCC, but there was also a Merchant production team decompression meeting after school that I wanted to go to. So I told Lissa that Mom would pick her up and take her over, but that I would meet her there around 4:30.

Lissa was waiting for me when I got there, really excited to see me, and that felt good. She loved my hair. She couldn't stop talking about it, how much she loved the pink, how much better she liked it than the green, what color I thought I would do next. And then she asked if I would take her to get a stripe put in her hair. I told her that was a question for her dad, and that was when she asked me why I always call him her dad, not our dad.

I mean, I can't pretend I didn't know this conversation was coming. But I thought I'd have some more warning. I was honest. I told her that I don't call him my dad because he isn't. She wanted a better explanation, and I tried to put her off with an "It's complicated," but she wasn't having any of it.

"Grown-ups say that all the time, and usually, it's not actually that complicated. You just don't want to explain," is what she told me. Smart kid, my half-sister. After that, it's not like I had much of choice, you know?

So I told her. I took her out onto a terrace, and I told her the story. And I found myself altering it. Like, not changing the events at all, but

telling them differently than I usually do, trying to soften the blow, I guess. And I never thought I'd do that, never thought I'd give Thom that courtesy. But he's her dad.

And for some reason, when I finished, I felt the need to tell her that it all happened two decades ago, and I was sure he was different now, that he'd already showed an improvement because he was still around.

Then she asked, "But I don't get it. If he left your mom when he thought she was dying, why hasn't he left mine who actually is?"

Before I could figure out what to say to that, Thom answered for me: "Because I left Zoe's mom."

He'd been standing there listening the whole freaking time, Alex. Lissa was all apologetic, but he told her it was okay, he was glad she knew, that she deserved to know. And then he asked her if he could talk to me.

Lissa, bless her heart, said that that was a question for me. I asked him if he wanted to talk about Lissa, and he said no, so I turned around then, to tell him to go to hell. But I caught Lissa's eye, and said instead that I would listen to him for three minutes.

I won't get into the specifics of the conversation. It's not worth it, and it will just get me pissed off again, but basically, he tried to argue that I didn't know everything that had happened, and he tried to feed me this sob story about how his mother had died and how horrible it had been for him and how my mom was all that had gotten him through it, and how he couldn't face the prospect of doing the same all alone

when my mom died. That he hadn't intended to leave Mom in the middle of her surgery, that he'd just stepped out for some fresh air, and then couldn't bring himself to go back in. And afterward, he couldn't face the fact that she would have forgiven him and welcomed him back.

It was all a bunch of bullshit, and then he started talking about how he recognized God's test in Michelle's illness, recognized that this was his chance to set past mistakes to right, and I was just done. I tried to call him out on how unbelievably selfish that whole misguided viewpoint is, and that's when he actually had the nerve to try and tell me that I was pissed at him not because he's a selfish, self-centered douche-weasel who deserves every guilt-ridden day that he's suffered, but because he "condemned me to growing up without a father."

~~I just How do you even~~ I hate him so much, Alex. I can't believe that he honestly thinks —

Whatever. I don't care. I needed to get it out, and I wanted to fill you in, but yeah. That's the first real conversation I've ever had with my biological father. Went really well, don't you think? But whatever. It happened, it's done, let's move on to happier things.

Translate 'chica' for this French-speaking girl? :)

I wish you could have come to Merchant – it was an amazing show. Everyone did so well. I think it's one of the best shows we've put on in years.

I'm glad that Emma is picking activities that actually interest both of you. ~~It sounds like she's becoming a better friend I just mean~~ No. I do mean that. I'm glad Emma's becoming a better friend. Because I

was worried about that for a while. I didn't say anything, because it wasn't really my place, but I did notice it, and I'm glad that you two are getting closer.

I'm not sure what to tell you about talking to Emma about her guilt. I guess, well, what would you say to me in that situation? Because you always seem to know the right thing to say with me. If I felt like I had caused this, what would you say to me?

Keep your gross, spicy, take-away-my-ability-to-taste-sweet foods to yourself, sir! I want no part of your twisted, evil crimes against taste buds. And hey – there are far worse ways to go than drowning in caramel. At least you'd die happy.

I'm sorry you were so nervous about sending me these recordings. I'm sorry that I feel so nervous about the prospect of meeting you. It shouldn't be like that, should it? Like, how ridiculous is it for us to be so nervous with each other? We know each other so well – we're just like any other close friends.

So let's make a deal. When we do meet, whether by accident, spontaneous decision, or pre-conceived plan, promise me that the first thing you say will not be a greeting. Don't say hi or hey, don't say my name like you're not sure whether or not it's me. Come up to me and start like we're already in the middle of a conversation. You don't get nervous about calling out to a friend on the street, right? That's how it should go. Because being afraid of each other, in any capacity, well, that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. So none of that anymore. Deal?

It's not that I'm not excited about prom. It's just that I don't care about having a date. Maybe I'll feel different when it's my senior prom, but this year, it's the one I'm planning. I'm gonna be too busy for a date. And when have I ever expressed a desire for Prince Charming to come sweep me off my feet? That's not my style, and he's not my type.

Your joke made me snort, Alex. Snort, and that's not a thing girls like to admit to. (And I'd argue that the joke was actually incredibly appropriate, given the circumstances :)) Thank you, again, for making me laugh. And hey – that friend who gave you that Christmas present? She sounds pretty cool. I hope you hold onto her.

And for Emma:

Hi, Emma. Thanks for taking such good care of Alex, I'm really glad you can be there for him. We talk about you a little, but not much, don't worry. You're his best friend, so you're bound to come up. My best friend does, too. Anyway. Keep him out of trouble, okay?

I think that's all I have for Emma.
You should end your recordings with "Talk to you soon." Because you will, and it will always promise something to look forward to.

I hope I'm back to sounding like myself again, but you'll be a better judge than me, I think. So. What's the verdict?

Your Friend,
Zoe