

March 11

Alex,

For the first time since, God, since September, I don't want to write a letter.

It has nothing to do with you, I promise. I'm just, I'm so emotionally exhausted right now that the thought of putting on paper what happened today, with me and Thom, is the very last thing I want to do. But you've been a companion on this emotional roller coaster since you wrote me your first letter and asked for my greatest hero, and I told you about my mom and this whole crazy, messed up saga. And I know you're worried, and I know you deserve to hear all this. So I'm picking up my pen, and I'm pushing through because I don't want to now, but probably when I finish, I will actually feel better. Maybe.

I went to the HCC today with still no idea what I wanted to say to Thom. I tried everything last night, tried writing letters or at least bullet points, tried saying things out loud to my mirror, but I had nothing. My hope was that I could put him off til tomorrow at least, but no such luck.

He was waiting for me. He's taken bereavement from work and is at the HCC almost 24/7. The compromise they reached with Lissa is that she still goes to school, and she goes home every night (a neighbor is staying with her in the house), and if her mom passes during that time, then that's what happens. But if she goes during the four hours a day Lissa spends at the HCC, then she'll be there for it. Personally, I don't think that's much of a compromise, but it's not my decision. I have promised that if I'm there, we'll sit in the hall and not in the room, and if I'm not there, she can text me like she did yesterday and I will drop

whatever I'm doing -- school, work, whatever -- and come to be with her. I don't care what Thom might have to say about it.

Anyway, Thom was waiting for me when I got there, and without a word, he directed me toward that freaking terrace, while Lissa went in with Betsy. When he invited me to talk, I shook my head and said, "You first." It took him aback, I think. But he started talking. And what he had to say was not what I was expecting.

He started talking about how I'd been born, of all freaking things. He told me that freezing the eggs had been his idea. He said that he'd wanted a family as much as Mom had, and that he had been willing to do whatever it took to make it happen. And he said that he didn't know I existed until he randomly ran into Mom at a restaurant when I was five. He said he'd known exactly who I was, because I looked just like him, but he hadn't spoken to Mom since their divorce had been finalized, and he hadn't known that she'd decided to implant the eggs.

He'd moved on since the divorce, met Michelle, and told her everything. She'd always been supportive, even as they got married and started their own family. But he said that while he hoped Mom had moved on, too, he hadn't expected her to have their children.

Once he knew I existed, he wanted to know about me, and he kept asking my mom for information, but Mom always said no. She said that the choices were made a long time ago, and she thought it was best for them and for me to respect those choices rather than tangle everything up together again.

He told me all this, and I didn't know how to process any of it, really, and I didn't know why he wanted me to know it so badly. So I asked him what he

wanted from me, and he sighed, like he was frustrated with the question, like it wasn't something he wanted me to ask. But he answered. He said, "I want to be part of your life."

My gut response was to tell him to go to hell, but all I actually said was that it wasn't gonna happen. I told him Mom was right. He made his choice. He walked out, and the fact that freezing the eggs was his idea, the fact that finding a way to have children in the future was his idea, doesn't make any of this better. In fact, it makes what he did all the more reprehensible, because if the eggs were his idea, then he didn't just walk out on Mom, he walked out on us, too.

I actually had to remind the bastard that there were six eggs. Six potential future children that he supposedly wanted, but condemned to non-existence when he thought their mother was going to die. I made it very clear that he doesn't get a claim on me just because he thinks he's the reason I'm here. First of all, he's not, second of all, that's not how it works. I am my own person. If I was going to be beholden to any parental figure, it would be my mother, who actively decided to have me, who gave birth to me, who raised me. It would not be a man who made it very clear he wanted nothing to do with me six years before I was born, no matter what genetics might have to say about it. I don't owe him anything.

And then, he wanted to know what I wanted from him, and he wouldn't accept that I didn't want anything, and he kept pushing, and I finally said that I wanted not to have been an oddity my entire life. I actually said that, Alex. And having said it, I had to unpack it, and that's when things came out that I had no idea I'd even been holding onto. About how I was supposed to have this great story. A couple so in love with each other and their future family that they were willing to do whatever it took to make that family a reality? That is the start of a great

story. And if it had played out, the fact that I was conceived six years before I was born, and the fact that I was the only egg of six to make it to personhood, would just have been more details, little quirks, that made my story this great, wonderful story. But when he left, he took that from me, and so instead, they're just more layers of complication that make my story so freaking hard to tell anybody.

