

Street Halo
George Wu Teng
2016

Violet walked a few steps ahead of Paul, who had his hands in his pockets and followed Violet as they wandered through the walkways of the campus. Every few seconds, Violet would tilt her head slightly and look at a tree she was passing, or a lamppost. Paul grinned while looking at Violet. He felt self-conscious of how he walked. He felt anxious. He wondered what she was thinking. Paul asked where they were going.

"I'm not sure," said Violet.

"Let's go to the bridge," said Paul. "Did you ever read Winnie the Pooh? He played a game where he'd throw sticks over one side of the bridge into the stream, then run to the other and see which stick went under the fastest."

Violet stared at Paul.

"Here, you take this stick, and I'll throw this one," said Paul.

Violet and Paul both threw sticks over the bridge, then ran to the other side, where they saw one stick flowing ahead of the other.

"I think it was yours," said Violet.

"It's too dark to tell," said Paul.

They ran off the bridge and followed another path, more twisting and winding, leading to a large parking lot illuminated with rows of bright lamps. The only car parked was a police cruiser, and neither Paul nor Violet was close enough to tell if a policeman was sitting in it or not. Paul caught up to Violet and walked beside her. He thought, "I like walking beside her," and, "this is good." They passed by many puddles. Paul went out of his way to step in most of them. He laughed every time he splashed his shoe in the water. He wondered if Violet found it as funny as he did.

"Look at this," said Paul. He stopped and picked up a broken pencil laying in the middle of a parking space. "How do you feel about this?" asked Paul.

"It looks like it lost its home," said Violet.

"I feel like throwing it," said Paul. "When it wakes up tomorrow morning, it will realize that someone helped it all the way across the parking lot."

Violet frowned.

Paul asked, "Do you think it would be bad to throw the pencil?"

Violet stared at the ground. She kicked a rock hesitantly.

Paul said, "You're probably right. Here, watch me put the pencil back."

Paul bent down and placed the pencil back where he found it.

Violet looked at the pencil, then up at Paul. "Good," she said.

They walked off the parking lot. Paul glanced back at the police car, thinking, "Oh no, it's 'the fuzz.'" He grinned to himself. He wondered if Violet ever noticed how much he

grinned to himself.

They continued on the path, which connected to a small garden, and at the center, a fountain, unilluminated, full of clear, transparent water.

"We should jump in," said Violet.

Paul looked at her.

"Take off your shirt," said Violet.

Paul took off his shirt.

"On three?" said Violet.

They jumped into the fountain together. It was deep enough that they were each submerged completely. Violet rose and grinned. "One more time," she said. Paul laughed and thought, "I like this." He felt like hugging Violet. After another minute they both rose and walked out of the fountain.

"I'm going to go behind this bush and squeeze the water out of my clothes," said Paul. "I have a lot of water in my clothes."

Violet smiled and turned, facing away from the bushes. Paul stared at the ground and took off his pants, squeezed them, then put them back on. "I think we should head back to the dorms now," he said.

They were both still soaked while they walked back. Paul noticed Violet smiling as they walked by other students playing basketball on an illuminated court. When they stepped in Violet's dormitory, Paul's shoes made squeaking sounds against the wooden floor, and they stopped in front of the stairs leading up from the lobby to the rooms, accessible only by females who inhabited the building.

"That was fun," said Paul.

Violet grinned.

"Have you ever had ramen?" he asked Violet.

"No," said Violet.

"I have this thing of spicy ramen. I'll make it for you for breakfast tomorrow."

Violet laughed loudly, then quickly looked at the floor.

"I'll bring it to the front of these stairs at exactly seven am," said Paul.

"Okay."

"Have a good night," said Paul.

They both grinned at each other, and Paul pushed out of the front door of the building back into the night, heading to his own dormitory, while Violet walked up the stairs.

"My brother is crazy," said Violet, later that night, on Facebook Chat. "Where does one get Valerian root in this ghetto?"

"Why is your brother crazy?" responded Paul. "Walmart. I'm going tomorrow. Come with me. Why are you not asleep?"

"My sister was trying to go somewhere today. He drove the car into the woods and took the keys."

"Why?" said Paul.

"I don't know. My sister was gone last night and he went into her room and did things to her stuff. He scratched her guitar."

"Why don't you kick him out."

"I can't do that. I have no power."

"Why haven't your parents."

"I don't know. You are probably bored. I am going to change the subject," said Violet.

"I'm not bored. If I was bored I would tell you that I'm bored. I like when you tell me things about yourself. What is the new topic of conversation."

"Did you brush your teeth."

"Not yet. If you rearrange the letters in your name you get 'love it.'"

"You have to floss."

"Go to bed, 'love it.'"

"Are you going to floss?"

"Yes. I'll floss and gargle mouthwash for thirty seconds too. Goodnight."

