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opening extract from

Viola in Reel Life

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Viola in Reel Life

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ONE

You would not want to be me.

No.

I'm marooned. Abandoned. Left to rot in boarding school in the dust bowl of Indiana like the potato we found in the cupboard in our kitchen in Brooklyn after months of searching for it. It was only when the entire kitchen began to smell like a root cellar from Pilgrim days that we figured out *why*—and when we finally found the potato it was soft, rotten, and breeding itself with white barnacles with totally disgusting green tips.

Consider me missing. Like the potato.

I only hope it doesn't take an entire year for people to miss me as much as I can already tell that I'm going to miss them. And if I'm not good at explaining it in words, well, there's always my movie camera. I do better with film anyhow. Images. Moving pictures.

I flip the latch off the lens, look into the view finder, and press Record.

“I’m in South Bend, Indiana, on September third, 2009.”

With my hand securing the camera and my eye behind the lens, I turn.

Through my lens, I slowly drink in three old brick buildings: Curley Kerner Hall is the dormitory where I’ll be living, Phyllis Hobson Jones Hall (called Hojo for short, according to my resident advisor) is the theater with art studios on the basement floor, and Geier-Kirshenbaum is the classroom building. The Chandler Gym, a modern building that looks like a Moonwalk carnival ride covered with a hard shell of white plastic, is obscured by tall trees on a flat field.

What did I expect? Purple mountain majesties? I’m in the pre-great plains of the Midwest. The gateway to the west. This *is* Indiana—translated it’s a Native American word for *flat*. Okay, I made that up.

I film the freshly painted black sign with gold lettering set in a stone wall.

THE PREFECT ACADEMY FOR YOUNG WOMEN SINCE 1890

It gives me little consolation to know that parents have been dumping their girls here for a solid education since bustle skirts, high-top shoes, and the invention of the cotton gin.

“This is my new school,” I say aloud. “Or my own personal prison . . . your choice.”

The stately brick buildings are connected by corridors of glass. From here, the glass hallways look like terrariums. That’s right. The boarding school has glass atriums that look exactly like the scenes I made in summer camp out of old jelly jars filled with sand, cocktail umbrellas, and plastic bugs.

I pivot slowly to film the fields around the school. The land is the color of baked pizza crust without the tomato sauce. There are no lush rolling hills similar to the ones that appear on the school website. The babbling brook on the home page gushes crystal water, but when I went to film it, it was a bone-dry creek bed, with gross stones and tangled vines. Besides being marooned, I’ve been had—duped by my own parents, who, up until now, have made fairly intelligent decisions when it comes to me.

I lift the camera and film a slow pan. The endless blue sky has gnarls of white clouds on the horizon. It looks a lot like the braided rag rug my mother keeps in front of the washing machine in the basement of our Brooklyn brownstone. Everything I see makes me long for home. I wonder what color the sky is now in New York. It’s never *this* shade of blue. This is cheap eye shadow blue, whereas New York skies have a lot of indigo in them. When the moon rises over Indiana, I bet it will be a cheesy silver color, but at home, it’s golden: 24K and so big, it throws ribbons of glitter over Cobble Hill. I can al-

ready tell there will be no glitter in Indiana.

The first thing my parents taught me when I held a camera was to spend the least amount of film time on beauty shots, and the most amount of time on people. “If you film people,” my mom says, “you’ll find your story.” I slip the camera back into its case and head back to the dormitory. I’m going to remember to tell my mom that sometimes you need beauty—and beauty shots. Beauty makes me feel less alone.

The gothic entrance hall smells like lemon furniture polish and beeswax. The dorm has the feeling of an old church even though it’s not one. Heavy dark wood stairs and banister lead to a ceiling covered in wide squares of carved mahogany. A burgundy carpet runner over the wide staircase is frayed at the edges but clean.

The hallway that leads to my room on the second floor is filled with small groups of girls, my fellow (!) incoming freshmen, who laugh and chat as though moving into a boarding school is the most natural thing in the world. I’ll try not to resent the smiling, happy girls.

Inside the rooms are more girls, hanging posters and unpacking, talking as if they’ve known each other forever. But then there are the *other* girls, girls who are quiet and clump together, looking around with big eyes full of dread and fear waiting for something horrible to happen.

