

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Oh My Stars

Lorna Landvik

About the Book

Tall, slender Violet Mathers grew up in the Depression, which could just as well define her state of mind. Abandoned by her mother, mistreated by her father, and teased by her schoolmates, Violet feels very alone.

Desperate for escape, Violet boards a bus heading to California. But when the bus crashes in North Dakota, it seems that fate is having another cruel laugh at Violet's expense. This time, though, Violet laughs back. She's rescued by two men: Austin Sykes, who Violet is certain is the blackest man ever to set foot in North Dakota, and Kjel Hedstrom, who inspires feelings Violet has never felt before.

OH MY STARS is a tale of love and hope, bigotry and betrayal, loss and discovery - as Violet, who's always considered herself a minor character in her own life story, emerges as a heroine you'll laugh with, cry with and, most importantly of all, cheer for all the way.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgments
Prologue

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three
Chapter Twenty-four
Chapter Twenty-five
Chapter Twenty-six
Chapter Twenty-seven
Chapter Twenty-eight
Chapter Twenty-nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-one

About the Author
Also by Lorna Landvik
Copyright

OH MY STARS

Lorna Landvik

In loving memory of my mother, Ollie Landvik, who read a book a night and was especially thrilled when one happened to be mine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Gina Centrello, my publisher, and everyone at Ballantine Books, especially Linda Marrow, an editor who asks the right questions and literally gave me the shirt off her back. To Kim Hovey, with whom I share news of hockey tournaments, and to Marie Coolman, for your hard work on my behalf and for booking me in all those swank hotels. Thanks to Peter Weissman for his sharp-eyed copyediting and to Arielle Zibrak for helping me with my computer illiteracy.

To Suzanne Gluck, my agent; thanks for your wise counsel and sense of fun. I hope we can have theater dates for years to come.

Many thanks to my friends Wendy Smith, Judy Henegan, and Kimberly Hoffer for consistent laughs and good times; a big thanks for joining me at the state capitol on my birthday with protest signs and a desire to better the world.

Speaking of a better world, I hope our government will realize the inestimable value of its libraries and adequately fund them. I will always be thankful for my favorite branch libraries in Minneapolis (now only open part-time), which have been oases since I was a kid. If they managed to stay open during the Great Depression, surely we can figure out a way to keep our libraries open now.

I am grateful to be a member of WWW, a group of writers who appreciate words, wine, and the importance of dessert after dinner. When are we going to figure out our secret handshake?

Thanks to the Riverview Theater for its real-butter popcorn, its wonderful aesthetic, and its cheap tickets.

I had finished this book before my mother died and she knew that its title came from her favorite saying and that I had named the North Dakota town of Pearl after her middle name. Still, more than anything, I wish she were here to read it. I could always count on her for a good review. Thanks to my brothers, Wendell and Glen and my sister-in-law, Cindy, who gave me strength and help through this big loss; thanks too to my nephew, Adam and his wife, Amy, my nieces, Nichol and Daisy, and their mother, Debbie.

Thanks to my aunts, uncles, and cousins for their support and for singing "Beautiful Savior" at Ollie's funeral. The person who remarked "they sounded better than the Von Trapp family singers" was right on the money.

As always, thanks to Chuck, Harleigh, and Kinga for everything you are to me.

PROLOGUE

Take a look around this diner. See what it says on the laminated menus that are propped between the salt and pepper caddies and the sugar bowls? The Off-Ramp Cafe; rightly named, tucked as it is beside a snarl of highway cloverleaves, the rumble of traffic laying down a bass line to every song the jukebox plays.

See the sullen waitress entranced by her fingernails, who acts as if a request for more coffee is a personal insult? See the trucker in the corner booth spanking the bottom of his ketchup bottle like he's mad at it? And the guy at the end of the counter, see him studying the sports page like a code breaker trying to decipher a secret message? And look at the cook behind the order window, who seems to think nose-picking and food preparation have a right to coexist in the same kitchen.

See anything else? The smudged dessert carousel making its lazy rotation with only a piece of lopsided lemon meringue pie along for the ride? The coffeemaker piddling decaf into a glass pot? The fishbowl of business cards gathering dust by the cash register?

The Off-Ramp could be anywhere at all, in Anytown, USA. All over the country, from Seattle to Selma, from Bangor to Boise, there are truckers burying their burgers in ketchup, salesmen sulking behind newspaper curtains,

waitresses scribbling orders on pale green pads in handwriting worse than doctors'. That's what I love about diners; they're as familiar as a next-door neighbor's house—one might be cleaner than the other, one might have a better cook, but in general you know what to expect. Don't even get me started on franchises; I avoid them like the plague, which I believe they are.

