

Start Over

by

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Rehearse, Greta commanded herself as she fidgeted in the freezing-cold waiting room. Likely Interview Question Number 4: *When did you decide you wanted to be an author?*

That question was easy. The answer was a year and a half ago, on her birthday, at the Violet LaForge vs the Blue Sorcerer theme park. It was just before her parents' divorce. At the end of the party, they'd given her a turquoise leather journal with a tiny golden lock and said if she was ever having a hard day – *hint, hint* – she should write down her deepest thoughts and fears and she would magically feel better. A few months later, Greta had moved to a new apartment and a new school and she still hadn't written one deep thought or fear. Instead, she filled up the journal (and four more journals after that) with stories about a girl named Zorra and her pet chameleon, who had to teleport to other worlds to collect all the scattered stones of the Pogmonian Mosaic and bring a lost civilisation back to life.

The problem, Greta thought now, was that those stories weren't right. Of course she'd made Darcy (her best friend from her old school) read them all, and of course Darcy had loved them and even made fan art about Zorra, but Greta knew they weren't as good as the Violet LaForge books. Something was off. She just didn't know what.

'Greta Berger?' said a tall man, poking his long neck around a door.

Greta stood up, her heart pounding. Finally. This was the moment she'd been dreaming of for weeks, ever since her story had advanced to the second round of the competition.

The tall man led her through a corridor lined with bookshelves and tentacled plants, all the way into a sunlit office.

'Good luck,' he said, and shut the door behind her.

Greta swallowed hard. At the desk in front of her sat a grey-haired woman with chunky red glasses. It was Katie Flicker, world-famous author of the Violet LaForge series, which Greta had read 12 times (15, if you counted the graphic novel adaptations). If Greta could just ace this interview, she'd earn a spot in the Summer Workshop for Young Writers, taught by Katie Flicker herself. Hundreds of kids had applied; only eight would be accepted.

'Come in, Greta,' said the woman.

Greta's legs felt wobbly as she stepped forward and sat down across from her hero. She tried to remember what she'd rehearsed, but her brain had gone completely on strike.

All she could do was stare at the Violet LaForge figurine bobbing its head on the desk.

'I enjoyed your story,' Katie Flicker said. 'I am very partial to chameleons.'

Greta looked up.

'What's more,' said Flicker, 'there is a vividness and emotional resonance to your prose that I rarely find in the work of young writers. I really empathised with Zorra.'

Greta had to be hearing incorrectly. 'You did?' she managed.

Flicker nodded. 'Tell me, Greta,' she said softly. 'Have you, by any chance, had a difficult year?'

Greta froze. What kind of interview question was that? Was she supposed to just admit that her family had shattered like a vase with no real explanation, that she'd moved across town into a tiny, damp apartment, that she hardly ever saw Darcy anymore, and that she was so utterly furious at her parents that she sometimes felt like running away just to punish them?

'I'm sorry,' said Flicker. 'Perhaps that was too personal.'

'Can we get to the point?' Greta burst out. 'Am I good enough for the workshop or not?'

Flicker smiled. It was one of those awful smiles adults give kids when they find them 'cute'. Like the smile her parents had given her when she said, 'Why don't you just be roommates, then? You don't have to be married to live in the same house.'

That smile was too much for Greta. She jumped up and pushed back her chair. 'Never mind,' she said. Her face was hot. 'It's OK. I knew you wouldn't take me anyway.'

'Greta!' said Flicker, looking alarmed. 'Please don't leave. You're doing great so far.'

'Yeah, right,' said Greta.

Flicker's eyebrows shot up, and Greta's face went even redder. She had ruined her chances now, she knew it. It was just like her.

'Please,' said Flicker again. 'Take a seat.'

Breathing hard, Greta plopped back down in the chair. She sat on her hands to stop them trembling. She *really* hated grown-ups. Why couldn't they, for once, just give her a straight answer?

'Let's return to your submission,' Flicker said. 'In spite of its impressive strengths, I wondered if it could have possibly been… a first draft?'

'What do you mean?' said Greta. This wasn't a question she'd prepared for either. 'I just wrote it. I wrote the whole book in a month. I'm fast like that. I don't do drafts.'

Flicker nodded. 'Well, let's be very direct then: do you feel it's good enough to be published?'

Uh-oh, thought Greta. 'No,' she muttered, looking down. 'It's not like your books. I don't know why.'

'Ah,' said Flicker. Suddenly she stood up. She walked over to one of the bookshelves, waggled her fingers, then plucked out an old-looking folder. She handed it to Greta. 'Read the first page, please.'

Greta could hardly believe it. She was holding a handwritten copy of *Violet LaForge vs the Blue Sorcerer*. Except… it was different.

'The words are wrong,' she said. 'It's not as suspenseful as it should be.' She looked up. 'Why does it go on for so long about the colour of her hair?'

Flicker laughed and sat back down at her desk. 'Very good observations, Greta. What you're holding is my first draft. The first words of the Violet LaForge saga I ever wrote.'

Greta didn't understand.

'Greta,' said Flicker. 'Readers sometimes struggle at first when they turn into writers, because they've only ever seen published books before – the tip of the iceberg, the final products after years of invisible work. So of course your own first draft can't compare to what you're used to reading. The fact is, every book you've ever read has gone through at least five or six drafts by that point.'

'*Six* drafts?'

'And sometimes more. Book 5 took me twelve,' said Flicker.

Greta was scandalised.

'First drafts are wonderful, Greta,' Flicker continued, leaning forward. 'Sometimes…' Her voice was quiet now. 'Sometimes I think they're a bit like falling in love. They're full of intensity and emotion, like you have wings and you're flying on a fast current of air. They're beautiful and important. But they're often full of problems. Most of the time, if you're willing to work hard, the problems can be fixed. Sometimes, though, they really can't… and the best thing to do is start over. Find what went wrong and try to do better, building on everything you learned in the first draft.'

She was looking intently into Greta's eyes. Greta realised all of a sudden that she wasn't talking only about writing.

'Does that make sense, Greta?'

No, it doesn't, she thought – and yet, for the first time, it also almost did. Tears were pricking behind her eyes.

'Here's my proposal,' said Flicker at last. 'You are one of my strongest candidates. But I need to see you're capable of identifying what isn't working and rewriting it. If you send me a new draft within the next two weeks, and it shows significant improvement… well then, you're in.'

Greta blinked away the tears and nodded. She already had an idea for Chapter 1.

'Can I go now?' she said.

'Yes,' said Flicker. 'But first, do you have any questions for me?'

Finally, a question Greta had prepared for. 'Why did Violet forgive the Blue Sorcerer at the end of Book 5?' she blurted. 'He didn't deserve it.'

Flicker was quiet for a long time. 'You're right, Greta. He didn't deserve it. But what would have become of Violet if she never forgave him?'

She stood and let Greta out of the office. 'Happy writing.'

Greta felt dazed. But when she caught Flicker's smile, this time she couldn't help it, she kind of half-smiled back.

Then she dashed off down the hall.

She had work to do.



THE END

Illustration: Juliana Penkova