

Foxley's Progress

MICHAEL WASHBURN

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Dear Lance,

This letter has come with no return address. As you realize who the author is, you may have an impulse to tear it up. I want to start off by asking you to hold off on assigning any blame for what has happened. I beg you to pause, reflect, and try to develop just a bit of perspective. Even at this distance, I feel the force of the tragedy and I'm achingly aware of what it has done to your life. Please, please don't blame me. I don't even know for certain whether this letter will ever come before your eyes, but my nights in these shitty little motels will be easier to get through if I can just try to help you reach some kind of understanding. I have to try.

When I first met your mother, Mrs. Vivian Foxley, I already had an idea of the world in which she was raising you. Competitive is a fair enough word. At the age of eighteen, you were showing promise academically, and particularly as a writer. You loved to read. But you lacked focus and needed a strong person to guide you and bring what was nascent into full bloom. In other words: You were eighteen. People believed in your promise but many complex and competing influences were at work and not all of them were healthy.

When I first set foot in your ornately furnished house in Brooklyn Heights, your mother was just getting done entertaining another guest,

a neighbor some ten years her junior named Emily Mitchell. Emily was telling your mom about what happened when she and her husband brought their three-year-old boy, Jimmy, to see your prep school's psychiatrist and childhood development specialist, Kate Brody. A few people had noticed that something wasn't right with Kate's mood that day. Still, it was a bit of a jolt when Kate spent a few minutes trying to administer some cognitive tests to uncooperative, irritated Jimmy, tests where you have to make simple deductions and recognize and identify things, and then brusquely turned around to the parents and proclaimed: "You'll never get him into any private school in New York. You'll have to start thinking about special schools for retarded children."

Vivian of course was shocked to hear this story.

Well—it was bad enough news for Jimmy, and I'm sure that Emily Mitchell took an extra mouthful of Prozac as soon as she got home that afternoon. Emily was still in a tizzy. When she and her husband made the rounds of cocktail parties in Brooklyn Heights, I'm sure that psychologically she had something akin to a scarlet "A" emblazoned on her forehead.

I didn't mean to get sidetracked here, Lance. But it's worth noting that these parties are the domain of parents who groom their kids for prep schools, Princeton, the big investment banks, and the partnerships of white-shoe corporate law firms. At these functions, it simply does not do to go around looking like you're marketing damaged goods. You have had to attend your share of these parties, and you know how parents stand behind and to one side of a son or daughter, place a hand on the child's shoulder, and tell the other parents that so-

and-so has a summer job on Wall Street or is interning at a publishing house. There have been times when Mrs. Vivian Foxley stood alone in the lobby or on the back porch of her brownstone, thinking herself unobserved, the fingers of her moist hands trembling as she unscrewed the cap of a tube of tablets and thought about an exam you had to take or a paper you had to write.

Particularly the latter. Though Vivian was not the first to take note of the increasingly feeble grasp of English usage and grammar among so many young people nowadays, she was prone to thinking about it more and more, perhaps partly because on some level she knew that she'd fallen short of her own family's expectations. At a remote point in her past, Vivian fancied herself a modern-day Virginia Woolf or Edith Wharton, but then she found that martinis and daytime soap operas have their allure. One thing she did become quite serious, deadly serious, about was making sure that you, her only child, her dearest Lance, learned to write well. There was still plenty of time for you to figure out what to do with your life, but one thing this lady understood was what E.O. Wilson calls the unity of knowledge and the universal value of language as a conveyor of it. So she invited me into the tea room of your impressive brownstone and served me a cup of Gevalia coffee and we talked for a bit. She said she'd heard that Bryce Allen was a wonderful writer and that I was also a patient, involved tutor. It did not take long for me to agree to become your tutor, not at the fees Vivian was offering. But don't think that was the only consideration. I made her show me a few of the papers you'd written for Mr. Irving's English class. A trained eye can quickly assess usage and style, and above all a writer's connection with what he or she is writing. If you'd been a hopeless case, as I think you know some of your

classmates are, I would have handed the papers back to Vivian and walked out of there and never given her or you another thought.

