

Zoe,

This time I've given you a set of directions. Dress for the weather, whatever it is when you decide to go hunting for your letter. (Are you excited for the cold snap they're predicting? Because I am!) Tell Eddie or Andi to give you your drink, to-go (don't worry, it's paid for, but you're going to be walking for a while, so better to have something warm in your hands). When you leave, head to Carmel Creek Park. Go to the picnic area and find the bench under a big fir tree. Your letter is hidden near that bench (don't worry, I sealed it in a plastic bag in case you don't get to it before the next rainstorm).

December 1

Zoe!

It was weird not hearing from you for a couple of days. Surprisingly enough, I've gotten used to having a letter from you waiting for me with my Cuppa Joe's breakfast (or at least a puzzle, telling me where the letter is). As you've guessed, holidays aren't exactly easy for me, so I was at Cuppa Joe's more than usual, and... yeah, I missed you. And since you don't miss strangers, I guess you're right - we are friends. I like that. It has been a while since I had any friends besides Emma, mostly because not too many people will put up with her mood swings for long and if you are friends with me, sooner or later she's gonna show up in your life too. Well, if you're friends with me in person, not through letters. I have a hard time imagining how you would meet Emma, at least ~~until we meet~~ unless we meet.

I'm flattered that you thought to ask me for advice, but I don't know what you should do. The cynic in me says that Thom is using your sister to get you to talk to him again. I mean, how convenient is it that her mother is dying, and you know exactly what that's like, because your mother was sick and you heard all about it? But, I'm trying not to be that person, and my other instinct is (and you're not going to like this) talk to her. Maybe not face-to-face, and definitely not without setting your own very strict ground rules, so you feel comfortable, but give her a chance. I mean, think about it. If your mom's cancer came back, and you wanted someone to talk to, would you prefer a school counselor who has no idea what it's like, or someone who is only a few years older than you and does know?

Maybe you should try writing her a letter. Pretend it's another part of your sociology experiment, and you have to write a letter to a stranger whose mother is dying. But whatever you decide to do, just don't be mean. Remember, she's only thirteen, and she didn't make the poor choices Thom made. It's not fair to hold her responsible for something that happened at least ten years before she was born.

Nice story! You should have more confidence in your storytelling abilities. It was very entertaining and suspenseful - it matches the feeling of the book perfectly! I am curious where the dove took her, though. I think there's much more to the story than you told. Expand on it someday, and I would love to read it.

You must be psychic, guessing what I would ask! I'm glad you had such a nice Thanksgiving break. It sounds kind of peaceful, despite how many people were involved. And you may tell Gina that I am, in fact, butt-ugly, which is why I have such a cute personality to make up for it. ;P

I knew you would see it my way eventually! Being words on paper means you can be or say anything, and it feels so good. Though, I have to say, the more we talk, the more I feel like I have already met you, even though I can't really picture you. It makes meeting in-person seem less of an issue.

I surprised you with my heritage, didn't I? And yet, nearly 30% of the San Diego population is Latinx. Just goes to show how biased we all are (and yes, it's fascinating, especially because even before you told me about your hair, I never pictured you as anything but white, even though I myself am not).

Okay, I'm going to be very specific about something you wrote that I find fascinating, so I'm going to copy it down (I'm paraphrasing a little). You wrote: "I will admit to some hand in my writing talent, but I still don't feel like I deserve the praise."

Then, in the very next paragraph, you wrote: "I think sometimes we live in a world that doesn't let us talk about what we're good at because it's seen as bragging or vanity."

Think about those two statements for a moment. Isn't the first quote a symptom of the second? Don't you deflect praise on your writing because you feel modest, or like accepting praise would be vain or bragging? It seems so contradictory to me. So this week, I challenge you to follow your own advice and admit that you are good at writing. No matter where you got the skills or how inevitable those skills were (which, trust me, I'm skeptical about. If writing all the time plus individualized tutoring was all it took to be a fantastic writer then why do some kids spend their entire school careers in tutoring and still just barely scrape by?). Write something, for yourself, and revel in the fact that you are good at it.

Honestly? The best part of the holiday, and the only part I really enjoyed, was when we all sat down together and shut up to watch the parade. Even though part of it was John fuming at Dad from across the room, it was nice to have the quiet (they got into it before I even got home Wednesday, so I'm not entirely sure what the "reason" was this time.). And, like I said, I spent lots of time in Cuppa Joe's.

Okay, my birthday is April 16th. And, killing two birds with one stone, birthdays also featured my favorite holiday tradition. (Do birthdays count? You did say any holiday.) I was born very early in the morning; 4:06 to be precise. When I was little, my mother would wake me up at 4 am on my birthday, singing "feliz cumpleaños" with an entire plate of chocolate chip cookies, still warm and fresh from the oven. We'd have the real birthday meal later, complete with cake, but at 4:06 exactly, I was allowed to take a cookie, and eat it in bed while Mom sang to me. Then we'd go up on the roof with a few blankets and the plate of cookies and lay up there watching the early stars until the sun rose. It was special, because I was the only one born at night, but Mom had a thing about exactness. ~~Since she left~~

Anyway. Silliness!

Honestly, I'm not sure I have a favorite color, or if I do, my favorites don't exactly have names. I love the blue of the ocean when the sky has just cleared from a rainstorm. I like the green of the leaves on the maple tree outside my window. I like the purple of the sunrise just as it's about to turn bright orange when the sun peeks over the horizon. They're inspiration for my poetry, you know?

Hmmm, I think I'd like a pet wolf. That or a dolphin. Both are loyal and incredibly intelligent.

I am terrible at being silly, so I had to have a little help. I looked up "Questions to ask your pen pal" online and picked the silliest ones I could find. Granted, the post assumed that your pen pal was someone from another country, or at

least another state, but technically we are pen pals, aren't we? I mean, besides being friends, which I'm kind of glad you think we are.

I'm sorry, but I just don't do funny things for my family to tell stories about. I know, it's a lame answer. Even when I'm upset about losing something, I just fume internally for a little bit before getting over it. And, since we don't talk about things that happened before Mom left, I don't even know if I did anything funny when I was little, which is where most people get their funniest stories.

What do I wish you would ask me? Surprisingly enough, I'm not sure. I'd ask you to ask me anything you're holding back on, but I doubt you're holding back much since I've lifted the ban on questions. Mostly, I like it when you ask me questions - they're always so you. So, I guess, I wish you would ask me more questions, rather than anything specific. How weird is that?

Of course, you still have to answer your question about your trip to Europe, in the next letter. I'd appreciate an answer about favorite holiday traditions as well (though, I suppose, if they have anything to do with Thanksgiving, you've already told me). Oh, and fair is fair: I told you my birthday, now you tell me yours.

Your friend,

Alex