And the old lady at the counter? Well, thanks for noticing. Let me tell you, old ladies are the ghosts—boo!—of American culture; only a few people actually see us. Of course my arm usually does cause comment, but the way I've got my coat sleeve arranged, I'll bet you didn't even notice it.

Excuse me for saying so, but you look sort of lonesome—how's about you park your caboose next to mine and I'll buy you a cup of coffee and throw in a story to boot?

I want to tell you how I came into the Off-Ramp Cafe on this cool rainy night that smells of diesel fuel and lilacs. I want to tell you how a person can be almost drowned—and glad of it—and then be pulled up into sky so blue and sun so sparkling that the allure of those dark suffocating waters evaporates in an instant. I want to tell you how a person weighed down with bitterness heavy as lead can be filled with the lightness of a song. I want to tell you how the real kings of the world are more than likely to be sitting in the cab—or the bed—of a 1932 Ford pickup than on a throne.

Tomorrow night I'll be having dinner at The Waldorf-Astoria, where my story will be indirectly honored, but to tell you the truth, I think flown-in-from-Holland centerpieces and fancy linen and heavy silver impedes the storytelling process, don't you? People can't tell their real stories when they're afraid they might spill bouillabaise on their designer gown, when they're worried they might use the wrong fork.

That's the beauty of a diner, wouldn't you say? Diners—and especially their counters—are the indoor version of a

campfire; people like to sit around them and tell their stories.

Mine's about miracles—I even have a daughter named Miracle, which gives you an idea of their importance in my life.

Aw, settle down and quit your squirming, I'm not witnessing for any Reverend I. M. Aphraud or Swami Fulla Lotta Bologna; I'm not one of those bothersome lackeys out to fill my quota of converts to the Church of Perpetual Possibility or the Temple of Unending Yakety-Yak. I am the salt of the earth, and I do not believe in the ninety percent rigmarole that is organized religion. But miracles? Miracles, my friend, are a different thing entirely. From what I can see, miracles are built from love, and as far as love is concerned, I am a true believer.

CHAPTER ONE

ON HER SIXTEENTH birthday, Violet Mathers nearly bled to death in a thread factory. The “incident,” as it was referred to in the company’s 1935 logbook, happened on the graveyard shift, just before break time, when the pounding and the whirring and the squeaking of the machines had crescendoed into a percussion concert conducted by the devil himself. Lamont Travers, the foreman, told her later in the hospital that the worst accidents always happen before break; people can’t wait to smoke their cigarettes or drink their coffee and talk about whose man or whose woman had done who the wrongest. Violet hadn’t cared about any of that; she wanted only to cut into the marble cake RaeAnn Puffer had brought, wanted only to hear her co-workers raise their tired, smoky voices in a chorus of “Happy Birthday.”

Excited and jumpy as a puppy with a full bladder, the birthday girl broke the cardinal rule of the Marcelline thread factory, the cardinal rule printed in capital letters on at least three signs posted on the dusty brick walls: DO NOT ATTEMPT TO CLEAR OR REPAIR THE MACHINERY WITHOUT FIRST TURNING MACHINERY OFF.

She was running the Klayson, a big reliable machine that sweat oil as it wound and cut dozens of spools of thread. There were women who were possessive of their machines (Lula Wendell even named hers and explained

that whenever the machine spit out thread or overwound, it was because “Pauletta” was on her monthly). Violet had formed no deep attachments to the masses of metal, preferring the job of “runner” and working whatever machine needed running. When she ran the Klayson, she felt as if she was wrangling a harmless but stubborn old cow, and it was almost with affection that she scolded the machine when it huffed and burped to a stop.

“Now, come on, gal, I ain’t got time for this,” said Violet, and with one hand on the Klayson’s metal flank, she stuck the other up into its privates, feeling for the tangled clot of thread.

There was a yank then and the benign old cow turned into a crazed bull, sucking her arm up between its jaws.

A flash fire of shock and pain exploded at Violet’s elbow joint and in her brain, and just as red-hot was her outrage: *But it’s my birthday!*

RaeAnn, who was next to Violet on the floor, screamed, and Polly Ball, the only woman on the floor to have gone to college (she would have graduated from UNC-Raleigh with a degree in art history had she not been summoned home after her father died), thought: *that’s the scream in the Edvard Munch painting.*

Violet too heard the scream even as she fainted, even as the weight of her falling body helped further tear skin from skin and bone from bone. When she woke up in the hospital, her stub-arm wrapped and bleeding like a rump roast in butcher’s paper, the screaming was still inside her head—was in her head for more years than she cared to count.

