

**Madeleine Mysko**

## **A Close One**

It was late August, and Andrea had had it with summer. It wasn't the heat. It was the lack of structure, the too-looseness of living in a household with teenaged offspring. She was tired of their shifting schedules, the friends ambling in and out, the cell phones suddenly chiming tunes from every corner of the house. She was looking forward to the first week of September, when Amy would have to settle into her senior year in high school, when Ryan would gather his clutter and cart it back to college.

One afternoon down in the basement, while loading the washing machine, she heard the doorbell overhead. Feet thundered down the stairs and then came Amy's high-pitched laughter and a rise and fall of chatter. The screen door slammed. In the silence afterwards, it seemed to Andrea that the entire house above her swayed momentarily on its foundation.

*One more week*, she thought grimly, and then immediately felt bad about it. Some day, when they were entirely flown, she would miss them. She remembered her own mother telling her so, one August afternoon when they sitting together on the porch, watching Ryan and Amy run around on the lawn. The children were small and portable then. Andrea had taken them to her parents' house in Maine for the whole summer because her mother's cancer had metastasized and she knew their time was short.

"Look at how fast they go," her mother had said, as Ryan streaked past, with Amy squealing behind on her fat legs. "Take a good look, because you'll miss them when they're gone."

Out of the blue, during that last week of August, Ryan announced that his friend Violet needed a place to stay.

"It's OK with you, isn't it, Mom?" he said, not really looking at her, stabbing at the last piece of meatloaf on the platter. "Just until the dorm opens."

It was news to Andrea that Ryan had a friend named Violet, but before she could open her mouth, Amy cried in girlish delight "Violet?" Amy had visited her brother's campus the previous spring. "She's so sweet, Mom. You'll just love her. She can sleep in my room."

Andrea looked helplessly down the table at her husband Jim. He gave her a roll-with-the-punches shrug.

"I guess it would be all right," Andrea said.

Not more than an hour later, Violet arrived—a pale-faced girl with large blue eyes and hair dyed the color of raspberry jam. She had brought with her a bulging laundry bag, several crates of odds and ends, a guitar, and an amplifier the size of a dorm refrigerator. Whoever had dropped Violet off at the doorstep didn't think it necessary to come in say hello or thank you.

"Nice to meet you," Violet said, when Andrea came out of the kitchen for the introduction. Violet extended a cool hand. Her nails were painted the color of dried blood. She wore a tiny jewel in her nose.

Ryan was already scrambling to get her baggage up the stairs. There was a weighty sound to Violet's moving in—the sound of pressure.

"Where are her parents?" Andrea hissed to Jim, when they were preparing for bed that night. From Amy's room down the hall came muffled laughter. A door opened, releasing a burst of music, then quickly closed again.

"Relax," Jim said, as he climbed into bed. "It's only a week."

It turned out that Violet was a vegetarian, and she liked to cook. She did her cooking after midnight. Three nights in a row Andrea was awakened by pungent smells—curry, ginger, and something unfamiliar Violet must have brought with her. Each morning Andrea would find the leftovers stacked in the refrigerator in cloudy containers. The kitchen would be wiped clean, but the foreignness had already seeped into the curtains and chair cushions.

Four days into Violet's stay, Ryan borrowed Andrea's car to drive to a concert in Virginia. The following day, Andrea was furious to discover mud all over the wheels and undercarriage. She went back in the house and found Ryan and Violet in the kitchen. He was pouring cornflakes into a bowl. She was delicately peeling a banana.

"There's mud all over my car," Andrea said.

"Take it easy, Mom," Ryan said. "There's a good explanation."

He explained it matter-of-factly: On the way home from the concert, they had pulled off the road—apparently into the mud—to help someone with a flat tire. Violet just smiled, as though she felt sorry for Andrea, and hoped she'd feel better soon. Later that morning, Ryan pulled the car into the driveway and hooked up the hose. Andrea watched from the window as he washed the mud away, every now and then whipping around to spray Violet and send her shrieking across the lawn.

Five days into Violet's stay, Andrea had a routine appointment with her gynecologist, Dr. Ensor, during which there was a minor complication. It seemed that Dr. Ensor had felt something—"probably just a harmless fibroid," but a procedure called a hysteroscopy would be required. Andrea was sent out front to the desk where she was informed that—lucky for her—there'd been a cancellation, and they could squeeze her into the schedule the next morning. She was given instructions highlighted in neon green: *8:00AM...No eating or drinking after midnight...You will need a ride home.*

And so, in the craziness of the kitchen that evening, Andrea asked Jim if he could drive her to the Outpatient Center in the morning.

"I've got a staff meeting first thing," he said.

Ryan and Violet were passing through, on their way to the back porch with a bag of Chinese carryout. "What's wrong with your car, Mom?" Ryan asked.

"Nothing's wrong with my car," Andrea said. "But I'm not supposed to drive. They have to give me some anesthesia."

"They have to put you asleep?" Amy called in from the dining room, where apparently she was not as engrossed in her emails as Andrea had thought.

"It's very routine. I'll be in and out in a couple of hours," Andrea said.