Paul brushed his teeth. He put on pajamas. He lay underneath his sheets in bed. After a few minutes, he saw a spider on the wall. He screamed extremely loudly while smashing the spider with a large book. He went to his bathroom, took toilet paper, wiped the spider carcass smudge off of the wall and the back of his book. It was four in the morning. He left his room and stood looking out of a window in the hall. He walked back to his room and listened to albums by The Antlers, and Burial, for two hours. He left his room again, taking his thermos, cellphone, earbuds, and packet of spicy ramen with him to the kitchen at the end of the hall. He listened to Fiona Apple while making coffee and microwaving the ramen. He took the thermos and the ramen, then, in socks, walked down the stairs and out onto the campus, and took the short walk on the asphalt-paved road to Eliot, entered the lobby, and placed the container of ramen on the floor in front of the door leading to the stairs. He texted Violet and told her he made the ramen, that it was waiting for her in the lobby. He walked back to his room, placed his coffee down on the floor beneath his bed, and slept.

They met later that day at the bus stop, where they rode to Walmart, sitting in adjacent seats lined against the bus' side, facing another row of seats across the aisle. Paul took a shopping cart, then wordlessly wheeled it into the store with Violet trailing beside him. They walked aimlessly, neither of them looking at each other. Paul—experiencing an unfounded anxiousness that Violet did not want to be where she was—felt relieved when they passed by a shelf of air fresheners, and Violet picked one up, saying, "blueberry," while motioning at Paul to help her find the scent. Paul grinned at her, picking up a blueberry freshener, then replied, "dangerously delicious," and placed the container in the cart, feeling pressured by himself to "seem good." They traveled in the same pattern through the store, each taking turns pushing the cart, with one of them picking up objects to buy (body

wash, frozen burritos, a miniature cactus) and describing the item using one word, then waiting for a reply.

Violet moved the cart past a large tank filled with 25-cent goldfish. "This one looks excessively depressed," said Paul, pointing at one of the fish that was missing a fin.

Violet stared at the tank. "They all look pretty miserable," she said.

They stood side-by-side looking at the tank for another moment. Then Paul took the cart and motioned for Violet to follow him.

While standing outside the store waiting for the bus to return them to campus, a man passed, asking Paul for a cigarette. Paul stared at the man for a few seconds, then said, with a forced accent, "No English." The man turned and continued walking.

Violet laughed. "That was good," she said.

Paul grinned while staring at the ground.

Paul returned to his room with his bag of purchases. He placed the cactus on his desk, then stood examining it. He moved the cactus to his bureau. He looked at the cactus again, then moved it back to his desk. He took his body wash and placed it with the rest of his toiletries in a drawer. He took the frozen burritos and wrote on the wrappers with Sharpie— "Paul Burritos," then walked down the hall and placed them in the freezer in the kitchen. He thought about miniature refrigerators while walking back to his room. He opened his laptop and played recordings of street preachers while he lay on his bed. He moved back to his laptop, turned the screen brightness down, then moved back to his bed, and focused on the voice of the preacher. "I feel strange, like I am trying to force an out-of-body experience," he thought. "I am trying to pass through to the spirit world." He grinned.

In English class Paul shared and presented on a short story he was instructed to write. The short story was projected on a screen in front of the class. The class sat in a "U" shape facing the screen.

"It seems weird how the narrator doesn't seem to focus on either of the two characters," said one of the students, a girl, Wendy, whom Paul had never spoken to. "It seems like the narrator isn't interested in narrating the story."

"I find it very affecting, in a way, you know?" said the teacher, a quiet man in his sixties, who resembled a turtle both in appearance and in personality.

"I guess it makes me unsure of how to feel," said Wendy. "Does the man in the story want to be sleeping with the girl, or is she making him do it?"

"Nabokov," said another student.

"Why does she check his wallet?" asked Nobby, one of Paul's only and closest friends.

"She didn't take anything from the wallet," said Paul, slowly. "I think she was just ... like, curious to see what was inside."

"It seems very oblique," said Wendy.

"It makes me feel uncomfortable," said a male student, causing the rest of the class to laugh. "It made me feel dirty after reading it, like I just witnessed something bad, only I couldn't do anything about it."

"I think," said the teacher, "it's clear that the girl is the one who knows what she's doing, much more so than the man, even though it's also clear that the man is much older than she is."

"But then why is she doing it?" asked another girl. "What is she getting out of it?"

"The man wants her to do it," said Nobby, "and she wants to do it too, but the man feels guilty because of what he wants to do, even if it's mutual." He slowed down on the last four words, thinking carefully about each one.

After class Paul sat with Violet in side-by-side chairs facing a desk in the green room, the small backstage area connected to the main stage, where musicians would stay before going up to perform. The room had a large window that was covered up and obscured with taped up paper by previous students, and was scattered inside with music stands and chairs.

