

February 2

Alex,

Oh my God, I am so, so sorry.

I feel like the world's biggest idiot and the universe's worst friend. I have no excuse, none at all, for leaving you letter-less for a week. Shit, more than a week, isn't it? Shit.

I am so sorry.

This was the week of Everything Coming Due, and then Miss Willowwick in the drama department asked me to put together a dramaturg presentation for the Merchant of Venice cast, and I've gotten so used to answering your letters as soon as they come that when I had to put it off for a couple days, I completely forgot (like a colossally idiotic asshole) that I hadn't written back yet.

I am hoping with every fiber of my being that you've assumed I just got super busy, rather than assuming something like I decided I was tired of writing, ~~but knowing you it's probably more likely that after what we talked about~~

I'm so sorry, Alex. Put me to whatever punishment you see fit. I deserve it.

Like, I don't even want to take the time to finish this. I just want to get you my apology and explanation as soon as I can, which is stupid because I'm stuck here in the HCC, and whether I stop writing now or give you eight more pages, you're

gonna get it all at the same time. I'm making a detour to Cuppa Joe's on my way home, and your drinks for like the next week are on me. I'm buying you a gift card.

Ugh. I am such a freakin' lousy human being. I didn't even realize it on my own! Kevin asked if I'd swapped the days I wrote to you, since he hadn't seen me working on a letter for a while, and I said that no, I actually hadn't heard from you for a while, which was weird, and then I realized that it was my freaking turn and had been for days because I suck.

Okay. Okay, I'm gonna stop beating myself up, because unless I suddenly develop time travel skills before I finish writing this, there's nothing I can do about it now.

Okay. Your letter. Which, thank God, I have on me, since I always keep your latest letter tucked into my planner for safekeeping. I'm going to do my best to answer this like I normally would, instead of peppering it with apologies ~~like I will undoubtedly want to.~~

I did not realize it was going to be a Herculean effort to accumulate five tickets at an arcade. Remind me to challenge you to a Skee-ball tournament at some point in the future when I need to feel I've accomplished something with my life (which can then be followed by a poetry-writing contest so that you also get to thoroughly kick my ass).

You're a wizard, Alex? And with such disregard for the International Statute of Secrecy! Well, I can't say it comes as a surprise. I've had my suspicions for a while now, both about you and about the San Diego School of Modern

Wizardry -- San Diego Comic Con? Please. Clearly a cover for your graduation ceremony, put in place to help the fashion-unsavvy wizards blend in as bad cosplayers! You didn't fool me for a second. I won't turn you in to the Ministry, provided you answer all of my questions... :)

In all seriousness, though, what a creative idea! And what a wonderful, if inadvertent, gift! You realize that our letters have now, because of you, left a tangible, indelible mark on the city? How many people, in days and weeks and months to come, will follow those arrows when it rains, just to see where they lead? How many will reach the end of the path and wonder what was so important about that bench by the creek? How many will walk away with a little more wonder and imagination in their lives because of you, and because of us? Thank you for that, Alex. Truly.

In regards to your questions about Kevin, I have an incredibly articulate and eloquent response for you, which is:

What? No! I don't - what? Shut up!

Thank you, I'll be here all week.

I'm not, though, I'm not "crushing" on anyone, that's not what this is. I just, I finally met someone whose "origin story" is more messed up than mine is. You don't know him, Alex. He's not callous. He's bitter. And he has reason to be. To respect his privacy, I'm not going to tell you everything that he told me, but life's really dealt him a rotten blow, and the only people he really has in the world are his grandpa, who's in a coma, and his aunt, who doesn't like him and would

kick him to the curb in a heartbeat if given the tiniest reason to. And with what he's told me, wanting to pull the plug on his grandpa, wanting to give him a peaceful and dignified end, it's not callous. It's selfless. He's not refusing to deal with his problems - he's coping as best he can with all the shit hanging over his head. So give the guy a break, yeah?

Lissa finally asked me about her mom. Today's been a harder day for Michelle. She was really having trouble breathing, and they had to give her a sedative. I think Lissa made the usual rounds and appeals to Betsy and Thom, got the same answers, and then she came to me. She asked if I would tell her the truth, and I said yes. So she sat down across from me and said, "Tell me what's going on."

