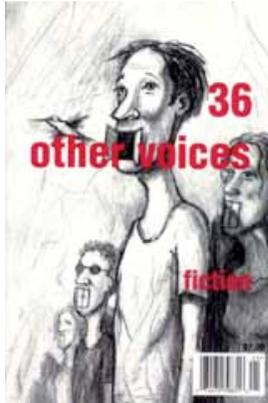


What's Yours?

by Anne Calcagno

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Sometimes, she stole someone else's identity. The best way was to get access to the internal address book of some institution. A university was ideal. It had plenty of numbers people hardly ever answered. You made a few calls looking for a professor's answering machine with a recording that easily sounded like you. After writing the professor's department and title in your little notepad, you tested out the newly acquired role. You visited a museum, neglecting to bring a purse. At the ticket counter, where the sign announces "Educators: Free," you stated your name, your educational institution, and fretted over having forgotten your wallet and professional identification—with your purse. But you pressed them, please, to call "your" number; they'll hear it's you. You've come to preview the museum for a class. They like educators. You sound authentic and frazzled. In you go. You are Estella Snyder, Professor of Biology. The real Estella couldn't be less hurt.

This was taking what the world had to give.

For her part, Violet gave the earth—labored and birthed—two young beings. Two girls, Betsy and Lulu, a fine restrained number she was raising fairly decently. Yet, on a regular basis, she felt eaten alive. That feeling of being clawed clean to the bone led her to scour university address books, seeking flight, an exit, outside herself.

She careened her blue Honda down Chicago's Foster Avenue, noting the asphalt's serious need of repair. Holes jerked, then catapulted her forward. She was picking up Betsy, from school, rushing her to her violin lesson, during which lesson time she'd blast fiercely—westward ho!—to the home day care that clasped Lulu.

"Jump in!" she yelled at Betsy, as she parked illegally in front of the school, in between school buses, to save time. Betsy skittered from her position on the front lawn, hair springing out of her pony tail, book bag tipping open, jacket bouncing onto the sidewalk. She tossed her things into the back seat, and stretched over to kiss Violet's extended cheek. "Hurry! Hurry!" Violet cried, pulling out of her parking spot before Betsy's seat belt was in place. This was usual. The car screeched back to Foster, heading east toward the violin teacher's condo.

Ah, the girls, the girls. Betsy, her first, wispy, all elbows and knees, with a shock of flax sprouting from her head. A handful of prairie grassland she was, long and flutey, and untamable. A child who did not sleep through the night until she was five years old. As a

toddler, Betsy would wake two or three times in the dark, her shrill voice keening, “Aaaaah! Pleeese! Aaah! Mommy, Mommy!” Usually, she stood straddling her bed, a dwarfish Custer fighting to the last shred, fine dry hair screeching about her head. Violet rushed in, trying to surround her, cupping the tense body into her own, hoping to fold away each scared protrusion. Betsy eventually sobbed herself to sleep. Her body would go limp, to fall back into the terrifying tunnel of dreams. She could never explain what woke her, crying, “Don’t go, Mooommy! Don’t leeeave!” But after she dropped exhausted, Violet tilted her into bed, pulled up the covers, patting her small, still, smooth back. Then, it was Violet who could not fall back asleep, feeling her own fears scramble up and down her back. She went into the kitchen, loaded the dishwasher, scrubbed the Formica counter, poured herself a glass of milk, and sat staring out into the black, praying her daughter would not encounter more fear than she could manage in this life, and praying to make the bills this month. Violet was not a good accountant; her ex-husband had called her budget deficient.

Now at eight, Betsy slept heartily, tired out from school and school friends. Violet always checked the girls’ bedroom right before she put her own body horizontal. She stood, half-way between their twin beds, listening to their exhalations, aware that they were on journeys she would never share. Lulu, stout and rosy, curled her head into her knees, shaping herself into a plump donut. Awake, Lulu was more like a pit bull. Like one, she daily designated her circle of territory. Lulu’s “Mine!” did not get put into doubt by other kids: they gave her wide berth, which she acknowledged with a firm nod.

