

Planting Violas

Story by M. Kolbet

Her birthday, the first of September, ought to have been a celebration year after year for she was still a child, barely on the cusp of adolescence. But the date also meant summer ending, not with the exactness of an alarm clock, but sometime thereabouts, soon if it hadn't happened already. Months of birds would vanish from the air, taking with them the echoes of their songs. Circus noises would fall silent. Even the eventual thaw of a distant spring seemed so false that autumn was no more than prologue to a graveyard.

And there was the murder, too. The neighbor's house standing empty. Or, not quite empty, for people came and went, though they never stayed long. They walked determinedly in through the front door with their heads shaking and came out examining papers or staring blankly at their phones or carrying something small. Pictures. Decorative figurines. Trinkets that had once meant joy when the old woman came home and saw her shelf decorated with wooden boxes, carved giraffes, hourglasses, stuffed monkeys, clocks that had shown better in the store.



Artwork by Diana Blackwell

No one told her it was a murder, but then no one had to, just as no one had to interpret her mother's prayers when she planted the pansies. The drawn faces—going in and coming out—were news enough. Despair was as legible as hope.

It would have been an awkward conversation anyway.

"Viola, you know the old woman across the street? Well, she's gone now and...." They'd have to discuss Viola staring out her bedroom window, or how dream-like her eyes became at the dinner table, how inattentive her ears. Her father was fond of having such discussions. Commanding them.

Nor was it quite true that all the birds had gone, the slate of the sky wiped clean. Blackbirds hung about, irritants to the trees, or because they scented the passing of seasons and people.

An August death meant it was too late to send Viola elsewhere for a few weeks, the way they'd done a few years back when the dog had the courtesy to pass in June. She'd gone to visit her aunt. There'd been day trips to the lake and camping in the backyard. Viola didn't forget the dog during her time away, but her mourning, rather than being spread out, was prolonged so as not to overwhelm her sensibilities.

"And I avoided the smell," Viola told herself, watching the trees to see if any of the leaves had turned yet. She guessed death had a terrible smell. False air. Something poisonous. It was the kind of thing she considered telling her mother, perhaps even writing in a letter, because her mother had little to say and hardly a moment to listen. Rarely did she or Viola intrude on one of the family discussions her father led.

Before she died (was murdered, Viola repeated in her head), the woman who lived across the street had sat out summer evenings and smoked a pipe. As unusual as it had been to see the old gal, her face scrunched up and billows of smoke erupting from her, the sight amused Viola. At least it kept the summer flies away, who probably thought they got their last feast on the body until the undertaker came and shifted it.

So the next morning—for though summer was moribund at best, school days had not yet begun—Viola waited until breakfast was over and her father had left for work to speak to her mother.

"Will there be any more photographers?"

"Whatever do you mean, dear?"

"Across the street. When Mrs. Wilkinson died, there were photographers." Besides the swiftness of the death, no wasting away over months, Viola

considered photographers another surety that Mrs. Wilkinson was murdered. The men who came in grey suits ignored the sharp edge of the August sky and bent down before taking pictures. Looking for footprints, Viola was sure. Portions of the wall seemed to fascinate them. She could only imagine what they did inside, conducting their gloomy operation, desperate to discover hidden clues, the missing reality that hovered around the old woman's corpse.

"No, I don't think there will be any more." Viola nodded, glad her mother had not opted for a full-throated lie but a meek truth, hoping it would be sufficient to settle the matter. It was the same way she whispered to the pansies when she planted them.

It was surprising how fast the world moved when the calendar turned. Two weeks later, while Viola was finding her footing at school, a moving van showed up across the street. Viola spotted it as she walked home and felt those twin impulses of wanting to be acquainted and wanting to beware. Next to the van, held in place by the memory of a stern look and command, a boy about her age stood on Mrs. Wilkinson's front lawn. Except it wasn't her lawn anymore, thought Viola. I'll have to call it something else soon.

She decided to introduce herself. The boy's name was Francis. He stared at Viola with frightened eyes, uncertain if talking to her was breaking the rules that kept him on the grass and out of the way.

"I didn't know we were moving until just last week," he whispered. "I'd already started school and then bam! They made me say goodbye to my best friends. It's a killer, the whole thing."

Viola nodded, happy the universe had invited her to mention Mrs. Wilkinson's murder. When she opened her mouth, though, she heard her mother's voice. Sound bounced across the street, her name again.

"I've got to go eat dinner," she said. Francis nodded and shrunk into himself, watching his mother stalk by with a stuffed cat.

Over dinner, Viola's father launched into a discussion on moving.

"Fastest deal I've seen in years," he said. Depending on the occasion, he could transform into an expert on everything, led by his own experience. "The realtors swoop in for the solitary pleasure of money. The house hunters are driven by their own desperation, anything to preserve the rhythmic movements of life."

"We'll have to let them know about when the city flushes water," Viola's mother said.

"I'm sure they've been told. Fed lies about the foundation, too. The way the backyard sinks. Scouring pipes is nothing compared to what they haven't been told."

"Like Mrs. Wilkinson?" asked Viola. "I met the boy, Francis, but we didn't get to talk about it."

"What?"

"Viola noticed photographers a few weeks back." Her mother spoke in a cautious tone, as though Viola was as absent as the old woman.

