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A Letter to Daniel Larusso, the Karate Kid

Abstract

Dear Daniel,

Good talking with you at the All-Valley Karate Championships. What a story you have! Inspiring. Seriously. The stuff movies are made of. Consider me a big fan. I don't know, maybe I saw something of myself in you, the lanky underdog trying to get his footing in that first match and then finding his stride, fighting, really, for his life and not just some trophy or title.

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January 24, 2014

A Letter to Daniel Larusso, the Karate Kid

by Ryan Shoemaker

Dear Daniel,

Good talking with you at the All-Valley Karate Championships. What a story you have! Inspiring. Seriously. The stuff movies are made of. Consider me a big fan. I don't know, maybe I saw something of myself in you, the lanky underdog trying to get his footing in that first match and then finding his stride, fighting, really, for his life and not just some trophy or title.

But even with all that heart, Daniel, I had my doubts. Really. I mean, anyone would, right? Fact is you're this skinny Italian kid from Newark who took a couple karate classes at the YMCA and then got bamboozled into doing these really awful chores for Mr. Miyagi. Second fact: by the time you got to the championship match, those Cobra Kai had unmercifully wrung you out, and Johnny Lawrence, tempered by all those years of practiced round houses and knuckle pushups in the dojo, was just warming to the task of wiping the mats with you. And you, hobbling around like a ninety-year-old man, practically crippled, and then carted off on a stretcher.

By that point, I thought best-case scenario was you on a morphine drip in Valley Presbyterian ICU. Worst-case scenario? Maybe you in a body bag. Then, suddenly, you were back in the arena, all smiles as you waved to the crowd.

And that awesome crane kick to Johnny's jaw. Ali running out in that sexy purple mini skirt and those white knee-high socks, and your mom there, too, the maternal relief on her face, because all those worries and uncertainties about this California move—the crappy swimming pool, the mysterious ass-whoppings, your strange relationship with an old Japanese guy—just vanished. And of course Mr. Miyagi, in that totally 70s retro shirt with the huge, pointed collar, grinning slyly like the proud father he always wanted to be, because he imparted his ancient karate wisdom, taught you all those cool life lessons, and, at the same time, secretly got you to fix up his old bachelor pad by the railroad tracks.

And when it couldn't get any better, Johnny, your arch enemy, the guy who kicked your ass all over town and even once at the beach, now humbled and repentant, hands you that huge gold trophy and tells you you're all right. The adoring crowd, the praise of friends, family, and strangers, the rich girl you love toweling the sweat from your brow—what a moment! But don't kid yourself, Daniel, into thinking you and Ali will live happily ever after up in the Hollywood Hills.

Reality is, in the end, you don't get Ali. Johnny does. Sure, you'll be the big man on campus for the rest of the year, the working man's hero for Freddy and all the other Reseda kids who had to endure Johnny's titty-twisters and atomic-wedgies since middle school. On weekends, you and Ali will cruise the Pacific Coast Highway in your vintage Ford SuperDeluxe convertible to roast hot dogs and kick a soccer ball around Zuma Beach. Or you'll eat pizza and make out in the dark comfort of Ali's home theater while watching *Revenge of the Nerds*. And Ali's parents will be cool with you, even though you don't have Johnny's moneyed, Anglo pedigree, and nothing even close to that perfect crescent of corn silk blond hair that floats on his forehead. They'll be cool with you, at least until the end of summer, because this will be a rich cultural experience for their daughter, much safer than a study abroad to Haiti or Burundi to see how the ninety-nine percent live. Maybe, they hope, Ali will even turn her slumming into a really cool personal essay for her freshman composition class at USC. They know you two won't last.

Why? Because Ali will go off to USC in her dad's old Mercedes coup, and when she calls, she'll go on and on about rush week and all-night keggers on Greek Row and how her roommate, Samantha, is dating William Shatner's nephew. And you'll have no idea what the hell she's talking about, because you're still living in the South Sea Apartments with your mom, slapping pizzas together full-time at the Domino's in Burbank, and taking a few evening classes at West Los Angeles College.

Now and then, you'll meet up with Ali and her college friends at Zuma Beach, skinny you, still stinking of Canadian bacon, in cut-off Levis and a muscle shirt, with a speck of marinara sauce on your left earlobe. And when you bounce a soccer ball on your knee and suggest a quick game, they'll look at you like you just pissed in their vanilla frappuccinos.

