



## Jchap 1 [formally Violet Revised]

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Violet/ July 11, 1989

Jchap 1

[formally Violet Revised] 9.23.90;10.16.90

Sth. I know that woman. She used to live <sup>with a flock of birds</sup> on Lenox Avenue <sup>known</sup> with <sup>too</sup> 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 from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you." 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



2

fifty

V. or her friend  
very  
notice.

Sweet man?



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thought she could solve the mystery of love that way. Good luck and let me know. She questioned everybody starting with Melvonne, <sup>the one who told her about Joe's dirt and</sup> an upstairs neighbor <sup>whose apartment Joe and the girl used as a</sup> 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 <sup>by singing like Kate Smith?</sup>); and when she was shown how, Violet did the dance steps the dead girl used to do.

<sup>former</sup> All that. When she had the steps down pat--her knees just so-- <sup>the two-week boyfriend and</sup> everybody <sup>else</sup> got disgusted with her and I can see why. It was like watching an old street pigeon pecking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats <sup>had</sup> left behind. But Violet was nothing but persistent and no <sup>wise-</sup> 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 off and on 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 sly. One particular thing the aunt showed her,



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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's how that <sup>ignorant</sup> ~~clumsey~~ 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 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 <sup>135</sup> 125th Street 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



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drawn wagons to tamp it down when they delivered coal for the furnaces cooling down in the cellars. Up in <sup>those</sup> the big five-story apartment buildings and <sup>the</sup> in narrow wooden houses <sup>in between</sup> 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 turpentine to the list drawn up and handed to him by the wives? [The weather <sup>g</sup> was so cold it hurt to breathe], but whatever the problems of being winter-bound in the City 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 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 by jowl, with <sup>open</sup> unencumbered, ~~if infrequent~~, trespass among them. The service trails, of course, were worn, and there

Breathing  
hurt in  
weather that  
cold

Rag and bone  
men ?



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were paths that got slick from the foray of members of one group 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. Where you could find danger or <sup>be it</sup> ~~hit~~; where you could fight til you dropped and <sup>smile</sup> ~~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 <sup>for</sup> ~~to give to~~ the husband <sup>hunting</sup> ~~braving the~~ ~~icy walks 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, or got very old, 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. I've known a few exceptions. <sup>Very few:</sup> Some old people who didn't slap the children for being slappable; who 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 they concentrated on making sure the person they had



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shared their long lives with had cheerful company and the necessary things for the night.

But up there on Lenox, in Violet and Joe Trace's apartment, the nights ~~for the most part~~ were like the empty birdcages wrapped in cloth. And a dead girl's face became a necessary thing for their nights. They each took turns to<sup>\*</sup> raise up from the sagging mattress and tip toe into the parlour to gaze at what seemed 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 <sup>her</sup> 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. 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 <sup>the</sup> 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.~~ <sup>stet</sup>

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

\* throw off the <sup>bed</sup> covers and ...



X Such <sup>2</sup> restless nights made them sleep late, and Violet would have to hurry 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~~ <sup>more and more</sup> to stay home and cry, Violet carried her tools and her trade <sup>into</sup> apartments where the women woke in the afternoon, poured gin in their tea and <sup>did</sup> 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. <sup>not</sup> ~~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 old hateful story about how a 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," said Violet.

"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. Won't work. Can't sleep. Grieves all day, all night...."

"O," said the woman. She knocked the fire from her cigarette, pinched 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. When she wasn't trying to humiliate Joe, she was worrying about his health; when she wasn't worrying about his loss of appetite, <sup>his</sup> insomnia, she wondered what color were Dorcus' eyes. Her aunt had said brown, ~~but~~ <sup>the beauticians</sup> ~~X~~ said black <sup>but</sup> ~~and~~ Violet ~~said she~~



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~~had never seen~~  
~~never~~ saw a light-skinned person with coal black eyes. One thing, for sure, she <sup>e</sup>needed her ends cut. In the photograph and from what she could remember from the coffin, the girl needed her ends cut. Hair that long gets fraggely easy. Just a quarter inch trim would do wonders, Dorcus. Dorcus.

*fx*  
~~Violet~~ She left the sleepy woman's house feeling miserable, helpless, but grateful that the customer who was coming to ~~Violet's~~ <sup>her</sup> 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 stove to its hinge 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 birdcages and listen to the children play in snow. <sup>4</sup> 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 thier own thoughts.

*verb tense?*



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9/7



Or else, into a beat of time, and sideways under their breasts, 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 long needle too, and both 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. The lender closes the door, and later, still smiling, touches the lapel of her sweater to her eye to wipe traces of the laughter away then drops to the arm of the sofa the 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 depriving everybody of his carefully loved hair.

TR — I know folks were furious when Violet broke up the funeral, but I can't believe they were surprised. Way, way before that,



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*Sitting*  
before Joe every<sup>1</sup> laid eyes on the girl, Violet ~~had~~ sat down in the middle of the street. She didn't stumble nor was she pushed: she just sat down. After a few minutes two men and a woman came to her, but she couldn't make out why or what they said. Someone tried to give her water to drink, but she knocked it away. A policeman knelt in front of her and she rolled over on her side, covering her eyes. He would have taken her in but for the assembling crowd murmuring "Aw, she's tired. Let her rest," and carried her to the nearest steps. Slowly she came around, dusted off her clothes and got to her appointment ~~only~~ an hour late, which pleased the slow-moving whores who never hurried anything but love.