"Oh, that." Her father carried on about legal distinctions, the story of Lazarus, the cost of relocation, but for all practical purposes, the discussion was over.

At the end of September, Viola pretended to fall ill. The neighbors were barely new anymore. School had become drudgery. She picked a Friday, knowing her mother would be more likely to acquiesce, given the cushion of the weekend.

"Is it as bad as all that?" asked her mother. Viola sat on the living room sofa, holding her head in her hands as though it was a weight, despite how her mind raced.

"Fine." Her father made the decision and dismissed Viola with a single word. He prided himself

on rarely getting sick; he seemed dismayed that it wasn't quite never.

After a terse goodbye from her father, Viola jumped up and rushed to the kitchen table. Her mother seemed surprised to see her.

"I'm feeling better."

"So quickly?" Her tone hadn't changed, but she winked as she poured the tea. Viola smiled. This was a mother she hadn't met yet, one she was eager to know. "You didn't have a fever in any case, so I guessed you wanted time to talk. With just the two of us. Not a family discussion." Their cups sat cooling on the brown table, steam dancing slowly in the air.

"Mrs. Wilkinson," Viola blurted out before she knew what she wanted to say.

"Of course." Viola's mother laughed. "She was a wonder, wasn't she? When we first moved into this neighborhood—when you were a baby—well, she was an old woman even then, and she gave me seeds to plant. Said she hadn't found space for them in her yard. She was so excited to meet you. Older people coo over the young. After she finished cooing, she gave me the seeds and went back to smoking that pipe. That's what I remember about moving in. But it's not what that new family will remember." It was more than Viola had ever heard her mother say.

"Mom," said Viola, desperate to understand this woman who would never smoke a pipe. Not in all her days. Not for all the money on offer. "Did something else happen? Is that why you don't talk about Mrs. Wilkinson?" Viola wanted to imagine her mother as someone more wild, someone who spent carefree nights in dance halls and smoky rooms. Someone who lived loudly in the devastation of happiness.

Her mother read her looks and smiled wanly.

"I was a woman at the edge of a ravine. And your father pulled me back. That's all."

Saturday morning, Viola saw Francis standing in the front yard again. She crossed the street to visit him, laughing at the day's unexpected blast of warm weather. Her mother's flowers still threw color at the autumn trees, which were muted now, their fireworks over. Many trees had begun to show their skeletons.

"Hey, Francis." He scowled at her. "School any better?" He shook his head. Viola scratched her head. "Well, I've got something," teased Viola, but Francis didn't alter his expression. He reminded her of her father that way. "Listen, the house you live in, a woman was murdered in it. You'll probably get to see a ghost."

Francis' face brightened at the thought.

"When?"

"Oh, end of summer." It seemed like another lifetime to Viola. And for Mrs. Wilkinson, she supposed it was. "Right before you moved in." Viola had felt proud to hold the secret. Sharing it with someone besides her parents, who hadn't really listened, meant giving away that power. This reality was borne in on her as Francis ran away, either to tell his parents or start looking for ghosts. He got to live in the house, after all and might see the dead woman whenever she chanced to put in an appearance.

Stranded on the neighbor's lawn, Viola suddenly felt ridiculous. She was tempted to cry. She'd closed her eyes against the low sun when a hand fell on her shoulder. She gasped.

"It's okay," a voice said. The hand lifted. It belonged to Ms. Harper, no ghost. Ms. Harper had been part of the neighborhood for as long as Viola could remember. Without knowing why Viola turned to the young woman and told her nearly everything about the last month. Ms. Harper listened, nodding along.

"Mrs. Wilkinson was here when I moved in, too. It was only a few months before your family did." She sighed. "I can see her tutting over you just as easily as I can see her blowing pipe smoke. She was a tough old girl, and I'm sure her children loved her. I think they

grew up in that house, which is why they came back to take pictures.”

“You mean she wasn’t murdered?” The news disappointed Viola.

“No. But after she died, they probably wanted to remember the rooms where they’d run. Where they painted the walls or left handprints.”

“Oh.” Viola could not conceal her regret. A story of murder became just another death, and she had nothing except loose memories. Ms. Harper bent down and looked Viola square in the eyes.

“It’s not all bad news.” She looked across the street at Viola’s yard. “If Mrs. Wilkinson gave those seeds to your mother she understood something. There’s plenty of space here for flowers, but she must have seen how your mother needed the seeds more.”

“What do you mean? They’re just pansies.”

Ms. Harper laughed.

“Not at all!” Her mirth soared out again like a song. “Your mother might never be the type to make glass shatter when she speaks, but she wants more for you. Every year after the birthday decorations come down from your house, she goes and plants those flowers.” Ms. Harper kept her gaze on the bright faces of purple and yellow, looking so much like butterflies. “Those aren’t pansies. They’re violas. They’re you.”

After Ms. Harper strolled back to her house, Viola pondered her mother’s nameless acquiescence. Her anger gave way to sadness, like August’s blaze to October’s gloom.

While Viola had no handprints to recall from house walls when her birthday arrived, she would remember Mrs. Wilkinson as well. Perhaps they could visit the cemetery before too many suns bleached the stones or too many winds wiped the letters away. She returned home to admire the autumn garden, the flowers her mother sowed dutifully each year after the balloons sank. Something to prolong summer’s hold.

Yes, thought Viola, if I ever have a daughter, I’ll plant her the same way.