But I saw promise in your writing, and I was pretty confident about taking you on and guiding you, Lance. God knows I liked you well enough. You weren't one of these excessively privileged kids one meets at an academy such as yours. I'm thinking of your classmate, Chase Sutter, and some of the encounters I had with his overbearing mother, Mrs. Beverly Sutter. The Sutters were the first people your family became acquainted with following your move down from Boston when you were just eight. Although I have always thought Beverly is a lovely name, in this case it belonged to a woman whose cawing, raspy voice worked back and forth over you as if you were a protrusion that needed to be sandpapered away. Moreover, there was something oddly ambivalent about her at times, as I'm sure you found, Lance. She wanted her son Chase to succeed, in a conventional sense at least, just as much as any mother in this milieu, yet she chafed at other parents' restrictions on how much TV their kids could watch, and disparaged parents for allowing their son or daughter to turn into a "bookworm." (Don't you adore that phrase?) She was, I think, quietly resentful that Vivian, though never really serious about having a literary career, managed to work her way up to a senior editorial position at one of the more prominent book clubs, while Beverly worked as a human resources parasite somewhere. As for Chase, he was cocky and rude in the way that only the most insecure young men can be. He was also a vicious bully, from what I have heard. He mocked your bookishness. More on the Sutters later.

Yes, there were many odd and disharmonious influences at work on you in your younger days, Lance. I said the Sutters were the first

people your family really befriended upon moving to New York, but that may not be strictly accurate. For you and your investment banker dad and your doting mom had barely planted your feet on the grimy pavements of Brooklyn Heights when a business acquaintance of your father's, the vice president of a publishing house, introduced your parents at a cocktail party to one Peter Osterman. Ah, yes. Imagine your mother's delight at getting an introduction to a writer with a growing reputation both here and in Europe, an author who'd already won lavish praise for his slender novels combining elements of hard-boiled detective fiction with a modern French style and sensibility. His four novels to date were a farrago of introspection, roman à clef, and metaphysical inquiry in which Osterman's many antecedents, from E.A. Poe to Raymond Chandler to Henry Miller to Georges Simenon, reared their figurative heads with varying degrees of subtlety. What a coup, your mom thought, just to be able to say to people that she knew Peter Osterman socially. That she knew a literary family.

A friendship blossomed with this literary family, which consisted of the writer, his Norwegian second wife, also a writer, and their son Noah. You became such good friends with Noah, I recall, that the Ostermans soon began taking you along on trips to their summer house, on the shore of an exquisite lake in Minnesota. You seem to have let some of the memories from this time of life go, but there is one that I have revisited, vicariously, on occasions without number since I heard of it from Vivian. Peter allowed you and Noah more than your share of boyish diversions at the lake and in the woods, but he also came up with an idea to have a kind of impromptu writers' school right there, in the summer house. Now, I don't know many professional writers, let alone kids, who can sit down on a moment's

notice and turn out something worthy of a critique from a pro, but that was Peter's brilliant idea here. Just sit down and put pen to paper and show me what you come up with. Do it. Right now. Let's go. So you and Noah obediently sat down and got to work. You were only ten, but you vanquished self-consciousness and got down to it and produced something: "There once was a farmer named Jody that lived on a farm with a lot of pigs . . ." In the short term, Peter withheld any comment on the results of this exercise, but the next morning, as you were quietly coming down the stairs after your shower, hungry for some Cocoa Puffs, you overheard Peter talking with Noah by the window looking out over the beautiful lake. Peter had some comments about the pages Noah had produced, but before getting to the chase, he cast aside the other pile of pages from the previous day's exercise, saying simply, "Lance is not a writer."

