

$22 \div 7$

$Life = Mistakes \times 10^5$

 $\pi$ 

# Violet and the

My Current  
Pie Chart



286208998628034825... 3.141592653589793238462643383279502884197169399375105820974445923071816104286208998628034825...

PIE  
OF  
LIFE

Mom's Favorite  
Lectures



DEBRA GREEN

# VIOLET AND THE PIE OF LIFE

**Violet**  
and the  
**PIE**  
**OF**  
**LIFE**

**DEBRA GREEN**

HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

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TO JEFF GARFINKLE, THE COURAGE, BRAINS,  
AND HEART AT THE END OF MY RAINBOW

# VIOLET AND THE PIE OF LIFE

# ONE

I knew my parents could solve most of their problems by applying simple math.

The night when everything went wrong started problem-free. Great, actually, once Dad came home. I was in my room, but I heard Dad at the door because our house is only 875 square feet, and my dad is never quiet. “Who wants a bucket full of heaven?” he asked.

I hurried to the front of the house, inhaling the delicious smell of fried chicken along the way.

Dad stood grinning at the door, holding a large fast-food bag. He hugged me with his non-bag-holding arm and said, “Vi! The apple of my eye! You hungry?”

“Now I am!” I said, following him into the kitchen.

Dad pulled out a bucket of fried chicken and plopped it on the counter. “Your mom’s not here?”

I shook my head. “She’s at that listing appointment she was all excited about.”

“Some people have a passion for music. Some for doing good. Your mother has a passion for real estate.” Dad laughed. “Hey, let’s each sneak one piece of chicken before she gets home.”

I stared at him. It sounded like fun, but not if Mom found out. She was into family dinners—with the whole family, not two-thirds of it. I loved fried chicken, but it wasn’t worth hearing another argument.

“Come on, Vi,” Dad pressed. “It’s killing me to resist this smell! If I can’t sneak a piece of chicken, I’ll keel over and die.” He stuck his tongue out and clutched his chest.

I laughed. “The smell is driving me completely crazy,” I said. “If I can’t sneak a piece of chicken, my brain will explode.”

“We can’t let that happen. You know how your mother feels about messes. For her sake, you’d better eat.” Dad opened the bucket, pulled out a thigh, and bit into it. “Ahh,” he said.

I took a drumstick, ate a mouthful, and said “Ahh” too.

“But seriously, don’t tell your mother,” Dad said.

“Don’t worry. I won’t.” If Mom saw us—eating without

her, leaning against the kitchen counter, talking with our mouths full, not using napkins—*she* might die.

“The only thing better than eating fried chicken is eating fried chicken with my favorite girl,” Dad said, and I grinned at him.

I’d finished about 80 percent of my drumstick when I heard a car in the driveway. “It’s Mom!” I whispered.

“Toss the chicken bones! Wipe your hands!” Dad said.

We rushed around the kitchen, two laughing fools.

“Admit to nothing!” Dad said in a loud whisper.

Mom walked in right as I was throwing paper towels over the evidence in the kitchen trash. She smiled. “What’s so funny?”

“We’re just deliriously happy to see you,” Dad said.

Mom raised her eyebrows. That didn’t ring true. Not lately anyway. Then she pointed to the bucket on the counter while she put her hand on her hip. “Why didn’t you tell me you were picking up dinner? I defrosted turkey cutlets.”

“You’re welcome,” Dad said unwelcomingly.

Mom put her other hand on her hip, doubling the unwelcomeness. “Did you go to the market for eggs and broccoli like I asked?”

“Does every word out of your mouth have to be a nag?”

Dad said, frowning now.

“Does every word out of your mouth have to be a complaint?” Mom complained.

That’s where math should have come into the picture. My parents should have stopped right there and determined how many words from Mom’s mouth actually were nags and how many of Dad’s words were complaints. Mom nagged a lot, but she also talked about real estate and the weather and other boring stuff. And Dad’s complaints were totally outnumbered by his funny stories. One simple division calculation for each parent could have shown them that they did a lot more than nag or complain.

Or my mom could have solved most of their problems simply by reversing her nag-to-compliment ratio from this:

**NAGS**

---

Compliments

to this.

Nags

---

**COMPLIMENTS**

Unfortunately, my parents weren't interested in my mathematical solutions. Last time I'd suggested one, Dad had laughed as if I were joking and Mom had apologized for arguing in front of me. At least my math proposal had distracted them from their fight.

"I love fried chicken," I said now, trying the distraction technique again. Also, I was still hungry. I put my nose in the air and said in a snooty voice, "Such excellent cuisine."

My parents laughed.

My mom said, "Quite so!"

