

Zoe,

That was hard. I'm not particularly good at arcade games, and I'm out of practice since Emma's been... well, anyway. So, I'm going to give you a hard one.

Go visit the Book and Bean. Each drink on the menu has it's own book counterpart. Each page of your letter is hidden inside a book related to the drinks that we have made each other have (or at least their closest approximations). I'll give you one hint - there's no Birthday Cake, so I went with Vanilla Bean Tea.

January 23

Zoe,

I am glad you enjoyed your jaunt in the rain. I thought you might, and it seemed like a really good opportunity to finally reveal that I'm not a muggle at all, but attending the San Diego School of Modern Wizardry - Canyon Crest Academy is just a front. Why do you think we always beat you at sporting events?

No, actually it was easy, although waiting until no-one was around to see me do it was more difficult. Dad had some clear waterproof sealer from building our porch laying around, so I "borrowed" some and painted the arrows. Now they've dried, those parts will never get wet and turn dark like the rest of the pavement. Your letter won't be there, but the arrows will probably stay a long time...

You would think there would be a way to share some things so Lissa doesn't feel quite so out of the loop without going into too much detail. I mean, she doesn't exactly have the medical knowledge to understand. Good luck, anyways.

Is that a note of nervousness I detect? Geez, one week with the guy and he's already made you less articulate. A crush perhaps? Is he cute?

Yeah, sorry, I can only do girl talk to a point, and that's it. Sorry.

Kevin sounds... kind of callous - pulling the plug on your own grandfather? And he's always joking around and, well, flirting. I mean, his grandpa is in hospice, wouldn't you think he'd be at least a little sad? It's almost like, I don't know, he's forcefully refusing to deal with his ~~shit~~ problems by making a joke out of everything.

It's not exactly healthy. But hey, if that's what you wanna crush on, be my guest. (Of course, there's me sitting over here thinking "boy does Thom know how to pick 'em - two wives, two major diseases, you'd almost think he's cursed," which isn't exactly the nicest thing to think ever, but at least I'm not doing it out of avoidance of issues.)

The birthday cake tea was alright, I guess. A little sweet, but it wasn't too bad. And, if you like that, then there's hope for you yet!

Really, 2028? That's a long time! I'm glad that you can see a future for us us getting along until then!

~~Please don't~~ ~~Zoe,~~ ~~I~~ You can't tell me I didn't screw up, ~~Zoe,~~ because I did. Maybe it was honest, but there's a difference between being honest and being mean. I crossed that line. So yes, I screwed up. ~~You can't tell me~~ ~~You can~~ ~~forgive me but~~ ~~I~~ Nothing you say is going to change that.

Yes, Dios is God. It's actually one of the few Spanish exclamations I held onto when I stopped speaking Spanish because both Will and John use it, so it pops up when I get upset. And sometimes other times too, but I was trying not to use it with you at first because of the anonymity thing, and I guess I never picked it back up.

Speaking of which, Will says hello. I passed along your response to his letter, and this is what I got back: "Zoe - Don't be offended that Alex didn't share you with us. He barely shares what happened at school, and that's hardly as big as having a female pen pal! I should add that because he doesn't share, we probably

over-reacted. I just assumed... Well, actually I kind of hoped he had finally moved on from Emma. Oh. He says he has, but not for you [I promised Will I wouldn't edit, but he's not saying it right! ~~I have gotten over Emma, I think, but not because I am going out with you.~~ That doesn't make it any better. Forget it!] Anyway, I am very glad he did share you with us, and I'm glad he has someone to talk to."

So, that's your response from Will. I'm looking back over what you wrote to him, and I will point out that he's not actually the brother in the military - that's John. Will is in IT, and he's pretty good at it. I wouldn't be surprised if he found a job in Silicon Valley when he's done with school. Still no word back from John or Brenna, and like I say, neither of us really want the twins to talk so...

Yeah, the "Gabe and I are besties" joke is getting too complicated to be funny any more. I think it is interesting, though, that you feel entitled to meet me before anyone else in your life does. It's a good thing Gina is in school several hours away, or she might have already ruined that for you!

You're welcome! See? Paying compliments is easy, and it makes everyone feel better. I don't understand why we think it's... I don't know, showing weakness or something.

Ah! Now we're finally getting somewhere! Sure, the Smithsonian might be a little far-fetched, but you never know - you're smart and you have the passion for it, so you might just do it! Don't sell yourself short. If you want to do it, then you should at least try. There's this quote, I don't even remember where it's from, but it goes something like "you never regret the things that happened, only the things that

didn't." If you never try, then you'll always wonder, what if? And if you do try and decide it isn't for you, then at least you made the attempt.

Okay, okay, calm down Miss All-Caps. My tap-dancing skills aren't anything to get excited about. I was 12, Brenna was trying it, and I wanted to get along with my new siblings, so I signed up to go with her. I discovered pretty quickly that I hated it, but I wasn't that bad so it wasn't actually too embarrassing. Don't go getting your shorts in a knot just because I didn't tell you about one misguided attempt at dance lessons four years ago!

Questions!

2) Bird, definitely. I'm not too big a fan of airplanes, but I've always wished I could fly. See, my thing with airplanes is that I'm not in control. If I were flying myself, then I'd be totally fine.

3) I don't even remember the last time I colored with crayons. I've always been a words person, not a pictures person. In fact, I vaguely remember stories about me taking the crayons they gave us in kindergarten and preschool and pretending like I was writing a letter, instead of following the lines of whatever color sheet they gave me. I didn't know any words, but I did all the scribbles in the right places. Guess you're kinda lucky I'm the one who found your letter, huh? :)

Answer your own, plus I'll give you a few more, since your apparently infinite question generator is somehow tapped out.*

4) If you could ask an oracle one thing and be sure it would answer both correctly and truthfully, what would you ask?

5) Why the heck do they announce power outages on TV?

6) What would you like to be remembered for when you die?

Okay, I'm falling asleep on your letter, and you don't need it covered in drool. Elisabeth is quiet for once, so I'm going to try for a nap.

Alex