

Writer's Block

Monday

Every morning Violet kissed The Girlfriend goodbye, popped in her headphones, and left the apartment. She needed the ritual, the fresh air, the space, to see non-girlfriend people. Some days she would go to the Rise & Grind, order chai latte after chai latte and work on working on her writing. On others she would go to the park a few blocks down and secretly stare at women jogging or walking their dogs or reading their books, convincing herself it was because of a wholesome appreciation of the female form and not lust. And if it was a low-energy day, she would simply wait until The Girlfriend left for work, slip into the apartment like a thief, and go back to bed.

This morning, the park beckoned. It was a fine day for it. The air was warm enough, if a little humid, and there was only a smattering of cotton-ball clouds in the sky. The trees had all regained their leaves in triumphant crowns of green and there were dozens of people enjoying the sunshine. Violet sat on the dirty wooden bench under the great oak, or at least what she thought was a great oak, because she didn't really know anything about trees and failed to notice its five-lobed leaves or helicopter seeds and simply decided it was a great oak because the name was dramatic. Next to her was her packed lunch, diligently made daily by The Girlfriend, which she would forget on the bench after only eating the pudding cup, and held a thick Tolstoy—she hadn't actually checked which when grabbing it from the shelf on her way out—open to an arbitrary page on her lap. Her headphones were blaring something pop punk from the *Edgy Songs to Feel Better About Doing Something Desperate* to playlist. She wore big dark sunglasses, a very fashionable floral blouse, some flattering high-waisted jeans, and a pair of

burgundy combat boots, all of which accented her extreme natural beauty that seemed effortless yet elegant. The plan was simple. While ostensibly looking down at her book, Violet would surreptitiously scan the passersby or her neighboring bench-dwellers. When a woman with a form particularly worth appreciating in a feminist way was in view, Violet would close the book and stare off in grave thought, taking off her fashionable glasses in an accidentally sexy way to better fix on some random point in space that, by pure chance, was a point containing something exciting, not that Violet would notice anything so base when she was pondering a particularly poignant line from *War and Peace* or maybe *Anna Karenina*.

Violet had been working through a particularly challenging Russian name for barely any time at all when she saw her. Very firm breasts. Tall. Goth, with black lipstick on a pale face and big beautiful eyes outlined in thick charcoal. A wide-brimmed black hat, a small black dress that showed both her thighs and sternum, tall black shoes, an unconscionable amount of silver jewelry. Book closed, glasses off, carefully considering “Aglaya Ivanovna Epanchin” (where do you put the emphasis?), Violet stared. What if she asked the goth cutie to sit with her? What if they got talking and went to Rise & Grind and then to Hot Topic or somewhere Goth Cutie wanted to go and then shared a passionate kiss of true love over a tarot reading, which Violet had been practicing, or rather meaning to practice, and the cards showed that they were destined for each other, and were actually reincarnations of ancient mythical lovers, Orpheus and Euridyce, reunited after all these millenia but lesbians now? What if they went back to GC’s one bedroom apartment she still shared with her ex-lover and she had a large collection of crystals, and Violet knew their names, and said “Oh, this is a purple agate, it grants you immense sexual prowess,” and GC asked her to prove it and they made nasty, tender love on the pile of dirty black dresses on GC’s floor while the poor fool who lost GC’s affection listened from the living room?

It would be very sad to break the news to The Girlfriend, yes, but she'd understand. She's known since the start that Violet is a firecracker destined for greatness. When the book is done, and immediately picked up by the biggest, most prestigious publisher in New York City, things are gonna be different. So The Girlfriend better make her peace with the fact that she has some work to do if she wants to hang on to this meal ticket. Be more like Goth Cutie, for one, and not be so predictable every day, because let's face it, The Girlfriend's a little boring. She's always working or wanting to go hiking or hang gliding or travel to Europe, which she knows Violet isn't interested in. But there's no hard feelings. She can come to the wedding, and she can even wear white, since Goth Cutie will no doubt want to wear a black dress. And kiss with lots of tongue.

The goth woman, Tasha, did not notice the ogling woman holding the book and sunglasses. She was on her way to see her mother and was very nervous.

The sojourn to the park was over after an hour, as usual. No one else very interesting came by, at least, not that Violet was looking for. A very famous author of crime novels was sitting three benches over, begging the universe to grant her an apprentice she could make something great of. Well, her work was probably a little too mainstream for Violet anyway.