"What will you do for winter break?" she asked.

"I don't know. Stay here."

"Why can't you come up to Maine with me?"

"My parents," said Paul. "They wouldn't let me." He moved his hand a little to touch Violet's.

"Can't you just ask them?"

"I know that they'll say no," said Paul. "I couldn't even have sleepovers when I was younger."

"That's," said Violet, stopping a little to clench the muscles of her left cheek, forming her eyes into a small, lopsided sneer, "ridiculous."

"I know," said Paul.

Violet took out a pencil from her pocket and began tracing spirals on the desk.

Paul sat without speaking. "She's upset," he thought. "I need to do something." He sat a little less steadily and started at Violet. "If I don't do anything she is going to keep being upset." He felt hopeless and nervous. He tapped his fingers together several times and looked up at the ceiling without moving his head.

"I can't do anything about it," said Paul. "It's only ... for a week."

Violet looked intensely down at the desk and what she was sketching with her pencil. She started writing her name in cursive many times.

"I don't know what to do," said Paul. He stood up and walked to the wall and then back to the chair. He tried touching Violet a little. He was breathing very hard. "She is being unresponsive," he thought. "She has lost interest in me. I made her upset."

"Eight days," she said.

"What?"

"Break is eight days, not a week." Her eyes got very wide. Paul felt scared.

"Okay. Eight days." He looked at Violet a little. Something wet moved down her cheek. He looked at the tear. "It feels hard to breathe," he thought.

"Eight days," he said again.

Violet texted Paul later that afternoon saying that she just woke up from a nap. She said that she was feeling very tired and couldn't focus on anything. Paul said that she should get more exercise and try to eat more. He went to her room and they walked to the train station and took it into the city. They walked to a street with lots of shops and looked at clothes. They walked to a record store and Paul showed Violet his favorite albums. They walked to a bookstore with a logo that was Poseidon's trident and Paul bought a collection of short stories by Tao Lin and a novel by Cormac McCarthy. They walked to a park and sat on a bench.

"While you were napping I watched videos of police officers beating up skateboarders," said Paul.

"Was it good?" said Violet.

"Yeah, it got me really angry and I felt a lot calmer after," said Paul.

Violet looked forward.

"What ... do I do," thought Paul. He imagined being strong enough to pick up the park bench and smash it over his head. He grinned a little at the thought.

"Let's walk more," said Violet, rising before Paul responded.

They walked to the center of the park, where there was a pond that swans inhabited, as well as other birds, ducks, and geese. They stood on a bridge over the pond watching people in paddleboats. Paul pointed to a child in a paddleboat and said that he looked like an idiot. Violet smiled a little.

"I'm sorry I was upset," said Violet.

"It's okay," said Paul.

"I know it's not your fault," said Violet.

"Don't worry," said Paul.

Paul told Violet about songs he listened to that he liked. Violet said that she would listen to them. They sat on a bench looking at ducks. Paul told Violet duck facts. Violet grinned. She told Paul that she was fluent in Hungarian. Paul looked at Violet with a surprised facial expression, and asked how she learned.

"I babysat for a Hungarian family for a few years when I was homeschooled."

"Did you pick it up naturally or did you make a conscious effort to learn?"

"I made a conscious effort."

"Was it hard? I read that Hungarian was one of the hardest languages."

"I don't think so; it's really easy after you learn the alphabet. The grammar is weird."

Violet asked if Paul spoke Mandarin.

"I can't really speak it. I mean, I can understand it almost fluently, but when I speak it's all broken."

Paul explained that when he was young he was taught Mandarin as a first language, but his father emphasized learning English without an accent, so he stopped receiving Mandarin instruction and only English.

"But I'm taking Mandarin courses on my own," said Paul. "I want to speak Mandarin fluently."

"So do I," said Violet.

"I have old Pimsleur CD courses that I can give you."

"That would be good."

"I'm going to download a lot of Hungarian learning courses and try to teach myself Hungarian. You can help with Hungarian and I will help with your Mandarin. When we come back from break we will be fluent in both."

Violet grinned and nodded.

That weekend Paul and Violet took the train for twenty minutes to the town where Paul grew up. Paul sat next to Violet and held her hand. He looked at her face and tried to gauge her emotional reactions while she looked out the train window. They walked off the train and Paul asked if she wanted to see the town center. "She looks like she's in a good mood today," thought Paul. "I like when she's in a good mood." She walked with Paul for forty-five minutes without stopping while holding onto his arm and occasionally looking at him. They talked about where they each wanted to live (both of them preferring cities), what Paul's parents were like (harsh but forgivable), and about Paul's siblings (they rarely if ever spoke.)

"What do your parents do?" asked Paul.

