

Just a Goodbye

by Stuart Finegan

Isabel Hiney was a newcomer with an old, battered red suitcase, a rented cottage, and a narrow street beside a row of sycamores. Fresh paint. New faces. A church bell every fifteen minutes. A stable door, and a town where everyone noticed everyone.

On her left cheek was a small dark mole. A point of curiosity. A mark. A tiny feature against her pale skin.

Each morning, the same bus stop. A green shelter with scratched plastic panels, faded timetables, and the scent of damp earth after overnight rain. Schoolchildren, commuters, shopping bags, folded newspapers, and long stretches of silence.

Across the shelter stood an elderly lady named Violet Duke. Pearls, gloves, polished shoes, and elegant coats for every season. Tinted hair, silver earrings, and the presence of old photographs and forgotten dances. Their first meeting was a glance. The second, another glance and a nervous smile. The third, a friendlier glance and a warmer smile.

Always at the same bus stop.

Isabel was patient. No irritation. No embarrassment. No real concern. Merely curiosity at the posh lady who looked at her so closely. The mole and the posh lady. Days drifted into weeks. Rainclouds. Sunlight. Autumn leaves. A chill breeze across the nearby fields. Violet Duke, immaculate elegance. Isabel Hiney, calm and confident.

The stare became a familiar ritual.

One grey morning, with fine drizzle and low skies, the road lay empty except for the distant murmur of traffic. The bus shelter was almost deserted. Only two people stood inside.

Violet Duke wore a navy coat and a velvet blue hat. Isabel wore a bright yellow scarf.

Their usual pause lingered between them. Then Violet asked a question.

“Why not remove that mole, dear?”

Isabel smiled. “No reason. It’s part of me.”

Violet nodded. Then came her story.

Not a dramatic one. A simple story. A younger Violet. A pretty girl. A small town of summer fetes, music, and a mole upon the bridge of her nose. Admirers, compliments, laughter, and endless attention.

Alongside those memories was her mother. Sharp opinions. Strict rules. A strong sense of appearance and respectability. But there was one particular concern.

The mole.

It was noticeable. There was family pressure. Social expectation. Cheap, snide remarks and unwanted opinions. Eventually, a clinic. White plastic walls. Antiseptic odours. Bright lamps. Trembling hands.

Then the mole was gone.

The mirror brought shock. Her face had changed. The scar was small, but permanent. Months of tears. Months of regret. Months of longing for a feature that had once seemed so ordinary.

An ugly scar. Clear evidence. Bad memories.

"No beauty there," Violet said. "Only a reminder, dear."

Silence settled between them. The rain was relentless. Isabel listened carefully. Violet stood among her distant memories.

"My mother believed in dignity above all else. Respectability. Appearances."

A sad smile followed. Then another glance toward Isabel's mole.

"Your face, dear... it has character. Your mole is part of that. It's difference."

Isabel laughed and pressed a hand against her cheek, fond of the little mark, fond of the imperfection.

"I would always rather be happy than dignified."

Violet's eyes brightened with delight. Approval, perhaps. Maybe even envy.

The rain grew heavier. Puddles gathered on the shelter roof. Water ran along the road and shone beside the kerb. For a while, they talked. Favourite books. Town history. Old shops. Lost cinemas. Gardens. Dogs. The passing of years.

Morning after morning, a friendship grew. Not a grand friendship. Not an obvious one. Just an odd, quiet friendship beneath a bus shelter. Shared smiles. Familiar greetings. Small kindnesses.

Then came one particular morning.

Dark clouds. A cold wind. Almost no one else around.

Violet Duke was unusually elegant, even by her own standards. A deep coat. A fresh flower in her hat. A silver brooch.

Isabel complimented her at once. Violet smiled. Then came silence. Not an uncomfortable silence. The kind of silence found in churches and libraries.

In the distance, an engine hummed.

The bus appeared. Headlights in the rain. Passengers moved closer to the kerb. Isabel held her handbag ready. Violet remained motionless.

The bus drew nearer. The doors waited. Violet gave one final glance toward the mole. No curiosity now. Only affection.

A smile from the elderly lady.

A smile from Isabel.

The bus pulled against the kerb. The doors opened with a hiss. A queue of passengers moved forward. Isabel stepped onto the first step and turned to wave at her friend.

Then came a strange moment.

No movement behind her. No handbag. No shopping bag. No bus pass. No intention of travelling. Only Violet Duke beneath the shelter, rain gathering around the flower in her hat.

The driver gave a puzzled look. Another passenger asked, "Your friend not coming?"

Isabel glanced out of the window.

The shelter was empty.

No Violet. No deep coat. No silver brooch. Only rain.

Confusion tightened inside her. She looked quickly along the pavement.

Nothing.

The bus departed. The shelter slipped into the distance. Then a memory stirred.

The florist beside the square.

A photograph in the window.

An old black-and-white portrait.

A name on a brass plaque.

Violet Duke.

Beloved daughter, devoted friend.

1898–1987.

Isabel touched the mole on her cheek.

A shiver passed through her.

The photograph. That face. The same smile.

Lost in the hum of the departing bus came one final thought.

No coincidence.

No imagination.

Just a goodbye.