I can't say that my parents got divorced when I was little and my mom remarried because it isn't true, and it's not even that it's more complicated than that, it's that it's fundamentally different from that. And so whenever anybody asks me about my parents, I have to either lie and do a disservice to Mom and Joe, or unpack all that freaking baggage that he left me with.

All that just came out, and I didn't even realize any of it was true until I was shouting it at him, and it was catching me off guard, and pushing me closer and closer to this edge, and making me terrified of what was yet to come out because I knew that once it was out, I couldn't put it away again, and I didn't want him to have the power to make me break down, but I knew that's what was coming.

Because the next thing I said to him was, "Was I really that disposable to you?" The question stunned him — everything else up to this point had just chastened him, but this stunned him — and it stunned me too, but I had to keep going. Because he didn't know I was alive until I was five years old and he had another daughter with another woman — was I really that disposable? Was the act of my creation that forgettable, or did he just want any family he could get? And I asked if he really wanted to know why I was angry at him, if he really wanted to know why I hated him so much.

It took him a long moment, but he did eventually say yes.

Do you want to know, Alex? Do you want to know why I hate him so much? You said you did, a few letters ago. You said it never made sense to you, and what I never told you was that it never made sense to me, either, not really. But I know now. I figured it out.

He found a way to be happy. And I can't stand it. He shouldn't have been able to, he doesn't deserve it, and I actually believe that. That's what I hate him for, that I actually believe that! I resent his happiness. Me, who never begrudges anybody's right to be happy. You know me. I want people to be happy, I do everything in my power to make people happy! But him?

I can't stand that he got to be happy. I honestly can't, it makes me sick, to think of him living a life that lets him be content and fulfilled, after everything he did. I hate, with sick, burning rage, that he has been happy with his new wife and daughter and life away from us. What right does he have -- and what the hell does that make me, Alex? What kind of twisted, cruel, vindictive, hypocritical, inhuman monster does that make me? He was supposed to be my father, he was supposed to be the man in my life who helped me become the best possible version of myself, and instead, he's the one person in the world who makes me into someone I hate! How dare he do that to me! How dare he turn me into that kind of person -- God, I hate myself. I

~~I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I can't. I can't do this.~~

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March 12

I'm sorry. I'm sorry for unloading my crisis and emotional freak out on you, and I'm sorry for disappearing in the middle of it. ~~Not that you would have known, if I hadn't~~

I just don't know how to deal with this. How to process it. He called Mom, after I left. He told her everything, and she was waiting when I got home yesterday, before I wrote all that up there, and I didn't want to talk about it, but she pushed me, and I lost my temper with her, which certainly didn't help anything. We still haven't patched things up, largely because of the way I handled things yesterday (not well, after breaking off this letter. I left the house without telling them where I was going and didn't come home until almost midnight, so that ended poorly for me. I'd be grounded if I was doing anything except school, work, and Lissa.) I hate fighting with my mom. I hate it, but I'm still so -- she took his side, how the hell am I supposed to feel about that??

I just feel so alone, Alex. Joe's upset with me for upsetting Mom and not being willing to apologize, Lissa has enough to deal with without any of this shit, and besides, seeing her means seeing Thom, which I am just not ready to do again, and Gabe wants to know what's going on so he can fix it, and I just can't tell it again, Alex, I can't, so he's frustrated too, and the only person I have to talk to about it is Kevin, but he's got so much of his own shit going on and his own emotional baggage to deal with. The last thing he needs to add mine to his load. So there's no one, no one but you, and you're just words on a page, and I need you to be so much more than that, but I can't I just feel so alone.

I wanted you with me yesterday at the HCC so badly. I wanted someone there. By the time I said everything I had to say, I was in tears, I just completely

broke down, and Thom actually tried to comfort me. He didn't get very far. And I left, just pushed past him to the parking lot, and wished for someone I cared about to be there. To help. But there wasn't anyone.

I never even knew that this was under everything else. I never even had a clue.

I picked up your CD, but I haven't listened to it yet. I don't feel like I deserve it. But I know what you'd say to that.