I guess I’m somewhere in the middle of these two camps.

I don't want to be too quick to make friends because I don't want to get stuck with an instant BFF who seems totally nice on the first day, and then a week later is revealed to be the most annoying person on the planet. I don't want to be *that* freshman—the chirpy kind, who needs friends fast in order not to feel alone. So I am deliberately aloof. At LaGuardia Arts, my old school, this method worked very well for me.

I did make close friends when I was a photographer for the yearbook. I even made my best friend since childhood join the yearbook staff. Andrew Bozelli (BFFAA—the double *A* is for: And Always) and I have a lot in common. Never mind that everybody, I mean *everybody*, thinks we're boyfriend and girlfriend—we are *not* by the way, we just happen to spend a lot of time together. And we were both lucky enough to get variances to go to LaGuardia High School. I fish my phone out of my pocket as it beeps. It's Andrew.

AB: Unpacked?

Me: Yep.

AB: What have you filmed?

Me: Exteriors. I will download and send.

AB: You hate it already.

Me: Yeah.

AB: Hang in there.

Me: Trying.

Andrew and I sort of read each other's minds. We've known each other since Pre-K. His mom and my mom are friends, and they used to set a lot of playdates with the two of us because I'm an only child and my mother didn't want me to be antisocial. And she especially wanted me to play with boys so that when I turned fourteen I wouldn't find them weird, like they were from another planet or something. Mrs. Bozelli liked Andrew to play with me because she thought if he hung out with me, he would develop some "finesse."

See, Andrew is in trouble a lot at home because he's the middle son of three boys and gets blamed for everything. The bookends of the happy family squeeze out the middle like too much jelly between slices of Wonder bread. Andrew never complains, he says he doesn't mind. (I would, but what do I know? I don't have annoying brothers—or fun ones for that matter.) He just says, "That's the way it is," and he winds up spending a lot of time at my house, which is fine with me.

Although Andrew is my BFFAA, the true love of my life is Tag Nachmanoff, who happens to be the best-looking boy in Brooklyn. He's probably the most gorgeous boy in all five boroughs, but nobody I know *ever* goes to Staten Island, so let's just say in all of Brooklyn because I can be *sure* about *that*. The problem is I'm not the only girl who wants him—every *other* girl in school is crazy about him too.

Tag is tall and he has really wide shoulders. (He swims and flanks in field hockey.) He has black hair and really

dark brown eyes and he's just so completely and totally handsome that it wouldn't surprise me if he *never* had a girlfriend because there wouldn't be anybody good-looking enough *ever* to match him. He should just wander the world alone—like some god from Greece or something, seeking truth and treasures—that's how gorgeous he actually *is*.

Tag maintains his distance. He practically invented the concept of cool. And he's older, and probably looking for somebody his age, eleventh grade (sixteen almost seventeen) instead of ninth (fourteen), which I am. I don't care about the huge age difference because Tag is *perfect* and I have proof on film.

When our school volunteered at God's Love We Deliver making dinners for the homeless and homebound, I made a movie of the whole day. Tag was the student coordinator, so I interviewed him for hours and then made sure I shot lots of him in action, ladling stew, making brownies, you get the gist. When I play back scenes of that day, it's hard to believe that such a boy actually exists in the realm of romantic possibility for any girl, much less me. He's hot *and* kind, and my mother says that's a rare combination in teenage boys and grown men.

Besides the mandatory schoolwide charity outing, I had a creative film and video class with Tag. One time, he was having trouble cutting some footage for an assignment, and I'm really good on the Avid, so I went over and helped him. He

smelled like chlorine and sandalwood—very brisk and clean, like ocean water in a swimming pool clean. When I finished, he smiled at me and said, “Thanks, *Violet Riot*.” Although my name is Viola I never corrected him because I sort of like that he gave me a special name. And he says it *all* the time, *every* time he sees me—loud in the halls or when he passes in the lunch room.