When the morphine curtain lifted on her consciousness, her first thought was: *some sweet sixteenth.*

Violet should have known better; in her short history she had learned that expectations only deepened the disappointment that inevitably stained every special occasion—not that many were celebrated. In excavating

her mind for memories of parties and presents, she'd only been able to dig up those concerning her sixth birthday, when her mother baked her a yellow cake iced with raspberry jelly and gave her a real present to unwrap. It was a rag doll Violet immediately christened Jellycakes, commemorating what she told her mother was "the best birthday cake and the best birthday doll ever ever ever ever made."

The remembrance of that lone celebration was ruined by what her mother did three days later, which was to run off with the pharmacist from Henson Drugs. Considering her robust good health, Erlene spent a lot of time at the pharmacy window; every other customer walked away tucking green or brown bottles of tonics and pills and elixirs into their purses or pockets, but all her mama left the drugstore with was a flushed face and a soft dreamy look in her eyes. Violet liked Mr. Gladstone, the pharmacist—he gave her root-beer barrels, and once a Henson's Drugs ("For All Your Drug & Sundries Needs") calendar with a picture of a kitten on it—but after he robbed her of her mother, Violet came to think of the druggist as the criminal he was; a man guilty of grand theft. She was a child at the time of the crime, hadn't even started the first grade yet. Ten years later, when Violet lost her arm, it occurred to her that this was not her first amputation, but her second.

Later, when she came to know how love can slam reason and responsibility to the mat as easily as a heavyweight takes down a bantam, Violet forgave her mother for running off (Yarby Gladstone did have nice clean hands, after all, and an entire set of teeth, or at least all of the ones that showed in a smile), but she never forgave Erlene for *forgetting* about her, for never sending a letter or postcard, for never sending for *her*. Mothers who disappear off the face of the earth leave their children feeling as if they've disappeared too; disappeared from everything they thought was certain and safe and true. Abandonment can

be crueler to a child than death; Violet would rather her mama had died because at least a grave would have given her a place to visit, something to touch, something to talk to.

There were few people in Mount Crawford, Kentucky, surprised by the young Mrs. Mathers taking a permanent leave of absence; it didn't take any great power of observation to see that Violet's parents were as mismatched as a crow and a canary. Judd Mathers was Erlene's senior by fifteen years and had always looked older than his age; he was not yet forty when his wife left, and yet his long thin face was as creased as a bloodhound's, his black hair leached to a lusterless gray. He was one of those men hobbled by his inability to exercise his emotions (except for anger), although Violet thought that in his stunted capacity, he really loved his wife. She remembered him smiling at her mama's jokes, watching Erlene with a shy delight when she put the corn bread on the table, crowing, "Ta-da!" or when she hung the clothes out on the line, grabbing his union suit and pretending to waltz with it.

What registered most on the young Mrs. Mathers's face when she looked at her husband was disbelief and impatience, as if she were always asking herself, "*How did I get here?*" and "*How soon can I leave?*" Had she not gone and got herself pregnant, Erlene would have laughed out loud at Judd's marriage proposal, would have swatted it away as if it was a black and pesky fly.

There was a certain flightiness to her mama that, even as a child, Violet recognized. The young (she was only eighteen when Violet was born), trim woman could be in the middle of kneading dough when she'd wipe her hands on the dish towel and dash out of the back door, calling out that she was going to town to see what was playing at the

picture show, and would Violet mind punching down the bread when it rose? The little girl longed to chase after her but had learned early on that she was usually included in those things from which Erlene needed to escape. When her mother was in an affectionate mood, she might invite Violet onto her lap, but it wasn't long before the girl would be flung off, as Erlene would be distracted by chores or a sudden need to manicure her nails, to wave-set her hair, or dance to the crystal radio in the boxy little room she called the parlor.

Erlene was full of fun ideas—"Let's pick raspberries and have a picnic on Mount Crawford!" "Let's throw a tea party on the porch!"—and once or twice these ideas blossomed into reality, but most always Violet would be left waiting on the crumbling front steps, her eagerness bright as a balloon and just as sure to deflate. The bulk of memories concerning her mother were those in which Erlene stood her up (indoctrinating Violet early on into the sorry club of wallflowerhood), and yet the little girl believed her mama when she called her her "precious flower," *clung* to those rare terms of endearment, knowing they were proof of her love.

