

Subject: You. Missing.  
From: e98989898@ymail.com  
To: b89898989@ymail.com  
Date: Mon, 25 Mar 12:12 EST

Dear Bea,

I am not mad at you. I don't blame you. But I do think you owe me an explanation.

I know you're gone. We all know you're gone. I think from the moment Mom went into your room and found it the way you left it, we knew. What an exquisite *fuck you* to her and Darren—a perfectly made bed. Like it had never been slept in. Like you'd never been here at all. How many times have they yelled at you to make that bed? How many times have you refused? (Hint: The answer to both questions is the same number.) And now: You left everything smooth and blank.

No note. No word.

I know. I looked.

I wasn't the one who found your room like that. I was sitting at the kitchen table, trying to eat cereal in a way that wouldn't annoy Darren. Suddenly Mom was screaming your name. Again and again, angry at first, then something else— maybe ten percent scared. (It maxed out there, about ten percent.) I'll admit I didn't think much of it, since no morning would be complete without you two fighting. Darren didn't look up from his

toast either. But then Mom came storming into the kitchen and launched right into me—  
*Where is your sister? Tell me right now where she is.*

If I were you, I would have responded with something like “How the fuck should I know?” or “Isn’t it a little early for this shit, Mom?” But it’s a well-established fact that I am not you, so immediately I was like, “I don’t know I don’t know I don’t know—what’s going onnnnnnn?” Sounding guilty as I tried so hard to sound innocent. Then she turned to Darren and was like, “She’s gone” and he was like, “How the hell can she be gone?”

As an answer, we took a family trip up to your room. That’s when I saw your bed and thought, *Oh, wow. She’s taken off.*

I wasn’t going to say anything more than that, but they saw me looking around and Darren was on me in a flash, asking what was missing. I pointed out that your backpack wasn’t anywhere in sight, and that your schoolbooks were now stacked next to your garbage pail. (Nice touch.) Also, the biggest shock, your phone was abandoned on your dresser. Presumably so we couldn’t use it to track you.

Mom and Darren acted like insider knowledge was required to make this observation, so the interrogation resumed. I didn’t crack, though. Or wait—I guess I *did* crack. But they quickly saw there wasn’t anything behind the crack. You’d left me empty, too.

They might have kept on me—there wasn’t anything else for them to do, or at least nothing else that was occurring to them—but at that moment we were jolted by a honk outside. And I’ll admit—even though it didn’t really surprise me to find you were

gone, it surprised the heck out of me to have Joe in front of our house, coming to pick you up. Because that meant you'd left him, too.

I probably don't need to describe the ambush that followed. Darren dragging poor Joe out of the car, into the kitchen. Sitting him down, asking him hundreds of questions. And Joe sitting there, it dawning on him that his girlfriend has vanished. You are his life, Bea. You know that. And of all people, *Darren* was telling him that his life had walked out the door. Buh-bye.

Even though Darren yelled at Joe to look at him, only him, Joe kept looking over to me, begging me to tell him this wasn't really happening, that I had a secret message from you, the coordinates of a meeting place where you'd be waiting.

All I could do was shake my head.

Eventually, Mom and Darren were satisfied by Joe's cluelessness. And you know what? The fact that Joe was in the dark actually pissed them off more. Like they were outraged at how unfair you were being to him, as if they've always been the biggest Joe fans in the world. And in fairness, they probably do like him better than they like either you or me. But that's not exactly an achievement.

Mom actually said to Joe, "Now you see what a liar she can be," as if they were on the same side, as if she was giving him some motherly advice. I didn't get it at all. But, of course, from the moment Mom started dating Darren, I gave up on figuring her out. And figuring out Darren is way too easy, and not very helpful. When things don't go his way, he yells. As you know.

I politely mentioned that it was time to go to school, so I needed to run upstairs and get my stuff. I felt bad about leaving Joe alone with Mom and Darren, but there didn't seem to be any way around it.

The minute I got to my room, I knew exactly where to look. I'm guessing you thought it would take me longer, but it didn't. You know exactly what I found. And what I didn't find.

Look, I don't blame you for taking the money. I'm not at all surprised that you took the money. In fact, I'm going to confess to you that I have more than one hiding place. You knew about the hiding place I told you about, and I never put anything in there that I wasn't okay with you stealing. (I'm not going to call it *borrowing*, although I'm sure that's the way you want me to think of it. I am not expecting any of it back.)

The big question, as I was lifting out the tray of baseball cards, wasn't whether you'd robbed your little brother. It was whether you'd left me something in return.

And you had. This email address.

I'll admit, I didn't even know there was such a thing as ymail. But good on you for picking an obscure platform. I will make sure no one else knows about this address, and (as you see) I've made up my own return address, only for you. I understand the rules of engagement here. If you'd left without giving me any way to contact you, I wouldn't have ever forgiven you. Ever. But this is okay, I think. As long as you tell me what happened.

Mom and Darren were too busy asking Joe questions to notice me slipping back into the kitchen. To Joe's credit, he was asking questions right back— had they called the police? Had they tried Sloane? Were either of their cars missing?

That last question sent Darren flying from the room, with a look that made it clear he would hold Joe personally responsible if either of the cars was gone. While he checked, Mom said that, no, nobody was going to call the police. Beatrix wasn't *abducted*. She wasn't *in danger*. Or if she was in danger, it was her own damn fault.

"We have to get to school," I repeated.

