



Violet X: Violet Revised

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Violet Revised

I know that woman. She used to live on Lenox Avenue with her husband, a tall quiet man who worked in a warehouse and cried all the time. He fell for an eighteen year old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. The woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face, but they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment on Lenox Avenue she took the birds out of their cages and let them out the windows, including the parrot that said, "I love you." But the snow she ran through was so windswept she left no footprints in it, so for a time nobody knew exactly where on Lenox Avenue she lived. But, like me, they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband, Joe Trace, was the one who shot the girl. There was never anyone to prosecute him because nobody actually saw him do it, and the dead girl's aunt didn't want to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops when she knew the expense wouldn't improve anything. Besides, she found out that

the man who killed her neice cried all day and for him and for Violet that is as bad as jail.

She was awfully skinny, Violet, but still good looking although she must have been butting fifty when she broke up the funeral. You'd think that being thrown out the church would be the end of it--the shame and all--but it wasn't. Violet was mad enough and good looking enough to think that even without hips or youth she could punish Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and letting him visit in her own house while her husband cried in the parlour. She thought it would dry the tears up and give her some satisfaction as well. It could have worked, I suppose, but the children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them because they are not really here. Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can't say. He may have come to feel that Violet's rewards were poor measured against his sympathy for the heaving man in the next room. But I do know that mess didn't last two weeks. Violet's next plan--to fall in love with her husband--exhausted her before it got on a good footing. Washing his handkerchiefs and putting food on the table before him was the most she could manage. The days of tears and sobbing nights wore her down. So she decided to love--well, find out about--the eighteen year old whose face she tried to cut open even though nothing would have come out but straw. Violet didn't know anything about the girl at first except her name, her former beauty, and that she was very well thought of in the legally licensed beauty parlor. She started going around gathering the rest of the information. Maybe

she thought she could solve the mystery of love that way. Good luck and let me know. She questioned everybody starting with Melvonne, an upstairs neighbor whose apartment Joe and the girl used as a love nest. From Melvonne she learned the girl's address and whose child she was. From the legally licensed beauticians she found out more: what kind of lip rouge the girl wore; saw the marcelling iron they used on her (though I suspect that girl didn't need to straighten her hair); listened to the band the girl liked best (Slim Bates' Ebony Keys which is pretty good except for his vocalist who must be his woman since why else would he let her insult his band by singing like Kate Smith?); and when she was shown how, Violet did the dance steps the dead girl used to do. All that. But when she had the steps down pat--her knees just so--I can see why everybody got disgusted with her. It was like watching an old street pigeon pecking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats had left behind. But Violet was nothing but persistent and no crack or ugly-eyed look stopped her. She haunted PS12 to talk to teachers who knew the girl. De Witt Clinton High School too, because the girl had quit there in the eleventh grade. And for a long time she pestered the girl's aunt, a lonesome woman who worked as a seamstress in the garment district, until the aunt broke down and began talking to relieve her own sorrow. She began to look forward to Violet's visits for a chat about youth and misbehavior. The aunt showed all the dead girl's things to Violet and it was clear that this niece had been hard-headed as well as pretty. One particular thing the aunt showed her, and eventually

let Violet keep for a few weeks, was a picture of the girl's face. Not smiling, but alive at least and very bold. Violet had the nerve to put it on the fireplace mantle in her own parlour and both she and Joe looked at it and cried--for the same reasons: to hang on to what they had lost.

It promised to be a mighty bleak household, what with the birds gone and the two of them wiping their cheeks all day, but when spring came to the city Violet saw, coming into the building with an OKEH record under her arm and carrying some stewmeat wrapped in butcher paper, another girl with four marcelled waves on each side of her head. Violet invited her in to hear the record and that is how that unlikely threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom.