"I'd take you, Mom," Ryan said. "But it's my last day at work."

"It's all right. I'll call Aunt Nan—"

Violet stepped forward, like a soldier at roll call. "I'm not doing anything tomorrow. I can drive you, Mrs. B."

"Let Violet do it, Mom," Ryan said, before Andrea could think straight. "Aunt Nan will only get herself all worked up."

"He's right," Jim said. They all knew Andrea's sister was a worrier.

"Violet's an excellent driver," Ryan added. "She won't drive into any mud."

And so it seemed it was settled. The next day, at seven in the morning, Violet slid behind the wheel. She looked to be about thirteen years old with her raspberry hair braided tidily against her head. She had dressed for the occasion in a yellow polished cotton shirtwaist, right out of the fifties. She wore matching yellow pumps on her bare feet, and carried a white plastic purse that reminded Andrea of a toy nurse's bag. There was an old smell about her, mothballs perhaps.

"I like your dress," Andrea said, clicking her seatbelt. "My mother wore dresses like that. Where in the world did you find it?"

"Salvation Army. Ryan and I went down there yesterday. Eight dollars—Can you believe it? The shoes were only four." She backed the car out of the garage and onto the street in perfect form, and in no time they were humming down the interstate at slightly over the speed limit.

"I really appreciate your doing this," Andrea said, gazing out the window at the skyline, at the far-off jumble of buildings to the east, one of them the hospital where the children had been born and another the newly constructed Outpatient Center.

"No problem." Violet frowned into the rearview mirror and passed a tractor-trailer. "You and Mr. B. have been so nice. I'm glad to help out."

During the drive, there was time to ask questions and find out why Violet had ended up camping with them until the dorms opened, but Andrea had no energy for it. She punched the button on the radio. On public radio someone was discussing the crab population in the Chesapeake Bay. It was pleasantly distracting.

At the Outpatient Center, Violet dropped Andrea off at the entrance. "You go ahead in, Mrs. B. I'll find you."

Andrea got out and watched her car disappear into the parking garage.

Inside, the admitting clerk greeted her with an automatic smile. "You aren't alone, are you?" he asked.

"There's someone with me," Andrea said. She signed her name on the clipboard marked *Surgery Today* in alarming orange. "She's parking the car."

"That's good. Because you'll need someone to drive you home."

The surgical nurse came out and called her name. When Andrea stood up, the surgical nurse glanced quickly to the right and left. "Do you have family with you?" she asked.

"No—Yes, I have someone with me but...She'll be here any minute, she's parking the car."

"Follow me," the nurse said. "I'll come out and get your family member after we have you all prepped."

Things moved fast in Outpatient Surgery. They gave her a gown, a cap, and booties. They zipped up her clothes and purse, and locked them away. They tucked her into the reclining chair with a heated blanket, and started an I.V. There was an air of kindly concern about these preparations, as though the procedure might be more serious than Andrea knew.

She looked about at the patients in the other reclining chairs—three others stripped and re-dressed in a gown and cap just like her own. Hovering near the

respective curtains were the family members—one husband, one wife, and a doting daughter for the older woman in the corner.

All of a sudden, Andrea realized her mistake. She felt a pang of longing for her sister Nan, who would have been very good at doting in a place like Outpatient Surgery.

Dr. Ensor arrived, dressed in a scrub suit and looking too young for it. "Hello there," she said. "Is your husband out in the waiting area?"

"He had to work," Andrea said. "But there's someone with me, my son's friend—Violet." She realized she didn't even know Violet's full name. "Maybe you could let her know how long I'll be?"

"Sure." Dr. Ensor raised her eyebrows and laid the permission form in Andrea's lap. "I guess there won't be more than one Violet out there."

But first it was necessary to go over the procedure one more time. Andrea listened politely to the list of the things that might go wrong, the possible complications of anesthesia. Then she signed the form. Across the room, the young husband in the crisp business suit leaned over to kiss his wife as they wheeled her away.

"I'll look for Violet," Dr. Ensor said. "Shall I have them send her back? They'll be coming for you in a minute."

"No," said Andrea. "Just let her know how long I'll be."

"Not long," Dr. Ensor chirped.

But for some reason, as they were wheeling Andrea toward the operating room, Violet stepped through the double doors anyway. "See you later, Mrs. B.," she whispered loudly. "Don't worry, the car's fine. I'll be waiting."

*The car's fine?* Andrea was wheeled through the double doors and greeted by a jovial anesthesiologist. Seconds later she was asleep. And what seemed like seconds after that, she was trying to focus her eyes on a little girl peering down at her—a little girl with her hair tucked into a green hat.

"...a fibroid, just as I thought," said Dr. Ensor in her green hat. "Looks benign...biopsy, of course."

A nurse was taking Andrea's blood pressure. Another nurse brought crackers and a ginger ale. Andrea nibbled and sipped and looked about. At last they left her alone.

They left her alone for longer than it seemed they ought to, and Andrea became aware of some sort of problem out there. People were moving fast. New people came hurrying in through the doors. Someone was calling out orders—loud and clipped. Apparently the problem was to Andrea's left, but she couldn't see for the curtain.