"My mom is a psychiatrist," she said. "My dad sits at home and doesn't do anything."

"What did he used to do?"

"He tried to start some businesses. He sold bread for a while."

"Why didn't it work out?"

"He was just too lazy. He snores really loudly. When he snores he sounds like this—" Violet demonstrated, snorting when she drew in breath, and blowing it out through flopping lips, making a blubbery sound. Paul laughed.

"What about your siblings. What are they like?"

"My sister is pretty normal. We did everything together. My brother is crazy."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. He went to a boarding school for high school. Before he left he was normal. When he came back he acted really strangely. He would be okay for one day, and the next he would run through the house and rip up all of our books."

"Do you know if something happened to him at school?"

"No. He won't talk to us. We send him to therapists and hospitals but nothing helps." Paul frowned.

"Everyone in our family is fucked," said Violet. She explained that her grandmother had schizophrenia and that her mother had occasional violent mood swings.

"That sounds like you," said Paul.

"What do you mean?"

"You're fine most of the time. Sometimes you just get really mad or really sad."

Violet stared at Paul.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Do you think I have mood swings?"

"Only sometimes."

"Why is that bad? I thought everyone had mood swings."

"They do, I think. But not as bad as you do. When you have a mood swing your entire personality changes with it."

"What do you mean?" She looked irritated.

"When other people get really sad, they still act like themselves, just sadder. When they get really happy, they still act like themselves, just happier. When you get sad or happy you act completely differently."

"What do you mean?"

"Your perspectives on things change. When you're angry you don't care about anything that you usually care about. I think when most people get mad they still care about the things they love just as much." Paul spoke uncertainly. "I don't know how to explain it. Your mood just changes more violently. Or drastically, I think."

Violet stared at Paul. She stopped holding Paul's arm and looked at the ground. They walked without speaking for a while. When they reached the town center Paul asked if Violet was okay.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Don't lie."

"I don't like how you said I have mood swings."

"You don't think you do?"

"I think I might but I don't like it when you tell me I do. I know I do. You don't have to remind me." She stared at the ground intensely.

"I'm sorry," said Paul.

"Okay," said Violet.

They passed a bench and Violet sat down. Paul remained standing and looked at her.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

Violet looked at the ground and didn't respond. Paul sat down next to her. After a long time Paul spoke.

"Can you tell me why you're crying?"

"I'm not," she said. "I'm fine."

"Okay," said Paul.

They both looked at the ground.

"If I don't say anything now things will be bad," he thought. "Things that get bad get worse," he thought. "Things were bad the other day and now they are bad again."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Whatever," she said.

"Don't say that."

"Why not? It's just a word." Violet made a face and narrowed her eyes, unfocused, at nothing.

"Saying 'whatever' means you don't care about the situation."

"If it offends you so much, I won't say it."

"It doesn't offend me," said Paul. "I think it's better to talk and discuss and work

through a problem than to say 'whatever' and ignore it." He ran his hair through his fingers. He looked at the ground. After another long silence Violet spoke.

"You're right," she said. She looked at Paul and used her sleeve to wipe her face. "I'm not trying to ignore the situation, I just say 'whatever' sometimes. It's just what I say."

"That's okay," said Paul. "I understand."

She put her head on Paul's shoulder. Paul took her hand and kissed it. Then they stood up.

Paul walked with her around the town center and pointed out all the shops. He told her which ones were new. He told her about what he used to do in town when he was younger. Violet held Paul's hand, then held his arm again. They passed a Boloco burrito shop and Paul asked if Violet was hungry. They entered the shop and used a touch screen electronic kiosk to order burritos.

"I've never ordered food like this before," said Paul. "This is really cool."

Violet grinned. Paul ordered "Tropical Burrito" with beef. Violet ordered "Summer Burrito" with vegetable stir-fry. They walked with the burritos down to the lower basement level. They sat next to each other on leather couches and ate.

"Do you feel any better?" Paul asked.

"Yes," said Violet.

"I'll try not to upset you next time."

Violet smiled. Paul imagined Violet's smile being so wide that it took up the entire width of her face. He laughed.

"Look at that painting," he said, pointing with his burrito at a Mexican-inspired painting of people at an open-air market.

"It looks like it was painted by a fifth grader," he said.

"Yeah, it really does," she said, and grinned.

"When I was in fifth grade I never did my homework and I didn't talk to anyone for half of the year," said Paul. "I made really bad grades in fifth grade."

"I was really weird in fifth grade," said Violet. "I didn't have many friends. I was always a little jealous of the popular girls. I wanted to be popular but my mom made my sister and I wear these old dresses. We were never allowed to wear pants."

"Like Amish dresses?"

"Yeah. Even now when I go home I never wear pants or shorts, only long skirts and Amish dresses."