Once, outside of Olive & Bette’s in the Village where my mother took me to pick out “one thing” for my fourteenth birthday, he came by with his friends and shouted, “Violet Riot!” from across the street in front of Ralph Lauren. My mother said, “Who is that?” But I was really cool and didn’t answer her. She said, “Well, he’s a tall one.” I just pretended that it didn’t matter that we ran into TN. Truthfully, I couldn’t believe that fate would have us both in the Village at the exact same moment in time. I mean, how can that even happen? But it did, and my friend Caitlin Pullapilly said that it was *a sign.* I miss Caitlin a lot. She’s a very spiritual person.

The door to my new room, Quad 11 on the second floor of Curley Kerner, has a photo of my head floating on a construction paper cloud. Tacky. The resident advisor who decorated the doors is a senior named Trish, who is, like, eighteen and still wears Invisalign braces. This is a bad sign. It’s the worst picture of me ever—she snapped it as my parents were leaving after drop-off—and I look like I’m

dying. I didn't think she'd use it on my door or I would never have allowed her to take it. Now, I have to live with my head floating on a cloud looking like a bashed basketball with eyes so droopy from crying it looks like I have allergies. There are three other clouds, empty ones, to be filled with the heads of my roommates. I hope their pictures turn out as horrible as mine. I haven't had my head on a door since Chelsea Day School when I was, like, three years old, and it was pasted on a red construction paper balloon. Believe me, a cloud is not much of an upgrade.

I applied for the lottery to get a single room. Ten freshman girls get single rooms on the quad floors. I lost. So, I'm stuck with three roommates. I begged the school to put me in a single, but they honor their lottery so I'm out of luck.

Our room is pretty big, with three windows in a round alcove that overlooks the water fountain, which is three giant fish standing on their tail fins, mouths gaping, spitting water into a pool surrounded by a circular concrete bench.

We're on the east side of the building, which means this place will be loaded with sun. I actually like a cheery room. The furniture in our room is old but clean, two plain single beds with headboards, and a set of bunks. There are four small desks and desk chairs made of dark wood that look like they belong in a mental institution.

I went ahead and took one of the single beds, as I doubt I will be close enough to any of these girls to feel comfortable

in a bunk-bed situation. My mom bought all my bed clothes in beige, thinking it would go well with whatever the other girls brought. For once, my mom was right. Not only won't I *clash*, I won't express any personal style whatsoever.

I place my camera on my desk and sit down on my bed, made perfectly in all its monochromatic beigeness by my mother, and text her.

Me: Thanks for making my bed.
Mom: Have you met your roommates?
Me: Not yet. Trish says that they will arrive soon. On the edge of my seat in anticipation.
Mom: Funny.
Me: To you. You don't have to live here.
Mom: Give it 2 weeks. You will love it. I didn't like it the first day either but it grew on me.
Me: Whatever.
Mom: Dad and I are sorry we couldn't stay to meet the other parents.
Me: No worries. You had a plane to catch. I wish I was on it.
Mom: Will you text me when you start to like the place?
Me: There is no texting in Never.

I wound up in this particular boarding school because my

mother went here, which is, like, the worst reason to go anywhere. That makes me a legacy even though my mom only came here for one year in 1983. She told me that in the eighties she had a separate backpack just for hair gel. I believe her.

"Excuse me."

I look up and see Marisol Carreras standing in the doorway with her parents. I know way too much about Marisol already because she writes a blog about her life and sent me the link when I received the letter with the room assignment. She's much tinier in life than she appeared online. She has a small body and a big head, like all the TV stars on *Gossip Girl* (which I'm totally not allowed to watch at home, so I watch it at Andrew's).

"I'm Marisol." She smiles big and wide, in a way that makes me feel slightly and instantly better.

"I know."

"Right, right. My blog." She blushes.

"I'm Viola Chesterton. From Brooklyn. New York."

Marisol is a brunette like me. She doesn't have highlights or streaks or caramel chunks like the other girls that live on this hall. However, lookswise, I'm very average, whereas Marisol is a true exotic. Her hair glistens like strings of black licorice, unlike my brown frizzy hair. She has a noble profile with a straight nose, whereas mine has a bump and I may seriously consider plastic surgery down the line.

Marisol is also top of the class. She is from the South and she is here on scholarship. Her family are Mexican immigrants who live outside Richmond, Virginia, and Marisol is so smart, they had to send her *somewhere* because wherever she was wasn't *enough*. I can't believe the Prefect Academy qualifies as *enough* but whatever.

