

Robert Wexelblatt

AUNT VIOLA CONVALESCES

Vice President in Charge of Losing Luggage
Alpine Airlines
Denver, Colorado

Dear Mr. Vice President (I know it's not PC to make gender assumptions, but I feel certain you're male):

I write to congratulate you on the excellence with which you are carrying out your duties. I notice that for the third year running Alpine has won the lost luggage sweepstakes and by what looks to be a gratifyingly wide margin. Bravissimo.

Last month, a friend of mine, who'd been pining for her daughter and her family in Seattle, saw one of your ads for bargain round-trip tickets. She bought one. My friend is a bit of a complainer, I'm afraid. She was rather put out that her flight took off two and a half hours late and was only a little mollified when I assured her that beats your average. However, she is still whining about her luggage because, even though she filed the required form, followed up with phone calls, emails, and two registered letters, she has yet to hear a word back from Alpine about her two missing suitcases. She is just the sort of pesky customer you must deplore. I fear she has grown a tad impatient, even though, as I pointed out to her, the suitcases have been missing for a mere five weeks. She is hard to satisfy, I admit. According to her, your colleagues, the Associate V.P. for Procrustean Seating and the Assistant V.P. of Indigestible Meals, are also owed kudos for a bang-up job.

You must hear from many annoying customers like my friend, so I thought a letter of appreciation from me might raise your spirits and send you back to your exacting work with renewed energy.

Yours, with all good wishes from a grounded wing chair,
Viola Malkin (Ms.)

Aunt Viola has always been physically active—a walker, cyclist, swimmer, camper. I think the same restlessness applies to her mental life; she’s a great reader, an autodidact. For years, she’s worked for a large law firm. Her formal title is Office Manager but it really ought to be pin-in-the-pinwheel. She’s devoted to the job and to her attorneys. Maybe that’s why she never gave me a cousin. When Uncle Roy died a few years back, it didn’t seem to knock Viola off her stride or, if she was bereft, she kept it to herself and pressed on, a good Stoic.

Apropos, when I could see she was suffering from a bad hip but didn’t complain about it, I said sympathetically that she didn’t need to be so stoical about it. She thanked me. When I said I hadn’t meant it as a compliment, she replied with stern sweetness, “Nobody’s ever insulted to be called Stoic, dear.”

The chief consequence of Viola’s widowhood for me was that we spent more time together. I’ve always liked my aunt, but now she had more time for me and I was just old enough to qualify as a friend. She took an interest in my education, then my career plans. She asked just the limited number of right questions about my dating. She also recommended readings most of which I’d never heard of; the books were varied but invariably interesting. It was mostly fiction, but, probably because of our little exchange about stoicism, she suggested Epictetus’ *Enchiridion* and loaned me her own copy of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*. When she handed it over, she said impishly, “If you find one or two of the Emperor’s meditations a bit dull, just tack ‘in bed’ on the end.”

Then her right hip finally wore out and, after a lot of quietly endured pain, many tests and scans, the medical verdict was that it had to be replaced. When two of her lawyers recommended the same surgeon, she phoned his office.

I saw Dr. Freihofer once, briefly. I was in my aunt's hospital room the day after the procedure when he stopped by, or stuck his head in. He seemed to me like a typical surgeon—large, forceful, self-confident, arrogant. I had the impression that he saw my aunt and me strictly as physical objects.

“How are you today?” he asked mechanically.

“Not quite so good as you, by the looks of things,” said Aunt Viola.

Freihofer frowned, as if any answer outside his narrowly acceptable parameters was unacceptable. Then he was gone. I wasn't surprised by the story my aunt told me about her first visit to his office to go over her MRI.

“He was excited, but not about me and my hip. He was just back from a trip to Germany and bubbling with irrepressible admiration for the Teutonic approach to orthopedic surgery. When I asked him what the Germans did so much better than we do, he said, ‘Well, to *begin* with, in Germany somebody like me would never have to talk to somebody like you. I'd just cut. So much more efficient.’”

“I'm guessing you said something back.”

“Sure. I told him it sounded German all right.”

Dr. Freihofer declared a complete success, but Aunt Viola still had to endure a recuperation period of seven weeks followed by a phased return to work. All that forced inactivity was hard for her. And so were her four days in the hospital before, as she said, I “sprung” her. I visited her every day while she was there. She tended to growl about wanting out unless she was drugged up. Nevertheless, from what I could see, she got on surprisingly well with the nurses, especially the middle-aged ones. As working women of a certain age, they seemed to have an understanding.

