



Vio/2

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She sat there sucking malt through a straw wondering who on earth this Violet was that walked about town in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other things: some things dimmer, shadowey--other things clear and much too big. The one that knew the knife was in the parrot's cage and not in the kitchen drawer; who remembered what she did not: scraping marble from the parrot's claws and beak weeks ago. She had been looking for that knife for a month. Couldn't for the life of her think what she'd done with it. But this Violet knew and went right to it. Knew, too, where the funeral was going on, although it could not have been but one of two places[tk ^{or} and tk] come to think of it. Still that Violet knew which of the two, and the right time to get there. Just before the closing of the casket, when the people who were going to faint fainted and the women in white dresses were fanning them. And the ushers, young men same age as the deceased--from her high school class, with freshly barbed heads and ghost white gloves--gathered first in a tight knot of six and then separated into two lines of three, moved down the aisle from the back where they had assembled and surrounded the bier. They were the ones that that Violet had to push aside, elbow her way into. And they did. Step aside, thinking maybe this was some last minute love desperate to make itself known before it couldn't see and might forget the sleeping face it treasured. They saw the knife before she did.

Before she knew what was going on, the ushers' hard hands--knuckle-tough from marbles and steelies, from snowballs packed to bullet strength, from years of sticks sending hardballs over the hoods of cars, into lots with high fences and even into the open windows as well as the closed of people living four floors up, hands that had held the boy's whole body weight from the iron railings of the [tk] bridge let alone the monkey bars in [tk] park--these hands were reaching toward the blade she had not seen for a month at least and was surprised to see now aimed at the girl's sweet and secret face.

It bounced off, making a little dent under her ear lobe, like a fold in the skin that was hardly a disfigurement at all. She could have left it at that: the fold unde the ear lobe, but that Violet wasn't satisfied. She fought with the hard handed usher boys and was time enough for them, almost. They had to forget right away that this was a fifty-some year old woman in a fur collared coat and a hat pulled down so far over her right eye, it was a wonder she saw the door to the church not to speak of the right place to aim her knife. They had to abandon the teachings they had had all their lives about the respect due their elders, the old folks whose milky light eyes watched every thing they did, commented on it, and told each other what it was; the younger old folks (like her) who could be their auntie, their grandmother, their mother, or their mother's best friend who not only could tell on them, but could tell them; could stop them cold with a word, with a "Cut that mess out!" shouted from any window , doorway or

streetcurb in a two block radius. And they would cut it out, or take it downstairs, behind the boiler, or off in [tk] park, or better still, in the shadow of the el where no lights lit what these women did not allow, don't care whose child it was. But they did it. Forgot the lessons of a lifetime, and concentrated on the wide, shining blade, because who knew? Maybe she had others in mind. Or maybe they could see themselves hang dog at the dinner table trying to explain to these same women or even, Jesus! the men, the fathers and uncles, and grown cousins, friends and neighbors, why they had just stood there like street lights and let this woman in a fur collared coat make fools of them and ruin the honorable job they had worn white gloves for. They had to wrestle her to the floor before she let go. And the sound that came from her mouth belonged to something wearing a pelt instead of a coat.

By then they were joined by frowning men who carried the kicking, growling Violet out while she looked on in amazement. She had not been that strong since Virginia, since she loaded hay and handled the mule cart with a four lead rein. But [tk] years in the city had softened her arms and melted the shield that once covered her palms and fingers. Like shoes taking away the tough leather her bare feet had grown, the city took away the back and arm power she used to boast of. A power that Violet had not lost because she gave the usher boys and the grown men too a serious time.

The malted was gone and although her stomach seemed about to lose its stitching, she ordered another and took it over to one of

the little tables next to the [tk] that Duggie had placed there against the law that said if he did it , it made the place a restaurant. There she could sit and watch the foam disappear, the scoops of ice cream lose their ridges and turn to soft, glistening balls like soap bars left in a dishpan full of water. She had meant to bring a package of [tk Ovaltine?] to stir into the malted milk shake, because they didn't seem to be doing any good. The hips she came here with were gone too, just like the power in her back and arms. Maybe that Violet who knew where the butcher knife was and was strong enough to use it had the hips she had lost. But if she was strong and had hips, why was she proud of trying to kill a dead girl, and she was proud. Whenever she thought about that Violet, and what that Violet saw through her own eyes, she knew there was no shame there, no disgust. That was hers alone, so she hid behind the [tk] at one of Duggie's little illegal tables and played with the straw in a chocolate malt. She could have been eighteen herself, just like the girl, reading [tk magazine] and playing at drinking malts in the drug store. Did she like [tk magazine]? did the blonde ladies with winged hair capture her? Did the men in golf shoes, and V-neck sweaters? How could they if she found herself stuck on a man old enough to be her father. A man who carried not a golf club, but a sample case of Lucky Heart products. A man whose handkerchiefs were not lightweight cotton poking from his jacket pocket, but red and large and spotted with white dots. Did he ask her to warm with her own body his spot in the bed on cold winter nights before he slid in? Or did he do it

