



CONVERSATIONS IN 201

BY SARAH PREVATT

Saturday

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That morning Violet's cell phone rang twice as she stood in the stark bedroom, watching in the mirror as the seamstress crouched on the floor, carefully slipping pins through the delicate organza. The dress was simple, strapless, so tight she could barely breathe. She took in a deep breath and felt her lungs fight against the stiff bra. Another two months, and the dress wouldn't fit at all. She thought about asking the seamstress to let out the sides, just a little, just in case, but she didn't want the questioning look, the confused "Are you expecting to gain weight?"

She stared at herself in the mirror as the seamstress worked. The glaringly white dress made her look washed out. Her face, lips, cheeks, hair even looked pale, lifeless against the brilliant fabric, and suddenly she wanted to tear it, to just take the thin organza between her fingers and pull until she heard the sharp rip and felt the fabric give way. She wanted to run outside, through the mud puddles left from yesterday's rain, run until mud splattered all over the hem, the train.

"I'm out of pins," the seamstress said, standing up. "I'll be right back."

It was while the seamstress was gone that Violet felt it. Her abdomen had been pinched with cramps all morning, but the doctor had said not to worry. When she saw the red drops gleaming on the white tile floor, though, she knew.

She didn't even think about calling her mother. Instead, she climbed into her old Taurus and drove north on I-75. She drove and drove, stopping only for gas and some stale cheddar popcorn from a convenience store. She drove until the sky was a deep, even purple, until her eyelids were so heavy she was afraid of falling asleep at the wheel. As she drifted along the interstate, she saw skyscrapers in the distance, walls of light outlined against a starless sky, and she decided to stop. She drove aimlessly along steeply sloped hills, through mazes of one-way streets until she found a hotel whose sign flickered in the harsh streetlights.

Sunday

She awoke to the sound of a man speaking. His voice—even, cheerful, with a light British accent—was so clear and distinct it sounded as if he was sitting right next to her bed. She bolted upright, her heart beating rapidly, then collapsed back onto the pillows when she realized it was coming from the next room.

"Just thought I'd check to see how Julie was feeling," the voice was saying. "How is she this morning? Does her back feel better?"

Violet closed her eyes. Next door, the man's coffee pot gurgled. She imagined him sitting there, probably in a dark business suit, tearing open packets of powdered creamer, the receiver cradled between his ear and shoulder. She wondered who Julie was. A friend? A colleague? Whoever she was, she was lucky. Lucky to have someone calling at eight in the morning to check on her, to make sure she was all right. Violet thought briefly about Peter, about her mother, and wondered if they were concerned about her, if they'd even realized she was gone. She thought about her students, backpacks slung over their shoulders and shoelaces untied, walking into the classroom—the classroom she had taken the time to decorate with brightly-colored bulletin boards about multiplication—and seeing someone else standing at the front. Outside, rain slapped the window intermittently. She pulled back the heavy green curtain and tried to make out where she was. All around the hotel skyscrapers loomed, disappearing into the thick fog that had settled overnight. Far below, people walked along the glistening streets, black umbrellas bobbing.

She was hungry, and she felt greasy. She had a sour taste in her mouth. Her gums were sore from embedded popcorn kernels. She

suddenly realized that she had no change of clothes. She had no toothbrush, no make-up, no clean underwear.

She slipped into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. Her eyelashes were crimped from sleeping on her stomach, and yesterday's carefully applied mascara formed ashy semi-circles below her eyes. She took a bottle of the hotel's fruity shampoo and lathered her hair in the sink. The suds slid down her forehead and stung her eyes. When it was all rinsed out, she pulled her hair back without bothering to comb it.

Out in the hallway, she waited for several minutes for the elevator to make its way down from the top floor. She stood studying her feet, the dirt crusted between her toes, the flaking pink polish on her toenails. Down the hall, a door swung open and clicked shut. A man emerged from the room next to hers, room 201. The British man who asked about Julie. He wasn't wearing a suit, but he was crisply dressed in a button down shirt and pressed black pants. A laptop bag was slung over his shoulder. He smiled at her as he joined her by the elevator. A short, polite smile, his eyes averted.

Violet wondered what was on his laptop. Probably important files, business letters, memos. Maybe Excel spreadsheets filled with complex data and formulas. Maybe pictures of his wife, his children, the places he wanted to visit.

After she found out she was pregnant, Violet had spent a lot of time on Peter's computer. She told him she was researching baby names and cheap wedding dresses. What she was really doing was checking his emails. She discovered his password—her name—and checked his email constantly. She read everything that came through, even the junk mail from people trying to sell porn, hoping to find something, anything that suggested he was cheating on her. When she couldn't find anything, she considered creating a fake account and emailing him disguised as another woman. Or she could call his house and leave a breathy message on the machine. Anything so she could scream and cry and tell him she didn't want to marry him after all.