I got her settled at home. We'd already set up a bed downstairs and moved a lot of stuff down from the bedroom and upstairs bath. I fixed dinner that first night, and, when she insisted I get going, I refused and stayed to see her safely into bed. When I came by after work the following day, she assured me she'd had a good night, was using her walker as ordered and being extra careful in the bathroom. She was still taking the Vicodin she'd been prescribed but didn't care for the side-effects. By the next day she'd given up the pills.

“Pain's better than stupefaction,” she said grouchily. “But I'm bored.”

My aunt has a taste for irony—sometimes to the point of sarcasm. There are members of the family, my father for instance, who don't much care for her because of that; but even as a little girl I enjoyed her wit and, in general, admired the ways she deployed it. Now, stuck at home, her mind was like an engine that would rust if it didn't run. And so, when I next visited a couple days later, I wasn't surprised that she'd found a few things to do. One was writing letters to corporate vice presidents. She ran the first one, the one to Alpine Airlines, by me.

“What do you think?”

“I think you might score some free tickets for your friend, or even yourself. If Alpine's got a sense of humor, that is.”

“A big if. I think it's at least as likely I'll be banned for life from their airborne sardine cans.”

I noticed a wicker basket by her chair.

“I didn't know you knitted.”

“I haven't for years and years. I'm taking it up again. Once you get into it it's rather nice—mindless, or I should say mind-emptying.”

“Nowadays that's called being mindful.”

“Ha! I keep hearing talk about this mindfulness thing, mostly from people who seem to make precious little use of their minds. So, being mindful means having a mind full of nothing? Sounds like what we used call 'Zen'.”

“People still say it. Zen.”

“I like Zen stories. And those short Jewish stories. They're a lot like each other, you know. Did I ever lend you Martin Buber's collection of Hasidic tales?”

“Not yet.”

She told me on what shelf to find Buber. There were two volumes.

“Take the first,” she said. “Better than the sequel.”

“What are you knitting?”

“Booties. And little caps.”

“For babies?”

“Well, not for tight ends or fullbacks. When I get better at it, I’m going to donate them to our local maternity ward.”

“That’s a lovely idea.”

“Keep that thought in mind when I ask you to drop them off, dear.”

Aunt Viola was not much of a TV fan, but now she watched a lot more than she was used to and only mentioned it with some shame. I gave her a list of good series and promised the kind of pleasure the cigar-makers had when the companies employed people to read them Dickens and Tolstoy as they worked. It was her time watching TV commercials that prompted the second in her string of corporate letters.

Vice President for Gender Stereotyping and Environmental Degradation

Ford Motor Company

Dearborn, Michigan

Dear Vice President:

Your subtlety, while not all that subtle, is worthy of the approbation that’s no doubt been heaped on you by the muck-a-mucks on the upper floors there in Dearborn. I know that motor vehicles have always been, as they say, “gendered”—what was more feminine than the Thunderbird, more masculine than the early Mustang? But you’ve taken things to a new level with more spectacular consequences. Profit margins on SUVs and trucks are a whole lot higher than on cars, particularly little, efficient ones. I’ve taken note that all your truck ads have men in them while all your ads for SUVs feature women. Meanwhile, ads for anything less ponderous, expensive, gas-guzzling, lane-filling, and polluting seem to have entirely vanished.

You’ve achieved something few thought possible, certainly not your history-is-bunk, anti-Semitic founder. I’ve just heard the announcement of your ultimate triumph—and thought it tastefully understated by the way. From now on, said the spokesperson, the Ford Motor Company will no longer manufacture cars at all, only profitable trucks for daddies and SUVs for mommies.

Mazeltoy, Mr. V. P. Mother Earth and Father Sky won't bless your name, but surely your CEO, CFO, your Board of Directors, and your many stockholders will.

Yours with all good wishes and a 2007 Honda Civic sitting in the garage,

Viola Malkin (Ms.)

Aunt Viola quickly improved her knitting. "It's something semi-mindless to do when I'm watching totally-mindless TV shows. I call it multi-tasking."

She used her computer to print out tags to be pinned to her little booties and caps:

Dear Newborn,

On the occasion of your birth

Welcome to our planet, Earth.

"That's so cute. Aren't you going to sign them?"

"Don't be ridiculous, dear. Infants can't read."

