

VIVY COHEN IS DETERMINED.

She's had enough of playing catch in the park. She's ready to pitch for a real baseball team.

But Vivy's mom is worried about her being the only girl on the team, and the only autistic kid. She wants Vivy to forget about pitching, but Vivy won't give up. When her social skills teacher makes her write a letter to someone, Vivy knows exactly whom to choose: her hero, major-league pitcher VJ Capello. Then two amazing things happen: A coach sees Vivy's knuckleball and invites her to join his team. And VJ starts writing back!

Now Vivy is a full-fledged pitcher, with a catcher as a new best friend and a steady stream of advice from VJ. But when an accident puts her back on the bench, Vivy has to fight to stay on the team.

In this perfectly pitched novel-in-letters, Vivy makes her dreams come true and finds a whole team—from friends and family to a big-league hero—to cheer her on.

Sarah Kapit lives in Bellevue, Washington, with her husband and their goofy orange cat. She earned a PhD in history from the University of California, Los Angeles, and serves as chairperson of the Association for Autistic Community. Visit her online at SarahKapit.com or follow her on Twitter @SarahKapit.

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FEBRUARY 10

Dear Vincent James Capello,

Hi! I'm Vivian Jane Cohen—VJC, just like you. That's a sign of a connection between us, isn't it? I think so. But I don't go by VJ like you do. People just call me Vivy.

Well, that's not really important. The really important thing is this: I want to be a knuckleball pitcher when I grow up. Just like you. My mom says that's impossible because there's never been a girl in the major leagues. Still, someone has to be first, right? And I'd like it to be me.

I don't know if it's actually possible, but my brother, Nate, says I throw a wicked knuckleball. He's on the varsity team as a catcher even though he's only a freshman in high school! That's really impressive, don't you think? So if Nate says my knuckleball is good, then it must be at least a little bit true.

The problem is, I've never pitched in a real game. I don't play for a team. And I don't know if I ever will.

But that's not a very happy subject to write about, and I want this letter to be happy. So now I'm going to talk about something else.

I bet you're wondering why I'm writing to you, out of all the bajillions of people in the world. Well, besides your general awesomeness, we actually know each other. Sort of. I met you three years ago, when you were still pitching in the minors. You probably don't remember, but for me, well, it was the most important day ever!

Here's what happened. My family and I went to a California Tornados game for this social thingy with the Autism Foundation. I didn't like the game—loud and boring, which means, not for me. The seat felt so sticky against my skin. I bounced up and down even though Mom kept telling me, “Sit still, Vivy!”

Then we went into the clubhouse to meet the players.

You weren't like the others. They talked to us in loud voices, which was pretty stupid because being autistic doesn't mean you can't hear anything. They used that funny voice teachers do sometimes, the one that needs to explaaain thiiinnnggs veeeeerrry sloooowllly. Not you.

You saw me wandering around in the back corner and came up to me with a big smile on your face. You tried talking to me, but I don't talk to strangers.

I fought very, very hard against the urge to run. I wanted so much to get back to my own room, away from all the strangers and their big voices and stinky armpits.

That's when you pulled out a baseball and showed me your knuckleball grip—four fingers clenched into a fist.

"The knuckleball is a very special pitch," you said. "It completely defies the laws of physics because it doesn't spin in the air like other pitches. Try it."

I didn't understand much about physics and stuff, but I liked the idea of throwing a super-special pitch. Except I didn't think it would be a very good idea to throw a baseball with all those people right there. "Now?" I asked.

You laughed. "Not in the clubhouse! But when you get home, will you give it a try?"

"Yes," I said.

You smiled. "I think you'll like it."

When I went home that night, I tried throwing the knuckleball for real. The first two pitches bounced into the grass. Then the third pitch sailed right over the backyard fence, so I lost the ball forever. Nate got really mad at me, because I borrowed it from him without asking. Oops. After that I asked Mom and Dad for my very own baseball. Even though it was hard, I knew I wanted to learn the pitch that defies the laws of physics. Your pitch.

Every day since then, I've practiced throwing the knuckleball. I'm not sure how many days that is, but it must be an awful lot. I can also throw a two-seam fastball, though it isn't exactly fast. But I guess no one says they throw a two-seam sort-of-but-not-really-fastball. Even if it is closer to the truth.

I wish so much I could pitch for a real team. Like in that movie where girls played baseball because all the boys were off fighting in World War II and stuff. But all that happened a really long time ago. In real life, girls don't play baseball. Especially not autistic ones. I've asked about it a million and three times, but Mom keeps saying I should play softball instead. No matter how many times I explain everything to her, she doesn't understand that it's harder to throw a knuckleball with a great big softball.

And if I can't throw the knuckleball, I don't want to play.

I'm writing to you because I need to write a letter to someone for my social skills group and I chose you. My dad says it's okay. He's a big fan of yours too.