Violet made all sorts of excuses for her, but in her deep heart she knew that mothers who loved their precious flowers didn't leave them to grow up in a musty old house on the edge of town with a father whose personality vacillated between melancholia and meanness; surely Erlene knew how that would make a precious flower wither up and die?

Violet. It didn't take long for everyone to see that the child had been misnamed.

"Gawd Almighty," Uncle Maynard said the first time he saw her, "she's homelier than Tate Seevers!"

(Tate Seevers was the one-eyed World War I vet who lived in a shack outside the junkyard with his half-wolf dog.)

Uncle Clyde nodded. “Yuh, I reckon you’ll see prettier faces in a horse barn.”

These stories were gleefully told to Violet by her cousin Byron, who seemed to have an endless collection.

“My mama says only people with hexes on ’em got faces like yours.”

“I heard your daddy says the only way you’re ever gonna get a boyfriend is if he sends you to a school for the blind.”

“Sit up, Violet, speak! Good dog.”

The Matherses’ back porch was the local speakeasy for Judd and his brothers-in-law, who’d congregate there to drink the corn liquor Uncle Maynard showed some talent at making; but after Erlene left, her brothers never came around. It wasn’t shame over their sister’s transgressions (Violet doubted they *had* shame, over their transgressions or anyone else’s) that kept them away; but their abandonment was double the hurt for her father, who not only lost his wife, but his drinking buddies. Violet didn’t miss them at all—they were loud and crude, like most drunks—and she could easily live the rest of her life without her cousin Byron and the two gifts he so conscientiously gave her during each and every visit: the “Indian burns” that cuffed the girl’s arms in welts and the constant taunts about her looks.

“Why does everyone think I’m so ugly, Mama?”

A giggle erupted from Erlene’s throat; she had an odd sense of what was funny and what wasn’t.

“Violet, now put that away,” she said, recovering her composure. “It’s time for bed.”

Erlene’s interest in things domestic was minimal, but occasionally she’d bring out her sewing basket (made of willow, it was the sort of crafted object that would be sold years later as folk art for the kind of money its creator, a mountain woman named Gimpy Mary, never saw in her

lifetime), and wanting to share something—anything—with her mother, Violet was determined to sew too. Like her father, she was good with her hands; they were quick and deft and seemed able to figure out things with little guidance from her brain.

Jabbing the needle in the handkerchief she was hemming for her father, Violet set it on the upended flour can that was her nightstand.

“And everyone does *not* think you’re ugly,” said Erlene, bringing the faded patchwork quilt up to her daughter’s neck and crimping its edges. “It’s just that, well, I suppose it’s because you’ve got a chin that looks like it wants to pick a fight.” She smiled, fondling the jaw that would have fit a man’s face better than a little girl’s. “You’ll just have to work on your other attributes.”

“What are ‘attributes,’ Mama?” asked Violet, liking Erlene’s hand on her face, even as she disparaged it.

“Well, look at me: I’m pretty, but I don’t stop there. I work on things, things like being smart and clever—who can tell a joke as good as your mama?”

“No one,” whispered Violet.

“That’s right. Plus, I’m a good dancer and have excellent grammar. Those are all attributes, just to name a few.”

“Erlene,” shouted Judd from the kitchen, “ain’t we got more biscuits than these?”

The young woman sighed and got up as if she were an old lady whose bones hurt. She stood at the side of the bed for a moment, the light from the kerosene lamp throbbing like an ache against the wall.

“Don’t say ‘ain’t,’ Violet,” she said finally. “‘Ain’t’ is a word that makes you sound like you don’t care.”

“Okay, Mama,” whispered Violet, willing to do anything asked of her. “I won’t ever say ‘ain’t.’”

She didn’t either, until her mother left, until Violet realized that every time she disobeyed her absent mother, she felt a tiny jolt of power that let her forget, for a breath,

how much she missed her. So she said “ain’t” and did all the other things Erlene had told her not to: she chewed her fingernails and burped and didn’t brush her hair and slept in her clothes. She became a dirty, tangle-haired, wild-looking thing; the kind of girl the school nurse always suspected as ground zero for lice and impetigo infestations; the kind of girl who found notes like “You stink!” and “Take a bath!” scattered like land mines inside her desk.