"Would your parents mind? Would they yell at you?"

"I don't think they would yell at me. They would probably look at me funny and not say anything. It would be uncomfortable."

Paul grinned.

"I'm thinking of growing my hair out into a ponytail. What do you think?" Paul pulled back his hair. Violet made an exaggerated gesture of contemplation.

"I don't know," she said. "I like how you're spiking it up now. I like the Asian pop star look." Violet spread her fingers out like a fan and moved them upwards, as if she were spiking Paul's hair up. Paul grinned.

"You don't think a ponytail would be good?"

Violet grinned. "No. You have to be an Asian pop star."

"Okay," said Paul.

There was a monster truck rally playing on the televisions of the store. Paul told Violet that when he was a kid he liked monster trucks.

"I liked Gravedigger."

"Sounds edgy," she said.

"I have to be edgy," he said.

They both laughed.

They walked around for a while longer, then took the train back. Violet laid her head on Paul's shoulder and tried sleeping. Paul looked out the window. "I feel really strange," he thought. "Like sad, as if I just graduated and I'm saying goodbye to all my friends." He caught himself, then thought, "wait, what friends?" and grinned. He thought about Violet. He wondered how he would react if they broke up. He wondered what he would feel. He thought about how he felt sad, now, without reason. They reached their station and Paul poked on Violet's face. She looked at him and yawned, then grinned. They stood and walked off the train.

Paul ate breakfast alone the next morning. He listened to Mozart's Requiem Mass while cutting open a kiwi, and thought, "Mozart's Requiem was made to commemorate the deaths of kiwis." He walked back to his room. He sat in his room listening to loud hip-hop music. He jumped on his bed. He drew on sticky notes. He sprinkled water on his cactus, then tried talking to it, asking it questions about its cactus life, its cactus friends, its cactus ambitions. Paul took the train with Violet that night into the city, then walked with her to Symphony Sushi. Paul talked about his favorite movies, all involving eccentric protagonists and bleak, intricate storylines. "She seems intensely interested," thought Paul. He smiled.

They sat against a wall towards the back of the restaurant. Violet ordered "Snow Mountain Maki." Paul ordered "Seafood Noodles in Soup." They sat for a few seconds looking at each other. "I'm going to 'break the silence,'" thought Paul. "I'm going ... to do it." He grinned, then asked Violet about her friends.

"I don't really have many." Violet laughed. "You already know them. There's Molly and her group of friends I sometimes hang out with. There's Sophie."

"Tell me more about them," said Paul.

"I don't know." Violet paused. "Molly's crazy."

"What do you mean?"

"She has a lot of issues. She takes lots of medication."

"What about Sophie?"

"You'd like her. She's really smart. She's probably the smartest person I know."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know." Violet paused again. "She has all these observations on the world that most people wouldn't consider."

Paul grinned. "We should all hang out sometime."

Violet nodded. "Your friends?" she asked.

"Uh," said Paul. "You know them too. There's Nobby. There's Calvin. There's Chris."

"What about them?" she said, laughing a little.

"Chris listens to the same music as I do. I feel connected to Nobby in a way that doesn't require words for us both to understand how we're feeling, I think. Calvin is Calvin. He's really good."

Violet smiled at Paul and asked more things. Paul intermittently ate his noodles while responding. He stood, then walked to the bathroom. He peed in the urinal. "Violet is good," he thought, while flushing. He looked at himself in the mirror while washing his hands. "Washing my hands for Violet," he thought, and grinned.

While walking back to the train station they passed a dog. Paul bent down and spoke gibberish to the dog in a high-pitched voice. Violet laughed.

"I want a dog," said Paul.

"We have a dog at home," she said. "She's really bad."

"Does she bark a lot?"

"Yes. She bites, too."

"Your dog is a cunt," said Paul, grinning.

"You have no idea," she said. "I have to beat her."

Paul laughed. "What do you mean?"

"She does this thing where she'll walk up to you if you're sitting and slam her paw down in your lap. Then we hit her so she stops."

"Does it hurt her?"

"No, she's huge."

Paul said that he preferred cats to dogs, but that cats didn't interact with humans on the same level.

"Cats act like they're better than humans."

"You're right," said Violet. "But you can't kiss cats like you can kiss dogs."

"What do you mean?" Paul felt confused. "I would never kiss a dog."

"Really? I kiss my dog all the time. I put my mouth on her snout and she slobbers all over me."

"That's really gross," said Paul. He couldn't stop grinning.

"Do you like eating healthily?" asked Paul, now seated against the window, beside Violet, on the train.

"Not really," said Violet. "I eat way too much ice cream. And I never work out."

"I eat really unhealthily too, I think."

"I know," said Violet.

"I am feeling very happy," thought Paul. "Tonight is going well."

"Do you want to have kids?" asked Paul.