After a while, a nurse came in to check Andrea's blood pressure again.

"Is everything OK?" Andrea asked.

"Oh, everything's fine," the nurse said. "A little excitement, that's all, but now everything's fine."

Another nurse arrived with Andrea's clothing bag. Andrea said she felt fine, and didn't need help getting dressed.

"Excellent," the nurse said, and disappeared.

As Andrea was just pulling on her slacks, a pair of yellow pumps appeared below the curtain. "Mrs. B.? Should I come in?"

"Yes, Violet," Andrea said, tucking in her blouse. "Come in."

Violet stepped through the curtain, and Andrea saw at once she'd been crying. Violet had the sort of complexion prone to red blotches.

"I was worried," Violet said. "All of us out there were worried."

"I guess they had some kind of emergency."

"I'll say. You should have seen them running." She widened her eyes.

"Scary."

"Well, the nurse said everything is all right now."

Violet sniffed. "You know, I figured there were only four of you back here, because there were four of us waiting." Her voice broke. "I mean...What if it was you? I don't even know where Mr. B. works."

"Oh, Violet, I'm so sorry." Even though her slacks weren't zipped and her belt was hanging loose, Andrea gathered Violet up and gave her a hug. Violet hugged her back, fiercely. Andrea could smell the mothballs.

The curtains were yanked open. "How are we doing in here?" the nurse said, shoving in the wheelchair and locking the wheels.

Violet was sent to get the car. Andrea was read the discharge instructions. A kindly volunteer—a large woman in a pink smock—arrived to take Andrea up to the main lobby.

Out in the corridor, Andrea was wheeled past the young man in the business suit. He was hunched into the little space of the courtesy phone, talking with his eyes closed. Further down the corridor, she saw a knot of nurses. One of them she recognized from the recovery room. "Out of the blue..." the nurse was saying.

Andrea was wheeled all the way out to the front curb. And there was Violet, standing beside the car. "Take it easy there, Mrs. B.," she said, as the volunteer locked the wheelchair and Andrea stood up. "We don't want you passing out or anything."

"Thank you, Violet," Andrea said. She could feel the warm blood draining from her uterus.

Once they were on their way, pulling out onto Charles Street, Andrea glanced over—Violet in her yellow polished-cotton shirtwaist, frowning ahead at the heavy traffic. "I think you are definitely the best driver I ever had, Violet," she said.

"Thank you," Violet said, all seriousness.

Andrea leaned her head against the window. Out of the fog that lingered from the anesthesia, there emerged a memory of her mother in a cotton shirtwaist with her hair swept up and clasped in tortoise-shell barrettes, just as it was in the photograph at home on the piano. She could see her mother standing at the curb in front of the Medical Arts building where the family doctor had his office, her mother lighting a cigarette in that elegant way she had. *Light a cigarette and the bus will come.*

"You OK?" Violet asked.

"Yes, thank you." In truth she felt nauseated. She unbuttoned the neck of her blouse, and adjusted the air-conditioner to blow at her face. "I like that dress, Violet. Did I mention it reminds me of my mother?"

"You did. Is your mother still living?"

"No."

"I'm sorry."

"It was years ago."

Andrea dozed off, and when she awoke they were already taking the exit, going down and around the ramp. She was overcome by nausea, and had to put her hand to her mouth.

"You feel sick?" Violet asked. "You want me to pull over?"

"It's OK. I can make it."

At the stoplight, Violet rooted in her purse and came up with a wad of paper napkins. "Here—You might need these." She shook her head. "You've had a rough day, Mrs. B."

"Rougher than I expected."

Violet smiled ruefully. "It was kind of a close one. And of course it's always scary when they're messing around with your insides."

The light changed. Violet accelerated slowly.

Andrea was wondering how much someone Violet's age could know about the messing around gynecologists do. "I'm sorry you were frightened back there in the waiting room," she said. "I should have given you Jim's number."

"That's all right."

"You know, I couldn't even tell the doctor your last name."

"It's Galloway."

"Violet Galloway. Well, now I know."

"So," Violet said. "Did the doctor tell you anything afterwards? Is everything OK?"

"She's pretty sure it was benign."

"That's good."

"Of course they'll do a biopsy, just to be sure."

Along the roadside, the weeds had that weary look of late August, more like autumn than summer. Tears came to Andrea's eyes, and she wiped them away. Perhaps the mood was a side effect of the anesthesia. "I'm glad you were with me, Violet," she said.

"No problem." She was looking straight ahead. "You go ahead and cry if you want to. That always works for me."

It was too much to bear, with the nausea rising and the blood running out, to picture Violet crying over anything. Andrea closed her eyes and rested her head against the cool polished cotton of the girl's narrow shoulder.

"Hang on, Mrs. B. We're almost home."

Andrea breathed in the odor of mothballs. It comforted her, like the memory of her mother bent over the trunks in the attic, her mother at the clothesline in the backyard of the house in Maine, pinning the sweaters out to air. It was September, that melancholy time when all the children go back to school.