As the years passed, Violet became less a stranger to soap and water, but her improved hygiene couldn’t deflect attention from her freakish growth surge: by age thirteen she was five feet eleven, and it didn’t take Violet long to realize that height does a homely girl no favors.

“Hey, Stretch!”

“Look, a giraffe escaped from the zoo!”

“Hey, Olive Oyl!”

Puberty was not done playing dirty tricks either, deepening Violet’s voice like a boy’s and inspiring her tormenters to add the name “Froggy” to the many in their arsenal, or to ask why Olive Oyl had a voice like Popeye.

Every inch she grew on the outside, every bass note her voice registered, made her smaller on the inside. There were a few kindhearted children who tried to befriend the odd Mathers girl, but her mother’s abandonment, her father’s neglect and cruelty, and her own shame had worked like rust on Violet, corroding her ability to accept amity and eating away the belief that she deserved to have friends.

School was her one respite; Lord, to draw maps of places like Burma and Ceylon and write reports on their major exports! (Rice! Rubber! Hemp!) To listen to Miss Mertz recite (in a practiced British accent) “The Raven” with the window shades pulled! To figure out how many apples Farmer Brown harvested if he had an orchard of 350 trees and each tree yielded approximately 3.8 bushels!

She loved each and every subject, as was evidenced by her report card, on which without fail marched a straight row of A's.

Her father was not impressed. "So, you think you're pretty smart, don't you, gal? Think you're smart just like your ma, huh?"

Yes, Daddy, thought Violet, being smart is what saves me.

When she was thirteen and stomach cramps had sent her to the outhouse, she had nearly fallen through the hole in the rough board platform after seeing her underpants soaked through with blood.

Running into the house, she found her father at the kitchen table, examining the heating coils of a neighbor's broken toaster.

"Daddy, something's wrong with me!" she said, panic racing through her like an internal tornado. "I'm bleeding to death!"

Her father's long creased face paled, and as Violet sought comfort in his arms, he set down his screwdriver and with both of his big grease-stained hands pushed her so hard that she would have fallen to the floor had not the edge of the kitchen counter stopped her. Still, the force of the push made her smack the back of her head against the cupboard, and she stood dazed and frozen, her disbelief melting into a puddle of resignation: of course her father would push her away even as she was bleeding to death, *of course*.

He stood up, not making eye contact with his daughter, whose own eyes, she was convinced, would soon be the blank and unseeing ones of a corpse.

"You ain't dyin'," he said. "You go ask Mrs. Mochler what it is you're doin'."

He tore out of the kitchen as if someone had called "Fire!" but as he reached the door he turned to her in one sharp move. "Now don't you ... don't you be bringing any

trouble into this house.” He pointed the screwdriver at her as if it were a knife. “Don’t you be doing anything like your mother.”

Staring at the space he left when he banged through the screen door, Violet gripped the counter edge so tightly that when she finally let go, her fingers were as crabbed as the tines of a rusty old rake.

Mrs. Mochler, a farmwife who lived down the road, would have liked to set the poor girl down and reassure her, but she was in the middle of canning peaches, and the heat and steam and a baby who needed to nurse did a good job of vaporizing her patience.

“Violet dear, you’re just changing into a woman is all. That blood’ll come every month ’less you’re gonna have a baby.”

“A *baby*?” said Violet, wondering what on earth blood had to do with a baby.

Stirring the pot of peaches with one hand, Mrs. Mochler used the other to pull at her dress, pasted as it was to her back with sweat.

“I swan, Violet, a big girl like you don’t know where babies come from?”

Violet shook her head, bewildered and embarrassed.

“Well, I s’pose then I’m—” began Mrs. Mochler, but her voice was drowned out when the baby in the basket by the sink cried out for her mama’s breast, and Hiram, her two-year-old, pushed the box of jar lids off the table, where they clattered on the floor like dissonant cymbals.

“Honestly, Hiram, I swan I’ll give you a whoopin’!” she said, and reacting to the threat, the little boy wailed louder than his sister. Violet knew all her questions would be ignored in the calamity of the household, and she slunk out the back door, watching the ground to see if any blood dripped on it.

She stuffed an old sock into her underpants and spent the afternoon at the Carnegie library downtown, and the

most important thing she learned there was that she was never going to be in a position of not knowing again.

Understanding exactly what Violet needed from her urgently whispered, "I need to read a book about bleeding!" Miss Louise supplied the girl with a short stack of books from her "reference" library. While she did not believe in censorship, the young and pretty Miss Louise did believe in the immaturity and hooliganism of Mount Crawford's teenage boys and therefore kept the few books she had on human sexuality shelved behind the front desk.