A harsh judgment, to be sure, but one that I must say looks more than a little odd in light of some of the critical evaluations of Peter's work that have seen the light of print recently. Anyhow, I bring this up because you have suppressed the memory without grappling with it, without knowing where you may have gone on a subconscious level with its tentacles wrapped around you. Your mom didn't know how to react when you told her about this, Lance. For her part, Vivian never gave up on the idea of having a son who was better read and more intellectual than those of the women she hung out with down at the squash club. Your mother was also bringing home books for you, from best-sellers to avant-garde curiosities. Sometimes they were books published in the last few years, sometimes they were what unlettered people, like Beverly Sutter, refer to as "the classics." You took a necessary step in your artistic orientation when you began to develop

an acquaintance with Dostoyevsky. You loved to read. I bolstered Vivian's efforts by giving you lots more to read, works by Salinger, Capote, Dubus, Carver, Wolff, John Fante, John Hawkes, John Cheever, and John Sayles, and then I got you on a Bukowski kick. And I relentlessly criticized your writing, where it was windy and where it was gauche, hammering you just as relentlessly when you used too few words as when you used too many.

Meanwhile, your mom and Beverly Sutter hung out a fair amount at the squash club and the more modish restaurants on Montague Street. Beverly made no secret of the fact that she wasn't thrilled with you. It's a little hard, trying to fathom the attitudes of a woman so committed to conventional success for her own son, Chase, and alternately distrustful and jealous of literary pursuits, which have such an ambiguous status for practical people like Beverly. On the one hand, she wanted Chase to be able to speak and write well, but on the other, she thought reading would ultimately distract her boy from what mattered. Chase was a popular kid, but also a limited guy who thought of reading as a punishment. When your mom tried to reason with Beverly, the latter invariably began saying, in an extremely shrill voice, that Kate Brody had assured her that Chase showed tremendous promise in his early evaluations and the last thing she must do was allow her boy to become a bookish nerd, as, by implication, Vivian had done with you. Beverly had values and she stood by them. Hail to the post-literate age.

During your mid-teens, I was tutoring you, you were fighting to get your grades up at the prep school, and Vivian kept ending up in awkward positions at her job. I don't think she's ever told you this one anecdote, Lance. But she told me. Oh yes, she told me in

detail about the time that she went into an editorial meeting in the Midtown offices of the most prominent book club on the planet, carrying portions of a translated manuscript of an author she and I both revere. The other editors at the meeting took turns plugging one or another diet book, smut novel, or ghostwritten celebrity biography. Then when the time came for Vivian's presentation, she said the name Dostoyevsky, and the eyebrows of the executive director, seated at the end of the table, immediately went up.

"Is that one of these new Eastern European writers?" he asked.

It's true, Lance—that's what he asked your mom.

All eyes were on Vivian. She could not tell her boss what she was thinking, right to his face, in front of 20 other editors. No, she sure couldn't.

Vivian thought for a moment.

"Ah, no, he's actually 19th century, but this is a new translation," Vivian said, laying stress on the last few words.

The editorial director of the world's most prestigious book club nodded, processing this information, as the subordinate editors seated around the table quietly exhaled.

Hail to the post-literate age.

Amid all the hostile forces at work, your mom's hope and faith in you never wavered for an instant, Lance. Never, not once. I want you to know that. It's critical that you regard everything that's happened in this light. And, it goes without saying, I never gave up on you. I continued to coach you as a writer, giving you as much tough love as I thought an 18-year-old could take. Meanwhile, Beverly Sutter insisted to your mom that Bryce Allen was a criminal whom her son should have nothing to do with, any more than top-flight restaurants in the

Heights should allow homeless people to walk in off the street and take up tables. But at her urging, I continued to tutor you and to tell you exactly what I thought of your writing, whether you wanted to hear it or not. You forged ahead, your work improved, and I could hear the resentment in Beverly's voice when she sat in your mother's tea room and described the crabbed, awkward, misspelled disasters that ensued whenever Chase Sutter put pen to paper.