*as far as I know*  
It never happened again--the street sitting--but *quit as it's best* she did try to steal that baby although there is no way to prove it. What <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ known is this: the Dumfrey women--mother and daughter--weren't home when Violet arrived. Either they got the date mixed up or had decided to go to a legally licensed parlour--just for the shampoo, probably, because there is no way to get that deepdown ~~so good~~ hair washing at a bathroom sink. The beauticians have it beat when it comes to that: you get to lie back instead of lean forward; you don't have to press a towel in your eyes to keep the soapy water out because at a proper beauty parlour it drains down the back of your head into the sink. So, sometimes, even if the legal beautician is not as adept as Violet, a regular customer will go to her just for the pleasure of <sup>a</sup> ~~an~~ deep shampoo.

Doing two heads in one place was lucky and Violet looked forward to the 11:00 appointment. When nobody answered the bell,



she waited, thinking maybe they'd been held up at the market. She tried the bell again, after some time, and then leaned over the concrete bannister to ask a woman leaving the building next door if she knew where the Dumfrey women were. The woman shook her head but came over to help Violet look at the windows and wonder.

"They keep the shades up when they home," she said. "Down when they gone. Should be just the reverse."

"Maybe they want to see out when they home," said Violet.

"See what?" asked the woman. She was instantly angry.

"Daylight," said Violet. "Have some daylight get in there."

"They need to move on back to Memphis then if daylight is what they want."

"Memphis? I thought they were born here."

"That's what they'd have you believe. But they ain't. Not even Memphis. Cottown. Some place nobody ever heard of."

"I'll be," said Violet. She was very surprised because the Dumfrey women were graceful, citified ladies whose father owned a store on 116th street, and themselves had nice paper handling jobs: one took tickets at the Lafayette; the other worked in the counting house.

"They don't like it known," the woman went on.

"Why?" asked Violet.

"Hincty, that's why. Comes from handling money all day. You notice that? How people who handle money for a living get stuck -up? Like it was theirs instead of yours?" She sucked her teeth at the shaded windows. "Daylight my foot."

"Well I do their hair every other Tuesday and today is Tuesday, right?"

"All day."

"Wonder where they are, then?"

The woman slipped a hand under her skirt to re-knot the top of her stocking. "Off somewhere trying to sound like they ain't from Cottown."

"Where you from?" Violet was impressed with the woman's ability to secure her hose with one hand.

"Cottown. Knew both of them from way back. Come up here, the whole family act like they never set eyes on me before. Comes from handling money instead of a broom which I better get to before I lose this no count job. O, Jesus." She sighed heavily. "Leave a note why don't you? Don't count on me to let them know you was here. We don't speak if we don't have to." She buttoned her coat, then moved her hand in a suit-yourself-wave when Violet said she'd wait a bit longer.

Violet sat down on the wide steps nestling her bag of irons and oil and shampoo in the space behind her calves.

When the baby was in her arms, she inched its blanket up around the cheeks against the threat of wind too cool for its honey sweet, butter colored face. Its big-eyed non-committal stare made her smile. Comfort settled itself in her stomach and a kind of skipping, running light traveled her veins.

Joe will love this, she thought. Love it. And quickly her mind raced ahead to their bedroom and what was in there she could



use for a crib until she got a real one. There was gentle soap in the sample case already so she could bathe him in the kitchen right away. Him? Was it a him? Violet lifted her head to the sky and laughed with the excitement in store when she got home to look. It was the laugh--loose and loud--that confirmed the theft for some and discredited it for others. Would a sneak thief woman stealing a baby call attention to herself like that at a corner not a hundred yards away from the wicker carriage she took it from? Would a kind-hearted innocent woman take a stroll with an infant she was asked to watch while its older sister ran back in the house, and laugh like that?

The sister was screaming in front of her house, drawing neighbors and passersby to her as she scanned the sidewalk--up and down--shouting "Philly! Philly's gone! She took Philly!" She kept her hands on the baby buggy's push bar, unwilling to run whichever way her gaze landed, as though, if she left the carriage, empty except for the record she dropped in it--the one she had dashed back into the house for and was now on the pillow where her baby brother used to be--maybe it too would disappear.

"She who?" somebody asked. "Who took him?"

"A woman! I was gone one minute. Not even one! I asked her...I said...and she said okay...!"

"You left a whole live baby with a stranger to go get a record?" The disgust in the man's voice brought tears to the girl's eyes. "I hope your mama tears you up and down."

Opinions, decisions popped through the crowd like struck matches.

"Aint' got the sense of a gnat."

"Who mis-raised you?"

"Call the cops."

"What for?"

"They can at least look."

"Will you just look at what she left that baby for."

"What is it?"

" 'The Trombone Blues.' "

"Have mercy."

"She'll know more about blues than any trombone when her mama gets home."