"I'm not sure. Molly keeps telling me to adopt."

"Do you agree with her?"

"I don't know. I think babies are really cute."

Violet asked if Paul wanted kids.

"I'm not sure either. I feel young. I want a family, I think. But I'm really worried that I'm going to be a bad father."

Violet stared at Paul.

"I think all fathers are inherently bad," said Paul. "Most of them aren't even around. If you're around, you're already a better father than most fathers."

Violet grinned.

"Tell me about your father," she said.

"He's harsh. I used to really hate him."

Paul told stories about his father. He told Violet that when he was a kid his father would make him do things perfectly. If Paul made a mistake, his father would give him long, loud, angry lectures about the importance of doing things correctly.

"Do you like him now?" Violet asked.

"I'm not sure. I think I understand where he comes from. If I was in his position I would have done the same things."

Paul smiled. Violet smiled back.

They arrived at the station and walked towards campus.

"I like walking around at night," Paul told Violet. "Everything feels calm. I like looking at the street lamps."

"I think so too. Do you not like the sun?"

"The sun is good, I think. When I'm sad I go outside and get a few minutes of sunlight. I always feel better afterwards, every time. But I think the dark is better as an environment."

"Look at me being pretentious," thought Paul. He grinned. He thought variations of the phrase "pretentious cunt" in his head.

Paul asked Violet if she preferred the sun or the nighttime.

"I've always liked dark. I keep the lights off in my room but Emily always turns them on." She grinned. "The night is good. I like rain, too."

Paul made an exaggeratedly concerned facial expression at Violet.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I love the rain. Walking in the rain is my favorite."

"I never understood people that like the rain more than sun. I usually don't believe them. I feel like a lot of the time they're just trying to be quirky," said Paul.

Violet smiled at Paul. "I understand," she said.

Paul looked at Violet. "I believe you, though," he said. "You're good."

Paul woke with Violet early the next morning. He left the room and made coffee. Violet stayed in bed and waited for him to return. When he came back Violet still looked very tired, and said that she would return to her room and sleep more. Paul agreed, and she left. He sat at his desk drinking coffee and browsed the internet while thinking things like "Why is this so expensive?" and "I feel like I should be working." He stood from the desk and did twenty pushups. He ate a Luna Bar and finished his coffee. He changed into shorts and a tank top. He ran around the town for half an hour, then returned to the dorm and took a shower. He took topless pictures of himself after the shower and sent one to Violet.

He sent Violet another message asking how she was doing and what she was up to. He microwaved a burrito and ate it while drinking Red Bull.

He lay in bed on his back for the next two hours holding his phone above his face alternating arms until they grew tired holding the phone up. While looking at pictures of Kanye West, his grip loosened, and the phone fell, smacking Paul on the forehead. He laughed and allowed the phone to rest on his face. "I am viewing the world through the lens of technology," he thought, still laughing. Paul thought about Violet. He imagined his life as one line moving forward at subway-like speeds, and pictured Violet's line meeting up with his and moved alongside it. Paul felt troubled with this image. "Most lines intersect once and then continue on," he thought. "And if two lines are parallel, they never intersect at all." He wondered if it was possible to have two lines run on top of each other. He wondered if he would look better with long hair or short hair. He wondered about Violet and why she hadn't returned his text messages. He got up and walked to the bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror.

When they entered the dining hall for lunch Violet held the door open for Paul in a very dramatic manner. Paul bowed at Violet, then stepped inside. "She is in a good mood, I think," he thought. Paul ate a slice of vegan pizza. Violet ate salad and french fries. While eating, Violet stood, saying that she was going to get something to drink. When she returned, Paul was focusing intensely on his slice of pizza.

"Are you okay?" said Violet.

Paul looked at her.

"You look mad." Violet sat down and looked at Paul.

"I'm not mad," said Paul.

"Then what?"

"You didn't ask me if I wanted anything to drink."

Violet stared at Paul.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you needed anything."

"I didn't have anything to drink either. You could have asked if I wanted something, too. If you wanted something to drink then I probably did too. Or if I didn't, after you said that you wanted something to drink, it probably would have reminded me that I didn't have anything to drink, and then I would've wanted something to drink anyways."

Violet looked down at the table.

"I didn't realize it was such a big deal."

"It's not. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up."

Paul focused on maintaining a neutral facial expression. Violet didn't speak for the rest of the meal. When they finished, Paul asked if she wanted him to bus her dishes. She nodded, still looking at the table. Paul bussed the dishes, then walked with Violet back to the dorms. He asked if she wanted to see him again for dinner; she wordlessly nodded, then left for her room.

