

March 9

Alex,

Lissa just told me that she doesn't want to be in the room when her mom dies. What do you say to that?

I'm at the HCC. I don't have your next CD, but, well, writing is how I distract myself, and I really need the distraction right now.

She doesn't want to be in the room when her mom dies. She lives in dread that her mom is going to pass away during the hours she visits, and she won't be able to escape it, and she doesn't know how to tell Betsy or Thom.

And the thing is, I can't blame her. I forced myself to go talk to Joe about what it looks like when someone dies, and I don't want to be in the room, either.

Michelle is sedated pretty much 24/7 now, for the pain. I'm actually in the room as I'm writing this, because I don't want Lissa in here on her own. I'm in with Michelle right now, how depressing is that? Does it soak into the page at all? Can you tell?

Kevin's grandfather passed away last week, so Kevin's not here anymore. He sends me texts, though. His grandpa left almost everything to him, including their house and almost all his savings. Hardly any of it went to Kevin's aunt, so she said he can clear out of her place now that he has one of his own. Well, he might have a house, sure, but he's 18. He doesn't know if he can afford the upkeep of it or the bills on it, even with the inheritance, and what happens to it when he goes to college? He's thinking about selling it, you know, in between

getting his calculus done and trying to graduate high school. Kevin's having a hard time, and I'm trying to help. But it's frustrating. I don't have the tools for this. I'm seventeen, and I've lived a relatively sheltered life – who put me in charge of helping all these people cope with death and all the things that come with it? Do you tell an eighteen-year-old that he needs to sell the last thing he has of his grandfather so he can put himself through college? Do you tell a thirteen-year-old that she needs to sit in a room while her mother dies, like actually dies, not just exists in the process of dying?

I wasn't that much older than Lissa when my Nana died. But that was different. She was 86. She had pneumonia. I wasn't there when it happened. I was at school. Joe came to get me, and as soon as they called my name on the PA system, I knew. But we didn't go back to the hospital. We went home. I wasn't there when she died, and I didn't have to see her.

God, this is depressing. I'm sorry. You don't want to hear about this. I'm just rambling on about death and dying and hospitals and sickness because as soon as I stop writing, I have to look up, and when I look up, I have to see Michelle, and Thom, who walked in a little bit ago and wants to talk again, I can tell from the look in his eyes. But this isn't the time. I don't want to have an argument with him while his wife is dying, which, I mean, I know I already did, last time around, but it feels different now.

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Got back later than usual from the HCC because traffic was a freaking nightmare, and just for fun, I thought I'd stop by Cuppa Joe's,

you know, just to see, and what do you know -- TWO CDs waiting for me? I feel so spoiled! :)

I'm home now and about to listen. There is no direction on which one to listen to first, so I guess it doesn't matter? I shall pick one at random.

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March 10

Alex. That CD was six hours long. That was nuts. It was also the most amazing thing anyone has given me in recent memory, so don't you dare apologize for it!

And are you kidding me? Of course I listened to the whole thing! Well, almost. I fell asleep for a couple hours in the middle . . .

I started listening at about nine last night and you said it would be two hours long, so I thought, Okay. Two hours. I can get ready for bed while I listen and then turn off the light when it's done.

I grabbed my notebook to keep track of the things I wanted to respond to, but I lost track of time, and around eleven, I think, I actually fell asleep, and I didn't wake up until I heard Joe at my bedroom door saying, "Zoe, do you have a boy in your room?"

In hindsight, it's kind of hysterical. I was so disoriented, and Joe was so confused. That was at about two. Joe told me to "kick my penpal out from under my bed" and go to sleep, but I didn't. I felt like I had an obligation to see you out to the end, even if I'd missed a couple hours.

So I turned out the light, but I didn't go to sleep. I turned down the volume and kept listening. It was almost three am when I finished listening to it. It felt like you were in ~~my~~ the room with me, telling me about your day. Like any other pair of friends, talking into the night far later than they should. And . . . yeah. It was nice.

Of course, I'm writing this in between classes at school right now, and I'm a zombie. Luckily, most of my teachers are filled in on the whole Michelle situation, and so they're assuming that my decidedly lackluster performance today is related to that, and I'm not disabusing them of that notion (yes, okay? I'm working the system for my own personal gain. It's a one time thing, unless you make this a habit).

I'm going off my notes, here, but they're only coherent for, like, hours one and two, and I don't know that I'm gonna get to responding to all six, okay? Just so we know that going in. I mean, I still have disc two that I haven't even heard yet! :)

You were not being a shitty friend. I was being a shitty friend for making you feel guilty.

There aren't a lot of people who could build a functioning commune on a desert island with the contents of one backpack, so consider me impressed (and very glad you are one of my West Coast backpacking companions next summer — don't think I've forgotten this!)

Hey! I am very real, thank you very much! :P What, do you think somewhere in the deep, dark places of your mind, that I'm running a long con?

Well! You found me out! There is no Zoe Ballard! All of this has been a construction meant to lure you into my tangled web of lies, deceit, infamy, and iniquity! I am no seventeen-year-old high school female. I am, in fact, the Chief of Police of a nearby planet (though for confidentiality reasons, I can't disclose which one). I was sent here to see if Earth had any subjects worthy of induction (by which I mean forced abduction) into our army.

I landed on earth some time ago, near New Zealand, and I trained a kiwi bird in the art of disguise and espionage. He's been working at Cuppa Joe's all this time and passing me information by means of our telepathic connection.

Soon all will be in place. You will receive, for your seventeenth birthday, a pocket watch – or at least, that's what you think it will be. But it is actually a teleportation device. It will take you up to our waiting ship as soon as you touch it, and there I will be, in the guise of this Zoe Ballard, to give you one brief moment of familiarity before I reveal my true form to you and take you away to fight an intergalactic war against your will!