Whatever you hear tell, the City wasn't so sure of itself in 1926. It was looking around at the rest of the world instead of its own face. It was a port, after all, surrounded by deep water to cross over if you wanted to get in or out. So it looked across and down into its deep waters and worked its loud harbors without a touch of smugness. What went on in its streets and neighborhoods was anything the strong could think of and the weak could admire. Armistice was half a dozen years old the winter Violet disrupted the funeral, and veterans on Lenox Avenue wore their army issue greatcoats, because nothing they could pay for was as sturdy or hid so well what they could not boast of. When snow came, it sat where it fell on Lexington and Park Avenue too, and waited for horse

drawn wagons to tamp it down when they delivered coal for the furnaces cooling down in the cellars. Up in the apartments and between the stone houses people knocked on each other's doors to see if anything was needed or could be had. A piece of soap? A little kerosene? Some fat, chicken or pork, to brace the soup one more time? Whose husband was getting ready to go see if he could find a shop open? Was there time to add to the list drawn up and handed to him by the wives? The winter was so cold it hurt the teeth, but whatever the problems [tk] they put up with them because it was worth anything to be on Lenox Avenue where the sidewalks, snow-covered or not, were wider than the main roads of the towns where they were born and perfectly ordinary people could stand at the stop, get on the street car, give the man the nickel, and ride anywhere you damned well pleased, although you didn't please to go many places because everything you wanted was right where you were: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools, no hospital), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barber shops, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner, and every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood, or association imaginable. The City was not citified then. It was a clutch of islands, sporting villages (called neighborhoods) cheek and jowl, with unencumbered, if infrequent, trespass among them. The service trails, of course, were worn, and there were paths that got slick from the foray of

villagers into the territory of another where it was believed something curious or thrilling lay. Some gleaming, cracking scarey stuff. Where you could pop the cork and put the cold glass mouth right up to your own. Knock any sort of danger away with another and laugh at the knife when it missed and when it didn't. It would make you wonderful just to see it. And just as wonderful to know that back in one's own building there were lists drawn up by the wives to give to the husband braving the snow to get to an open market, and that sheets impossible to hang out in snowfall draped kitchens like the curtains of Sunday School plays.

The young were not so young then, and there was no such thing as mid-life. Sixty years, forty, even, was as much as anybody felt like being bothered with. If they reached that, they sat around looking at goings on as though it were a five cent triple feature on Saturday. Otherwise they found themselves butting in the business of people whose names they couldn't remember and whose business was none of theirs. Just to hear themselves talk and the joy of watching the distressed faces of those listening. There were some exceptions. Some old people didn't slap the children for being slappable; they saved that strength in case it was needed for something important. A last courtship full of smiles and little presents. Or the dedicated care of an old friend who might not make it through without them. Sometimes just making sure the person they had shared their long lives with had cheerful company and the necessary things for the night.

Over there on Lenox, in Violet and Joe Trace's apartment, the nights for the most part were like the empty birdcages wrapped in cloth. Occasionally though, one of them raises up from the sagging mattress and tip toes into the parlour to gaze at what seems like the only living presence in the house: the photograph of a bold unsmiling girl staring from the mantle piece. If the tip toer is Joe, driven by loneliness from his wife's side, then the face stares at him without hope or regret and it is the absence of accusation that wakes him from his sleep hungry for her company. No finger points. Her lips don't turn down in judgement or approbation. Her face is calm, generous and sweet. But if the tip toer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy. The face of someone who will never work for anything; some one who picks up things lying on other people's dresser's and is not embarrassed when found out. It is a face of a sneak who glides over to your sink to rinse the fork you have laid by her plate. An inward face--whatever it sees is its own self. You are there , it says, because I am looking at you, and what you think about me is what I think about you.

Two or three times during the night, they took turns to go look at that picture, and sometimes one of them would say her name. Dorcus? Dorcus.

Such restless nights made them sleep late, and Violet hurried to get a meal prepared before getting ready for her round of heads. Having a knack for it, but no supervised training, and

therefore no license to do it, Violet could only charge 25 or 50 cents anyway, but since that business at Dorcus's funeral, many of her regular customers found reasons to do their own hair or have a daughter heat up the irons. Violet and Joe Trace didn't use to need that hairdressing pocket change, but now that Joe was missing work days to stay home and cry, Violet carried her tools and her trade into apartments where the women woke in the afternoon, poured gin in their tea and could not care less about what she had done. These women always needed their hair done, and sometimes pity darkened their shiney eyes and they tipped her a whole dollar.

"You need to eat you something," one said to her. "Don't you want to be bigger than your curling iron?"

"Shut your mouth," said Violet.