Aunt Viola took a new interest in endings as well as beginnings. She took out an online subscription to the *New York Times* just for the obituaries, which she included in her daily routine, reading through them every day with her mid-morning cup of tea.

"They're the best written things in the paper and fascinating, really. *The Times* has a special staff to write obits of the famous and notorious in advance and update as needed, for when the time comes. Nobels won, divorces finalized, philanthropy broadcast, memoirs ghost-written, diseases contracted, frauds committed, indictments filed, wars declared, and so on."

"And so on. But what a morbid job. Like being a bunch of vultures."

"Vultures? Not at all. The paper of record requires recording angels."

Not all my aunt's corporate letters were exercises in sarcastic chiding. She insisted the following one was both sincere and complimentary. I noticed, though, that if the hook was smooth it still had a little barb at the end.

Vice President for Business Plans
Vice President for Labor Capital
Jiffy Lube International, Inc.
Houston, Texas

Dear JL Vice Presidents:

First, I am writing to praise your business plan which was terrific at the start and continues to be exemplary. In fact, it was the first time I went to a Jiffy Lube that I understood the meaning of *business plan*, that now-soiled and over-familiar phrase. Jiffy Lube remains for me the model of entrepreneurial insight. You saw a need and figured out how to satisfy it conveniently for me, profitably for you. These days, too many *business plans* are about coming up with some innovation (yet another app) and then trying to engineer the need for it via marketing and advertising. But Jiffy Lube is the real thing. Anybody old enough to have owned an automobile before your company came into existence will know what I mean. Oil changes could be had, but from gas stations that didn't inspire confidence, didn't finish the job in a jiffy or fix all the little things you do. This is why, even when places promise to change my oil for half what you charge, I remain a loyal customer. You can check your computer records; they'll show I show up around every 3K miles.

Second, just a little query directed to the V.P. for Labor Capital. Why is it when I go to my local Jiffy Lube there's never anybody there who was there the last time, including the manager? What is it? Can't you hold on to employees, or are they all unreliable dropouts and drifters apt to move on or be incarcerated before my car goes three thousand miles? Or do you move them around the way the Church did priests with regrettable proclivities? Just asking.

Well, keep up the good work, no matter who actually does it.

Yours down to my carpet slippers,
Viola Malkin (Ms.)

Things got crazy at work for a while and, though I phoned nightly, I didn't see my aunt for a week. I stopped by on Sunday morning on my way to join the irreligious mob at the supermarket.

She greeted me warmly enough and retreated to her chair. She'd come to the door with her new cherry wood cane, almost apologizing to me for having put aside the walker earlier than she probably ought to have done.

"You don't get better by making what's wrong more tolerable, by making instability stable. For me, the cane marks progress. So, please, no sermon."

"Wouldn't think of it," I fibbed.

Despite her spirited self-defense, Aunt Viola was more subdued than usual. Since she began to improve she'd been itchy, impatient, but now her body was still and mood pensive. I soon found out why.

"Read this," she said, handing me the printout of a breaking news article from a North Jersey paper.

The day before, on Saturday afternoon, a man was flying his private plane with his two children aboard, a ten-year-old boy and a girl of seven, from Danbury Municipal Airport heading for Teterboro in South Jersey. Over Ramsay, the engine apparently failed and the plane crashed into the parking lot of the local Hilton which was about to host a twentieth high-school reunion dinner. The class officers had arrived early and were inside setting things up. Most of the guests wouldn't be coming for another hour or more. There were vehicles but no people in the parking lot when the plane fell on it, except for a recently married couple, both members of the reunion class. They were early to see how things had been arranged because they were going to be given special attention at the dinner. They'd been a couple in high school, had gone to the prom together, were elected "king" and "queen," and then went their separate ways. A little over a year earlier, they'd gotten in touch via Facebook and one thing led to

another. They were just about to get out of their car when the Cessna fell on top them. Both were killed. So were the three people in the plane.

I looked at my aunt.

“Check out the name,” she said, “the name of the pilot.”

It hadn’t registered. The article identified the pilot as “Charles Freihofer, a well-known orthopedic surgeon.”

“What? *Your* Freihofer?”