During your junior year of high school, your family kept up a precarious, complicated relationship with the Ostermans. It wasn't the highest point of Peter Osterman's career, what with his sales in a slump and an appraisal of his oeuvre coming out in one of the glossy weeklies. You might say that sounds like exactly what his career needed at that point, an essay drawing national attention, but then you've never brought yourself to read the magazine in question, *Lance*. Here was an acid rebuke not just to Osterman's serial use of clichés, but to the limpness, the laziness that characterized so much of his prose, which often read more like a Cliffs Notes summary of someone else's plot than like narrative. A measure of the accuracy of this appraisal was that everyone carefully avoided mentioning it at dinners and parties. But I suspect Vivian was thinking, "My son's not a writer, Peter? No—you're not a writer."

Having said all of this, Peter was a better friend than Beverly in some respects. He was outwardly warm toward Vivian, and he kindly, perhaps condescendingly, agreed to put in a word for you that helped you land an internship one summer at New Era Press, which billed itself as a progressive publisher and a home for authors not deemed commercially viable by the conglomerates. I guess in Peter's thinking

you may not have been a writer but there were still ways for you to be involved with books.

So you got the internship at this place, but it wasn't quite what you hoped or expected. The founder and editorial director was an aging fellow whose family had fled the war in Europe when he was a little boy. No one questions his social conscience or his aptitude for publishing works that otherwise might never make it into print, but you quickly came to learn about his judgment in other areas. He hired an office manager named Martine who dealt brusquely with the interns and whom you sometimes overheard making off-color jokes or talking about killing white people. When you went to the editorial director to complain, he gazed at you across his desk with a distant look as if he couldn't fathom what you were upset about. Then he informed you that Martine was "signifying," expressing a certain attitude without actually meaning it. You told him you took offense and had a circular conversation with him, yielding nothing. But this wasn't what got you fired. All of the interns were powerless in the scheme of things but there was a so-called "head intern," a 22-year-old woman from Seattle, a living embodiment of what they call youth culture. I would have said that putting a 22-year-old in a position of authority is always a questionable proposition, but this young woman brooked no defiance as to how the other interns would do things. She made them say "No problem" rather than "You're welcome" when talking to outside callers, and, weirder yet, she required them to make all the personal pronouns in their readers' reports gender-neutral. She talked as if those were obvious things to do. So, when you wrote, in your report on a manuscript, "A character in such a situation may find his options painfully limited," she made you change it to "their options," even

though you were referring to a fictional situation in a manuscript where the protagonist was in fact male. When you protested, she went right to Martine, and you walked between them as they faced each other in the hall outside the intern area, talking with smirks on their faces. So much for your internship.

But your writing continued to improve. You wrote with economy, yet avoided the workmanlike, dot-connecting banalities found in Peter Osterman's prose. I don't think I have ever seen jealousy so peculiarly manifested as it was on Beverly Sutter's face when she stood in the tea room of your brownstone and Vivian showed her a copy of the new edition of the prep school's literary magazine, which had published a story of yours. "The Gift," a tale set in the Australian outback, made the reader feel the presence of bloodied forms writhing and crawling through dry heat. In your early *oeuvre*, I believe that only your Vietnam War story "To Return to the Fields" surpasses it. I'll bet that the tales compare favorably to anything Peter Osterman produced at the same age or even years later. Let alone Chase Sutter. Your work was brilliant and it came as no surprise when, during your final year at the prep school, you won a partial scholarship to Princeton based largely on your creative writing. Your mother was not the only one who began to imagine how a literary aptitude might dovetail with professional success rather than just acting as a distraction.

That fact brings us to the next chapter in this sordid history. I recall Vivian telling me of the spontaneous decision Beverly made, one afternoon, to have Chase "do literature." Beverly abruptly got up off her bloated behind, went out from the Sutter residence to the nearest Barnes & Noble, and returned with a big pile of "the classics." Here were *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Crime*

and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov, The Great Gatsby, The Scarlet Letter, 1984, Animal Farm, Brave New World, To Kill a Mockingbird, Ethan Frome, The Sun Also Rises, and In Cold Blood. She dropped them on the desk in Chase's room and said, Get going, Chase darling. I want you to read these over the next few weeks and then you should be able to write stories that will make Lance Foxley want to crawl under a desk and stay there. And your publication history will overtake his, in no time at all.