On days that started with study, the late morning/early afternoon block was reserved for writing. Reading is magical, yes, but the real glory is artisanal: the crafting of words into complex ideas; the transfiguration of meaningless squiggles into a living, breathing world; creation *ex nihilo*; the arcane production of emotion and purpose; the manifestation of the divine muse Urania.

Violet went back to the apartment and ate a whole bag of Fritos in bed.

On the wall of the bedroom, almost directly opposite the deflated pillows, hung a painting. It was a gift from a long-gone high school friend, but Violet didn't remember that. She just saw it as a permanent fixture. It depicted a field at sunset. Shadows of trees and hay bales stretched to the edge of the frame. A pair of workers, exhausted from the day's labor, hiked towards a warm house in the background, smoke puffing from its brick chimney. The sun was a pink and orange impression behind the towering trees on a distant knoll and the sky was deep purple. The field was framed by dense, near-black woods. At the rightmost edge of these woods stood a furtive figure, a shadow darker than the trees, watching the laborers. A little goblin with long fingers, wide eyes, and an impish little grin.

Violet considered the creature. She wondered why the painter included him. If he was supposed to be scary, that failed. He came out cute and a little silly. If he was a joke, it was an odd choice to make him so subtle. She hadn't noticed the gremlin for years. Her running theory was that the whole piece had once been about monsters on the farm, but the painter lost their nerve and switched to something more palatable. She'd been meaning to research the artist but hadn't found the time yet. Regardless, she liked that he was happy hiding in a thicket and watching people farm.

After a few minutes Violet was asleep in the corn chip crumbs. She dreamt of being crushed by big rocks.

Dinner was Chinese, bought by The Girlfriend on her way back from whatever office she was at now. They ate it together at the table, by The Girlfriend's insistence. Violet wanted to watch Parks and Rec instead. The Girlfriend asked how Violet's day was and what she wrote with all the time she set aside to get some serious work done.

“It was great. I got through a whole other chapter,” Violet said through her lo mein. “I wrote Annika’s big scene where she saves Piper from the imperial soldiers. It was really dramatic. I think it came out great.”

Violet did not consider herself a liar and would have been quite offended by the suggestion. What some would call lying—that is to say, acting as if something is true when it is not—is not really lying at all if that thing will be true before anyone notices the difference. That is to say, talking about hypothetical writing is basically writing, and thus is no longer hypothetical, meaning that chapter really was written, even if it wasn’t written in the traditional sense. If Violet can come up with stories off the cuff and have them make sense, well, that’s half the battle. The words and ideas are clearly all there. She just needs to sit down and scribble them out.

And Annika and Piper’s story is very interesting. It’s a fantasy epic, but it’s basically about how hard life is when things are stable and safe and how important danger is to feeling alive. Annika is a sorceress who is from a very wealthy and caring family, but she’s only ever used her magic to make doilies and polish gold spoons and so on. She’s in a loveless engagement to this really boring guy who just talks about work and business. Then she meets Piper, who’s the leader of a rebellion of these street urchins, and they have a passionate love affair and topple the government.

It’ll be really excellent when it gets written.

The Girlfriend asked if she could read the chapter. Why had she never read anything by Violet, anyway?

Violet said she had a headache and went to bed early.

Tuesday

Kiss. Headphones. Goodbye. It was a rainy morning, so the park was a no-go. Plus, Violet was feeling a little inspired, and thought maybe this was finally going to be the morning where the words looked right on the page. No time for reading, no sir. The coffee shop awaited.

Rise & Grind, formerly Mud Cup, formerly Roast & Toast, formerly something something Joe, was right across the street. It was a small joint, with two tables and no bar seating, but it had free wifi and the drinks were passable. The place always smelled like burnt bread and would for the rest of time.

The plain barista—Sophie, or maybe Sonia—was working the counter. Perhaps, Violet conceded, that’s for the best; Emily/Evelyn might be distracting. The window table was free.

“Morning, Violet. Large chai latte, soy milk?”

Sophie/Sonia, Violet thought with mild distaste, must think she’s boring. She deposited her laptop bag at the table and approached the counter, squinting up at the shakily-written chalk menu.

“Well, no, hold on.” What was an Americano, again? How was she supposed to know if any of these ridiculous drinks were any good? “Okay, give me a large chai latte, but with oat milk.”

Serena nodded and started preparing a large chai latte with soy milk. They were out of oat, but Violet wouldn’t know the difference and wouldn’t complain if she did.

