

October 28

Dear Zoe,

I apologize. I did not intend to have you drink the entire cappuccino. I distinctly remember telling Andi and Eddie to have you "give it a fair try," which, according to you, is three sips. I must not have made that clear enough to the baristas. Either that, or they were enjoying your punishment way more than they should have! Once I have finished writing this letter I will take them to task (and I do have some clout at least). That said, "disgusting," "a very pretty leaf," and the amount of anger you showed is far from "boring." Unboring doesn't have to mean pleasant after all (though obviously, I find them pleasant or I wouldn't order them so often). As penance, I have sent this directly to your P.O. Box, so you don't have to work at all for this one.

I probably shouldn't say this, because it will make you hate me more, but I am actually kind of glad you were angry and upset. I mean, I'm not happy you had a bad day - I'm not that sadistic. But your constant cheeriness was making me nervous. I have never met any real person who had that much... I don't even know what to call it. I was beginning to think that you were only still writing to me for some unrevealed extra portion of your experiment. I thought, maybe, in a few weeks you were going to get whatever it was you wanted from me and stop writing. I suppose that could still be true, but I doubt you would reveal that you were having a bad day to someone you were experimenting on. Well, unless it was a part of the experiment, to see how quickly you could get a stranger attached to you, and-

No. I'm not going to go down that road. Remember how I said that talking to a stranger is a chance to reinvent yourself? Well, I'm trying to be less paranoid. ("Paranoid" isn't the right word. It's more that I'm hyper-aware of all the ways in which things can go wrong and being prepared for what could go wrong is more important than just hoping things will go right.. I suppose that has to do with the way my life has gone. Someday, maybe, I'll tell you about it.) Anyway, you seem to be are the most trustworthy I trust you more than many people in my life, so if I'm going to try-- well, anyway.

I... don't know what to say? I'm glad that the compliment you deserved made you feel better. "You're welcome" seems trite but also appropriate. Do you see why I write such short letters? I have a hard time expressing what I want to say without sounding like a loser.

Baby sisters aren't that big a deal when you're already the middle child of seven. I have two older brothers, an older step-sister and two younger step-brothers from Rachel's first marriage, plus one younger half-brother (Rachel's my step-mom, did I say that last letter?). The three older ones are all out of the house - I've already mentioned that the oldest is in the military, and the other two are both at college. My step-brothers are twins, both Freshmen and a pain in my ass, mostly because their mother believes they are angels when, in fact, they are little devils who have made it their lives' mission to make my life living Hell (possibly because I'm the oldest one still at home, but just as possibly because they're little twerps who know they can get away with murder). My half-brother is almost four now, and I was excited about him finally going to pre-school because I would finally be free from babysitting

duty (don't ask me why the twins can't do it - I've asked many times, and never gotten a satisfactory answer). Instead, just as I was about to win my freedom, I'll be roped back in with another pooppy bottom. "Excited," as you put it, would be something of an overstatement. Tell you what though, if we ever get to the point where we do meet, I promise you can come over and help me babysit.

When I first read your challenge, I thought I didn't have any questions. You share so much more than anyone else in my life, I couldn't see how I could have anything else to ask about without disturbing your privacy. Now that I get to the point of writing the questions, though, I find I have far too many. The first, and most important, since I intended to ask it along with my last letter and somehow forgot: Before I revealed my gender and age, what would you have guessed? It's different from this side, being the anonymous one, and I forgot towards the end that you didn't know (which seems like an oxymoron because I talked a lot about being anonymous). Anyway your questions, boring though they were, came as a surprise, and made me wonder what it would have been like being on the other side.

And, since you have challenged me to ask questions: Have you continued writing to any of your other respondents, since that first letter? What made your week so terrible? How did you and Gabe meet, and why do you think you're such good friends? I don't know much about the two of you, and I don't see what you have in common yet. What's it like being an only child? I know, this will be hard to answer. I just can't imagine it, because our house is always so full and noisy! In fact, I'm surprised I didn't find your "read me" envelope sooner because I often go to Cuppa Joe's to get away from the noisy house. What other classes are you taking

this semester? What makes you angry (though you may answer this a little with one of the earlier ones)? And, since you want to tell me so badly, what is it about your hair that makes it so noticeable? ;P Since I have nothing to go on, I'm imagining a fiery red curly mane that stands out from your head in a true '70s 'fro (is there a politically correct way of saying this? I feel like there should be, and yet, I don't know what it is.)

My day was actually very interesting, thank you for asking. Emma and I always compete for best costume for Halloween, and since the big party is tomorrow I've been putting the finishing touches on mine all afternoon. The criteria are fairly simple - we can only use things we find offline (this year's costume came from the thrift shop mostly), and they can't be ready-made. I've been working on a '20s gangster suit for a few weeks now. It's simple, but by the time you add in the fedora, candy cigar, and various gun holsters it actually looks pretty swell (I know, I know, I crack myself up too). Just for authenticity's sake, I've added a pouch of fake blood to the pocket handkerchief, and I've convinced my buddy Brent to call for a duel (he's going as a cowboy - I should have mentioned this is for a party, though the competition is strictly between Emma and I. And, in case you were wondering, it's not the Cuppa Joe's party). He'll "shoot" me, and I'll pull a string in the cuff of my jacket that will pop the "blood" bag in the exact shape of a gunshot wound. I'll have a dramatic death scene and finally, finally win something!

Okay, I thought I was done, but one more: do you celebrate Halloween, and if so, what will your costume be?

As you have probably guessed from the tone of this letter, I've changed my mind about anonymity. It was fun while it lasted. You can ask me any questions you like. I may decide not to answer them but you can ask.

Sincerely,

Alex