Harry Potter and The Sacred Text 1.03- The Letters From No One: Fear

“Letters From No One. The escape of the Brazilian Boa Constrictor earned Harry his longest ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started, and Dudley had already broken his new cencamera…”

(Quote continues, fades into intro music)

Casper- I’m Casper ter Kuile
Vanessa- And I’m Vanessa Zoltan
Casper- And this is Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.

Vanessa- I taught high school English for one year when I was 24 years old, and the advice that every experiences teacher gave me was that you have to be strict and you have to be really scary on the first day and in the first month or so, and then you can loosen up over time. But you can’t start weak and then get stricter, you’ll just lose all control of the classroom. Now, I was terrified as a first-year teacher. I was teaching high school so the kids were 16 and 17; I looked like a 16/17-year-old, I was still breaking out like a 16/17-year-old, so I just was scared that I was going to have no authority in the room. So I told my boss, the head of my department, that I was scared, and I was teaching English. And she said, “Why don’t you write a letter to your students for the first day, and that way you’ll have something pre-said, and it can be their first assignment to write a letter to you and you can get to know them and assess their writing and that’ll calm you down.” I thought that that was a great idea. And I spent so much time crafting this letter. And really, just trying to sound intimidating and scary and like I really knew who I was and I spent so much time that it’s been almost 10 years and I still remembering of the lines I wrote in it, which was (and this is so embarrassing now), it was, “I like to rock the boat until I’m seasick.”

Casper- HaHaHa! That’s... so embarrassing.

Vanessa- Yep. That’s Vanessa’s great writing. And so I read this letter and I give then their assignment... end of class comes and I decide to be super-authoritative and I go and I open the door at the back of the classroom and the kids are filing out, and I’m feeling pretty proud of myself that through my fear, I had prevailed and put the fear of God into them. And these two girls we filing out and I overheard one saying to the other, “Isn’t she so cute?” And looking back, I mean it’s just beautiful in its irony because what I was trying to do was instill fear in them and instead all I did was reveal my own.

Casper- Which remains me so much of Vernon in this chapter. And we’re reading through the theme of fear this week, and you see exactly the same thing with him; he’s trying to assert authority and, y’know, scare the rest of the family into doing his bidding, and actually just reveals his own lack of control and total fear.

Vanessa - Exactly! Yeah. But before we jump into that, let’s do our 30-second recap.
Casper- And I believe that it is your turn to go first.
Vanessa- It is my turn.
Casper- And the votes have been coming in; results online, but keep voting for who your favorite recapped is.

Vanessa- And I think that people should keep in mind who goes first and how that’s a harder task. But I’m still gonna win.

Casper- Ready? Steady? Go!

Vanessa- This chapter starts with it being clear that Harry been punished for the incident at the zoo. But on one of the days of his punishment, a letter arrives. Vernon freaks out that Harry has gotten a letter. Um, so that he tries to eventually as the letter coming again and again, Vernon takes the family away to try to avoid the letters. The letters follow them all the way out to an island. Harry is turning 11 and he is just constantly dreaming about this letter. And midnight in the middle of a storm the middle of an island we hear knock on the door!

(loud buzzer)

Vanessa- Remember everybody, I went first and did that well.

Casper- You've got game.

Vanessa- I know. No one’s surprised. I even have game on my trash talk. Thanks David and Jonathan (my brothers).

Casper- Yeah, you grew up with brothers, I grew up with sisters.

Vanessa- Yeah. No, I know how to trash talk.

Casper- I know how to plait hair.

Vanessa- (laughing) Are ready to try to beat that Casper? Are you ready to embarrass yourself in front off all of our listeners?

Casper- I was born ready. (laughing)

Vanessa- ... to embarrass yourself? Bet you were.

