

January 9

Alex,

See, I told you that you and Elisabeth would click! You're her favorite? That is the most precious thing I've ever heard. Please excuse me for a moment while I just revel in how completely adorable that mental image is. And now, with a photo of you and the cutest freakin' baby picture EVER of her, I absolutely have that mental image firmly in my head. So. Freaking. Precious.

Okay. I'm better now.

Your soccer picture is so cute (not as cute as Elisabeth, but as far as cute kid pictures go, it's up there)! You were such an adorable kid! What happened? (Okay, sorry, but c'mon, that was practically obligatory. :P)

So, I filled Gabe in on the whole "you two are secret besties" joke. He was with me at Cuppa Joe's when I collected your letter and read it, and that part made me laugh out loud, and so I had to explain the joke to him. He laughed, then said, "Is that a picture? I think it's only fair I know what the person replacing you as my best friend looks like." So I handed the photo to him. He looked at it for a second, then said, "Yeah. I accept that best friend aesthetic. He won't ruin my image, though he'd better be as willing to go thrift store shopping with me as you are." So . . . there's that. You have the Gabe Seal of Approval. Hope you like thrift stores. :)

Okay. Now the elephant. Look. I know you mean well, and I know you're worried, and I am grateful for and honored and flattered and touched by your concern. But right now, the biggest stressor surrounding this aspect of my life (Thom and Lissa and Michelle, et al) is having four mother hens hovering around

me, trying to make sure I'm okay. Between you and my mom and Joe and Gabe, I am starting to get claustrophobic, and I haven't even started taking Lissa to the Hospice Center yet. I love all of you for caring about me and my mental well-being, but I am capable of taking care of myself. No one needs to monitor me or have secret pow-wows about me or "make" me take care of myself.

I know what I can handle. I am not overwhelmed by this. What I am getting overwhelmed with is trying to constantly convince the four of you that I am on top of this. At this rate, yes, I am gonna have a nervous breakdown, but it's not gonna be because of Thom and Lissa or prom or school or work, it's gonna be because of you four. I am not in over my head. I am not treading water. I am swimming strong and steady.

Now, might that change in the future? Absolutely. If it does, I promise I will tell you. I promise I will not keep it to myself. But at the moment? I'm good. I swear. Okay?

Okay.

But now for the news I know you've been kept up nights waiting to hear: Gabe's prom theme. So he showed up this morning with a color-coded binder of sketches and budgets and fabric swatches, and a scale model of the gym all decked out in his theme, because Gabe is all about the unfair advantage. And his theme proposal is . . . *drumroll please*

"A Night in Wonderland"

It's Alice-based, of course, and Gabe out-Gabed himself, which I didn't think was possible. But this is one of the most incredible things I've ever seen him design. In case Canyon doesn't do this, Grand March is basically a chance for all

the couples to walk through the gym, decorated to the nines, and show off their outfits. There are five places to stop so parents can take photos, and Gabe's hitting the major images from the book: entrance is through a (rabbit) hole in the roots of a giant tree, the three in-march stops are the Mad Hatter's tea party, the Caterpillar's Mushroom, and the Queen's rose garden, and the exit is through a giant looking-glass. The whole thing is incredible, and even though we don't officially vote until next Monday, everyone knows what's gonna win. To be fair, everyone else submitting themes knew ahead of time what they were up against. And it's safe to say that Gabe takes it far more seriously than anyone else. Also, all the other themes are either super prom-cliche, like "Tropical Paradise" or just bizarre, like "Viva Las Vegas," so I don't even feel guilty about giving him my vote.

Okay, I reject the notion that it is my family doing the majority of the matchmaking. I had one. You had three. Numbers don't lie, Alex. And for the record, all I ever had to say to Gina to get her romantic mind whirring was "I have a penpal, his name is Alex."

I'm glad you're enjoying my super embarrassing photo. That makes me feel good about life. :P

It's weird to think that you saw me, or almost saw me. It's weird to think that our first meeting was almost in front of ALL my cousins, because yes, that was Gina. I know exactly what day that was, too. I forgot my purse in the car and had to go back and get it. Otherwise, I might have been the first one through the door. Weird.

The more I look at your photo, the more I think I've seen you, too, but I don't know. I think it's more that I want to have seen you, like, I wanted it to be this thing where I finally see a photo, and I could say, "Oh! Of course! You're that guy

in the corner always reading Tolstoy!" Which is pretty silly, but there you have it. I guess we've truly and officially left anonymity behind us, huh? Like, before, I might have passed you on the street, apologized for bumping into you, taken your order at Which Wich, and never known, but now? Now I'll know. And so I'm curious. What do we do, Alex, if we inadvertently cross paths? What do we do if we spot each other across Cuppa Joe's some afternoon, or pass each other in the street? Do we stop? Do we pretend it never happened?

These questions are mostly rhetorical. Mostly.

Okay, that's all I got for now. I imagine I will have more to say after tomorrow, but until then, yeah?

Your Friend,

Zoe