Later that day, as she stood in the bathroom trying to wash her shirt in the sink, her cell phone rang. She left the shirt floating among the flat suds and retrieved her cell phone from the bottom of her purse. It was her mother.

"Where the hell are you?" her mother asked as soon as Violet answered the phone. She didn't sound angry, or worried. Only tired.

"I had to get away for a while," Violet said. "I'm fine."

"Are you with another man?" her mother asked. "I won't tell Peter."
"No."

"Do you need money? I can see if Peter will send you some."

"I don't need money." Violet pressed a hand to her aching forehead. Soapy water trailed along her brow and into her eyes, making them burn.

"Look, could you just tell Peter that I'm fine? I don't know when I'll be back, but I'm okay."

"Sure." Her mother sounded distracted. In the background, the doorbell rang, and her mother's Chihuahua began barking. "I'll tell him."

Monday

The next morning was as gray and dreary as the previous. Violet lay in bed, listening to the rush of water from the roof, the splash of car tires in puddles, a distant siren. After a few minutes, she heard the distinct sound of a train calling out a warning.

In room 201, the door slammed. Sounds followed: heavy footsteps muffled by the thick carpet, keys clattering on the table, a faucet running. A woman's voice, high-pitched, piercing. The distress and anger almost palpable even through the wall.

"Oh my God, where have you been?" she said. Her voice was loud, forceful, but Violet thought she detected a tremor. She climbed out of bed and sat down on the cold wooden chair by the wall. She thought about pressing her ear to the wall, but then realized that would be too much.

"My God, you smell," the woman said after several long seconds. Violet imagined the man, probably in a rumpled shirt, jeans damp and smelling of the rain that floated down outside, walking over to the bed, maybe to give a conciliatory kiss, or to reach for the television remote. Maybe he had been out drinking. Maybe the woman smelled alcohol, sweat, vomit, all combined into one salty, sour, nauseating stench. The stench of loneliness, bitterness, escape.

"How many times must we go through this?" the woman asked. The quick sound of a zipper, the rustling of plastic. "It doesn't matter where we are. New York. Atlanta. The freaking Bahamas. You'll never change."

The man finally responded. His voice was soft, tired, barely discernible through the wall.

"This is who I am," he said. "You knew this about me when you married me."

Those words. Frustrating, familiar words. Violet pushed back

from the wall. In the bathroom, she brushed her teeth and pulled her hair away from her face. She slipped on her shoes and left the room.

Outside, the damp, cold air made her lungs burn. Raindrops settled on her eyelashes and with every blink, the world around her grew blurry. People pushed past her, bent forward for balance as they hurried up the steep sidewalks. Beneath her, the sidewalk rushed by, gray concrete smeared with wet red clay and pink earthworms, some already dead.

You knew this about me. Peter's words to her last Christmas morning. They lay in bed, Peter with a cold cloth over his eyes, his hand on his stomach, Violet with her head propped up on a pillow, refusing to look at him.

The night before they'd been at a Christmas Eve party at her friend Margaret's house. Violet knew almost everyone there: friends from childhood, her mother's friends, even a few co-workers. She was so proud to show off Peter, the lawyer from Miami, who wore a suit and tie to work, who owned shoes that cost more than Violet's grocery bill for an entire month. Peter with his quick, dimpled smile and strong hands. There was no one like him in Homestead.

Peter who liked to drink. Peter who drank all of Margaret's expensive cherry liquor, who got quiet and sullen and wanted to leave at nine o'clock. Who threw up in Margaret's bougainvillea bush.

Violet had been so embarrassed. Her friends smiled and acted like it was no big deal, but she could see the judgment in the way they averted their eyes, the way their smiles faltered as they looked at each other. They were thinking that she did no better with her rich Miami man than she did with any of her high school boyfriends from Homestead. That she hadn't made much progress in her life after all.

Tuesday

The next morning Violet stayed in bed until almost noon. Her stomach twisted and ached, and she could barely move. She watched television for a couple of hours and then lay on her side to watch the rain stream down the foggy window.

Shortly after noon the door clicked open and shut in room 201. Feet shuffled on the carpet. Keys clattered on the table by the window. Someone turned the television to the weather channel.

"You know, I don't see why you're making such a big deal about it." A man's voice, guttural, emphasizing the 's' sounds. "I was only joking."

"Well, you just don't joke about something like that." A wom-

an's voice, a thick southern accent. "You embarrassed me."

A mattress squeaked. Violet imagined the man sitting down next to the woman, maybe rubbing her back. Maybe she jerked away from him.

"You know I don't really think you'll need one," the man said. "I was only offering to pay for it if you did. Can't you take a joke?"

The woman muttered something that Violet couldn't understand. The volume on the television rose until all Violet could hear was the upbeat, instrumental music played when the weather channel displayed the ten-day forecast.