After Betsy’s many shrill anxieties, Lulu’s determined self came as a blessing. But by the time this was clear, Lionel, her ex, was already half-way out, his first month’s rent deposited on an apartment in Chicago’s trendy South Loop, where singles, not families, resided. Had Lionel propagated Pollyanna, he would not have been a happy family man, not in their house. Yet Violet thought Betsy’s incessant fears and tears had helped push him over the edge. And it was because he vanished, Violet suspected, that Lulu never quite gripped the gift of her no-nonsense self. Lulu had been just three, energetically naming everything, when he moved out. Her assertions did not turn into contentment. They became intertwined with loss, a harsher time. Lulu grew a frown.

With Lionel gone, Violet’s eyes often seemed to bulge from her sockets, as she struggled through her litany of tasks: pick-up, cooking, feeding, homework, bathing, undressing, dressing, tooth-brushing, reading, singing. When her heart seemed to beat fiercely out of both armpits, and her nostrils felt like fistfulls of hot sand, the girls glanced and rapidly moved out of her range.

Not long after Lionel left, Lulu revealed her internal storms. Like one harried Wednesday, when Lulu lost Plucky, the orange velour chicken she clasped in sleep. Was it at the park? Under a piece of furniture? Lulu’s forehead, cheeks and chin turned the hue of peaches then cooked beets, as she clenched her fists. She held her breath. She would not release it, began to look waxy. Violet shook Lulu—“We’ll find Plucky! Plucky’s just hiding. Stop this!” Lulu’s eyes bulged and her skin grew dark, liver-red.

Violet yanked Lulu's stubborn little body over to the couch, shouting, "Stop it! Right now!" Then shrieked, "What are you doing?" And slapped Lulu right hard, in the face.

Lulu howled, her feet and fists now flailing, kicking Violet. But breathing again. Violet had had to stop Lulu's self-harming.

But what was to come? Violet could not fall asleep that night until she downed a bottle of red wine and forgot her own phone number. The girls stretched her into places she'd never imagined going; her elasticity lost recoil. She stumbled, uncoordinated. She had hardly had enough time to regret Lionel's departure, or to ponder why exactly their presence so irked him. Had she not occasionally traded herself in for other models (Professor Estella Snyder and whatnot), she might have lost her stamina for parenting altogether. Thank God for occasional theft.

Violet checked the Honda's clock every few minutes to see how close she was to the violin lesson's appointed hour: 3:30 p.m. "Eat something," she urged Betsy. A plastic bag offered an apple, crackers, and a grape juice box at Betsy's feet.

"I'm not hungry."

"You will be in the middle of your lesson. Then you won't concentrate."

"I will."

"No, you'll come out begging to go to McDonald's, and I'll say no."

Betsy pulled her knees up to her chest, clutched them and glared ahead.

Violet studied her hands on the steering wheel; the veins made a rivy landscape out of them. She had olive skin and, a decade ago, had long slim fingers, but her hands looked craggy now. She reached the violin teacher's place, a brick three-flat of condominiums, and Violet quickly checked Betsy's music bag: rosin, metronome, kuhn, Suzuki Book Two, Orfendorf's scales. Betsy snatched the bag away, and ran to ring the buzzer. Mrs. Sims waved from the first floor window, pressing her in. Betsy kept her face averted. Right before the door closed her in, she blurted, "You pick on me!" Violet shook her head. She took a deep breath. She leaned her forehead on the steering wheel. She had to zoom off to get Lulu.

It was Lulu's last year in home day care; she'd start kindergarten in the fall. Maybe then Violet would have some pocket change, a gamble at splurging. Now Violet's worked to pay for child-care. But surely a day was coming when her salary would actually be incoming.

By three-thirty, punctilious Catalina had her eight wards in their coats, lunch boxes in hand, sitting in a semi-circle on a bench in front of the curved window of her living room, facing the front path. It was a well-devised plan to provoke parental punctuality. Who wanted their kid to be the last anxious face at the window? Each day the children stared, poised to discover: yes, you did, you forgot me.