Soon, Ali won't come home much on weekends and will seldom return your calls. When you do go out, her mind will be elsewhere, certainly not on the new windmill hazard at Golf N' Stuff or the white-knuckle drop of the water slides you planned for a Saturday date. You'll hear from Freddy, who's busing tables weekends at the Woodland Hills Country Club, that he's seen Ali there with Johnny, dancing, lip-locking, and then disappearing into the night on the back of his Ninja 600R.

In a rage, still wearing your red, white, and blue Domino's uniform, you'll gun it down to USC in your vintage car, and there find Ali and her friends hanging out on the grass in the McCarthy Quad. When you wave at Ali, her face will flush a deep red and then she'll look away and pretend you're not there. A blond frat boy you remember from the beach will say, "Hey, Daniel, where the hell's our pizza?" And everyone, including Ali, will laugh hysterically. And like you did at the country club when you had goulash smeared all over those sharp, white jeans, you'll run.

On the way home, you'll stop at a bar in Van Nuys and drink beer after beer thanks to the fake ID Freddy gave you for your eighteenth birthday. And when some leathered biker from Tujunga makes fun of the way you say *water* and *over there*, you'll raise your arms and leg into crane kick position and then fall on your ass when you slip in a puddle of Old Milwaukee. For the second time that night, you'll run.

Making pizzas by the hundreds, general eds at the community college, your mom's awful scrambled eggs each morning, and the annoying way she blabs on and on about your gorgeous baby browns to make you feel better about yourself. You'll spiral into a dark depression. Mr. Miyagi won't be any help. When he's not fishing for striped bass at Castaic Lake, he'll have another at-risk teenager he's mentoring, some Armenian kid with a harelip who's getting the bejesus wonked out of him every morning at the bus stop.

In bed at night, you'll stare up at the tough-looking trophy on your bookcase and try to recall every sensation of your victory at the All-Valley Karate Championships, the crowd's deafening approval, Ali's tender encouragement, and

the solid, fleshy weight of foot connecting to jaw. Still lying in bed, you'll practice the old moves: wax on, wax off; sand the floor; paint the fence; crane kick. Your mom will hear the bed banging against the wall and worry that your deep depression has led you to the mortal sin of self-pleasure.

But we're fighters, Daniel. We've always been fighters. A deadbeat dad. Smoky apartment complexes with blistering paint and crumbling stucco. Wheezing clunkers. The shame of thrift-store clothes and free lunches. All we've ever done is fight.

While managing the night shifts at Domino's, you'll finish your associate's degree in plumbing technology and start an apprenticeship with a construction company in Pacoima. You'll move out of your mom's apartment. You'll trade in the Ford SuperDeluxe for a Honda with good gas mileage and plenty of trunk space. You'll grow up, Daniel. You'll move on.

Still, you'll often wander the dimly-lit arcade at Golf N' Stuff and think of Ali, imagining how different your life might have been if you were one of those kids from the Hills. And then one night the girl collecting prize tickets behind the counter will say to you in a thick Jersey accent, "Hey, why so depressed, paisano?" You'll laugh and stop to talk. Her name will be Vivian Giordano, and she'll be staying with her aunt in Canoga Park for the year, saving money for beauty school when she returns to Jersey City. She won't have Ali's blond hair and soft curves in all the right places, but she'll love you, even if you weren't All-Valley Karate Champion and just some guy with a used Honda and a one-bedroom apartment in Tarzana. And she'll love you, Daniel, even when you drag yourself through the door at the end of a long work day reeking of sewage, long, long after your hair recedes and your cheeks sag into fleshy jowls. And on Saturdays when she's cheering you on from a park bench as you kick a soccer ball through the grass with your son and daughter close behind, you will be a champion.

Daniel, I know how you're feeling. Trust me. I've been there myself, the skinny Italian kid from the other side of town, trophy in hand, punch drunk from the sweet thrill of victory and the warm embrace of the blond girl from the Hills. All I'm saying is don't get too hung up on the pretty girl and the view from the Hills. Though hard to believe, you'll see, Daniel. Even without Ali and the Hills, your life will be better than you ever imagined.

All the best,

Vincent Castellano,
All-Valley Karate Champion, 1975

Ryan Shoemaker's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Silk Road Review*, *Santa Monica Review*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *Kugelmass: A Journal of Literary Humor*. Currently, he is a student at the University of Southern California. Find him at RyanShoemaker.net.