Casper- Ahhh... OK. 3... 2... 1... (clock ticking) it's nearly Harry Potter's 11th birthday, and he's being punished, so he's back under the cupboard under the stairs. Um... but one day he receives a piece of mail which is very unusual; no one has ever sent him a letter in his life. And it's addressed to Mr. H. Potter, Cupboard Under the Stairs, which is freaky. He's not allowed to read it; more and more letters start arriving. Vernon's going crazy. He thinks that Sunday means that there won't be anymore letters, so he relaxes. But no! More letters come. So, he takes the family away. They're in a hotel, then they start walking around random places, ‘cause Vernon wants to kind of shake off the following letter people. And then... the island, (loud buzzer) Knock on the door! (laughter)

Vanessa- You're great with the details, but I don't think you know what 30 seconds means.

Casper- I just want to bring out the richness of the chapter.

Vanessa- I appreciate that, but 30 seconds means 30 seconds.
Vanessa- OK, so we’re reading this chapter through the lens of fear. I saw it everywhere. What about you? Where is a place that you saw it?

Casper- The thing that really struck me was the smelting stick, the school that Dudley is gonna go to, is literally given a stick, which, to me, really mirrors the wand that Harry is going to have at Hogwarts. But wands can be used for many, many wonderful things, as well as violence... and, really the smelting stick seems like, no, the pedagogy of fear and pain is the dominant culture in this school.

Vanessa- Yeah, it says, “They also carried knobby sticks used for hitting each other while the teachers weren’t looking. Supposed to be good training for later life.” I feel like there was actually a pedagogical choice that they were, like, “this is the point of these sticks.” Is that something that happens at English school for real?

Casper- Well, this is one of the things that I was thinking, was, “is this Rowling’s illustration of what a real boarding school experience is like?”. And I’ve talked a little bit about my unhappy time at a boarding school. And I think this is really the accent to the wonderful home at Hogwarts that we're gonna find of, of a different reality a boarding school can be like.

Vanessa- it's also interesting because Petunia and Vernon are so scared of the wizarding world, but the world that they live in is horrifying. Where you're arming children in order to whack each other at every opportunity. This world that's being painted for us is equally as scary as like the unknown wizarding world.

Casper- But, like, what does this reveal about the world view of people who send their children to Smelting Stick; it’s all about you the to be prepared to be tough and to fight and the world is frightening and dangerous, and it's such a fearful way of looking at the world, that I think that it is really illustrative of how the Dursleys understand who they are and the context in which they live.

Vanessa- And, I think that the further context is that they're bullies and the bullied, and it's better to be a bully. I mean, that seems to be the lesson that they're teaching Dudley again and again.

Casper- Which is such a comparison with Harry, of course, if we think all the way through to the final book. The kind of theme of sacrifice, which is gonna be so important throughout the story.

Vanessa- There seems to be a really Christian idea about that around “the first will later come last and the last will later come first.” You know we see Dudley very clearly as “the first”; he's the person in charge and we see him become, in a lot of ways, even literally, smaller and smaller. And then, ya’know, we see someone like Neville, who is bullied, just become stronger and stronger as the books go on.

So, I’m wondering just because your background is in Climate Activism, as climate change becomes more and more pervasive over the next 50 years, something that I am scared of is that, as resources become more scare, it is going to be easier and easier to live in a culture of fear. Do you... are you optimistic about that? Do you think that, like in the books, hope is gonna prevail?

Casper- I mean, that’s why I came to Divinity School, y'know. We’re gonna live in a
climate-changed world, we already do, and who’s feeling the effects is not equally shared. And what matters to me is what’s the culture of response? Are we gonna welcome people to our homes? Are we gonna welcome people to our shores as we see a huge number of increase in climber refugees? Well, that really depends on the culture that we have, and, so for me, that’s why I love thinking about these kind of questions because how we react something like a letter in the mailbox is how we’re gonna read to a refugee on our doorstep.