As Violet drove up, parking, Lulu spotted her and bounded away from Catalina's window, sprung out the door, to come running down the path. She threw herself at Violet, on the sidewalk, her panda bear backpack stretching the circumference of Violet's hug, so that her fingers dug into the panda's plastic nostrils.

"Ice cream, Mommy. Pretty please with a sugar cube on top!"

"Honey, it's almost supper time."

"One time, one time, one time!"

"That's against the rules."

"You never give me any fun." Lulu folded her arms, popped out her lower lip, and squinted, ready to cry, while the remaining children surveyed the scene hungrily, hoping their own parents would be better arrivals.

"All right, all right," Violet relented. Lulu hugged Violet's thigh. Five years old, her hair dark as the bark of a wet tree, her eyes skittish moles peering from tight burrows. "After Betsy's lesson."

She belted Lulu into place, handing her a baggie of grapes. They don't need so much stuff, Lionel used to say. You invent complication. She drove quickly back toward Mrs. Sims's place, checking the car clock at every intersection. Time, her enemy, always. This was a luxury she granted Betsy, these private lessons. But Betsy surely deserved them. She wielded her undersized violin with a fervor—albeit still awkward—gained God knows where.

"Can't you stay to listen to my lesson?" Betsy pleaded on most days.

"I can't be late for Lulu, honey."

"Who asked for Lulu?"

Violet leaned her head on the steering wheel and counted slowly, inhaling in, out, and in.

Betsy stood quietly watching their approach from Mrs. Sims' window. Mrs. Sims, who had another student right after Betsy, communicated Betsy's practice schedule and progress to Violet via notes. Betsy came out the door waving today's note.

"Ice cream time!" Lulu shouted.

“Really?”

Violet nodded, “If you hurry.” She folded the note into her purse.

Parenting so surely guaranteed worries, in every ridiculously possible small shape. Ice-cream before supper? Not a good choice. But having Lulu cry right when she was picked up and start the slippery slope of a weepy evening? Ice cream did have calcium. Was the order in which you ate your food more necessity or convention?

Back at home, Violet pointed the girls to the TV and hurried into the kitchen to prepare supper: macaroni and cheese, canned corn, frozen broccoli. Another thing Lionel had not liked: the reduction in food quality. Which was relative. Macaroni and cheese was high up on the girls’ list of favorites. So: supper, a review of Betsy’s homework sheets, baths, tooth-brushing, Lulu’s two bedtime stories, then lights out.

The silence at the end of the day fell on Violet like a light veil. She relished this enclosed, barely muffled feeling, the stasis that reached her. She stretched her legs, levering them up on what had been Lionel’s La-Z-Boy. He had sat there, the soles of his feet parallel to her face, already pushing her away as she entered the room. Now she was the one pressing her feet up, up and away. Immobile, she listened to nothing-ness: the black night, tender and stoic. She stared out the window at the street-lit maples, and, beyond them, the bluish front yard squares. Lionel could not take away this hushed vision. Lionel promptly paid the mortgage bills to avoid being pressed for visitations.

As Violet reclined in his La-Z-Boy, she conjured up images, images that became delectable, and soon drummed into a pattern: marquees, marquees, marquees: T.J. Maxx, Marshall’s, Filene’s Basement. Their temptation. Her fingers itched, hunger suffused her. The way someone else might anticipate pecan pie. She concentrated on clutching the chair’s arm rests, but, really, she could already feel herself checking clothing labels: Jones New York, Anne Klein, Willi Smith. Her toes wriggled into a clearance pair of loafers by BCBG, then some hefty black DocMartens. Did Lulu need summer sandals? Violet jumped up and tossed on her black evening coat and her fine suede Hush Puppies. Coiled her chestnut hair in a bun. It was important to represent (or misrepresent) a certain income level. She was: “bored, with an excess of expendable income.” She closed every window shade, double-locked the front door, left the crooked porch light on, and pulled out the driveway. The girls would sleep; she’d escape.