It wasn't that funny, but I faked a laugh to keep the household mood up.

"Let's eat," Dad said.

Mom put the bucket and sides on the kitchen table, I got the ketchup from the fridge, and we all sat down.

Then Mom tried to ruin things again. She said, "Do three people really need a large bucket of fried food?"

Before Dad could respond with his usual line that nothing he did was ever good enough for her, I said, "Yes, three people need a large bucket of fried food when one of those people is me."

To prove it, I grabbed another thigh and drumstick from

the bucket, drowned them in ketchup, and wolfed them down.

“Slow down, Violet,” Mom said, frowning. “You’ll make yourself sick.”

Dad winked at me. “It’s impossible to slow down with such excellent cuisine.”

I winked back at him, poured out more ketchup, and grabbed more chicken, even though I already felt like I might throw up.

It was worth it though, because Dad put his arm around my shoulder and said, “That’s why I bought a large bucket,” and Mom said with a smile, “Twelve years old, ninety-something pounds, but she eats like a linebacker.”

Dad laughed and went with it, speaking in a deep, dramatic voice like a sports announcer, “Violet Summers, newest, youngest member of the Chargers. Best known for her fierce tackle and her charming smile.”

I grinned, and my parents grinned back, and I clutched my stomach under the table.

*π*

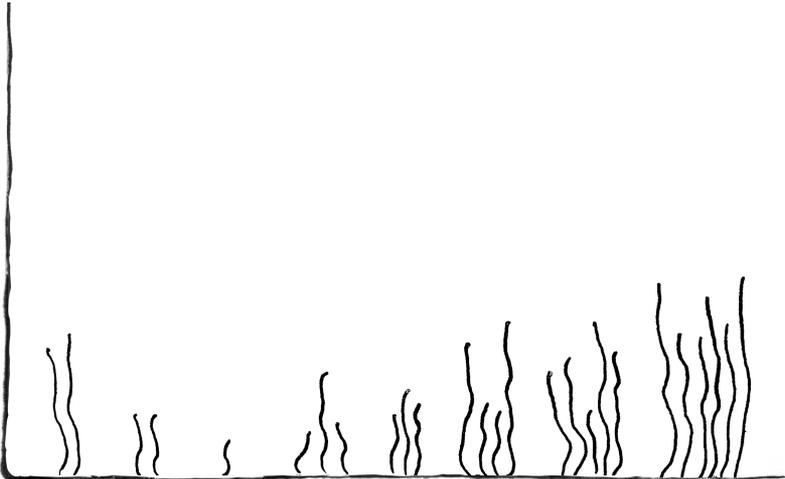
I felt even more throw-up-y later that night in my bedroom when the fighting started again. I could hear it through my door.

The thing about math is that it's logical. You have to solve the first part of a problem before going on to the next. Once that's figured out, you keep moving on until you have the whole problem solved.

My parents' fights were the opposite. They started arguing about one thing and moved to another and then another. Nothing ever got solved. In fact, it seemed like everything was getting worse.

I sat at my desk and added my parents' latest argument to my chart to see if I was right.

INTENSITY  
OF FIGHTS



Jan. Feb. Mar. Apr. May Jun. July Aug.

NUMBER OF FIGHTS

I stayed there, frowning down at the chart while my mom and dad shouted in the background. Finally, I put the chart facedown in a drawer, climbed into bed, turned out the light, and put a pillow over my head.

# TWO

After school the next day, I sat in the back of the Horton Johnson Middle School auditorium with my best friend, McKenzie Williston. We were waiting to audition for the school play.

“It’s so great that we’re doing *The Wizard of Oz* this year,” McKenzie said. “My dad played the Scarecrow when he was in high school. Did I tell you that?”

“Yeah.” This was the third time she’d told me.

“I hope I get Dorothy,” McKenzie said. “Go big or go home, right?”

I nodded, but I didn’t want to do either of those things. I mostly wanted to hang out with McKenzie at rehearsals. And, hopefully, Diego Ortiz, who was sitting in the third row. I’d been stealing stares at the back of his gorgeous head. His hair was dark and thick and amazing.

Going big meant singing solo in front of hundreds of people. That was fine for McKenzie, but terrifying for me. I didn't like to stand out, not even for being good at something. For example, the odds that announcing my math skills would help my middle school popularity quotient were zero, so I kept those skills as secret as my crush on Diego.

I didn't want to go home either. Not if it meant hearing my parents fight again. Or hearing the front door slam late last night, and then a car driving off. Or trying to stay awake to hear the car return. Or checking for Dad's car this morning and coming up empty.