To be completely honest, I don't understand the point of this assignment because everyone in the whole world uses email. DUH. But when I mentioned this fact to Sandra, the counselor who runs the group, she just let out a sound that sounded very not-nice to my ears. "Just do what you're told, Vivy," she said.

Adults sure like saying that, don't they? And I want to be good, so I am doing what I'm told. Even though I don't entirely understand why I'm doing it.

Oh, sorry. You're probably not very interested in Sandra. Since you're a super-famous pitcher and all. I mean, you've been an All-Star twice, plus you won the Cy Young Award! You probably don't have time to read letters from eleven-year-old girls at all. But I wanted to try anyway. It took a really long time for me to find an address on the official team website. Someone should fix that, in my opinion. But I did find it and now I'm sending you a letter. Since we've met before, we're not strangers.

Also, pitchers and catchers report to spring training today and I wanted to wish you good luck. Not that YOU of all people need luck, of course, but I figured you're probably pretty down after what happened in the World Series last year. That must have been really hard. I know what it's like to mess things up.

I wanted to tell you that even after what happened, you still have lots of fans like me who are rooting for you. My dad says it's our year, and I think he's right.

Sincerely,

Vivian Jane Cohen, also known as Vivy

P.S. Do you know why the knuckleball is called a knuckleball when you don't actually use your knuckles to throw it? Wouldn't it make more sense to call it a fingertipball?

FEBRUARY 14

Dear VJ,

Is it okay if I call you VJ? I know it would be proper manners to call you Mr. Capello, but all the TV announcers call you VJ, so that's how I think of you.

You're probably surprised to hear from me again. I was only supposed to write one letter for social skills group, but I liked it so much I thought I'd write another one, just to say hi. I like writing letters to you for some reason. And I found a big stack of envelopes and stamps in the kitchen, so I figured, well, why not?

You didn't write back to me, but that's totally okay. I know you must be busy in spring training. Mom and Dad say that if I'm good maybe we'll get tickets for a game this year. Of course, I really want it to be a game where you pitch, but any game will be exciting. I'm much more grown-up now than I was three years ago. Now I understand baseball.

Also, I really don't want to bother you or anything, but something's been bugging me. It's about baseball, so I thought maybe you could help.

Well, actually, some ONE has been bugging me: Nate. I used to throw with him all the time, but now he won't play baseball with me anymore! The other day I went into his room to see if he wanted to throw a ball around in the backyard.

I found Nate sprawled out on his bed. And let me tell you, that bed was totally NOT made in the way Mom likes. The walls of his room were covered in posters of baseball players—mostly all the super-great catchers like Buster Posey and Gary Sánchez. Except for this one picture of a dark-haired pitcher I didn't recognize.

The moment I entered, Nate twisted his face all funny and slammed his laptop shut. "You know, there's this thing called knocking," he said in his grumpy voice. "You might want to try it sometime. Works great."

I know you're probably wondering how I managed to remember everything he said so well. The answer is that I just keep thinking about what happened. What I could have done better. So I really do remember every single thing he said. Maybe one or two words aren't completely right, but that doesn't matter. The point is, he was being mean.

"I know what knocking is," I told him, because duh. "But I wanted to know if you can do a throwing session with me."

Nate glared at me so hard that I could feel my spine shrink in. "I'm not your personal catcher, Vivy. I have my own life and it's kind of important. Not that anyone around here gives a flying Triceratops about that."

Actually, he did not say "flying Triceratops." I can't repeat his actual word because it was very bad and I am not going to use a bad word in my letter to you. I changed it to "flying Triceratops" because it's such a funny expression. Dad says it sometimes.

"I care about your life," I insisted. "But when DO you want to play with me?"

Maybe it was stupid to keep talking when he was obviously in a super-bad mood, but VJ, I just didn't understand why he was acting like this! I know he's busy with baseball, but Nate always throws with me at least once a week. And we haven't done it in ten whole days. Which is basically forever in pitcher-time. So obviously we needed to do it again soon. Right?

Nate gave me another grumpy monster-glare. "When I feel like playing catch with you, I'll let you know, okay? But right now I'm busy and I just can't."

The way he said "playing catch" . . . VJ, I'm not exactly

sure how to describe it, but there was just something in his voice that I didn't like. I always thought our throwing sessions were more important than just playing catch, you know? But I guess he doesn't agree.

"Okay," I whispered. I could feel an awful prickly feeling swell up in my eyes, so I had to get out of there. Before I did something really, really stupid.

VJ, why would my brother act like this? He never used to be mean! Did I do something wrong? I say the wrong thing a lot, even when I don't mean to, so maybe that's what happened. What do you think? You can give me your honest opinion. I promise.