She was her own. One hour and a half, hers. Saturday, with the store full of people was a better set-up for this game, but she’d take what she could. The handbag she’d grabbed out of her entry hall for this jaunt was a wide rectangle, big as the front page of the Sun-Times. She felt it resonate, attentive, shiny under her arm. Her senses were on alert, an amphetamine feeling. A scattering of people moved languidly through Marshalls’ fluorescent aisles. Violet first tried on shoes; black Italian leather loafers with

silvery buckles. They encased her foot like a masseuse's hand. She plopped them in her cart, along with some olive green leather sneakers, a couple of towels, and five pairs of socks. The cart must look full.

Socks were the quickest prey: their stickers easy to roll off, themselves easy to hide. At \$6.95, they were worth the trouble. She brought three pairs back to the shoe section and, looking as if she sought to match sock and shoe, she stuck a sock set in a shoe while her hand peeled away its price sticker. She dumped each pair of price-less socks back in the cart—ripe to drop into her coat or handbag at her earliest opportunity.

The clearance racks were next, their red stickers clamped onto the original discounted prices. With summer nearing, Violet focused on lightweight pants. She ran her fingers over the size ten rack and found a pair of navy linen Ralph Lauren slacks, marked down to \$49.99. She dropped them in the cart. Next she inspected the aisle for the most hastily applied clearance stickers. Easiest to remove if the sale price had been reduced repeatedly, because labels that became a hodgepodge of devaluation lost stick-to-it-tiveness. She selected three pairs of clearance pants. Stuck the socks into their pockets. The rhythm, the musicality of this role filled her with confidence. Violet headed for the dressing room.

She tried on the Lauren navy linens, which fit well. She removed the socks from the clearance pants' pockets to stuff them, label-less, into her large coat pockets. She sat on the little room's triangle bench, obviously not placed for comfort, and proceeded, with a pocket razor, to exchange price labels. Her fingers sweated, her adrenaline zig-zagged like a panicked chipmunk. Her hearing magnified keenly; someone had just stepped into the changing booth next to hers. Why on earth right next to her? She labored quietly not to tear the replacement discount price, lifted it tenderly enough to retain some adhesive. Voila! Her Ralph Laurens now cost \$19.99. Violet had learned not to press her luck, not to propose a designer item as a \$3 steal. If the price looked reasonable, sales clerks processed you indifferently and out you went with a good pair of pants at a superb price. To steal, you always bought. The cashier wasn't hired to be a sleuth.

Twenty minutes later, Violet waited in line to purchase black loafers and the Lauren pants. A Pakistani salesman waved the hungry red scanner beam over her items. She handed him her credit card. Her purchases had driven Lionel to the accusation: you're buying us out of house and home. But at such a good price! Now, stepping into the sensor range of the security gates, fear spurted up her spine. A hot sea, a liquid fever, suffused her face and neck. The fear zoomed arrow-like, to a boiling target behind her eyes. Her eyes tensed in their sockets. A broad hand—"Stop Ma'am!"—should clasp the base of her skull. But no. She floated out. Violet, the renegade, stepped into the blue night victorious: three pairs of socks, one pair of green leather shoes, a foldable umbrella, and a silk scarf with a floral motif in her miracle bag. She plopped this next to her legitimate shopping bag on the passenger seat. Now, home.

She flipped on a cheerful golden oldies station, tapping her fingers to:

Help I need somebody

Help, not just anybody, HEEELP..."

She thought about her work taking phone orders eight hours a day for the Homes-R-It housewares catalogue. Most definitely, this world was a buying world. After interminable hours on the phone, she wished the space around her would shut up when she reached home. But no such luck, with two young girls. Her whole life, she was on the job. This song should go on her answering machine.

Nearing home, panic bolted through her. For a few seconds she imagined Lulu or Betsy awake and terrified. Would Betsy call 911? Or run across the lawn to a neighbor's? Betsy's cries strafed her, and Violet pushed her hand against her stomach. Years ago, when Violet was home in the basement, pregnant, doing laundry, Betsy had woken half way through her usual nap time. Violet did not hear her toddler yelling, running from room to room. When Violet trudged up the steps back into the kitchen, Betsy attacked her leg, clutching and heaving; "I thought you gonied without me! Mommy, why? why?" Violet had ached with Betsy's fear, afraid of her own awful limitations because already the second baby was sucking away at her food and blood, and swelling her to absurd proportions.

