

October 13

Zoe,

I am impressed at your resourcefulness! Clearly you're not afraid of putting yourself out there and getting it wrong a few times (though, to be fair, my order was pretty specific and the probability that someone with my name would come in and order the exact same thing is small). Unfortunately (for you) this is not your letter. Instead I give you four clues:

1. Cuppa Joe's
2. Pieces
3. Green
4. Tiger

No asking the barista for help. I'll check on it in a few days to see if you figured it out and left a reply. If you can't figure it out, the baristas know who I am, so you can leave a note with them. Or not.

Oh, and I promise I will not "stake out the joint" hoping to catch you getting it. It would be pretty obvious, since Cuppa Joe's is tiny, and besides, where would be the fun in that?

Good luck!

Zoe,

You say "air of mystery," I say "protective shield." Besides, I think it's exciting to be communicating relatively anonymously. Even if you say something that I disagree with (and don't worry, we'll get to your answers in a minute), I can't be upset about it, because I don't know your life. My only knowledge of you is from the words you choose to give me - you're deciding who you want to be, and I think that's far more fascinating than who you are. Since you consider yourself trustworthy, I will add that to my opinion of you, though you'll still have to forgive me for ignoring any speculations or identifying questions you "did not ask" (please note the joking tone of voice unavailable to text rendition). Anonymity, after all, requires a little bit of mystery!

I know I just said I can't judge you, but seriously? White chocolate latte with amaretto syrup? Are you trying to get diabetes?!* (Another joke - I'm suddenly realizing how much I rely on tone of voice so I don't offend anybody. Sorry in advance if I say anything that makes you mad. I'll try and remember to mark things I'm joking about with asterisks or something so you know I'm not actually trying to piss you off.)

I suppose I could have guessed your answer to question 2; you seem exactly the sort of overly-peppy type who wants everybody to be happy. Who knows, maybe you're not actually like that, but trying to become that, and who am I to deny your dreams?

Okay, after I wrote that big speech about believing in the words you give me, I have to take it back. Are you mentioning your tall and athletic best friend just in case I do turn out to be a serial killer? Well, I have to tell you, it won't work. I don't intimidate easy.

On the greatest person thing, I don't have much to say. That's a pretty powerful story, and hey, it's amazing that she got through it on her own. Cancer sucks. I'd say I'm sorry but that doesn't have much meaning. I would choose Oscar Wilde, but that pales a bit in comparison. Especially considering you gave four totally respectable choices that most people would rank higher than some writer. Tell you what though, Nelson Mandela, FDR, and those other four at least make the top ten.

There's something you have to understand if I'm going to talk about my best friend. I love games. Any game, you name it, I love it. I think it's my incredibly competitive nature. So you can see why your letter appealed to me, right? I know it probably messes with your experiment if I'm not taking it as seriously as you'd like, but in some ways writing a letter to a stranger was kind of like a game. I just had to do it once I read your note.

Anyway, my friend, Emma, doesn't actually care too much about games, and yet somehow she manages to beat me at everything from basketball to bridge. I know, bridge is an old-people's game, but it has become a personal goal of mine to find some game that she can't win, and I'm down to the weird and unpopular ones. I suppose you could call that a quest if you like. I take back last week's answer to "what is

my quest" and substitute "finding a game that Emma can't win." Of course, to make things interesting, there's usually a bet of some kind going on. At the moment we have somewhere around thirty ongoing bets, some of them years old. The prizes are usually little things: quarters, loser-gives-winner-a-compliment, and sometimes, if it's really big, loser-buys-winner-[dinner/movie tickets/that thing they've wanted for forever]. Once, and only once, loser-is-winner's-slave-for-a-day was invoked. It made for some nastiness and eventually we called the bet a draw. Emma can be a bit mean sometimes, and I'm just glad I avoided that one.

As for the secret, I'll tell you a little-ish one: I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up. Everyone asks, and usually I just make something up on the spot, but none of them are actually true. That's why the "What is your quest?" question had a flippant answer. Most people would probably give their ambitions or their absolute longest-shot dreams, but I don't have any.

For your challenge this letter, tell me about something totally mundane that happened to you recently, but try to make it more interesting than it actually was.

Alex

P.S. If you prefer not to scavenger hunt for your notes in the future you can say so. You just seem like the type who might enjoy that kind of thing. (At this point in a conversation I would usually shrug, but that doesn't translate too well. You'll have to imagine it.)