Violet spent the afternoon reading, and learned that her low stomach cramps were a common accompaniment to menstrual periods and sometimes relieved by aspirin and hot-water bottles. She read about estrogen and testosterone, fallopian tubes and menarche, about foreskins and clitorises, sperm and ova, contractions and placentas, about premature ejaculation and orgasm, masturbation and homosexuality, about syphilis and gonorrhoea, about frigidity. She pored over the pages like a precursor to Kinsey's copy editor, and when she returned the stack to Miss Louise, Violet felt years older than the thirteen-year-old who had walked in just hours ago.

"Thank you," she said, willing herself not to blush, something the librarian was unable to do herself.

"You're welcome," said Miss Louise, and as her face boiled in a wash of pink, she said in her most businesslike voice, "Whatever your field of study, Violet, the library can always help you."

Preparing supper that evening—fried hash from the leftover pork shoulder a customer had paid for a recent appliance repair, and greens from the garden—Violet felt nauseated. Supper was twenty minutes of guaranteed misery; the one time she had to sit with her daddy and listen to him berate her or her mother or both, and now today—what was he going to say today? The words and phrases she had learned at the library swirled in her head;

how could she even look at him, knowing that he knew about her, about the *onset of her menstrual period, about the shedding of her unfertilized eggs*? And how could she look at him when she knew he had had *sexual intercourse* with her own mother? Feeling light-headed, Violet closed her eyes, but when her father tromped into the kitchen, she steeled herself and served his dinner and then her own.

They ate in blessed silence, but just as Violet began to think she was home free, her father scraped up the last of the hash with a heel of bread and asked, "So you saw Mrs. Mochler?"

Violet nodded.

Judd Mathers took a swig of his preferred dinner beverage—corn whiskey (Violet didn't know who his supplier was now that Uncle Maynard wasn't around, but he'd found one)—and after emitting a short burp, his hand lunged outward, smacking his daughter's face.

Violet's hand cupped her burning cheek. "What ... what was—"

"It don't have to be for nothin'—but in this case, it's to remind you not to be bringin' any babies around here."

A laugh gurgled out of Violet, surprising her father and herself.

"You laughin' at me?"

"No sir," said Violet, but her denial bobbed on laughter and he slapped her again.

He got up quickly, like a hired gangster who had rendered his hit and felt no need to check for breathing. He did offer one last thought, though, on the odd chance that he hadn't made her feel as low as possible.

"Just remember, you ugly mutt, your mother was a slut and they say those things are in the blood."

When the screen door slammed and Violet knew he was out of the house, she began to laugh again. *Those things are in the blood*—did he mean in the *menstrual* blood? Was he making that good of a pun? And when he had warned

her not to bring home any babies—was he aware that she couldn't conceive by herself—that she'd need a boy to assist her, and was he aware that there was no boy in the county, no boy in the state, who would offer that kind of service? She leaned back in her chair, reveling in the laughter that shook her shoulders until it turned, as it often did, into tears.

You ugly mutt.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me. As many times (and it must have been thousands) as Violet said this to herself, she couldn't believe anything so asinine, not when she could feel each mean word cutting and bruising and hurting her more than any sharp stick, than any jagged stone, than even her father's fist.

Many times, her face hot from either his hand or his name-calling, Violet wished for his death, but if he would have opened his arms to her, opened his arms just once, there wouldn't have been a watch fast enough to measure the time it took to leap into them. She couldn't remember the last time he had touched her with something other than force, and finally, after having been rebuffed so many times when reaching out for him—honestly, he acted as if she were made of stickers and burrs, and every time she touched him, he was snagged by them—she put her arms down for good.

When the urge to hold another living thing became a necessity, she went to hug the river birch that grew by the creek behind the woodshed, pressing herself against the trunk and running her palms against the fissured, shaggy bark. It became her little joke to call it "Tree Pa," to accept as personal gifts its tiny yellow flowers in the spring, its cones in the summer.

If she could be sure her father wasn't banging around in the shed, she would have run to Tree Pa now, to feel the wind whispering through its leaves, telling her with each

whssh, whssh, whssh, that it was all right, that she was loved.

Instead, she cleared the dishes, forcing herself, as the words to a popular song urged, to look on the bright side of life; reminding herself that at least she had a home (a mildew-smelling, rotting home that had been in the Mathers family for years) and at least she wasn't living in Tent City; at least she wasn't out panhandling for the spare change nobody had.

