

March 13, 5 am

Alex,

~~I'm sorry again for~~ ~~Sorry, no apologizing~~ Damn it. When did apologizing become my default setting?

Well, if I can't apologize, can I at least say thank you again for talking to me on the drive over here? I know I cut off kinda abruptly. Ms. Douglas, the neighbor staying with Lissa, had seen my car and was coming out. Betsy called her to let her know I was coming and why, so she was on the lookout. She offered to stay with us the rest of the night, which was really sweet, but I told her she could go home. I thought it might be easier on Lissa if it was just me.

Telling Lissa went just how you said. I didn't have to say anything. I woke her up, and she saw me, and she knew.

We're both in the living room. She's finally asleep again, on the couch. I should try to sleep, too, but I can't. So I'm doing this instead. This house is so big and empty, and I desperately want something or someone to fill all this silence, but I feel like I have stretched the generosity of my friends enough for one night. So I'm gonna turn the TV on and think about what happens next, and try not to dwell on being in ~~my fa~~ Thom's house. I'd keep writing to you, but there's not much more to say right now.

March 15

Do I try and get you this a page at a time? Like, is that helpful? Probably not. I'm writing in short little snippets when I can, but I'm listening to your CD in the car, because that's the only down time I

really have. I got all my work shifts covered by some awesome coworkers, but I still have to go to school. I'm writing in between classes right now, but I'm swamped – yay midterms with their excellent timing – and I feel weird writing to you while I'm at Lissa's. So I'll probably just wait and send you everything I have all at once.

I feel so out of place at Thom's. Like, I'm the only one who's not grieving. Michelle's relatives start arriving tomorrow. Friends have been bringing food and cards for the last two days, and the house is so full of flowers that everyone's sinuses are clogged.

Lissa's having a hard time at school. She wants to be there to keep her mind off everything else, but she told me she's so tired of everyone walking on eggshells around her. She's that kid, and she never wanted to be, you know?

March 17

I should get to your actual letter one of these days, I know. ~~I~~just The funeral is tomorrow, and I'll have a chance after that.

I still feel awkward here, but less so. I'm trying to make myself useful. Like, at the HCC, I didn't know what to do to help. But here I do. I'm not grieving, so I'm trying to do the things that the grieving people shouldn't have to think about. I wash dishes and take out trash and arrange food (and try to get people to eat it) and go buy coffee and bottled water and extra napkins and all that. And awkward as I feel sometimes, it's actually been helpful, having specific things to do. I'd rather be here, doing those things, than at home or at work, wondering if anyone is here taking care of Lissa and everyone else.

I don't know. I bought my first new dress in months this week, and it was a funeral dress. Betsy asked me if I would sit with Lissa in the family's pew tomorrow. I said I'd sit right behind Lissa, but that I'd feel out of place being in the very front.

But all this is over tomorrow. I have the funeral, then the lunch, then I promised to spend the rest of the day with Lissa, and we'll work out a schedule after that. But the stress of it is over, or nearly, anyway.

Anyway. Sunday, I promise, I will tackle my response to your letter.

March 19

Okay. I can breathe now. Lissa asked on Monday if I would spend the nights this week here with her, and I did, last night included. She's been coping pretty well this past week, but I do worry about what happens next. Like, right now, there's so many people here that playing hostess is helping keep her mind off of everything, but what happens when everyone leaves? The last of the relatives are heading home today, except for Betsy, and once they're gone, once I'm not around constantly, like I have been this week, she'll have nothing to distract her from the reality of being motherless. And I worry about what that's going to mean for her.