(There was supposed to be a third thing in that story, but I can't read my handwriting and I can't remember what it was. I've failed you.)

Of course, I was going to fail you anyway -- didn't you tell me once you weren't a prose writer? Liar. That constellation story was one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard, Alex, and I know you weren't reading off of any notes because how would you have written them? You made that up off the top of your head, and I kind of hate you at the moment (Except not really at all, but my jealousy and envy know no equal).

Okay, I'm going to need to know what songs you didn't like on my mix, because I might need to reevaluate our friendship based on which of my favorite songs you somehow don't see the appeal of. :) Kidding, of course (though thank goodness you said you love Hamilton, because that one might have been a friendship-breaker for real). But no, it's because I might make you another one of these, and I need to know what to avoid.

And hey, Neil Diamond is a lot better than people think he is! You just have to have the right attitude when you listen to him.

Sorry, I can't even write that with a straight face. That's what my mom keeps telling me, but "Sweet Caroline" is the only song of his I even remotely like. I'm working on a theory that you have to be a middle-aged woman to understand the appeal, so check back with me in 30 years, and I'll let you know.

And there were only, like, four oldies songs on that CD, if you count Rainbow Connection, which I don't, because Muppets transcend era. I could make you an entire three CD collection of just Elvis, Frank Sinatra, and the Monkees if I was so inclined. And Neil Diamond. I actually pulled the list from my Most Listened To playlist, but I pulled in alternates so that the CD wasn't entirely the Beatles and Sara Bareilles.

That's where I stopped taking notes because that's just about where I fell asleep. The other thing that really stands out was, thank you for the poetry. That was really special. I don't read enough poetry because, I'll admit, I have trouble getting into it. But maybe it's all in hearing it recited. So thank you for that.

Okay. School is done and I don't work for another hour and it's Friday, so I can put off homework while I listen to CD two! I figure after such a long, wonderful contribution from you, I might as well write a few more pages than usual on my end.

You are an invalid who needs to fill his time – I don't know why you didn't track down and start watching Doctor Who yesterday. Well, maybe you did. I have no way of knowing.

Hey! That should be your next six hour letter! Live-recording a marathon of Doctor Who! :)

Yeah, I should have picked this CD to listen to first – it would have prepared me for my six-hour adventure a little better! :) No, seriously. My six-hour letter is one of the favorite things I own right now. Have I told you lately how awesome you are?

Sorry, I misunderstood! I am, actually, so unused to getting requests for presents that I thought you were talking about getting something for me for your birthday! Now, usually, my policy is that choosing a gift off a wish list is cheating, but! You are the exception to this, because you are so adamantly anti-gift that I am really interested to know what you would actually ask for. So by all means, lay it on me.

Zoe's Rules are a thing I came up with . . . a week ago. So right now, there's only the one. But you're right, I should work on this list. Rules for Being. Got any suggestions?

Who knows – the extra vitamins might help you heal faster. Or give you superpowers. Either way, you win, right?

And it never really felt like you were running out of time for me, okay? It certainly doesn't anymore, and I hope I didn't come across as — never mind. I'm gonna get muddled again if I try to explain more.

And despite the dangerous precedent you have set, I will not be expecting six hour letters from you from now on. Promise. :) But thank you. For caring enough to do that. When you become **involved with someone** friends with someone, you know that you take up space in their life, but usually, it's hard to measure. You made the measuring easier, and that's

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Sorry. Wow, we're just gonna do everything in one letter, aren't we? I'd leave this for later, but I want to write it down while it's fresh in my head, so I'm going to go on for a few more pages, okay?

I was in the middle of writing the above when I got a frantic text from Lissa at the HCC. She thought Michelle was about to die, like actually about to die in the room right then, and she was freaking out and begged me to come, so of course I did. I called work and let them know I wouldn't be coming in and I drove out to Carlsbad.

Michelle is stable for now, she pulled out of whatever downward slope she was on, but Lissa was a mess, so I talked to Thom, about how she doesn't want to be in the room. I told him that even though it wasn't my decision, I thought he should respect that wish. He, however, made the conversation about other things.

Actually it's my fault we ended up having at least part of the conversation he wanted, because I gave him the opening. I got too caught up in scolding him and making sure he knew that he couldn't get



so wrapped up in his own grief that he forgot about Lissa. I told him he has to be there for her, 100% present, and he used that comment to remind me that he thinks we need to talk.

I thought about making some kind of sarcastic comment. I thought of about three of them, actually, but in the end I just shook my head and told him that we shouldn't have that conversation while his wife was dying.

And for the first time, he got short with me. He said, "Well, my wife is never not going to be dying, Zoe." He went on to say that we were running out of time to have our conversation, and that it was one we needed to have, for Lissa's sake. And, yeah, he got me with that. Because I don't want to lose sight of Lissa, either. So I agreed to the conversation, but I told him it wasn't going to happen today, that he had to let me get ready for it. That he owed me that (also, I'm just too exhausted to do that today, but I didn't tell him that).

He looked like he wanted to argue, but he did say okay. So now I have that conversation to look forward to this weekend, probably tomorrow, but I'm gonna see if I can hold it off until Sunday.

He wants to "clear the air." He said he wants me to have the chance to "get things off my chest." But the thing is, I don't even know what's on my chest. I have no idea what I want to say to him at this point. So, can I ask a strange favor? What do you think I want to say to him? I know that's a weird question, but sometimes, when it comes to Thom, you express what I'm struggling with better than I do. No pressure, though, okay? Like, if you don't know what to say, don't stress about it. I'll figure it out.

Thanks for getting through this ridiculously long letter. And —

Just thanks.

Yours,

Zoe