But we weren't going to be cleared to go until Darren was back, saying the cars were safe in the garage. I didn't point out that both sets of keys were sitting on the kitchen counter, which would have saved him a trip.

Joe and I were free to go. We didn't say anything as we walked to the car. We were still afraid Mom and Darren might hear us. It was only when we were safe in the car and I was putting on my seat belt that Joe asked, "Is she really gone?"

And I had to say, yeah, it sure looked like it.

I was mad at you then. Because Joe was trembling. He didn't want me to see him cry. He didn't want to be that guy, not in his own car. But there we were, with me sitting in the seat that was always yours. It was like you'd sent me to break up with him, and it didn't matter that you'd dumped me too. Because Joe was the one you were supposed to take along and didn't. It's clear you didn't even ask. I'm not quite sure what he did to deserve that.

I didn't tell him about the email address. Not even when he asked if I knew how to find you. Blood is thicker than water, I suppose. It can also leave a much crueller stain.

We clung to the hope that Sloane would know something, that you'd left some instructions with her. Maybe you were over at her house, waiting for us to find you there. Joe and I tried calling and texting her, but there wasn't any response. With me, I could

almost understand—it wouldn't have been out of the question for Mom and Darren to commandeer my phone to track you down. But Joe's calls? I had no idea why she wasn't answering those.

I tried to reassure Joe, telling him you'd run away before, that you'd called it "taking a break," never really going that far. Like the time you got that hotel room in Columbus and crashed that forensics convention until one of the advisors complained you were distracting his team.

I thought this news would make Joe feel better, but he'd never heard any of these stories before, and that only made him feel like more of a heel. I was accidentally emphasizing how little he knew you. Which was odd, because I would've thought he knew you better than I did, for all the time you've spent with him these past couple years.

It's possible I wasn't very convincing when I told him about how you always came back. Because those other times didn't feel like this time. I don't know how to explain it. I saw that bed and knew you were planning to be gone for good. The fact that you'd cleaned out my hiding place confirmed it. You wouldn't have done that unless you really, really needed to, right?

Joe and I got to school, and I was convinced that we knew something that nobody else did—not yet, at least. Everyone was wandering around thinking you were still with us, still a part of the school. *Yeah*, I can imagine you saying, *like they paid so much attention to me while I was there*. But some people did. Joe said he'd look for Sloane, and I said I'd do the same, even though from my sophomore vantage point it was going to be harder to track down a senior. I'm sure some detective would ask, "Well, what about

looking for *Bea* when you got to school?” But neither of us seriously thought you’d be here. Of all the places in the world, this is the last place you’d escape to.

Terrence was waiting for me at my locker as usual. And I kissed him hello as usual. He asked me how I was doing . . . as usual. And I thought: *This is where it starts. If I tell someone else, that’s when the new reality begins.* I wanted to lie to him. But at the same time, if our family has taught me anything, it’s that lies will come back to haunt you, and that people are more forgiving up front than if they find out later you’ve been lying all along. Seeing what you just did to Joe made me want to avoid doing anything like it to Terrence. So I told him the short version. I made it sound less final than it probably is. But I didn’t pretend it wasn’t there.

Also, I didn’t tell him about the hiding place, or the missing money, or this email address. I promise I won’t tell anyone about those things.

Terrence was concerned—asking me if I was okay, asking me if there was anything he could do. I told him I was open to suggestions, and that I was feeling a lot of different emotions at the same time, sad and confused and strangely relieved and deeply unsettled.

Because he’s sweet, Terrence pretended to understand. He has some issues with his family being pretty don’t-ask-don’t-tell about him being gay, but I’ve never really let him see how monumentally messed up our family is.

We kissed goodbye, as usual. I went to my morning classes. In your honor, I didn’t pay attention.

(I know that’s not fair. I know you cared about some things.)

Now it's lunchtime and I'm at one of the computers in the library, making sure Mrs. Goldsmith doesn't look over my shoulder and see what I'm typing. Sloane still hasn't been found, although Joe has talked to people who've seen her at school today, so we know she isn't off somewhere with you. I think Joe's disappointed by this, but it makes sense to me, the alone part.

Poor Joe. Poor Sloane. Poor me.

You do realize how hard this is going to be, right? You do realize what you've left me with? And while I guess I'm happy you gave me the gift of plausible denial ("Really, Darren, I had no idea!"), some prep time would have been nice, too.

And a goodbye. I would've liked a goodbye.

But for now, I'll settle with you telling me where you are. If you trusted me enough to give me this email, you have to trust me enough to let me know where you are, and that you're okay. If not the first part, then at least the second. You have it easy—you can picture where I am. You can imagine exactly what I'm doing. You know which computer I'm at—the same one you've found me at all year, when the library is about to close and it's time to look for another place where we can avoid home. You know what it's going to sound like when I get back and Mom and Darren yell at me some more. You know—you must know—the disappointed, heartbroken look that's going to be on Joe's face for a long time. I know you pay attention. You know things I don't know. And you also know a lot of things I *do* know. Focus on those for a minute.

I'm hoping it's not something I did. I don't want to be the reason you chose today—the reason you couldn't wait two months until you graduated. I don't think I'm the reason, but I just have to put that out there.



Lunch is almost over. I'm going to hit send. I'll be very careful to cover my tracks, to make sure no one else will find these emails. So you can write me back.

Really, Bea. Write me back. It's going to be very hard to make it through your disappearance without you.

I know you've never needed me, Bea. But fuck it—I really need you.

Write. Back.

Ezra