"I mean it," said the woman. She was still sleepy, and rested her cheek in her left hand while holding her ear with the right. "Men wear you down to a sharp piece of gristle if you let them."

"Women," answered Violet. "Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing. It's these little hungry girls acting like women. Ain't content with boys their own age, no, they want somebody old enough to be their father. Switching round with lipstick, see through stockings, dresses up to their you-know-what..."

"That's my ear, girl! You going to curl it too?"

"Sorry. I'm sorry. Really, really sorry." And Violet stopped to blow her nose and blot tears with the back of her hand.

"O, the devil!" said the woman. She took advantage of the pause to light a cigarette. "Now I reckon you going to tell me some hateful story about how some young girl messed over you and how he's not to blame because he was just walking down the street minding his own business, when this little twat jumped on his back and dragged him off to her bed. Save your breath. You'll need it on your death bed."

"I need my breath now. "

"Did he move out? Is he with her?"

"No. We still together. She's dead."

"Dead? Then what's the matter with you?"

"He thinks about her all the time. Nothing on his mind but her. Can't work. Can't sleep. Grieves all day, all night...."

"O," said the woman. She knocked the fire from her cigarette, tapped the tip and laid the butt carefully into the ashtray. Leaning back in the chair, she pressed the rim of her ear with two fingers. "You in trouble," she said, yawning. "Deep, deep trouble. Can't rival the dead for love. Lose every time."

Violet thought it must be so; not only was she losing Joe to a dead girl, but she wondered if she weren't falling in love with her too. Dorcus? Dorcus.

She left the sleepy woman's house--miserable, helpless. A customer, coming to Violet's kitchen for an appointment, was not due until three o'clock, and there was time for a bit of housekeeping before then. Some business that needed doing because it was impossible to have nothing to do, no sequence of errands, list of

tasks. She might wave her hands in the air, or tremble if she could not put her hand to something with another chore just around the bend from the one she is doing. And while she sprinkles the collar of a white shirt her mind is at the bottom of the bed where the leg, broken clean away from the frame, is too split to nail back. When the customer comes and Violet is sudsing the thin gray hair, murmuring ha mercy at appropriate breaks in the old lady's stream of confidences, Violet is re-situating the cord that holds the oven door to its hinges and rehearsing the month's plea for three more days to the rent collector. She thinks she longs for rest, a carefree afternoon to decide suddenly to go to the pictures, or just to sit with the birds and listen to the children in the street below. This notion of rest, it's attractive to her, but I don't think she would like it. They are all like that, these women, waiting for the ease, the space that need not be filled with anything other than the drift of their own thoughts. But they wouldn't like it. They are busy and thinking of ways to be busier because such a space of nothing pressing to do would knock them down. No fields of cowslip will rush into that opening, nor mornings free of flies and heat when the light is shy. No. Not at all. They fill their mind and hands with soap and repair and dicey confrontations because what is waiting for them, in even a suddenly idle moment, is the weeping they have not done. The rage. Molten, Thick and slow moving. Mindful and particular about what in its path it chooses to bury.

Or else, into a beat of time, sideways, slips a sorrow they don't know where from. A neighbor returns the spool of thread she borrowed, and not just the thread, but the extra large needle too, and the two of them stand in the door frame a moment while the borrower repeats for the lender a funny conversation she had with the woman on the floor below; it is funny and they laugh--one loudly while holding her forehead, the other hard enough to hurt her stomach. She closes the door, and later, still smiling, touches the lapel of her sweater to her eye to wipe traces of the laughter away, before she drops to the arm of the sofa with tears coming so fast she needs two hands to catch them.

So Violet sprinkles the collars and cuffs. Then sudses with all her heart those three or four ounces of gray hair, soft and interesting as a baby's.

Not the kind of baby hair her grandmother had soaped and played with and remembered for forty years. The hair of the little boy who got his name from it: Golden. Maybe that is why Violet is a hairdresser--all those years of listening to her rescuing Grandmother, True Belle, tell Baltimore stories. The years with Miss Vera Louise in the fine stone house on [tk] street where the linen was embroidered with blue thread and there was nothing to do but raise and love the blond boy who ran away from them to find his father. True had come to them after Violet's father had gone away, and maybe it was hearing about little boy's determination that fascinated her along with his carefully loved hair.