I get up from my bed to greet my new roommate and her family because I haven't left my good manners back in Brooklyn. I shake Marisol's hand and then her parents'. Her mother, also tiny, almost curtsies, while her dad, who looks a lot like the host of *Sábado Gigante* on the Spanish channel, shakes my hand and smiles. Marisol looks like both of her parents, but she inherited her big head from her dad. For those of us who faithfully read Marisol's blog, we know that her mom is a nurse and her dad owns a landscaping business called Ava Gardener's. My mom about died laughing when she saw that online.

"I took one of the single beds. I'm slightly claustrophobic," I lie.

"Me too." Marisol drops her duffel at the foot of the other twin bed. "So I'll take this one."

"Hiiiiiiya!" Trish bounds into the room with her pink digital camera and snaps a photo of Marisol for the cloud on the door. She looks at the picture. "Ooh, this is a good one," Trish says. "Hola, Marisol! I'm your resident advisor, Trish."

"Nice to meet you," Marisol says, blinking from the flash.

“These are my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Carreras.”

Trish fusses over Marisol’s parents as she fussed over mine. Trish speaks the worst Spanish I have ever heard. It’s all choppy and she uses her hands a lot. However, Mr. and Mrs. Carreras are very pleased that Trish is trying. I watch as she skillfully puts yet another set of parents at ease. They must learn that in resident advisor training. “I’ll be right back,” Trish says and skips out of the room.

“Wow.” Marisol watches her go.

“I call her Trish Starbucks. She has more pep than a Venti latte.”

“She seems nice.”

“Oh yeah, she’s buckets of nice.”

Mr. and Mrs. Carreras look at each other, confused.

“Forgive me. I’m from New York. I’m a little wry,” I explain.

Marisol speaks to her parents in Spanish, and they laugh really hard. Marisol turns to me. “My parents think you’re funny.”

“You know what I always say . . .”

“No. What?” Marisol asks as she unzips her duffel.

“If you can make parents laugh, you can probably get them to buy you a car when you’re sixteen.”

Marisol smiles. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Mrs. Carreras opens a box and lifts out new pale blue sheets and a white cotton waffle blanket. Then she pulls out a quilt, which she places with care on the desk nearby.

I've never seen a person make a bed as quickly as Mrs. Carreras. I guess she mastered it in nursing. They have to make beds with people already *in* them, so they get good at it. When Mrs. C unfurls the quilt to go on top of the perfectly unwrinkled sheets and blanket, I try not to cringe.

"My mom made the quilt." Marisol forces a smile.

The quilt is babyish (the worst), with swatches of memorabilia sewn together. Things like pieces of Marisol's first baby blanket, a triangle of red wool from her band uniform, messages written with permanent marker on pieces of satin—which Mrs. Carreras points out with way too much pride. It wouldn't help to turn it over because the underside is just bright orange fleece. The quilt says homemade like one of those crocheted toilet paper holders at my great-aunt Barb's in Schenectady. Our room is officially uncool—me with the blah beige and now Marisol with the homemade quilt of many colors. We're doomed.

"I'm back!" Trish says from the door, where she tapes Marisol's head to one of the clouds. It's as bad as the picture of me. Great, we're going to be the quad with the ugly girls and the ugly bedding. "Something the matter, Viola?"

"Can we redo the pictures? We really suck."

Trish squints up at the pictures. "You think so?"

"I look all sad and Marisol is just blurry."

Trish looks hurt.

"I mean, it's not the photography at all—you did a great

job—we just need to comb our hair and put on some concealer or something. I look really red."

"You were crying," Trish reasons.

"Yeah." Great, she just told everybody that I'm on the ledge of insanity because I cried when my parents left. Why don't I just curl up under Marisol's baby quilt and sob some more?

"I'll try not to cry when my parents leave," Marisol says supportively.

"You do whatever you need to do," I tell her, and I mean it. Marisol looks at me with relief, grateful for a little support.

Trish goes back to her room for the camera while Mr. and Mrs. Carreras say good-bye to me. Marisol takes their hands and leads them out into the hallway. I hope she'll be brave because I feel like an idiot that I wasn't.