At her table, Violet opened a fresh Word document. The story spread before her mind like the contents of a picnic basket. She had just had to spread the rich brie of exposition on the salty cracker of character study and take a big bite of the juicy pear of plot.

Annika was a young— No, that’s not right. It should start with the setting. *In the land of—* Fuck. What should the land be called? Let’s come back to that. Some action will be a good

warm-up. “Ha-ha!” said Talvazar. “I’ve cursed you!” Annika gasped in pain as the evil magic coursed through her soul. “No!” shouted Piper. This is nothing.

An outline, Violet decided, will be the best way. Break it down into manageable chunks. She listened to something lute-heavy from the *Inspiring Songs to Write the Next Great Fantasy story* to playlist. She opened a new document and stared at the blinking cursor, then cautiously began typing.

1. *Annika is rich and pretty.*
2. *Piper is beautiful and exciting.*
3. ...

“Large chai latte with oat for Violet!”

Violet stood up. Can’t write and drink at the same time. The outline will have to wait. She sipped her latte slowly, noticing the interesting flavor of the oat milk. It really added a certain richness.

She was back in bed two hours later. The gremlin looked happy. How exciting can it be to watch two guys scythe wheat? What did that little rat have to smile about? Maybe the workers had a secret romance, hidden from the mistress of the farmhouse, who thought they were competing for her hand but only had eyes for each other. Maybe they were even plotting to steal all her jewels to run away to Paris and find happiness in the big city where they could be anyone, and the goblin saw it all, and was smiling at his intimate knowledge of the human experience. Or maybe he was just a nasty little fucking pervert with no future who deserved whatever was coming to him.

Tuesday night was Manuel's Movie Club. Held in an apartment uptown, Manuel's Movie Club was the highlight of Violet's week. She met new people, got free food, and felt like she was doing something intellectual. She got there late so people would assume she was busy and important and active.

"Violet! You made it! And you're alone! Because you didn't bring anyone, which I asked you to do!" Manuel said as she stepped through the door, slapping her on her back chummishly. Attendees were supposed to bring someone new to help the group grow. Violet, and most others, never did. What was Manuel going to do?

The apartment was large and shabby. It had expansive wood floors scuffed and gouged by a century of traffic and sliding furniture, big windows that were streaked and didn't quite live in their frames, and an off-white paint job that was a little too off-white. It was a two bedroom, but Manuel selfishly limited the festivities to the living room/kitchen and the bathroom. The living room was furnished with a coffee table (stained), a couple mismatched wooden chairs (falling apart), and a big red couch (stained) (falling apart). The coffee table had some sad hors d'oeuvres, pita chips and some green-tinged goo, that would be gone in fifteen minutes.

There were six people in attendance. One was Violet, who cracked open her singular Pabst tallboy the instant she crossed the threshold. There was Manuel, who had asked Violet to bring beer for the group, a claim she would vociferously deny if he had the energy to make it. Curled up in the easy chair was the artsy girl, a regular always dressed in something shapeless. Violet had chatted her up on a previous occasion and been firmly rebuked. Standing by the window was a guy with shaggy blue hair and a nose ring. He was talking with another man—Poppin' Off, as Violet knew him, because he was always wearing a t-shirt that said "Poppin' Off!" in block letters—about his favorite directors. These two were at the club more often than

not, but they and Violet hadn't spoken much. They were unattractive, for one, and had so many opinions that it made Violet nervous.

And there, sitting regally on the couch, was a gorgeous woman. A very gorgeous woman. The dream girl. She was tall, probably, or at least elegant. Her hair was dark and straight and reached her chest. It looked silky smooth and Violet desperately wanted to smell it and run her hands through it and find it in her shower. Her face was sharp, with prominent dark brows and a strong nose and a wry set to her plump crimson lips. She wore tight gold pants, a white crop top, and a pair of gold rings set with green stones. She looked like a queen on her throne. Her eyes, dark brown and lined with gold, caught Violet's with a little smirk.

Violet swung around to Manuel. "Who the fuck is that?" she hissed.

"I don't know, V, I was just glad to see someone new tonight, but listen, I gotta start this movie, it's getting late and I don't just do this as a chit chat time, you know, I actually wanna see this one tonight, it's called *Slime City*, it's supposed to be really great, you know? Now take a seat, go on, and don't talk too much, it's a movie, alright?" he said, waving his beerless hand in an aimless circle. "Also, I made some spinach artichoke dip, so you know..."