In his room, he drank a Red Bull, ingested an Adderall, then, not wanting to remove his posters to open his window, he walked outside, traveled through back streets, and sat

outside an apartment building. He listened to songs with titles like Dog Shelter and Stolen Child. "If I didn't say anything," he thought, "she wouldn't have been upset. But then I wouldn't be honest. If you're in a relationship you need to be honest all the time, or you start lying about everything." He wondered if there was another way to say what he had felt. He wondered if he should feel bad over something like that.

At 8 p.m. Paul walked with Violet to Panera Bread. He repeated phrases like "holy fucking shit" and "stop being a piece of shit" in his head. Violet, while walking and staring at the pavement in front of her, spoke.

"I'm sorry."

Paul looked at Violet.

"Why are you sorry?"

"I shouldn't have gotten upset. You're right. I should have asked if you wanted anything to drink."

Paul stared at Violet and felt strange.

"No, that wasn't your fault. I made a big deal out of nothing."

Violet looked at Paul.

"Either way. I should have asked you. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too."

They held hands without speaking until they reached the cafe. They chose a small, circular table near the back, close to the windows. Paul sat across from Violet looking at her for a long time. Paul asked what Violet wanted to eat. Violet told Paul that she would have whatever he was ordering. He grinned, then stood and walked to the ordering counter. He ordered two "Creamy Tomato" soups and two "Mediterranean Veggie" sandwiches. He walked to the pickup window and waited for his order. "There is no food," he thought, and grinned. He mumbled "there is no food" under his breath while looking at the pickup window. His food came, and he brought it back to the table.

"What did you order?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he said, while grinning.

"The food."

"What food? There is no food." Paul made an exaggerated gesture of frustration.

Violet grinned back at Paul.

"Oh, I see what you mean." She looked at the tray of food. "It's the famine," she said, laughing.

"Yes, the famine," said Paul, grinning. "The famine."

"She is in a better mood," thought Paul. "We made up and now our relationship is better than before. Now we understand each other more." He looked up at the ceiling and imagined it opening up and letting in moonlight. He grinned while thinking variations of the word "werewolf."

In Paul's room later that night Violet took off her clothes and Paul took off his clothes and they kissed for a long time.

Paul woke early the next morning. He stepped off the bed, then walked out of his room and down the hall, where he stood by the window and watched the sun rise. He felt

exhausted. He walked to the kitchen and made coffee with ten scoops of coffee grind and two cups of water, laughing in an uncontrollable manner while pouring scoop after scoop into the coffee filter. "I feel slimy," he thought, "like someone stuck a needle in me and filled my insides with Vaseline." He took the coffee thermos back to his room, grinning while thinking about a coffee thermos filled with Vaseline. Violet was awake but still under the covers.

"I thought you left me," she said. She looked at Paul with a sad facial expression.

"I'm sorry," said Paul. "I thought I could make coffee before you got up."

She stared at the covers. Paul set the coffee on the floor, then crawled into bed and held Violet for a long time. Then Violet looked at Paul, this time with a more calm facial expression, and spoke.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Sometimes I get sad."

"I understand," said Paul. "Why do you get sad?"

Violet looked at the covers for a long time without speaking.

"I don't know. I just want to be loved."

Paul nodded.

"I understand. Don't worry, I love you."

Violet looked at Paul and grinned.

"It has nothing to do with you. Even if you love me sometimes I get sad because I still feel abandoned. Don't be sad," said Violet.

"Okay," said Paul.

Later that month they walked to a bakery. Paul ordered croissants and thought "hurry up with my damn croissants," and grinned. He bought iced coffee for himself, and a fruit smoothie for Violet. They sat against the window looking out at the sidewalk.

"I've never felt this close to someone before, I think," said Paul.

"What do you mean?" asked Violet. "What about with Emily?"

"We were never really dating," said Paul. "We were very close for a long time, but it wasn't like this." Paul took a bite of his croissant and thought, "buttery— almost creamy."

"It felt more like we were siblings and not, like, dating, I think," he said.

Violet grinned.

"But without the incest," said Paul, laughing. "At the summer camp we went to, we told everyone that we were half siblings."

"Did people believe you?" said Violet.

"Most of the camp did. It was really fun."

"This is the most excited I've seen you," said Violet.

Paul grinned.

"I mean, I think this is the most I've ever seen you talk without my saying anything."

"Good," said Paul.

They walked back to the dorm. Violet told Paul of her travel arrangements to get back to Maine, for winter break.

"Okay," said Paul. "When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll miss you."

"I will too." Paul looked at the ground.

Violet left for her room and Paul walked to his. He lay on his bed. He walked to his desk and took his hardcover edition of *The Old Man and the Sea* and read it in bed. "I don't think I understand this book," he thought, "but I like it, I think." In his junior year of high school he had an English teacher named Mr. Durning who would bring in poetry every day and say things like "I think you guys are ready" and "what do you guys think?" and change the curriculum based on student response. He lay in bed and thought things like "What does the marlin represent?" and "What do the lions represent?" and "Maybe I'm overthinking this. Ernest Hemingway seems like the kind of guy who doesn't overthink things."

