

Alex,

Let's continue with the Alice theme for your letter, shall we?

A very merry Unbirthday to you, sir. Find the maddest tea party you can (in Del Mar) and have yourself a cup of birthday cake (vanilla chai blend). It's not on the menu, but a certain Miss Hattie will make it for you special, if you tell her you're a friend of mine.

January 12

Alex,

God, it's depressing in here. I mean, it's the waiting room of a Hospice Center, so that's kind of to be expected, but man.

They've painted this place blue and cream, in an attempt to be comforting, but it still smells like a hospital, and there's a hushed tone in the air, and everyone moves really quietly. I'm inescapably aware that apart from me, everyone in this building is either dying, caring for the dying, or a loved one of someone who's dying. And then there's me, here to give Lissa a hug when she's done talking to her mom, help her decompress from what she's feeling, and give her a hand with her algebra (honestly, it's that last one that might be the biggest adventure). In the meantime, I'm just sitting here, feeling as out of place as I did on Tuesday, and doing my Statistics homework. Well, writing to you. Then the Statistics.

Alex, I don't want you to stop telling me what you think about Lissa. I value your opinion, I just, I want that opinion to leave room in it for trusting me.

I don't know if I can explain this well enough to be understood, but I'm gonna try.

You asked me once to be sure how far I was willing to go for Lissa, and I took that question seriously. I've been thinking about that a lot in the last week. And not just thinking, I made a list, so that when Betsy called me and let me know what the plan was for Michelle, I could fit myself and what I was willing to do into it. I am giving Lissa ten to twelve hours of my life each week. That's less

than I give my job, less than I give my homework sometimes. I pick her up from school at 3:30 two days a week, and I leave for home at 6:30. I devote four to six hours of my weekend to getting her out of the house. I am doing this because I need to be there for my sister, because it will be much harder for me, in terms of stress and time, if she runs away unexpectedly and ends up at my door again - or worse, she runs away and doesn't end up at my door.

The weeknights I am with Lissa, I am home earlier than the nights I work, and starting my homework by 7:30, if I haven't already completed it in the three hours I'm sitting in a waiting room with nothing else to do. On work nights, I don't get to my homework until nine!

Prom Steering Committee is my only extracurricular right now, and it meets before school, not after. I am playing in the pit for Into the Woods in May, but I doubt this situation is going to continue into May.

I have had this conversation so many times. I am so tired of this conversation. If we were adding new concerns to it every time, that would be one thing. But we're not. It's the same points every time. Mom and Joe expressed them first when I told them the plan, and I shared everything I had figured out, and I thought we were good. But then, the next day, they came back, still doubting, and we had the conversation again. And then I got it from you in your letter before this one, and before I could write my response, Gabe pulled me aside, and we did it again.

And I don't know what I've done, Alex, to lose the trust of the four people I care about most. Because from my perspective, that's what it feels like. And to

be fair, it's from Mom and Joe more than you and Gabe, but it is from you and Gabe, too. (And I can't figure out what's different (well, no, that's not true. I know exactly what's different. Thom.) Mom and Joe and Gabe suddenly aren't listening to me, and aren't believing me, and now neither are you, and – like, I want to say that it offends me or insults me, but those words are way too strong. I'm not offended or insulted, not really. I'm hurt. I hate putting it that way, because it sounds childish to say that my feelings are hurt, but they are. It stings, that none of you are willing to believe that I'm capable of looking out for myself, that somehow, I've become some damsel in distress for all of you, some silly girl who hasn't thought things through and doesn't know when to stop and is eventually going to need to be rescued by big strong men or mama bears who know better. It hurts, and you know what, I've changed my mind, it is a little insulting to me. (And it's getting to the point where the conversation is becoming condescending and patronizing, and the more times I have to explain myself and stand up for myself, the less your concern feels like support.

I just, I need someone to freakin' say that they understand why I need to do this, and that they trust me to know if I start to get overwhelmed, and that they trust me to ask for help if that moment comes. You can have your concerns and your opinions, Alex, and you can voice them, I want you to, but I need that to be part of it, too. Because otherwise it just feels like you're waiting for me to mess up, and it feels like I'm alone, despite the fact that I have four of you saying that you're concerned for my well being.

(And I know that your concern is genuine, okay? I know that part of you seeing me as helpless is my own damn fault, because what you know of all this, you know from letters I wrote when I was overwhelmed and panicking. I do realize

that. But I'm just so tired of defending myself against concerns that are always the same. There's only so many times I can say that I have a plan, that I'm looking out for myself, that I know what I'm getting into and I have this under control. After that, well, you either believe me or you don't.

Thanks for . . . letting me get through all that? This is much more an issue with Mom and Joe and Gabe than you. You're just the first opportunity I've had to sit down and figure out how to say what I'm feeling, and writing it here has helped, because I have the words now, to say to them. Thank you. Please, try to understand, okay? I'm asking you for that, as my friend. I'm not mad at you, I just, I need to know that you trust me.

I'm glad that you're talking to your mom, and I'm glad that the conversations are going so well. It sounds like she's done really well for herself.