Violet didn't hear a word. She was sniffing her breath and checking out her hair in her phone camera and practicing her opening line. She stalked confidently to the couch.

"Hey," she said in a deep voice, settling down in a smooth and seductive manner that belied power and suaveness.

The queen laughed. "Hey, yourself." She looked Violet up and down and smiled an enigmatic little smile. "My name's Lucille. What's yours?"

The lights dimmed and the opening credits started.

"I'm Violet."

The Girlfriend was asleep when Violet finally returned to the apartment. She sat at the kitchen table with a glass of water and stared into the shadows.

Violet had to be honest to herself about a few things. Firstly, while she was very pretty and attractive, she had maybe not been as successful with the ladies as she acted. Which is fine, because, as they say, one should fake it until one makes it. But somewhere, deep inside her, Violet had maybe not had entirely full confidence in herself as a sexually appealing entity. Of course, after tonight, after talking with Lucille on the couch during the whole movie and then a little afterwards, until frustrated (read: jealous) Manuel kicked them out and they talked in some park and then Violet put an arm around Lucille's shoulders and she said, quote, "You're so cute I could eat you up" with a charming little laugh, after getting Lucille's phone number and a promise to be in touch soon, and hugging her goodnight for a minute or two and seeing her smile her little smile, Violet could be certain that she was, in fact, very good with the ladies. Good job, Violet.

And wow, what a talk they'd had. Lucille was so smart. She must be a beautician or something, although Violet hadn't asked. She kept touching Violet's skin and complimenting it, like by asking what moisturizer could make skin that dewy or joking that she would kill for skin so soft it felt like suede slippers. And she must've gone to school or something, because she kept talking about how the slime from the movie was like some ritual or other. Really, her lips just looked so soft when she talked it was hard to listen. And she had this sexy, greedy look as she examined Violet from head to toe, and kept complimenting her bone ratio and how well her hair parted and things like that, and when it got cold around twelve, Violet could see the outline of her nipples through the crop top and imagined pulling Lucille close and feeling her breath raising

the hairs on her neck as she rubbed her hands against her and Lucille's beautiful eyes looked deeply into Violet's as she confessed her love and asked her to move in.

Now that's a woman to impress. That's a woman that Violet had to impress.

After climbing into bed and elbowing The Girlfriend until she made room, Violet sent Lucille a simple yet charming message and fell asleep with her phone in her hands.

Wednesday

Lucille didn't text back.

Violet waited and waited. She didn't kiss The Girlfriend goodbye, or pop in her headphones, or leave the apartment. She stayed under the covers and alternated checking her phone and staring at the painting. Did the goblin, she wondered, ever fall in love with a beautiful goblin queen and think about her all day? Lay in goblin bed and look at its goblin phone and think maybe the goblin cell carriers were down or something, or maybe the goblin queen had dropped her phone on the way home and it broke and some goblin at the goblin Apple store was bogarting all the sexy goblin texts? No, Violet decided, the goblins probably didn't have cell phones. The signal would be bad underground. Goblins just worried about looking at farmhands and giggling or whatever.

The hours rolled by. Violet didn't move. She watched Parks and Rec on her laptop, she took a few naps, she looked at the gremlin. She didn't have the heart to get up and get something to eat. The Girlfriend called and Violet let it ring out.

Still nothing.

She opened the outline for the Annika/Piper story and tried to get a few more things down.

7. Piper has to hide from the guards and Annika thinks she's been betrayed.

8. Annika rescues Piper from the guards and they make love right there.

9. ...

Violet closed the Word document and checked her phone. Nothing.

The Girlfriend came home an hour early and made chicken noodle soup. Violet sipped it sullenly and thought about Lucille. Where was she?

Violet was still awake at two in the morning, flipping through social media disinterestedly and listening to the *Whiny Songs to Feel Sadder About Being Sad to* playlist. She passed a “new job with good benefits and high salary and meaning” announcement by someone she was friends with in college. She passed a “just bought a house upstate with an upstairs and two and a half baths and a garage” announcement by someone she used to work with at Target. She passed a selfie of a very pretty lady who advocated against racism or something in the description. Not bad. She was mid-swipe when Lucille texted back.

Are you awake?

Relief and adrenaline filled Violet. She felt her veins pumping. *Sure am. What's going on?*

Come over. I'm at 566 1st. I'll meet you outside. Bring a sacrifice.

Hmm.

Animal or human?

Animal is fine.

Well, that's not so bad.