Okay. Okay, pull yourself together, Zo. Because you have a letter to listen to, because you have a penpal who deserves a response. Okay.

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Have I told you lately how amazing you are and how lucky I am to have you as a friend? Thanks for letting me ramble about death without wanting me to shut up.

Alex, please don't – I loved that letter. I love that you took the time to do that for me, that you spent six hours talking into a microphone, talking to me, to reassure me how much I matter to you. What I meant about taking up space in someone's life – I don't know if I can explain it. Everyone's life is made up of the people in it, and most of the people you meet just brush up against the space of your life for a moment or two, or they're there in the background, but there are some people who come to make up more of the fabric of your life. I gather people to me, but –

I'm not doing this well.

It's not about comparing myself to anyone, it's about having some tangible reminder that you have opened up a space in your life for me. It doesn't matter how many others you've done that for; it matters that you've done it for me.

It's like, when we first started this, I knocked at the door, and you didn't let me in. You talked to me through the crack, but that was it. Eventually, you invited me inside, but I was still a visitor. I sat in the living room and I got glimpses. But then you made the decision to invite me to stay. To be a permanent fixture in your world. It's been that way for so long now that I sometimes forget how monumental a thing that was, until you do something like make me a six hour letter, and remind me that you invited me to belong in your life.

Is that any less incoherent? I'm still exhausted from all this unexpected soul searching, so forgive me if I'm still not making sense. Long story short, I am constantly thrilled to be shown how much I matter. So don't you dare set timers when you talk to me. You talk for as long as you have things to say. Got it?

I will not promise to let you take all the blame on the whole "who's been a shitty friend" argument. I know I've been emotionally irrational lately and shouldn't have brought up things I knew were baseless. But I will promise to leave this particular argument in the past.

Alex, you know I'd always be thrilled to have your company, but you don't exactly take the place of food and clothes and survival essentials, so if you're going to unpack my backpack to stow away, you'd better be packing money and a charged cell phone, is all I'm saying.

I wanted to fight you so bad about my playlist! Like, you said they were downer songs, and I immediately went, "What? No, they're not. Are you nuts?"



Those are great songs! They're upbeat!" And then I went and looked at them, and, you're right. They are downer songs. They're just upbeat compared to what I've been listening to lately.

Jesus. I thought I was okay. I really did. I mean, I know the whole Thom thing has been eating at me, but I thought I was doing all right with the rest of it. But it's been popping up unexpectedly lately. I guess I knew it would, ~~but I was hoping~~ I didn't think it would creep in quite so much. I'm sorry. I owe you a real Zoe playlist. I'll start working on that, I promise.

Oh, and Eleventyseven is awesome. I hadn't heard of them, but I love "Evil Genius"! It reminds me of "Future Soon" by Jonathan Coulton, which will be on your next CD. Thank you for the new music. :) And fine. Even though the Beatles are technically classified as classic rock, I listen to a lot of oldies (though five songs in nineteen isn't a third. Firmly looking at a quarter, there, math whiz). And for all your complaining, you're getting Carpenters on your next CD (what am I saying? That's not a punishment. They're awesome).

Oh, now I'm sorry I stole your Doctor Who thunder! :) Great minds think alike? I look forward to you getting the DVDs and watching them. I will have to put Joe's in and try to sync us so it's like I'm watching alongside you.

You'll tell me what you want for your birthday when you're ready. That's okay. But I'm gonna keep working on my idea in the meantime.

I'm still at a loss about your dad. Like, I honestly don't know what to think of him. He should not have kept the letters and calls from you for so long, but at least he did keep the cards? I mean, at least there's that. You have them now. He

could have just thrown them out. So maybe that means, on some level, he knew he was making a bad choice?

And I'm glad you talked to your dad. I mean, I know that can't have been easy, but you did it. It's always good to clear the air. Take it from someone who really sucks at following her own advice.

I'm so glad you're healing well! Though, much as I look forward to the day when you can write again, I'll be strangely sorry to give up this method of communication.

Anyway. This letter is insanely long, and insanely emotional, and there's not much I can do about that. I know if I apologize for it, you'll just tell me not to be stupid, so I won't. But I will try to promise that the next time I talk to you, I'll be in better spirits. One day at a time, right?

Yours,

Zoe