Judd Mathers was an excellent mechanic but a bad drinker, and even before the Depression closed down the farm equipment plant, he had drunk himself out of a job. He made his living at the kitchen table, repairing appliances, or out in driveways or farmers' fields, bringing the engines of idled cars and tractors back to life, and every Wednesday and Saturday night, he cleaned the Methodist church, of which the family were not members. The Matherses were poor, but poor in those times was like being sunburnt in the summer: everyone suffered to some degree.

Along with her schoolwork, Violet tended the household and the garden, and in her spare time (of which there was plenty; the girl managed her chores with a quick thoroughness) she sewed; designing her own patterns out of newspaper. For fabric, she used tablecloths she bought for pennies at church rummage sales, or she would rip apart and then refashion the worn blouses and dresses she also bought at these sales, usually on bag days. (There was an Episcopal church in the next town over, and Violet made a point to attend their sales, finding the perspiration stains a little less conspicuous and the tears a little more repairable than the old clothes sold at the churches in Mount Crawford.)

The girls at school were too cowed by her status as an untouchable to compliment Violet on her fashion sense, but

the teachers did, along with townswomen Violet passed on the street.

“What a smart outfit!” Miss Louise, the librarian, said time and time again, and every time Mrs. Rothman, the dentist’s wife, saw her, she’d clutch the girl’s arm and opine, “Violet Mathers, I swear you look like you just stepped out of the *Harper’s Bazaar*.”

When Violet wasn’t cutting, pinning, and stitching, she was drawing, and she was as good a sketcher as she was a seamstress. She filled pages with wardrobes a “woman of means” would wear, signing them “Fashions by Violetta,” the name she decided to use when she became a famous designer. She reserved other pages for faces; nearly all her classmates and teachers had been surreptitiously caricatured, and a special section of a Red Chief tablet was devoted to likenesses of her father. Her portraits were not pretty like her designs; she liked to embellish them with scars or leaking wounds; she gave Marjorie Melby an excess of facial hair, while denuding Clint Ganz, the most popular (and meanest) boy in her class. Her father often sported horns, crossed eyes, or jagged pebbly teeth.

The third in her triumvirate of pleasure was reading, which was what Judd found her engaged in the day after school let out. On the porch, letting the sun warm her long legs, Violet was reading *Arrowsmith*, an activity that enraged the man. He couldn’t articulate his anger, but if he could, he would want to know why this homely, lazy daughter of his could look so happy when life was nothing but one stinking misery after another. And what right did she have to think she was so superior, enjoying book learning like that? He grabbed the book out of her hands and threw it into the overgrown azalea bushes, telling her it was damn well time that she started bringing in some income, “‘cause I don’t want you sitting on your scrawny can all day doin’ nothin’!”

“Fine,” Violet answered. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t worked—she watched the Mochler kids and sat with Mrs. Kilroy every Friday night so her daughter and son-in-law could get a reprieve from the old woman, who was sweetly addled and powerfully flatulent; she scoured the streets for returnable bottles and took in sewing—but the idea of a real job appealed to her. She considered counter help at Woolworth’s, or selling tickets in the Bijou box office, but even if they had been hiring, Violet was intimidated by the jobs’ glamour, deciding that if she was suited for anything, it was factory work.

Marcelline Threads was owned by Eugenia Demming Dodd, daughter of the company’s namesake. Much later, people would have referred to her as a “feminist,” but back then she was simply known as “crazy,” writing editorials in the *Mount Crawford Messenger* about how the world would turn a whole lot easier if women were given their rightful place “*beside* men instead of *behind* them.” (“You women won the right to vote,” the usual rebuttals went, “what more do you want?”)

Miss Eugie (she was Eugenia only on official documents) practiced what she preached, hiring as many women as she did men all through those Depression years; mostly women who were heads of their households, who’d lost their husbands to death or, more often, desertion. Normally Miss Eugie would have readily dismissed a teenage girl over needier candidates, but for a certain item of clothing Violet happened to be wearing.

“Excuse me,” she said to the tall gawky girl filling out an application on a bench outside the reception area, “but may I ask you—who did that to my tablecloth?”

Violet looked around helplessly, hoping the stocky, meticulously dressed woman with the chic hat was speaking to someone else, even though they were the only two in the room.

“I ... I...”

The older woman fingered the crocheted collar of Violet's blouse. "If I'd known something like this could have been done with it, I'd never have thrown it out."