But both girls slept soundly, lately. Her gamble was actually ninety-nine percent secure. You had to play the good chances. The hallway light gleamed through the front door's translucent glass panel. Just as she'd left it. She turned her key and it clicked her in. A sweet hush collected in the hall. The usual. No harm done.

She dumped everything out of her bag onto her bed, and relished the mound. She folded the scarf, positioned the socks in a drawer, hung up the pants, placed her new shoes parallel to the others. When Lionel had lived here, she had to hide every purchase, slip it under the bed, or behind the summer junk in the basement. When the path was clear, she hurried single items onto shelves or hangers as if they'd always been there. Lionel wasn't particularly observant; his clenched brows hindered his vision. She'd felt no urge to confess. When the credit card bills came, then they argued.

Early on, in the blush of attraction, Lionel's reticence had sung to her that he had healthy caution; his withdrawals defined a vigorous internal space. But marriage revealed that these traits had synonyms: intolerant, inaccessible. And when the name of a word changed, how very much that change meant. The two letters separating sanity and in-sanity weren't much, but the consequences!

Violet's small acts of defiance, her wily victories, kept her mildly sane.

In the morning, Violet dumped honey wheat chex into their bowls, and OJ into plastic cups. "Hurry! I can't always be late for work. Andale, andale!"

At 7:15 a.m. the school bus picked up Betsy. Next, Violet dragged Lulu out to the car to be delivered to Catalina's care. "But Mommy, my tummy hurts so bad."

"Catalina will let you lie down, honey."

"She says everyone must play."

"She can't have everyone doing different things, Lulu."

"She doesn't even let you draw faster than the others."

"Ummm."

Were these salient clues, fatal warnings? If Lulu was divulging serious repressions, what was Violet to do? Bring her to work? Not allowed. Leave work? And live on what? She pushed Lulu's words out the window. Only a few more months of this child-care, then a safe, government-regulated bus to public kindergarten.

That evening, she took the girls to the Jewel supermarket for groceries.

"Can't we get Marshmallow Alpha Bits?"

"And have no nutrition for breakfast?"

"Oh, and I love the Danimals yogurts, with granola. Pleeese?"

"They're half the regular size, but cost more, Betsy. Nope."

Violet was a plain downpour, a ready-made disappointment. But the supermarket was on task to deplete her wallet with its weekly display of new sensations. Her only revenge against the system was to filch a couple of cosmetics. This time it was lipsticks: their shrink-wrapped UPC codes easily flicked off with a tug from her nail. Chatting loudly with the girls, no one thought anything when she slit her purse open; a woman did that one hundred times a day. Her laden cart was before her; her intent to purchase. The lipsticks plopped in. She merely fed this moment's need. Even if she couldn't feed all of her children's.

Betsy sulked, hanging back, so that Violet had to turn around repeatedly to call down the aisle, "Get over here!"

“This isn’t any fun,” Betsy whined. “All my friends can choose. And we never go to the toy aisle.”

“In the supermarket we buy food.”

In the cleaning supplies aisle, Betsy focused on kitchen rags printed with violins, “Please, just one for Mrs. Sims?”

“You can’t give people rags, Betsy.”

“I want ice cream sandwich,” Lulu announced.

The incessant discussion and demand drove Violet mad. No one had warned her that, as a mother, grocery shopping would become an emotional watershed. And, in this public space, she could not exactly scream: “Leave me the fuck alone!”

It was this, too, about motherhood that pained her; the girls were normal, not wicked, but she had little fuse left. Every little whimper maddened her. Still, the three of them had to make it together, which included surviving Violet’s limited patience. She was straining to not smack one of them in the head. Betsy could sense this. Because she walked a mild distance behind Violet, gaze lowered. Maybe at home, Betsy would pick up her violin and lose herself in the new practice scales. Unwind herself. Violet understood this much: the need to flee into something.

The checkout lines moved quickly, and Violet readied to push the cart out the door, remembering to feel that slight, almost erotic jolt of satisfaction at not being found out. But the alarm went off.