Sincerely,

Vivy

FEBRUARY 16

Dear VJ,

Oh my gosh, VJ, I have GOT to tell you about everything that just happened. I can't talk to anyone else about it right now and it's just so amazing and . . . anyway, I'll try to explain.

I told you before about how weird Nate's being and how he never wants to play with me anymore. It's very confusing. I know he's a high school student and a varsity catcher and all, but how can he be too busy for ME, his sister? Does he not want to spend time with me anymore? (I've been wondering: Do you have any siblings, VJ? I bet they always want to play ball with you.)

But today Nate said we could go to Crescent Memorial Park and throw together. FINALLY! You probably don't know much about Lakeview, California, but Crescent Memorial is the biggest park we have. There are two whole baseball diamonds, but during the season they're usually

full. That doesn't leave much pitching time for knuckleballers who don't have a team.

Since it was gray and chilly out, there weren't many people at the park—good news for me! I'm certainly not going to let a few clouds keep me from pitching. You wouldn't. I remember that one game when there was lightning and stuff but you still threw a shutout.

Today Nate was totally being Nice Helpful Older Brother Nate, not Grumpy Nate Who Always Says No. If you ask me, it's weird that he acts so different one day as compared to the next. I hope this means Nate's grouchiness is over for good!

Nate says the pitcher's mound at the park is set to youth baseball standards. I guess that means it's shorter than the mound you throw on, but every time I get up there I'm still amazed by how tall I become. The extra height makes me feel just a little braver.

I threw to him for about half an hour. My first fifteen pitches were all way outside the strike zone, but then Nate came over to give me some tips. He knows a lot about pitching because he used to be a pitcher himself. He taught me my delivery and everything. A few years ago, he switched to playing catcher because pitching hurts his arm too much. Personally, I think sitting crouched behind the plate all game long looks way worse than throwing a few

pitches, but it's nice for me that he can catch. He's even good at catching the knuckleball.

"You have to imagine the target in your mind," he said. "Like a big red X. Then you throw to the mark every time."

I started to imagine giant red Xs floating around in the strike zone, and then the knuckleball came to me. It zigged and zagged all over the place. Just like a good knuckleball should.

That's when the most amazing thing happened. After about thirty pitches, a tall man came up and started watching us. He had been throwing with his son out on the field, but he left to watch me. Can you believe that, VJ?

For about ten pitches, he just watched me from the sidelines. I had to try really, really hard to concentrate on pitching. I'm sure you probably don't care about people watching you, but for me it was all so new. And kind of scary.

Finally, the man spoke. "You!" he said without smiling. "Where'd you learn how to throw that knuckleball?"

Like I said before, I don't talk to strangers. But since he asked me a direct question, I knew I should answer. I looked over at Nate and he nodded.

So I said, "VJ Capello."

He laughed really, really hard at that. I don't think he

believed me. Even though it's 100% true: You taught me the grip.

"I think I like you, kid," he said. "Hey, you ever use that knuckle in a game?"

"She's not into softball," Nate explained for me. He stepped closer to me while the man asked all those questions. He even put a hand on my shoulder.

"Got it," the man said. "You can't throw a real knuckleball with a softball, especially not with those small hands. But I bet you could fool batters with that knuckle in a baseball game."

Pitch in a baseball game! Me!

I knew right then that this was a Very Important Moment.

But Nate just didn't get the important-ness of everything. "Um, what?" he said.

"I coach a team in the Apricot League," the man said. "And we could always use pitchers. You look like you're around eleven, right? That's perfect for my team."

People always say "my heart skipped a beat" and I never know what that even means because how can your heart ACTUALLY skip a beat? But right then I swear that my heart really did skip. I started flapping my hands like crazy, even though my therapists always say not to. It's

hard to explain to people, but I guess I just needed to feel my hands flick up and down. The man's stern face didn't change one bit.

I don't usually pay much attention to faces, but I tried to remember a few things about this man: Brown hair, graying around the edges. A lined and pale-ish white face that looked very serious, but maybe also kind.

"But she's a girl," Nate said.

"That's sexist!" I told him. Really, I expect better from my brother.

The man pulled his shoulders up. "Yeah, I can see she's a girl. So what? You ever hear of Mo'ne Davis? 2014 Little League World Series, she goes out and throws a shutout. Or how about Eri Yoshida? She's a knuckleballer too. Played pro in the Japanese leagues."

I flapped harder and carefully placed those names in my memory, so I could look them up later. Mo'ne Davis and Eri Yoshida: my new heroes. Along with you, VJ, of course.

It's weird, but it didn't occur to me before that there could be other girls playing baseball right now. But of course there are, and that made me want to play more than ever. Who knows? Maybe someday people will talk about Mo'ne Davis, Eri Yoshida, and Vivy Cohen.

"Um. It's not just the girl thing," Nate said. He shot me