And so Violet came to realize that the tablecloth she had remade into a blouse was the same tablecloth that Miss Eugie had donated to the Episcopal church's rummage sale.

"But it was all stained," said the factory owner, squinting over her glasses as she examined the blouse. "With turkey gravy. My girl tried and tried and couldn't get it out."

"Well," said Violet shyly, "I just cut around the dirty parts."

"It's exquisite," said Miss Eugie, shaking her head. "Look how you used the crocheted hem for the collar—absolutely exquisite!"

Pleasure was like a bubble bath, and Violet soaked in it; imagine having something she made be called *exquisite* not once, but twice!

Miss Eugie believed in hiring those who needed helping, but she also believed that talent and ingenuity should be rewarded, and so over a long list of applicants, most of whom had at least two children, Violet was hired.

She started work on the hottest night of the year, when the smell of perspiration curdled the already stuffy air, when moths banged against the caged light fixtures like convicts in a cell-block riot, when people's tempers were short fuses, lit again and again and again.

"Florence, how we ever gonna make quota if you don't turn that thing up!"

"Polly, I'm workin' feeder and that's all there is to it. Now move!"

"June, if you can't keep track of these spools, I'm telling Lamont, and don't you doubt it!"

Amid the noise of the factory and the hollered threats, the floor supervisor took his new charge over to a tiny little thing (she was nearly a foot shorter than Violet) whose hair was tucked into a kerchief on which was embroidered a picture of Niagara Falls.

“RaeAnn’ll show you around tonight,” shouted the floor supervisor. “You just do what she says and you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know about that,” Violet thought, but when RaeAnn laughed, the trainee realized she had spoken aloud.

“Sorry,” said Violet, “I’m just a little scared is all.”

“Don’t be,” said RaeAnn. “This job’s so easy, a monkey could do it.”

The two got along like pork and beans, like Laurel and Hardy, like buttons and bows. RaeAnn was cute, in a pudgy, dimply sort of way, and at break time she took Violet’s hand and walked her outside.

“I suppose you need a cigarette break,” she said, and when Violet shook her head and told her she didn’t smoke, RaeAnn said, “Oh, good, me neither! I just thought you did ’cause your voice is so deep!”

Violet felt herself closing up to the insult, but then RaeAnn added, “Sorta like Marlene Dietrich’s! Anyway, all the other gals smoke—I tell you, you practically need a gas mask to breathe inside that break room!”

By the end of their shift, when the morning sun had already burned away the dawn, Violet had heard RaeAnn’s entire life story. She was nineteen years old, the mother of a two-year-old boy named Silas whose father “lit out the day after I told him he was gonna be a daddy,” and lived with her mother, “who, I swan, is just about the fattest woman you’d ever want to see. You’d think these hard times would make her lose a little bit of that weight, but nope; she’s still bustin’ up the springs in the sofa.”

RaeAnn didn’t show a keen interest in her new friend’s story, which was fine by Violet, who much preferred the

listening side of a conversation to the talking side.

Seeing that Violet hadn't brought anything to eat when they stopped (at 3:30 A.M.) for "lunch," RaeAnn unpacked her tin bucket and split everything inside it: corn bread soaked in molasses, cold ham, a slab of apple pie, and a jug of sugared tea.

"Did your mama make this?" Violet asked, her cheeks bulging with the sweet corn bread.

RaeAnn nodded.

"Well, no wonder she's fat. Who could stop eating food this good?"

RaeAnn shared her lunch every night after that.

"Heck, you're only helpin' me keep my figure," she said, waving away Violet's thanks. "You think I wanna look like my mama?"

Violet loved working the graveyard shift, loved feeling productive and capable running the machines, loved eating hush puppies and blueberry buckle as she listened to RaeAnn talk about how smart Silas was or what she should wear on her date with the hardware clerk. Sometimes they sat outside during breaks and sometimes they joined the others in the break room, and Violet didn't care that the smoke made her eyes water because her co-workers accepted her just as RaeAnn had and teased her the same way they teased each other.

"My gosh, June, look at them new shoes of yours. You thinkin' of goin' into nursing?"

"Oh, shush. They might be ugly but they're comfortable."

"I guess when your feet are as wide as a bread box, y'all gotta grab comfort where you can."

"Least my feet ain't as long as Violet's! What size shoe do you wear, Violet, a fifteen?"

The tall girl shrugged. "I don't know the size—but I gotta order them through a circus catalog!"