"I doubt I'll get cast at all," I said. I wasn't just being modest. There were so many kids in the auditorium, the ratio of auditioners to roles was at least two to one.

"You sing like a kitten," McKenzie said.

I wasn't sure what she meant by that. Soft and mewly? Or loud like a wildcat?

"On the plus side, you're pretty," McKenzie said. She must have meant the kitten thing as a minus.

I didn't feel that pretty. I liked my big brown eyes and peach-colored skin, the same combo as my dad. But my arms

and legs were too skinny and long for my body. I was basically shaped like a spider.

McKenzie was softer and rounder. Nothing wrong with that. Pie was soft and round, and it was my favorite food. Plus, her skin was the same color as unbaked piecrust.

“Violet, you have to be in the play with me. It won’t be any fun without you,” McKenzie said. “What’s a good non-singing part for you? Who’s pretty in *The Wizard of Oz*?” I barely had time to think about it before McKenzie answered her own question. “The Good Witch. Does she sing?” Before I could answer *that* question, she said, “I don’t think so.”

Besides not wanting to stand out, the other reason I usually kept quiet was because McKenzie did so much of the talking.

McKenzie elbowed me. “Ugh. Look who’s here.

I turned toward the door and saw Ally Ziegler. “Ugh,” I said.

“She must have bought a new outfit just for this audition,” McKenzie said.

Ally wore a blue dress kind of like the one Dorothy wore in the movie. McKenzie had on a blue dress too, but hers wasn’t new. She’d worn it to fifth-grade graduation. It was pretty tight and short on her now.

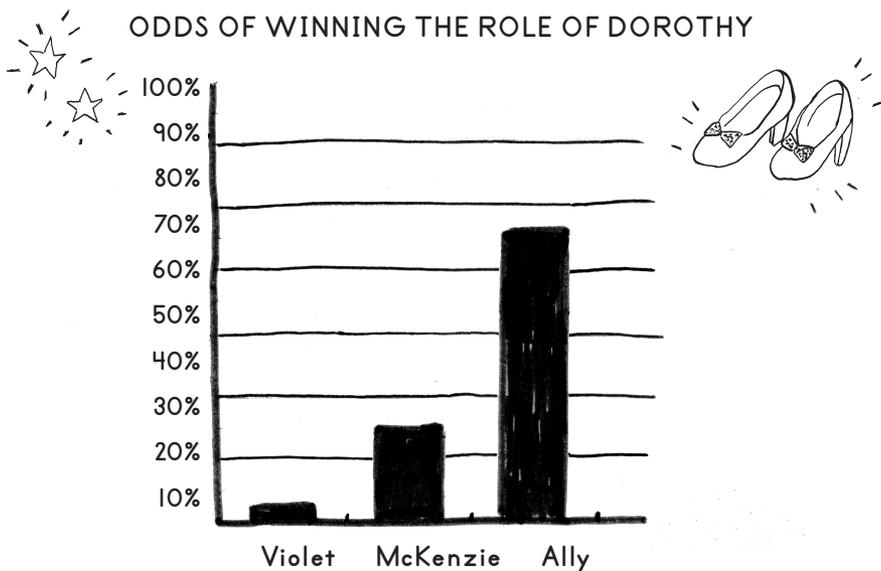
McKenzie sighed. “Ally’s going to be Dorothy.”

“No way,” I said, though there was definitely a way Ally would get cast as Dorothy. Easily. Ally wasn’t just pretty—she was beautiful, with wavy black hair, creamy, copper-colored skin like in a tanning commercial, and huge blue, angelic eyes that looked like those sparkly quartz rocks in museum stores. Also, she was super popular, but not in a Mean Girl way. Everyone truly liked her.

Except McKenzie. And me, because I was loyal to my best friend. “Maybe Ally’s a bad singer,” I suggested.

McKenzie shook her head. “Ally Ziegler doesn’t do anything bad.”

She had a point.



Mr. Goldstein, the drama teacher, came in a few minutes later. He was short and balding, but he strutted up the aisle of the auditorium like a star quarterback taking the field. He passed the front row, turned to face us, and said, “Greetings, fledgling thespians.”

“Couldn’t he just say hello?” McKenzie whispered, and we both giggled.

Mr. Goldstein told us the girls had to sing two verses of “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” and the boys had to sing the opening of the Tin Man’s song. But he took a quadrillion hours to say it, because he also talked about each character starring in their own story and revealing our emotional cores and plumbing the depths of our inner beings.

At last, the first kid was called onstage. Poor Grayson Aljian sang just one line from “If I Only Had a Heart” before Mr. Goldstein told him to start over and project.