Violet rolled over and closed her eyes. The first time that she had brought Peter to meet her mother, he had embarrassed her. Violet wasn't sure why; she'd expected her mother to be the one to embarrass her.

They were sitting out back after dinner. Her mother was nursing a beer, Peter was finishing his second glass of wine, and Violet was playing with her watered-down daiquiri. The air was warm and salty. The banana tree, heavy with curved purple bundles, rustled in the breeze. The peach flowers of the angel trumpet bush bobbed, directing their silent music at the grass already glistening with late night dew. In the distance, the cars at the Homestead-Miami Speedway entered their final lap, their straining engines humming like bees.

Violet wasn't even sure how the topic came up. The conversation had been slow and awkward all night. Her mother, normally so loud and boisterous, got quiet when she drank. Peter, who could be very charismatic, seemed uncomfortable in her mother's house with its tie-dyed curtains and glow-in-the-dark peace signs. Somehow, though, along the course of the night, the topic came up.

Violet wasn't paying attention, really, until she heard her name. She had been studying the puddle of condensation on the dusty glass tabletop. Peter said her name, and when she looked up, he was tapping the bottom of his chin.

"Not now," he said. "But eventually. She's got that Harmon face, doesn't she?"

A facelift. He was telling her mother that Violet was going to need a facelift someday.

Her mother looked at Violet and brought what was left of her cigarette to her chapped lips. "Where the hell did you find this guy?" she wanted to know.

Wednesday

Violet woke to the sound of the train, a distant whistle. Below her, cars rushed by, grates clunked under heavy tires. What she did not hear was the sound of rain. She slipped out of bed and pulled back the

heavy curtain. Gray sunlight fell over her. The sky was still overcast, but at least the rain had stopped. The streets looked dry. There were no more black umbrellas.

A few minutes later her cell phone rang. It had been beeping all night, signaling a low battery. She didn't have the charger. Once it died, she would be cut off from the rest of the world. Completely. Her mother could never find her. Peter could never find her.

She picked it up after checking the number on the screen.

"So are you ready yet?" Her mother sounded so nonchalant, as if she was asking Violet if they were still meeting for lunch.

Violet pictured her mother curled up on the pink couch covered with dog hair, tapping her cigarette against the top of her empty coffee mug. She was probably still in her nightgown, the same silky one she always answered the door in, the one that clung to her drooping breasts and bunched around her midsection. Her daughter had disappeared, and she was probably lounging around like any other morning.

"Am I ready for what?" Violet asked, wrapping the curtain cord around her finger.

"To come home." Her mother sighed, then lapsed into a coughing fit. "It's getting old, you know. Peter keeps calling, keeps knocking on my door at ungodly hours. He doesn't believe that you're okay."

"I don't know." It was the truth. Violet sank onto the bed and pulled her knees to her chest. The hair on her legs was soft. She needed to shave.

"You know, I did the same thing once," her mother said. "After I had you. Just left. Just got in my jeep and drove."

That didn't surprise Violet. Her mother had always been the only mother who didn't come to school plays, or softball games, or high school graduation. She liked to remind Violet that if she'd believed in birth control, Violet wouldn't be there.

"And then you know what?" her mother continued when Violet didn't speak. "It got old." She paused, coughed a few more times. "Well, it's a good thing I came back. A hell of a good thing. Do you know how you would have turned out if your dad had raised you?"

Violet studied the paint chipping on her toenails. That was one nice thing about dating someone like Peter. She could afford things like spa pedicures. She could afford to have someone scrape away dead skin and polish her toes so they looked brand new. It didn't matter how many pedicures she had, though. As soon as she stepped outside, a stray speck of dirt always found its way into the gleaming polish.

"There's no baby," Violet said. She hadn't planned on telling her mother. But it just came out, and suddenly she couldn't stop. "Tell Peter that. I had a miscarriage. I'm not pregnant anymore. See if he still wants to know where I am. See if he still wants to marry me."

Her mother laughed, which sounded completely inappropriate, yet Violet wasn't surprised.

"It's just as well," her mother said. "So, are you coming home, then?"

In room 201, the door slammed. There was a rustling sound, like a suitcase being dropped onto the bed. Or clothes being taken off. Someone giggled, a short, sharp, ragged noise. It could have been hiccup, or a sob.

"I don't know," Violet said. "Tell Peter I'm sorry." She hung up and turned the cell phone off.

Next door, the noise stopped. Not a rustle. Not a whisper. Violet stood and pressed her ear to the wall. She tried to drown out all of the other noise—the cars on the street below, the rattle of the housekeeper's cart, the hum of the vending machines—to focus on the life in the next room. Maybe, if she could hear something, she could join their lives for just a second. Maybe, for just a second, she could escape her own.