Vanessa- It’s really interesting that you say that because, umm… Vernon responds to a letter. I mean, Harry is sort of dragging his feet when he gets the mail because Harry is so surprised the letter has come for him. Vernon’s quote-unquote “joke’s “What did you find, a letterbomb?” And so, I’m just worried that the Vernons of the world are actually gonna win, right? There’s a moment that is slightly different than what he is used to… what he’s used to is Harry going to get the mail and Harry quickly scurrying back with the mail. And one thing is different. And Vernon’s immediate response to one tiny change in his morning routine is immediately going to this defensive, violent place…

Casper- Right

Vanessa- … I’m scared that that is the way the people actually respond to change. And a sentence that means something to me in all of it’s complications is the Martin Luther King line of “The arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” I love it; I don’t think it’s true, but I try to live my life as if it is true. But I think that Vernon clearly does not live in that world. And I do, I just get scared that the Vernon reaction of “is it a bomb?” is the reaction that most people have.

Casper- But I think it’s important that we don’t separate the world into Vernons and, and Harrys, I guess. But we try and figure out, like, where is that Dursleyish-ness in us? And that’s what I love about us reading these books in the way is that we really come face-to-face with the truth that who is in us as well, and that it’s up to us to try and, and take that fear and honor it and say, “that’s a totally valid reaction, and it’s not the one I choose.”

Vanessa- Since I brought up Martin Luther King and I think that this is exactly to your point, Casper, the first time that I went to the Martin Luther King Memorial in Washington, D.C., I went with this friend of mine, who is and African-American man. And, y’know the quotes, and I don’t remember what the quote are, but some of them are very cynical quotes and some of them are these great optimistic quotes, and I turned to my friend and I was like, “Oh, y’know, he could be such a hypocrite, and my friend was like, “Or… the man had moods, Vanessa.” Right? Like, he was a person with moods, and when talking about the Vietnam War he had something different to say than when talking about poverty. And I had made no room for this icon to be a human being who had moods.

Casper- What’s interesting with Vernon is that level of fear and aggression really gets ramped up, you know. We’re dialed all the way to the point that I think we’re beginning to see a sort of breakdown. He is skipping work which I’m presuming he does very infrequently. Petunia is scared of him; he is acting in a way that is very unusual. Does this look like a breakdown to you?

Vanessa- It does; I think it’s both a breakdown and evidence of how quickly people,
when scared, can become radicalized, right? It’s... he goes from, like, zero to nuclear. I mean, Dudley notices, right? He says, “Daddy’s gone mad, hasn’t he?” He’s willing to put his family at risk. There’s a rainstorm, and he’s like, “let’s get into the tiny boat”. But I literally don’t understand what he is so afraid of. This is an opportunity to send Harry away.

Casper- Doesn’t he want that? I mean, he hates the child.

Vanessa - Right. So what is it?

Casper- I think there’s such a strong attachment for him to the way things are. And to his position in it. As a straight white man, in a, kind of management-level role in his company, the world looks pretty good from where he’s at. And to admit that there’s a whole other layer to society which could have power over him to which he is defenseless, is something which is not only physically dangerous to him, but it's more about his sense of identity and who is and where he fits within a kind of pecking order, which, he learnt at Smelting’s. Y’know he’s gonna be the top. Now suddenly there's this shadow organization that's gonna be above him, he can no longer be the person he thinks he is. I think that's what's so dangerous for him.

Vanessa- Yeah, and I'm trying to think of the times which I have been truly, deeply scared and they sort of fall into one of two categories, is when my physical safety is somehow being threatened or I perceive as though my physical safety has been threatened. Which, if you don't understand wizards, right? I mean, I can understand how Vernon is scared of that. And the other times are when I feel as though I feel my sense of identity is gone. When you lose a job, or someone who you really love passes away, it's like, if I don't see myself in relation to this other thing, who am I, right? He's having an existential and a physical crisis.

Casper- . Exactly. And I love how the whole scene becomes smaller and smaller as we travel. Starts in their house, you know, they're connected to the local environment; they go to this hotel, it’s got two rooms. They then end up in this kind of shack on an island, and they’re in kind of one space kind of together. And just that the environment in which he is trying to control, becomes smaller and smaller as he becomes more desperate.