I definitely had a heart, and it was racing like crazy. Auditioning was bad enough. Getting interrupted and told to try again was terrible.

McKenzie nudged me. “Grayson will get cast because there’s only, like, eight boys here. It’s so unfair.”

I nodded. There were around forty girls, so the boy/girl

ratio was one to five. Thinking about math calmed me a little.

But my heart raced again once Diego got onstage and started singing. He spread out his arms, which were long like mine, so they went really wide. He thumped his chest on every word of “If I Only Had a Heart,” giving me the giggles again. Then he clutched his heart, sank to the floor in ultra-slow motion, and pretended to die.

Mr. Goldstein sniffed as if Diego were made of rotten eggs, and said, “I cannot say I agree with your humorous approach. The Tin man is meant to be rife with heartache and longing.”

Watching Diego made *me* rife with heartache and longing.

Ally came on next. Her voice was almost as beautiful as her face.

As Ally sang, Mr. Goldstein rose to his feet, which he hadn’t done for anyone else.

He was silent afterward, even though he’d said “Thank you” or “Good job” to the other kids. A quadrillion years later, he finally said, “Your ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow’ gave me chills. Chills.” He wrapped his arms around his chest, pretending to shiver.

“Get a hold of yourself, dude,” I whispered.

“Told you she’d get the lead.” McKenzie gave a long, dramatic sigh.

I wasn’t sure whether I should agree with McKenzie or tell her she still had a chance. So instead, I joined in the sigh.

As Ally walked offstage, Mr. Goldstein said, “Let’s see. . . . Who is next?”

Not me, I hoped. Not after the beautiful and chilling Ally.

“Violet Summers,” Mr. Goldstein said. Of course.

“Knock ’em dead,” McKenzie whispered.

I froze.

“Come on, Violet,” McKenzie said, louder.

A few people turned around to stare at us.

“Violet Summers. Are you present?” Mr. Goldstein asked.

“You got this,” McKenzie urged. Then she said, “She’s coming, Mr. Goldstein!”

I left my seat and made my way to the stage in a slow daze, like Dorothy in the poppy field, and stood in front of Mr. Goldstein and, two rows behind him, Diego Ortiz.

“Stand tall,” Mr. Goldstein said before I even started singing.

I straightened up, forced my mouth open, and began:  
“*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up—*”

“Positivity, Violet,” Mr. Goldstein said. “Dorothy is a determined, joyful character. *Be* Dorothy. You’re determined and joyful.”

No, I wasn’t. But I forced a smile so I could finish the song and get off the stage. I cleared my throat and sang, “*Some-where over the rainbow, way—*”

“That is an improvement. Now show me your energy,” Mr. Goldstein said.

Running out of the auditorium might show him my energy.

Instead, I stayed there and took a deep breath. On the exhale, I muttered, “Determination, joy, energy.” Then I stretched my neck high as a giraffe and raised my nose in the air like a celebrity and plastered a smile on my face like Mom showing a real estate listing. The giraffe + celebrity + real estate agent combination must have looked really dumb.

“Superb,” Mr. Goldstein said.

Okay, maybe not so dumb. And standing straight and smiling felt better than slumping and frowning.

I started singing and stopped thinking about how I looked or what the other kids thought of me, or even about Mr. Gold-

stein or Diego. I was Dorothy. I had determination, joy, and energy. The gangly girl who sang like a kitten had been replaced by a confident pro.