I've tried to talk to her about it a little. I asked Lissa last night if she was sorry, in the end, that she hadn't been there when her mom died, and she said no. She said Michelle had actually woken up on Sunday, enough to be coherent, and that she had gotten to say goodbye. I'm glad. I'm glad she got that bit of closure. She's spent most of the week crying, but I think she's coming to terms with everything

pretty well. Even so, Betsy and Thom want her to talk to a counselor, and I think that's a good idea. I made it clear that I'm not going anywhere, and on Tuesday, I'm picking her up from school to take her to get a stripe put in her hair. She wants pink to match mine. Her relatives would be appalled. She says her mom would be happy. I'm inclined to believe Lissa.

She's also coming prom shopping with Gabe and me next Saturday, so that promises to be fun.

Okay. Your letter. It's been put off long enough. So here goes.

Alex, you may use my description of friendship for your poetry on one condition – I get to read it when it's done. And I'm curious. How would you describe your best friend in ten words now? As for me:

I couldn't have gotten through this without them.

You can say I'm entitled to emotional irrationality right now all you want, but that doesn't mean I should give in to it. I know how important Emma is to you, and I know how hard it can be to balance friendships that don't overlap. I'm glad you've worked so hard to have time for both of us.

I would pay good money to watch you fold yourself into a backpacking pack. Can that be my birthday present?

~~Alex, it's not that I'm not letting myself—~~

~~I don't even know how to start—~~

~~No one has to tell me~~

This is the part I've been avoiding.

There's a difference between knowing something intellectually and being able to act on it emotionally. I know that it's okay to not be okay, and that it's okay to be angry at Thom, and that I'm allowed to be sad. I know all that. But I can't just turn off how I feel.

Gabe says I martyr myself (you said it, too, actually, which is suspicious, but I've decided not to call you out on talking about me behind my back :)), and you're not wrong. I'm trying to be better, I am, but it's hard. I can't just change overnight how I think about things and how I respond to them. But I am trying. And in the interest of trying, I have this for you:

Zoe's Rules for Being

1. You can't get mad at people for doing what you've asked.
2. Don't lose your own happiness in your quest to give it to others.
3. You are allowed to feel angry, sad, and upset.
4. You are allowed to need help.
5. Let yourself have bad days.
6. Don't argue with Alex (or Gabe) when he's right.
7. Dance in the rain at every possible opportunity (you said I should have at least one ridiculous rule, so that one's for you. :))

That's the list so far. Now you can use the numbers when I need forceful reminding. Because I'm sure I will.

~~Alex, I don't know what to~~

How could I possibly get mad at you for wanting meeting me to be part of your birthday present, Alex? That's one of the most amazing things anyone has ever asked of me, so if you want me to give you your birthday present in person, consider it done.

And this is the part I skip. Number one of Alex's Rules? Don't punch walls.

I can't help it, Alex, I feel like a bad person. ~~I can't~~ I start to cry every time I listen to this part, because you're giving me all this absolution that I just don't think I've earned. I feel like a bad person, and that's what I hate. I don't want to feel vindictive, I don't want to feel resentful. ~~And I want to be able to forgive him.~~ No, I have to cross that out, because I don't actually want to be able to forgive him. I just, I know I should, if only for my own damn peace of mind. But I've hated him for so long, I'm not sure I'd know how to stop.

He gave me something. Before I left this morning. He pulled me aside and, well, you know how I said I was angry that he'd never even apologized? Well, he did. He apologized for not being able to give me the story or the father I deserved, I think were his words. He apologized, and he gave me this envelope, and he said that he understood if I didn't read it, but that he hoped I would.

It's sitting on my desk. I haven't opened it yet. I don't know if I'm going to.

Which reminds me — did you ever open your mom's cards?

I'm trying, Alex. I can't promise to stop beating myself up, not yet, to not be frustrated and angry and disgusted with myself over all this. But I'm trying. I would try just about anything if you asked me to.

Okay. Let's end this week of silence. I honestly am closer to okay than I've been for a while, and that's a lot to do with you. So thank you, again. I feel as if I could spend my whole life thanking you, and never feel it's enough. I honestly don't know how this year would have gone without you.

Talk to you soon,
Zoe