Vanessa- One last thing that I’ve noticed in this chapter is that when Harry gets moved the second bedroom, to Dudley's second bedroom, the first thing that we see is that is the island of Dudley’s discarded and broken things. And so it’s Harry fits into that room perfectly another one of Dudley’s discarded and broken things.

Casper- You see, I read it differently. I read as this house is full of broken things for broken people. Here is a family that is afraid, that has a secret, that is scared and worried about so many things. And that kind of brokenness in who they are is reflected in all of these... um... in all of these broken toys. And y’know, we’re all broken in some way, and that’s really kind of brought to the fore through these objects in the second bedroom.

Vanessa- Yes! Every week, we’re gonna engage with the text through a sacred practice, and this week again we’re gonna do Lectio Divina, in which we pick a quote at random from the chapter, literally by flipping through and putting our thumb somewhere. And we go through four stages with the quote, which is 1) Reading the quote just literally; what’s happening in the text?, what’s happening in the sentence?, where
is it in the chapter? Step 2 is what's going on figuratively in the text? So, what symbols pop out of us, what does it remind us of? Step 3 is how does the quote speak to us in our lives? And then Step 4 is what action does it inspire us to take? So, I've picked our sentence,

Casper - What is it?

Vanessa- and it is, “He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive, and get the letters for Number 4 first.” I’m gonna read it again for everybody at home. “He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive, and get the letters for Number 4 first.” OK Casper, literally, what's happening? Who's “he”, etc.?

Casper - So, Harry, here, is coming up with a plan. He knows that the sender of the letters is gonna keep sending the letters. And so he's thinking of how to get two letters before Vernon. Um, so he's gonna leave the house and see the postman outside and just pick up the letters there so he can read what this letter to him is all about. So the next layer is reading it figuratively, or allegorically. So, what are the symbols or other stories that we reminded of because of this sentence?

Vanessa- Can we talk for a minute about Privet Drive? Privet obviously sounds a lot like "private", right? And so I think that that speaks to the desire of the Durselys to live on a private drive.

Casper- And, of course, literally the word “privet” means “a hedge”...

Vanessa - Yes! And I think that she's going for that, right? A hedge is something you that have to look over, it's... they want to be normal and they want everyone to leave them alone. But it... I don't think I'm crazy, right? It sounds like “private”.

Casper- Yes? Absolutely! That's the first thing I thought of.

Vanessa- And, if you and I both thought of it, it's clearly smart and true.

Casper- No, and I think you can read that even further onto the number 4 on Privet Drive, it's a... It's a stable number, you know, it's got 4 legs, 4 corners, it's a... it's not a very interesting number like he number 7, which I think is a wild and crazy party. But there's... y’know, there's a solidity to their life.

Vanessa- Mm-hmm. It's an even number, it's not an odd number. Absolutely. I love that!

Casper- I love also that we're invited to imagine alone, outside of the house for the first time. He's usually kept inside, or he's with the Dursleys on an outing or at school, but here he is, y’know, the promise of being alone and free. So he's already being liberated in some way by just the promise of Hogwarts.

Vanessa- Totally! Something has come in and interrupted the cycle. It's just this tiny interruption the, like, idea of maybe a letter getting into his hands, and everything is already different.

Casper- I also noticed the word “wait,” because that strikes me of... Harry has been waiting for 11 years to be reclaimed. And this... he has been waiting such a long time. Even if he doesn't know it, he will look back at those years of really being lost in some way.
Vanessa- Something else that strikes me is that the... the fact that it’s... Harry was gonna get the letters for Number 4 first. It implies this competition, right? It’s like, “I’m gonna get them first.” And he knows that Vernon is waiting for them; he knows that someone is waiting to intercept. And his plan, we know, fumbles, but the fact that he knows that this is a competition. And, sort of a competition for survival another interesting thing that I noticed.