She nodded. “It’s almost a cliché these days, isn’t it?” she said gravely, wistfully. “Facebook divorces I think they’re called. . . . There was a follow-up report on the radio this morning. Human interest. If humans are interested in jaw-dropping ironies. What are the odds? That star-crossed couple in the car? He was a widower but his new wife divorced her spouse to marry him. The custody agreement allowed her former husband two weekends a month with the kids. Apparently, he was planning to take them horse-back riding in the pine barrens.”

“You mean—?”

“Yep. The discarded spouse was Dr. Freihofer. *And* so was the pilot. And the kids—”

She stopped and I more or less fell onto the sofa.

A minute later: “Would you make us a cup of tea, please?”

Aunt Viola talked while I was still in the kitchen

“Do you think a fatal accident is really a tragic finale we can’t understand—or is a tragedy an accident we think we *do*?”

“It sure makes you wonder,” I called back, waiting for the water to boil.

When I brought in the tea, my aunt nodded towards her knitting basket. “Birth and death,” she said with a chilling smile, “they both louse up your plans.”

I sat down and waited. I could tell she had more she wanted to say.

“I’ve been reading one of my old college textbooks, a three-pound drama anthology. It starts with the Greeks, of course. They invented plays, tragedy and comedy. This was at the same time they dreamed up democracy. Everybody in Athens sitting together, watching things play out. Not just rich men listening to lyre-playing Homer wannabes after dinner. Stories for the masses, seats one drachma

each. It occurred to me that tragedy and comedy are compelling and durable because they're biologically, not politically based. Sex and death. What gets us here and what gets us out of here. Those things don't change, do they?"

"No."

"No. But then I thought about endings. Every kid on the playground knows the difference. Tragedies have unhappy endings and comedies have happy ones. But what kind of ending is happy and what kind is the opposite?"

I held my tongue. It was a rhetorical question.

"It's really all about families, isn't it? The whole Danish royal family dead at the end of Act Five of *Hamlet*; it takes more plays but eventually the House of Atreus gets wiped out. And then there's comedy. What actually happens at the end of *Lysistrata*? It's not just an orgy, everybody making love instead of war. It's mass reproduction, everybody thinking they're getting what they've been aching for when it's really Life getting what *it* wants. Which is more of itself, which is continuing on. Plowing, planting seeds. What Life wants is to continue, families saved not annihilated. Christian comedies end with people getting engaged or married. It's more decorous than the old pagan orgy, but isn't the point the same?"

"But they're *plays*. Tragic one and comic ones—they're *contrived*. We make them up so they'll make sense. But what happened in that parking lot. . . it doesn't make any sense."

"No, I guess I can't claim it does. But don't you feel the irony means *something*, *sort of*? What was the philosopher's theory? Pity and terror, wasn't it? An emotional enema? What happened to the Freihofers makes me feel pity and terror a lot more sharply than, say, *The Bacchae*. I re-read that one, too."

"It *is* tragic."

"In a lot of senses. The tragic fall. The hubris of aviation. Elevated individuals brought down. A whole family gone in a moment."

"But in a play it adds up to something. What happened yesterday is, well, it's ridiculously improbable."

Aunt Viola looked at me and nodded. “So, you read Aristotle too. He was the one who said a probable impossibility is better in a play than an improbable actuality. Something like that, anyway.”

“I never understood what he meant, not until now. You couldn’t make a play out of that plane crash.”

“Unless God was the playwright.”

“People like that idea. That there’s a script, that ‘everything happens for a reason’—by which they mean a *good* one. Even some atheists think that.”

“Yes. I suppose the need to find order goes deeper than the desire for God.”

“God’s one way of getting it.”

“Or the gods, the Fates. But *this* story. . .” She didn’t complete her thought.

“I think it’s like this,” I said. “You’re walking through the woods and you come to a stream. There are a lot of pebbles and stones in it. And among them there’s a rock in exactly the shape of the Venus de Milo.”

“Order implies meaning?”

“That’s what I’m saying. And vice versa too. It feels like there’s some meaning in that plane crash and so we want it to be *orderly* too. We want a reason.”

“*Want* being the operant word, dear. It’s not the same as believing.”

“No.”

We were quiet for a full minute.

At last Aunt Viola sighed. “Well,” she said, “I won’t be writing to any vice presidents at Cessna. I’m going to knit more caps and booties.” She looked out the window. “What I want isn’t so much a reason as a happy ending.”

Only later did it hit me that Aunt Viola, who had borne no children, wasn’t just referring to the new beginnings in the maternity ward. She was also thinking of broken toes and broken hips. She was also talking about her own ending.