I'm glad Emma seems to have found someone stable. Here's hoping Derek will be good for her, maybe even help her turn over a new leaf.

I am including in this letter a copy of one of my favorite photos of Gabe for your perusal. It's from the tech run of last year's big musical, Cinderella. Gabe is trying to work out the kinks in the Cinderella transformation scene, so this incredibly candid photo is Gabe in the midst of what he does best. Plus he's just so . . . Gabe in this picture, the clothes, the scarf, the glasses, the hair. Best representation of your secret best friend that I can give you. And hey, braving thrift stores with Gabe is going to give you a killer wardrobe. Honestly, that might be what I will miss most about losing him to you. :)

Oh, and yeah, Gabe's theme won. We're doing "A Night in Wonderland," and it's gonna be pretty awesome. I have our budget breakdown with me here, and the prom catalogue with the ready-made decorations to look through and see what I can find and work out. That is an assignment I am actually looking forward to.

I don't know that I'd say my cousins were "rooting" for anything in particular. Did I catch Allie and Gina spying on me and exchanging knowing looks while watching me read your letter on the porch? Yes. But Allie is pretty good about dropping it if I say there's nothing going on, and Gina, well, is Gina, so I pretty much ignore her when she pushes me at boys anyway.

Alex, you're making me blush again. I hope that my personality does come through in these letters, and I hope that, in the alternate universe where you didn't see a photo of me, you still know me instinctively when you happen to meet me. Of course, there will also be an alternate universe where you don't know me, and one where we never started writing at all, and I'm gonna stop this line of thought before it strays too much further out of my control.

Yes, my stripe is still green, but the green has not held its color as well as my previous dyes. It's still there, but it's not forest green anymore. I don't know exactly what shade to call it. You'd know the right comparison to make, if you saw it. But it's . . . lighter? And yellower? I don't know. Poetry was never my strong suit.

There is a part of me that really wants to meet you, in person. But, well, it's like you said. I don't want to lose these letters. I don't want to even risk losing these letters. And I feel like, once we plan a meeting, that's a point of no return.

I feel like it can't be a thing that happens once, you know? Like, it either becomes something that happens all the time (which would compromise the letters), or there's a reason it only happens once (which I feel would also compromise the letters). Perfect and easy as our ~~relat~~friendship is on paper, I don't want to risk it not being that perfect and easy in real life. But I also feel like meeting you eventually is inevitable. So let's say this: Let's not plan anything. Not right now. Let's let things go on as they have been. If we see each other at Cuppa Joe's at the same time, we can acknowledge it, with a smile or a nod, but then go our separate ways, not breaking the silence, not yet. If we run into each other, like we literally bump into each other on a street corner and we say "sorry" and "excuse me" before we realize who it is, well then it's fate. But until then, let's go on as we have, holding something sacred between us in the fact that we've only ever written our communications down. Let's not break that yet.

We haven't done ridiculous and random questions for a while, and I feel like we need to get back to that. So I'll start us off again.

1. You're popped into some dystopian universe where you're given three careers to choose from. If you have to be either a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher, which do you choose and why?
2. What do you miss most about being a kid?
3. What is your favorite snack?

That's all for now, since I still have a mountain of Stats to get through. I'll talk to you later.

Zoe

PS - I just talked to Thom. And - it actually went okay, I think. He still has to work, so we'll only overlap for a half hour or so on the days I'm here. He avoided me on Tuesday, but I think it slipped his mind that I was coming today.

I was sitting with Lissa, helping her with her homework, when he came in. You can't get to the wings of rooms without coming through this waiting area, and when he walked past, he saw Lissa first, and started walking over. When he realized I was there, he froze. Under other circumstances, it might have been funny, his deer-in-the-headlights look of panic. He turned right around midstep and walked away toward Michelle's room. Lissa didn't notice, thankfully, because I'm not sure I want to have that conversation with her yet. But I noticed, and I knew that wasn't something that should continue, him being so conscientious of avoiding me that he avoids Lissa, too.

So, I followed him. I figured if I did it now, then it happened on my terms, and I'd get to say what I needed to say. So I stopped him outside Michelle's room and just told him, flat out, that he couldn't act like he wasn't supposed to be here every time he saw me, because he is supposed to be here. His wife is here, his daughter is here, this is where he needs to be. And I told him that I am here for my sister, which means that he and I are going to be occupying the same space for a while, and that we both have to deal with that. But the fact that his daughter is my sister is the only point where we overlap.

I told him in no uncertain terms that everything I wrote him last year still stands, and that if he needs to talk to me about Lissa, that he shouldn't hesitate, but that I'm not interested in any other conversation.



He thanked me then, which was . . . weird, and then not-so-subtly informed me that Lissa's been asking lots of questions about me that he can't answer. I told him to tell her to ask me, quickly shutting down any opening for whatever weird-as-hell, not-gonna-happen "Father"/"Daughter bonding time he was looking for.

So that's that. It's done. My first conversation with my biological father. I feel better now that I'm not dreading it, you know? I feel better, and I hope that you and Mom and Joe and Gabe will feel better, too, now that it's happened.

Anyway. That's all from me for now.

Zoe