

January 3

Zoe,

Wow. ~~That's some really tough stuff.~~ Sorry, that sounds too flippant. I'm sure you know this, but my immediate reaction is "what do you even say to somebody who is going through this?" That was probably your immediate reaction too. When I was feeling really upset, it helped to read the notes your cousins wrote, because it was something completely different to think about for a while. So, I'm going to return the favor, and track down as many of my siblings as I can (and that can write, since Ethan isn't even in kindergarten yet). This should be interesting, since I haven't told any of them about you yet.

Will-

Zoe! Apparently you and my brother have been carrying on an illicit affair for a whole three months without any of the family finding out? Congrats. I'm not entirely sure why he's telling us now, to be honest. If you haven't noticed yet, he's not much of a sharer. Anyway, he says you need cheering up (though he's being mysterious and won't tell me why) and that he promised you he would ask us to tell you dirt on him, because your cousins gave him dirt on you. Big man for fairness, he is.

So, dirt on Alex. Let's see. He really didn't do much embarrassing stuff. I was the one who broke every limb and ended up in the hospital more often than I can even count.

Oh, but since it's the holidays, I have a good one! This one year, just before Christmas, Alex and I were chasing each other through the house. To be fair, it was my idea - I was the one into rough housing, not him. Anyway, he went careening around a corner into a side table with Mom's favorite vase on it. He might not even remember - he was probably four or five. It hit the ground and shattered. As soon as Alex figured out what happened he burst into tears. He wasn't upset that he was going to get in trouble, though. He was upset because Santa was going to skip our house, and it was going to be his fault that all the rest of us wouldn't get presents even though we deserved them (Where he got that idea, I'm stumped. I NEVER deserved the presents I got, but he insisted that we did.) So yeah. Hope that cheers you up a little.

Awesome, he cheers you up by making me look like a wimp.

Zoe, if he has crossed that story out after promising not to censor anything you should refuse to kiss him for at least a week.

Zoe, I promise you, I did not say anything to give him the idea that we were involved, I swear!

You need to know that he's blushing beet red right now, Zoe, and that's hard for a Latino.

OKAY, I think it's time to go find someone else. Let me go see if I can figure out where John got to.

Hi Zoe! This is Asher. Alex was kinda stupid and left this just sitting out on the kitchen table, so we're going to take a turn. I'm the oldest twin - has he told you about us? Yeah, we're the cool ones of the family.

And I'm Aaron, and I'm the cuter twin. Speaking of which, are you single, and more importantly, pretty? Since Asher has called dibs on Emma, I'm in the market for a beautiful lady.

Of course, listening to Alex telling Will about you, I'd guess you're very beautiful? He wouldn't sound so much in love with you if you weren't pretty.

Oh Right. Well I guess that's good for him. But seriously Zoe, Alex is weird, you don't want to go out with him. He's all emo and stuff, and likes going out for walks in the park. I mean, come on? Video games are where it's at, girl!

Sorry about that, Zoe. Apparently my family is even worse than Gina. I did know the twins would be like that, though, which is why I was hoping they wouldn't be participating. Feel free to ignore everything they said, they're just horny teenagers who don't know what they're talking about. Anyway, on to John.

Hello Zoe. I hope this missive finds you well. Alex says you need cheering. I'm not entirely sure why I've been chosen for that task, as I am not particularly funny, nor entertaining.

Ah, he says I'm supposed to tell you embarrassing stories about him. The trouble is, there is not much about him that is embarrassing. I suppose I could tell you that it took him two years to be fully potty trained, or that his first word was "fuck" because Dad said it one too many times in front of him, but neither of those are particularly embarrassing or entirely his fault. Other than that, I'm stumped.

Tell you what though, Zoe. From what I can tell, you're the one he talks to. I don't know how much he has told you, but he's going through some stuff right now. Oh, apparently you are too, he says. Well, you two look out for each other, okay? It's very difficult to convince Alex to talk to anyone, so if he's talking to you, then please let him keep doing it.

Honestly, I think having them write is enough embarrassment in and of itself. We might as well complete the set, since the twins took the initiative and jumped in. Lemme find Brenna.

So... Zoe, is it? Apparently you've been writing letters to Alex? That's cool. I always wanted a pen pal as a kid. It's good of you to put up with him — take it from a girl with six brothers, it's not always easy. Alex says you are excited about Elisabeth? I am too, even though I'm in school at University of Washington up in Seattle right now and can't see her that often.

I don't really have embarrassing stories about Alex either, sorry. We mostly kept out of each others' way while we were both living here, and of course, I didn't know him while he was young. But yeah, don't listen to the twins, they're total

butt-heads. Alex may be quiet, but you know that saying "still waters run deep"? That's him.

The one who knows me the least was the least embarrassing. Well, I hope that cheered you up. I know, what can really do that when you're dealing with the problems you are? But I hope it helped a little.

I do know the poems you mention. I actually really like Shel Silverstein. He's one of my inspirations as a poet.

You were kind of hard on Lissa at first, but I'm glad you helped her in the end. If you hadn't, I think you never would have forgiven yourself. It's not what I would have done, sure, or even what I would have advised you to do, but it is what you would do. I know you're trying to do what's best, and as you've said, you know what I would tell you, so there's not much more to say. I feel a little better about it because you say you're trying to look out more for yourself. Just keep remembering that you don't have to go through this. It's hard enough when you're family, but technically you aren't family. (And yes, technically you are family, so it's all very confusing, but that's why you have to be extra aware of what you can and can't do). I get it, you don't want to be the one who runs away either, because you've been so mad at Thom for so long for doing just that. They say that the things that piss us off the most about other people are the traits that we deplore in ourselves. I don't know if I believe that, but-

I don't know where I was going with that sentence, sorry. Basically, I don't want you overcompensating out of some weird sense of duty. And if you don't believe me, I'll call up my best friend Gabe and tell him to knock some sense into you! ;P You know, big scary teddy-bear Gabe? The one who got pissed that you didn't tell him last time something big happened? (Hint hint, tell him so he doesn't hunt me down and try to kill me please!)

Don't cry, Zoe. It was true - you are my best friend. I don't tell you lies. I might not tell you some things, but I don't lie.

Speaking of not telling you things, I did call my Mom. It was awkward, but I did it, and we might make it back to being on speaking terms. That's all I'm really prepared to say right now.

Emma is fine as far as I know. We don't see a lot of each other over breaks anymore. She's always traveling somewhere, or hanging out with her boyfriend. It's funny, my family is the one with the money, but she's the one who is constantly going places. I've texted her a few times, just because I wanted something sort of normal after all this drama, but I guess she was too busy or something. School starts up tomorrow, and then I'll see her. I'll tell her you said "hi."

Okay, well, I'm going to try and sleep through the baby's screams. Please keep me updated. You know I'll listen, no matter what.

Alex