And I did. After my conversation with Michelle, I sat down and talked to Joe about what everything meant, so I'd be able to tell Lissa. I told her about fluid build-up in the lungs and late stage renal failure and dialysis and why Michelle won't be put on any kidney donor lists. (Her Wegener's isn't going anywhere, her lungs are still an issue, and she probably wouldn't survive surgery). I was as objective and kind as possible, while still being truthful. And Lissa handled it really well, but she still broke my heart because at the end of my explanation, just when I thought she'd asked all her questions, she looked up at me and said, "She's gonna die, isn't she?"

God, there was a part of me then that understood the impulse to keep all this from her. Because no thirteen-year-old should have to ask that about her mother, and I didn't want to see her face when I said yes. Like, I almost said

"Hey, we're all gonna die eventually," but I knew that wasn't her question, and I knew that wasn't going to help. So I just nodded.

It's the first time I've ever seen her cry. And that actually solidified my decision, because it wasn't like she didn't know. But she hadn't let herself acknowledge it. And she didn't sob. She just cried, just tears and a quiet catching of breath, and she tried to stop it. I could see her. She's not an innocent little kid. I don't think she has been for a while. I held her, and told her to go ahead and cry because if anyone had the right, it was her.

It's the first time I've hugged her. And it helped, that I was there. It made it easier for her. So stressful as this is, there is no doubt in my mind that right here, with Lissa, is where I'm supposed to be right now.

I've never really felt like her sister before. But I do now. And it's, I wish the circumstances were anything but what they are, of course I do, but I'm glad that I have the chance to be a sister.

Wow. That got intense really fast. Shake it off, Zoe.

Anyway.

I'm sorry, there's hope for me yet? Me and my cavity-creating sweet tooth? Well, aren't you just Mr. Snark? :P

Alex, even if you did screw up (which I still don't agree with, by the way), well, I think now my screw up is bigger. So. ~~God I'm sorry. After everything we talked about, for me to go and do this to you~~

No, keep going, Zoe.

Going after your crazy dreams is all well and good, but, look, Southern California is not known for its rich American history. None of the west is. I mean, we have the Gold Rush, and that's pretty cool, but the real stuff? It's all in the east and the south. That's where the wars were fought, that's where our history was really shaped. If I don't want to get stuck in some podunk small town collection, I have to move thousands of miles away. And that's terrifying. Like, yeah, I want to travel, I want to see the world, but I don't want to live there. At least, I don't think I do. I don't know. Every time I try to think about it, I get freaked out, so I stop. It makes the fact that I'm seventeen and a year and a half away from graduating way too real, you know?

Am I to be constantly disappointed in your embarrassing stories? You got my hopes up, Alex. Then you dashed them. How dare you.*

Questions.

Bird for me, too, rather than fish. There's just something about the open sky, vast and full of endless possibility.

I colored with crayons last week. I was helping Gabe choose costume color palettes for Into the Woods, but still. (And yes. I consider myself very lucky that you were one of the people who found my letter.)

Geez, Alex. You know, you say you can't think up questions, but you throw some doozies my way. What would I ask an oracle? Gosh, I don't know. Something like, is the collective consciousness of humanity worth it? Does everything in the world -- the joy, the despair, the happiness, the suffering -- all even out in the end?

Power outages are announced on TV because sometimes the world is irredeemably nonsensical.

I hope when I die, I'm remembered as having done some good in the world, as someone who gave all she could, and loved and lived both widely and deeply.

For new questions, if you're up for them,

-What superpower do you want, what would your costume look like, and what would your name be?

-You have the chance to revisit any one day in all of human history. Which do you choose and why?

Alex, I'm so sorry. I wish I had more to say, I wish I could make this letter longer to make up for my thoughtless, careless, hurtful idiocy. But I don't have more to say. My life is work and school and Lissa right now. And it's not that

I'm wishing for more drama and stress – please, God, don't do that to me – but I feel so awful right now. I feel like I've let you down. Because I have. And there's nothing I can do about it except to say I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Tell me, please, how I can make this up to you.

Yours,

Zoe