The ~~little~~ knot of people, more and more <sup>angry</sup> ~~furious~~ at the stupid, irresponsible sister, at the cops, at the record lying where a baby should be, had just about forgotten the kidnapper when a man at the curb said "That her?" He pointed to Violet at the corner and it was when everybody turned toward where his finger led, that Violet, tickled by the pleasure of discovery she was soon to have, threw back her head and laughed out loud.

The proof of her innocence lay in the bag of hair dressing utensils which remained on the steps where Violet had been waiting.

"Would I leave my bag, with the stuff I make my living with if I was stealing your baby? You think I'm crazy?" Violet's eyes, squinted and smoking with fury, stared right at the sister. "In



fact, I would have taken everything. Buggy too, if that's what I was doing."

It sounded true and likely to most of the crowd, especially those who faulted the sister. The woman had left her bag and was merely walking the baby while the older sister--to silly to be minding a child anyway--ran back in her house for a record to play for a friend. And who knew what else was going on in the head of a girl too dumb to watch a baby sleep?

It sounded unlikely and mighty suspicious to a minority. Why would she walk that far, if she was just playing, rocking the baby? Why not pace in front of the house like normal? And what kind of laugh was that? What kind? If she could laugh like that, she could forget not only her bag, but the whole world.

The sister, chastised, took baby, buggy and "Trombone Blues" back up the steps. Violet, triumphant and angry, snatched her bag, saying "Last time I do anybody a favor on this block. watch your own damn babies!" And she thought of it that way ever after, remembering the incident as an outrage to her character. The makeshift crib, the gentle soap left her mind. The memory of the light, however, that had skipped through her veins came back now and then, and once in a while, on an overcast day, when certain corners in the room resisted lamplight; when the red beans in the pot seemed to be taking forever to soften, she imagined a brightness that could be carried in her arms. Distributed, if need be, into places dark as the bottom of a well.



Violet/ June 23, 1989

Stuck  
~~Stuck~~  
X, X and 18  
other

Joe never learned of Violet's public crazinesses. <sup>^</sup>His <sup>^</sup>male friends passed word of the incidents to each other, but couldn't bring themselves to say much more to him than "How is Violet? Doing okay, is she?" Her private cracks, however, were known to him. I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globelight of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, place<sup>s</sup> entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. ~~In between the things (the wavey string of well-lit scenes) is nothing, (except getting to the next globelight.)~~ <sup>But</sup> And right there, in the nothing-in-between, it's dangerous. The globelight holds and bathes each scene and it can be assumed that ~~in between,~~ <sup>^</sup> at the curve where the light stops, is a solid foundation. In truth, there is no foundation at all, but alleyways, crevices one steps across all the time. But the globelight is imperfect. <sup>too</sup> Closely examined it shows seams, ill glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet wasn't paying attention she stumbled onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street.

She didn't used to be that way. She had been a snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman, with the snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician. She liked, and had, to get her way.



*before her eyes.*  
Violet/ June 23, 1989

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*taking shape slowly bit by bit until he was whole* → ~~[come slowly into view at dawn]~~ She had butted their way into an apartment promised to another family by sitting out the landlord, haunting his doorway. She collected customers by going up to them and describing her services ("I can do your hair better and cheaper, and do it when and where you want.") She argued butchers and wagon vendors into prime and extra ("Put that little end piece in. You weighing the stalks; I'm buying the leaf.") Long before Joe stood in the drugstore watching a girl buy candy, Violet had stumbled into a crack or two. *Felt* ~~and~~ the anything-at-all began in her mouth. Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment. "I don't believe an 8 has been out this month," she says, thinking about the daily number combinations. "Not one. Bound to come up soon, so I'm hanging a 8 on everything."

"That's no way to play," says Joe. "Get you a combo and stay with it."

"No. 8 is due I know it. Was all over the place in August-all summer, in fact. Now it's ready to come out of hiding."

"Suit yourself." Joe is examining a shipment of cosmetic products.

"Got a mind to double it with an aught and two or three others just in case who is that pretty girl standing next to you?" She looks up at Joe expecting an answer.

"What?" He frowns. "What you say?"

"Oh." Violet blinks rapidly. "Nothing I mean... nothing."

"Pretty girl?"

"Nothing, Joe. Nothing." She means nothing can be done about it, but it was something. Something slight, but troublesome. Like the time Miss Haywood asked her what time could she do her granddaughter's hair and Violet said "Two o'clock if the hearse is out of the way."

Extricating herself from these collapses was not too hard, because nobody pressed her. Did they do the same? Maybe. ~~Quiet~~ <sup>Maybe</sup> ~~as it's kept~~, everybody has a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own. Violet shut up. Spoke less and less until "um" carried almost all of her part of a conversation. Less excusable than a wayward mouth was an independant hand ~~that tried to grab and turn the faded cabbage rose on a quilt as though it were a door knob.~~ Violet got still as well as silent. Over time her silences annoyed her husband, then puzzled him and finally depressed him. He was married to a woman who spoke mainly to her birds. One of whom answered back. "I love you."

that found a knife lost for weeks,  
in a parrot's cage