Casper- Well... and I love this scene because we see a promise of what Harry will do. He comes up with a plan; he's not afraid. He walks into something squishy and dangerous... all of these kind of little elements of what Hogwarts life will be like for are being him pre-figured here

Vanessa- Absolutely. And in contrast to all of the fears of the Dursleys, is Harry's almost pathological fearlessness. He is, in my mind, dangerously unafraid. He attacks Vernon. He, y’know, makes jokes within striking distance of Dudley. He makes that, I think, really funny joke about, he goes up to Aunt Petunia as Petunia is dying some of Audrey’s old clothes to eight into Harry's school uniform, and they’re in the vat in the sink and water, y’know, Petunia is like, “this is your uniform”, and he says, “Oh, I didn't know it had to be so wet.” He has never been taught that humor gets you rewards in this life; I’d made that joke at home, I would have been given, like, some sort of positive reinforcement of a chuckle from my mom, but Harry hasn’t been taught that. His fear was this does seem almost pathological to me, and I feel like we’re gonna to see that again and again.

Step 3 is how the sentence speaks to us in our own lives; did this occur to you in any way? What did it remind you of in your life?

Casper- It reminds me of my email inbox... I, ya’know the first thing I do I get up is go to my phone, and check my email. And so there's this eager... like, I wanna get ahead, I wanna get there first, I wanna be on top of things, I wanna... y’know before the rest of the world gets to me, I wanna deal with this kind of thing. And I will literally wait for emails to arrive like, emails are validating to me. I feel great when I email arrives because that means that I matter in some way. So please send me email. (laughing) How about you, Vanessa?

Vanessa- I think what it reminds me of in my life are moments of desperation; of being so scared and, sort of, being willing to just sacrifice anything in order to try and make something happen. And how rare those moments are where you have such a clarity of purpose. Yesterday for example, and it’s really silly, embarrassing way, and obviously I’m fine, but I tripped. I literally tripped over the ground and I fell and, y’know, I had cut myself and I sort of sprawled out. And my friend who was with me very sweetly, like, immediately ran to me, but I had dropped my dog’s leash in the process of falling. And even though I absolutely could have used to hand, and someone to shield me from how embarrassing this was, my first instinct was, “Get the dog!” And so there are moments where you just know in your gut what needs to happen, and so what you want to happen, or how you want it to happen, doesn’t matter anymore. That’s what I see in Harry here.

Casper- I’m... I’m seeing another parallel in that Harry has a plan, he’s gonna execute it. But Vernon gets there before him. Vernon has thought this through one step more than Harry has. You know and just like Vernon thinks he has a plan, the wizarding world is 3 steps ahead of Vernon. And so there’s this thing, if like, sometimes I feel like
I'm being really smart, and then I'm just totally outwitted by someone who's thought this much more carefully through than I have.

Vanessa- Yeah, and it also is just a sign of, like, you can't control the universe; let go.

Casper- *(singing)* Let it go!

Vanessa- Exactly! So, step 4: what action are we called to and this text, Casper? Can you read the sentence one more time?

Casper- “He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive, and get the letters for Number 4 first.” Still really inspired by the word “wait.” And the fact that this attempt doesn't work. But that things work out for Harry in the end. There's a promise here, I think, oh... I'm trying not to say, “good things come to those who wait,” but I get so impatient with all the things I want to do in my life, and of the things I want to create, and the people I want to work with... and in some ways I think it kind of speaks to what I need to do with my *email* in the morning. I think I need to take a page out of Harry's book and wait those 11 years a little more, and y'know, I'm not... I'm not imprisoned in the way that Harry is, or, know, I'm kind of imprisoned by my desperation to get to those emails first thing. But there's a choice-fullness that I have that Harry doesn't. But if Harry can wait, and try, and fail, as he does here but still read that letter in the end, Then I'm gonna try to do the same. How about you Vanesa? What action is this sentence inviting you to take?