He finished the book after three hours, then laid it down on the floor and stayed in bed for a while longer staring at the ceiling. He sat at his desk. After another hour, he opened a web browser and Googled to find the time the sun would set. He looked at things on the internet, then, after checking again online to make sure the sun had gone down, he closed the lid to his laptop, moved the book back to his shelf, then took an Adderall and put earbuds into his ears. He found a pair of sunglasses and put them on. "I am cool," he thought. "Look at how cool I am wearing sunglasses even though it's dark out." He grinned a little, then, after pocketing his wallet, stepped out of his room.

On the sidewalk he walked while listening to songs with titles like "Guilt is my Boyfriend" and made his way to Whole Foods. He texted Violet and asked how she was doing. He walked in circles around the store listening to music and looking for things for Violet, selecting an organic energy shot and a travel-sized tube of organic salt-based toothpaste. He walked out of the store and wandered around the streets for a long time. Slowly, the amount of pedestrians walking around him decreased, and he imagined in his head a graph of the relation between hour of night and amount of pedestrians, then another between the hour of night and the emotional state of people still out walking. Paul grew increasingly anxious without knowing why—maybe unconsciously placing himself years earlier, as a child, using his family's first, slow computer in the basement, clicking repeatedly on a window that remained unresponsive, and feeling a certain helplessness that, despite his most earnest efforts, things were not working out—and combatted this feeling by walking faster and faster until he, almost screaming, began sprinting in the opposite direction from his dorm. He sat on the edge of the sidewalk breathing heavily. He stared forward and cried for a long time. Then he stood and laughed and walked back to the campus.

When Paul reached his room he checked his phone and read a text Violet sent ten minutes ago asking if she could come up. He responded. He sat on his bed waiting for Violet and feeling strange. He searched for the source of the emotion, repeating the word "feelings" in his head, and felt further depleted when he couldn't find a resolution to stop the uncomfortable sensation. He stood, then did twenty pushups, then sat back in bed. "The pushups didn't do shit," he thought, and grinned. Then Violet knocked.

They sat together and talked about what Violet's house in Maine was like. Violet said that it was a farm, and that she had grown up taking care of the animals on it. She told Paul

about having to scoop maggots out of a goat's festering wound. Paul made a sound.

"Do you have any money?" said Paul.

"For what?"

"I don't know. You said you liked shopping. You need money to buy cute clothes."

Violet grinned.

"I don't have any cute clothes," she said.

"You should buy some."

"You should save your money."

"I am. But you want cute clothes."

He stood and gave Violet some money from his wallet.

"I'll pay you back when I come back," said Violet.

"Don't worry about it," said Paul. "I'd probably use it to buy you things anyways."

Then he stood and walked over to the Whole Foods bag on his floor and took the toothpaste out and gave it to Violet.

"This is really good," she said, grinning. "Why did you get me this?"

"I don't know. I thought you might need toothpaste. Most people don't use mini toothpaste. You wouldn't be able to bring it on the plane."

"Thank you."

They watched *No Country for Old Men* on Paul's laptop while holding each other in bed, then Paul put the laptop on the floor and they kissed. He touched her with his fingers and she did things to him with her tongue and her mouth. He moved on top of her for a long time. They made sighing sounds. They switched positions and she put her hands on his chest and moved on top of him for a long time. Then she made louder sighing sounds and he made louder sighing sounds. Then he got up and threw something into the trashcan and crawled back into bed and lay next to her looking and smiling at her and holding her until they fell asleep.

Violet left early that morning. He walked her to the bus stop and kissed her. She promised she would text often and then he walked back to his room and sat at his desk. He drank a Red Bull and stared at his wall. He drank another while swallowing an Adderall. He imagined his room spinning, slowly at first and then faster with increasing urgency, and himself in the center of it, unable to move, seeing the walls rotate quicker and quicker. He felt sick, and lay down on his bed, pulling the covers over himself. She texted from the airport letting Paul know that her plane had boarded and that she was shutting her phone down and that she loved Paul a lot. Paul read the message over many times, then responded, telling her to have a safe flight and that he would talk to her soon. He went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. He looked at himself in the mirror. He went back to his room and listened to music. "Violet isn't here tonight," he thought. He looked at things on the internet until 11 p.m., then swallowed an Adderall. Then he tried to organize his desk like the desks in Wes Anderson movies. He placed his glasses at the top right corner next to his watch and his wallet underneath. He placed his loose change beside the wallet, then his phone and ID to the left of it. He looked at the setup and tried grinning. When he

looked at the clock again it was 3 a.m. He walked to a window in the hall and looked out of it.