“I’m so sorry madam, “ the beleaguered manager said, clearly frustrated at having to stop a paying customer. He pulled on his black mustache. “We’ll do a very quick check. The machines get overheated, I think.”

She handed him her long shopping list receipt. “Of course, of course,” he replied. “If you don’t mind, allow me to run your purse through the scanner.” He extended his hand. She handed him her bag as if she were moving under water, slowly, without air. But her purse swung back and forth silently. She’d removed the evidence properly then. “I’m sorry for this waste of your time.” he apologized.

“No problem,” she murmured. Which is when, as they filed out one by one, it became clear Betsy set off the alarm.

“Ma’am?” the manager called back.

Betsy stood in the middle of the buzzing alarm, petrified. “Honey, step back!” Violet cried.

Betsy’s face was an unnatural lavender tint and her eyes filled. “Did some label get stuck to you by mistake, sweetheart?” the manager smiled.

Betsy reached into her pants' pocket. Very gradually, she retrieved a lurid, fuchsia, yo-yo shaped holder, an unpaid "Polypocket"—of which she already had two. Tears melted down Betsy's face now; "You never get me anything!" she cried.

It was true that the little abundances Violet snatched were never for the girls. She did not want them tainted with theft. Yet this moment warned her that her interpretation might be flawed. Or did it warn her about something else?

"Betsy, love, what were you doing?" Violet's heart burned, she itched inside Betsy's skin. She was Betsy. I am right with you, babe; this isn't just you, she should blurt.

"It's your fault," Betsy cried loudly, and her sobbing turned Lulu, too, to tears. Violet became aware that every shopper in a check-out line had centered their gaze on them. The supermarket exit was at a standstill.

"Please," Violet whispered. "Can we take this somewhere private?"

"No need," the manager said. "Mystery solved. I think this little girl has learned her lesson. Crime just doesn't pay, hon. I'll bet you never want to feel this way again."

"I'll talk to her at home," Violet asserted. Betsy's sobs were convulsing her, and she began to choke.

"Of course you will. Don't be too harsh. I think she's had her worst moment." He waved them through, dangling the Polypocket in his palm. They exited into the late daylight, where the busy mess of cars did not know their story.

Lulu cried, "That man hurt Betsy!"

Betsy's shoulders were hunched, her chin and arms gripping her chest as she sobbed. As if she thought she could funnel back into herself, and vanish. Violet patted her back; they were at the car; she could not think what she should say.

Then Betsy yelled, "I'm a thief!"

Lulu watched, round-eyed, stern, unsure what Betsy was talking about.

Violet's hand snapped off the cart, and slapped her, "Don't ever say that!"

Betsy keened, quick and shrill, then threw herself on Violet, clasping her, her tears smearing Violet's shirt, again, as after all her nightmares. Violet spoke fast; "You did something everybody does, once, to test the waters, that's all. It's over."

"Mommy, I won't ever again, I promise, for life."

"That's too strong," Violet muttered.

In that bright lot, moving with cars, carts, people, Violet felt a darkness swirl like a whirlpool around her threesome, “You got hungry, hon. You just did. Hush, hush, now.”

She leaned against the blue Honda, with Betsy wound around her, patting her narrow back as the groceries lingered in the cart next to them. Lulu perched in the cart seat, half-surveying the white plastic lumps on hold. No, hunger wasn’t physical these days, not here. Not for them. Should Violet have taught Betsy how to undo the powers of a UPC label? Wouldn’t Betsy have asked: Mommy, how do you know this? But this manager who had judged her child, he was no more than some toady.

Maybe Violet wasn’t really, deeply, honestly, American. Her colleagues at work seemed to feel one hundred percent certain about right and wrong. They celebrated codes and rules, didn’t fall off the bandwagon. But Violet saw loop-holes everywhere—weren’t these loopholes for her, too? It was like gambling. The risk was part pleasure.

“I’ll never do it again, Mommy,” Betsy cried.

“I know, baby.” But she flinched: did hunger grow in the genes? And if not, what if one’s mother were no compass?