Vanessa- I mean, I think fact that Harry fails, and yet, obviously, in the long run succeeds, is... what it reminds me of which is just... I can be very controlling. Like Vernon. But it never works when I try to control situations. It... I... I don't think I can tell you in which it worked. And yet, I just keep trying. I mean, what would happen if Harry just sat back, relaxed, and *trusted* that these letters would find him? He could be laughing at how desperate Vernon is, and probably save himself a lot of strife. So, although I appreciate that he's a go-getter and out there and trying, there's a time for trying and a time for just letting things unfold. Which is scary, right? I was that you never let things unfold because the Nazis are coming...

Casper- The Nazis are coming.

Vanessa- Yeah! No, seriously, right? Like, first they came for my neighbor, nobody was left, and then they came for me, so I... I was very much raised that you interfere; that the world is sort of tripping toward evil, and so if you can stop it, that is your job. But the Nazis aren't always coming. They're not always coming. And maybe for me, that's what I'm trying to retrain my brain from and toward. I'm trying to frame it toward... ya'know, the arc of the universe is long and it bends toward justice, not towards Nazis.

Casper- Hm. *(chuckles)*

Vanessa- Every week we like to end the episode with offering a blessing for someone who has spoken to us in this chapter. So this week, I want to bless Petunia. And something that Petunia does that I think is really beautiful is that she lets Vernon this out for himself. She could put her foot down and throw a fit, but then Vernon wouldn't get to feel as though he’d done everything he could to try to prevent magic from entering their home. I mean it's Corinthians, right, but it's, “love is patient,” and so I think that she's just being very loving and very patient with him and letting him, I would argue,
letting him go too far because he endangers his family by getting on that boat. But she is in no way punishing him for this behavior. She's just being loyal and loving. And that's my blessing this week, and you know may we all sometimes have the wisdom to sometimes sit back and be loving, even when it looks really hard. Casper, who is it for you this week?

Casper- I want to bless Dudley this week. I think he is... he's still a 10-year-old boy. For all the challenges he offers and all the spoiled-brat-iness he exhibits, um... I think he is totally shaped by his parents and by the broader culture. And I feel like, y'know, we were all raised in a world which in many ways we were taught not to care about, whether it's climate refugees or whatever, kind of, issue that's far away or far from our sight. I want to bless in Dudley the capacity that he does have, for generosity and for empathy, and for love. And that... that's something that we all need to be reminded of, because it's not something were asked to do every day. But we are all capable of doing it.

(music)

Vanessa- You've been listening to Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. This episode was produced by me, Vanessa Zoltan, Casper ter Kuile, and Ariana Nedelman.

Casper- The music was by Nick Bohl and Ivan Pyzow. Next week, we'll read Chapter 4, “The Keeper of the Keys” through the lens of generosity. If you've been inspired by any of the readings that we've offered, we'd love to hear from you, what other ideas you've got, or what other things we've missed.

Vanessa- We'd like to thank the Humanist Hub...

Casper- ... and our fabulous Harry Potter and the Sacred Text reading group,

Vanessa- Rebecca and Charlie Ledley, for all their support...

Casper- Shane Bannon, Lauren Taylor, and Rufus for theirs...

Vanessa- And Ben Horn for making his very generous contribution through our Kickstarter...

Casper- Stephanie and Graham at the Harvard Communications Office...

Vanessa- and you, our listener...

Casper Thank you so much. Please make sure you subscribe on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcast, and especially if you can rate and comment, that would be super-helpful as more and more people hear about the podcast project.

Vanessa- Thanks! You'll hear from us next week.

Casper- We'll see you then!

(outro ends)

Vanessa- Are you talking about Original Sin?

Casper- I'm a... I'm a Calvinist... (laughing) I've just been reading about Calvin; i'm like, “oh yeah, it's got a good point...” He only burnt one person in Geneva
Vanessa- No!
Casper- He has such a bad reputation; only one guy!
Vanessa- Only one... burning