for her? He probably let her put her spoon into his pint of cream and scoop off the melty part, and when they sat in the dark of the [tk theater] he wouldn't mind a bit if she stuck her hand down in his box of popcorn and came up with a fistful of it the sonofabit-ch. And when "Wings Over Jordan" came on he probably turned the volume down so he could hear her when she sang along with the choir, instead of up so as to drown out her rendition of [tk]. Turned, too, his jaw to the light of the bulb so she could press out between her thumb nails the hair root caught in a pore the dog. And another damn thing. The malt was soup now, smooth and cold. The twenty-five dollar bonus prize of a blue shaded boudiore lamp or an orchid colored satin-like ladies robe that he won and was due to him for having sold all that merchandise in one month--he gave to her the heifer. And took her to Indigo on Saturday and sat way back so they could hear the music wide and be in the dark at the same time, at one of those round tables with a slick black top and a tablecloth of pure white on it, drinking rough gin with that sweet red stuff in it so it looked like soda pop, which a girl like her ought to have ordered instead of liquor she could sip from the edge of a glass wider at the mouth than at its base, with a tiny stem like a flower in between while her hand, the one that wasn't holding the glass shaped like a flower, was under the table drumming out the rhythm on the inside of his thigh, his thigh, his thigh, thigh, thigh, and he bought her underwear with stitching done to look like rosebuds and violets, VIOLETS, don't you know, and she wore it for him thin as it was and too cold for a room that

couldn't count on a radiator to work through the night, the night while I was where? where? [tk] Whereever it was, it was cold and I was cold and nobody had got into the bedsheets early to warm up a spot for me or reached around my shoulders to pull the quilt up under my neck or even my ears because it got that cold sometimes it did and maybe that is why the butcher knife struck the neckline just by the ear lobe. That's why . And that's why it took so much wrestling to get me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to no that Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit that Violet is me. The me that hauled hay in virginia and handled a four mule team in the brace. I have stood in cane fields in the middle of the night when the sound of it rustling hid the slither of the snakes and I stood still waiting for him and not stirring a speck in case he was near and I would miss him, and damn the snakes my man was coming for me and who or what was going to keep me from him? Plenty times, plenty times I have carried the welts given me by a two tone peckerwood because I was late in the fieldrow the next morning. Plenty times, plenty, I chopped twice the wood into short logs and kindlin so as to make sure Mr. [tk] had enough and wouldn't go hollering for me when I was bound to meet my Joe Trace don't care what, and do what you will or may. He was my Joe Trace. Mine. I picked him out from all the others wasn't nobody like Joe he make anybody stand in cane in the middle of the night; make any woman dream about him in the

daytime so hard she miss the rut and have to work hard to get the mules back on the track. Any woman, not just me. Maybe that is what she saw. Not the fifty year old man toting a sample case, but my Joe Trace, my Virginia Joe Trace who carried a light inside him, whose shoulders were razor sharp and who looked at me and never saw anybody else. Could she have looked at him now and seen that? Under the table at the Indigo was she drumming on a thigh soft as a baby's but feeling all the while the way it used to be skin so tight it almost split and let the iron muscle through? Did she feel that, know that? That and other things, things I should have known and didn't? Secret things kept hidden from me or didn't notice? Is that why he let her scoop the melty part from around the edges of his pint of ice cream, stick her hand down in his salt and butter popcorn. What did she see, young girl like that, barely out of high school, with unbraided hair, lip rouge for the first time and high heeled shoes. And also what did he? A young me with high yellow skin instead of black? A young me with long wavey hair instead of nappy? Or a not me at all. A me he was loving in Virginia because she wasn't around there anywhere. What was it? Who was it? What happened?

Even she couldn't drink the remaining malt--watery, warm and flattasting. She buttoned her coat and left the drugstore only to discover it was spring.