There were surprisingly few all-night live butchers in the neighborhood, but Violet arrived at the address with an off-white lamb clutched to her breast. It was heavier than it looked and it had squirmed for the first several blocks, but it had either tired itself out or decided Violet wasn't ready to kill it yet and accepted its passage with docile resignation.

The building was inconspicuous. It looked like any converted brownstone in the neighborhood. Lucille was not inconspicuous. She had on a long gown and a sort of tiara, both gold and glittering. She smiled as Violet approached and walked to hug her, sandwiching the lamb between them.

“Violet. I'm so glad you came.”

“Well, what can I say? I aim to please.” Violet shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, desperate to sound suave. “So, what did you have in mind?”

Lucille smiled wider. “Follow me. This is going to be so much fun.” She held open the basement door and the pair started down the steps.

Now Violet expected one of two things. A sex dungeon seemed most likely. A bed and chains and whips and one of those crosses they put people on when they flay them and lots of leather and stuff. Maybe the lamb would watch? That's kind of kinky. Less probable but still plausible was the blood altar, a big slab of granite with red candles and a pentagram and a lectern with a spell book to summon demons or possess people or something like that. Regardless, the fact that Lucille had asked for an animal sacrifice was a good sign that Violet, at least, would be fine.

It was the blood altar one. The basement was hardly lit despite the plethora of small candles. Deep shadows swallowed every corner, but the altar and its pentagram were visible enough. The lectern stood near the stairs, but in addition to its book, it held a large knife.

“Dear Violet, you go lay on the altar. Pass me the sacrifice.” Lucille lifted the lamb from Violet’s arms. It began squirming again, this time with some vigor. It bleated a few times, softly.

“I will if you kiss me.” Violet felt her heart beating fast. This was it. The payoff.

Lucille laughed, fully and genuinely. She knew Violet was on the hook, but didn’t realize it was that bad. Well, it couldn’t hurt. “Of course, darling. Come here.”

The women kissed, deeply and fully, the lamb still faintly maa-ing between them.

It was alright. As Violet pulled back, she compared it to the passionate love she had imagined in the park, and was a little disappointed. Lucille’s tiara seemed a little less glittery.

“Well, I promised. What’s going to happen?” She hoisted herself up on the stone prism. She considered moving a few of the candles to make the climb a little easier, but decided that may have consequences.

Lucille stepped over to the pentagram and strapped down the lamb, which had again given up. Perhaps, Violet thought idly, it was pretending to be in a grassy lea with its mother. No, it had probably never even seen grass. It wouldn’t know what to imagine.

“It’s oh so simple. I’m going to perform a ritual to pull your soul out of your body. Your spirit will roam free, invisible and untouchable, and I’ll keep your flesh. Does that sound like something you want?”

“Can I say no?”

“Yes. You can get up and walk out if you want to. Again, do you want to?”

Thursday

It was just past dawn when Violet returned to the apartment. The Girlfriend was still asleep. She was a small woman, Violet saw with a jolt. When had she even looked at The Girlfriend last? Really looked? And was it even correct to call her The Girlfriend anymore, or was she the ex? Or the... widow? Maybe just her name? Regardless, she was small. She looked tired, like she wasn't getting enough sleep, or was overly stressed. She had such long hair. What color were her eyes, again? Violet determined to get a better look once she woke up.

She floated through the walls, seeing everything from a new perspective. The fridge was a lot dinkier. The rooms were cramped. The windows let in less light. The bed looked pathetic. The painting had no depth when viewed from above. How had she spent so much time in this place? Sorry, little goblin. The world is bigger than one farm.

Violet flew outside. It was another beautiful day. She couldn't exactly feel the air, but she was so sure it would be warm that she felt it. The sky, still a pale red, was like a dried flower held up to a light. The city was both smaller and more detailed, like a dollhouse. The lives of all the tiny people in their tiny buildings were so complex and there was so much to discover. She stopped above the park. There, the great oak, so much less great but just as beautiful. There were a few joggers out already. One, a blonde woman with a very nice body, caught Violet's eye, and she briefly considered following her home to watch her shower. Well, there will be time.

An hour later, Ramata opened her eyes and stretched. With a frown, she looked around for Violet and called out for her. There was no answer. She checked her phone. Nothing. Her chest tightened. It's all fine, she persuaded herself. Violet's probably out getting coffee or just

went to the park early. She'll be back. She wouldn't leave me. She loves me. She loves me and needs me.

Violet, invisibly hovering inches away, nodded, satisfied. Hazel. Not bad.