The books on the pile on Chase's desk looked so new and fresh, with their spines uncracked, their pages not yet smudged or creased. To Beverly and perhaps also to Chase, they said: *Possibility*. Chase began making his way through the books and obeying at least the letter of Beverly's second commandment, to write. But when Beverly read the stories and essays her son produced, even she knew right away there could be no question of submitting them to the prep school's literary journal, let alone to the prestigious national ones where you, Lance, now sought entry. Still, I don't think Chase quite anticipated her reaction. Nor did she expect his reaction to her reaction. If it is a gross mistake to underestimate an upper-class mother's vanity, it is a fatal error to fail to gauge what a teen lacking experience in life, in its vagaries and vacillations, may do in response to the kinds of words Beverly uttered to her boy.

In Chase Sutter's mind, the newness and freshness of that stack of books on his desk were sort of akin to the sleekness and coolness of a revolver's barrel, on those occasions when he'd held one. It's hard to get your hands on a gun legally in New York City, as everyone knows, but there are subways that thunder past narrow platforms at all hours of the day and night. Chase had Beverly's feedback in mind when he

made his way down to the station at two in the morning. They said later that the train practically cut Chase in half.

Here's the kicker, Lance. The first of two. Here's what no one has told you. After a couple of your stories came out, Beverly approached me with the same request your mother had made before. I asked to see some of Chase's writing, received it electronically as attachments, mulled it over, and wrote back saying that Chase's mom had forced on him pursuits that were not antithetical to developing gifts as a writer, but were not conducive to such gifts either. I fail to see how this is any different from what Beverly had been telling her boy all along, but I can't know what went through Chase's mind when he logged onto Beverly's account and read the message. But don't believe anyone who suggests that I may have sent really malicious, hurtful messages. In any event, I'm in trouble again.

Ah, Lance. Please refer to my earlier comment about vanity. I think you can understand it well enough now. You, or perhaps it was Vivian, should never, ever have granted Beverly's request to let her see early drafts of a few of your tales. You missed so many hints about Beverly and you never suspected that she might keep versions of the stories and might claim later that her son was the author and you, the plagiarist. Some people just might believe her. But guess what, Lance? Kicker number two is that I still have the earliest drafts, the ones you e-mailed over to me when the tales were just hot pulpy matter that had trickled out of your fecund imagination onto your screen. I also have our exchanges of e-mail in which I gave you ideas for revisions. Anyone will agree, upon reading these exchanges, that it is extremely unlikely that Chase and not you wrote the stories. You thought I

deleted all of these things, but I kept them, and the e-mail account I'm using now isn't under my name, so they're going to stay my property for the time being, at least until you need to present them in court. (I am not privy to your current e-mail address, hence this letter.)

I'm going to have to stop writing now because I'm exhausted and it's only two more hours before the trucker in the next room brings home a drunken lady and the heavy breathing and banging resume. If I'm going to sleep at all, it has to be now.

In closing, please don't blame me or your mom for what has happened, and please, please, whatever you do, don't blame yourself. And don't trouble yourself about the lies Beverly tells.

It will probably take quite a while for all of this to go away and for you to find some time to isolate yourself and write. It may take years.

But some things won't change a bit, Lance. I'll still be a proud anachronism in a post-literate age, I'll be grateful for having been your tutor, and I'll always, always be proud of your progress.

Best wishes,
Bryce

P.S. I hate to bring this up, Lance, but I never got a check from Vivian for our last session. Crashing in these motels and eating at Hardee's is tough enough as it is. So I really need you put a check in the mail, made out to me, but send it to my brother in Maryland. There's only one Felix Allen living in Salisbury. Maybe you can add a little advance on the next two lessons. Will you do it now, Lance buddy? □