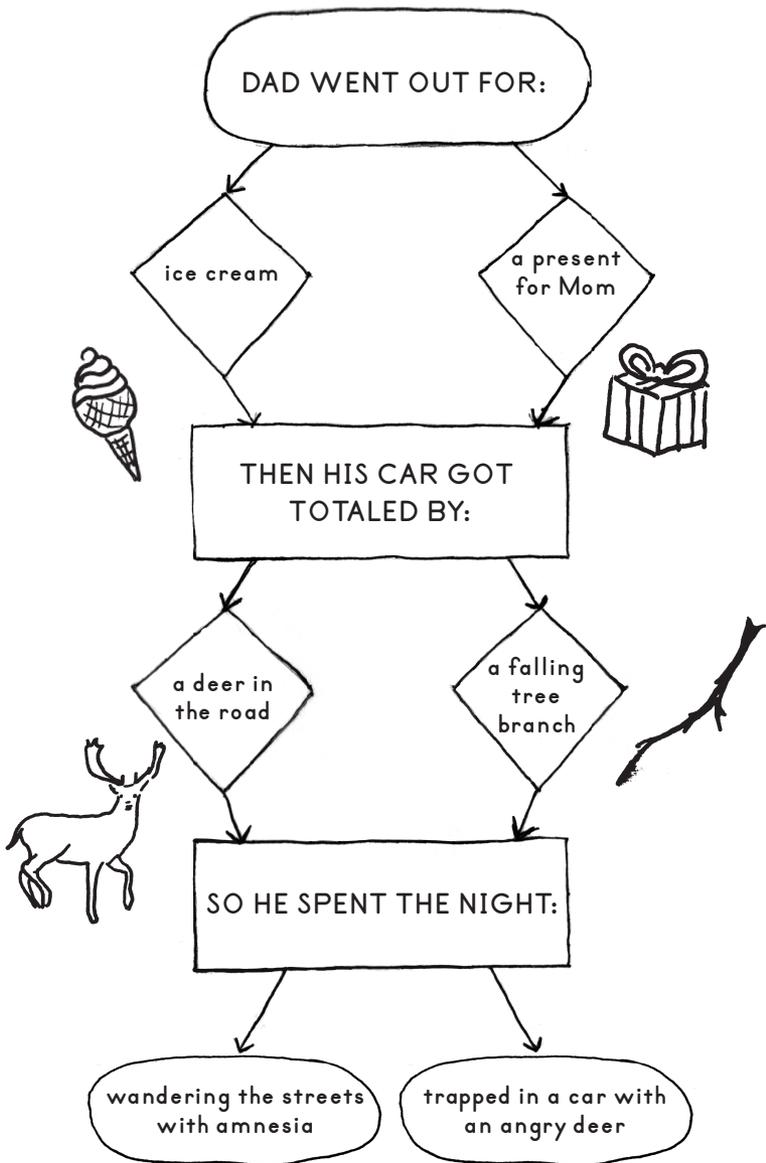
I sang two verses of “Somewhere over the Rainbow” while smiling the world’s biggest smile and keeping my back perfectly straight. For those two verses, I liked having the attention on me. It felt amazing. *I felt amazing.*

When I finished, Mr. Goldstein nodded at me, and I could feel his positivity.

I bounded off the stage and down the aisle of the auditorium, grinning the whole way.

Once I returned to my seat, McKenzie patted my shoulder and said, “Great.”

As soon as I was done freaking out about going onstage, I started worrying about my dad again. There were a lot of explanations for his disappearance, so that was good. But some of them involved criminal attacks and gruesome injuries and Dad lying in a ditch, so that wasn’t good. The possibilities were getting complicated, so I opened my notebook, put my hand over it so no one (McKenzie) could see what I was doing, and tried to work it out.



“McKenzie Williston,” Mr. Goldstein said.

“Knock ’em dead,” I whispered.

McKenzie walked onstage with a huge smile, holding her head up and her back straight. She strutted like a runway model, except pudgier and about nine inches shorter.

I thought she sounded nice, but Mr. Goldstein didn’t shiver or tell McKenzie she was superb or anything. Of course, he’d already heard two hours of auditions. As I told McKenzie, the world’s greatest singer (Beyoncé, obviously.) could have performed at that point and Mr. Goldstein would have cut her off after two verses.

A few minutes later, after the last kid auditioned, Mr. Goldstein made a speech about how everyone performed wonderfully, blah blah blah, and not to take it personally if we didn’t get cast.

“How are we *supposed* to take it?” McKenzie whispered.

“Yeah,” I whispered back. Maybe I hadn’t cared about getting cast before, but my audition had sucked me into caring. I’d imagined myself somewhere over the rainbow, starring in a play, and it had felt exciting.

Mr. Goldstein said he’d made up his mind about some

people today, so we might get a role even if we didn't get a callback. He'd post a list online tonight.

When we left the auditorium, I was grateful to see Grandpa Falls-Apart, our ancient Ford Mustang. Mom had a thing about being on time. That meant she was always telling me to hurry on weekday mornings, but it also meant never having to wait for a ride after school. Unless Grandpa Falls-Apart was acting up.

As I opened the heavy, dented car door, Mom said, "Does McKenzie need a ride?"

"Want a ride?" I shouted to McKenzie.

"No thanks," she said.

"It's getting dark!" Mom shouted.

"My mom's on her way. Bye." She waved.

I bet she wasn't coming.

McKenzie said her mother was in the Free-Range Kids Movement, which meant she believed in giving kids independence. When McKenzie and I first became friends in fourth grade, her mother would leave us at the mall for a few hours. We had a great time trying on fancy dresses and makeup, playing with stuff at the Apple store, and going the wrong way on the escalators. But my mom found out

and ended our fun. She tried to make up for it by taking McKenzie and me to the mall, but it was completely different with her there.

Anyway, the Free-Range Kids Movement was great at the mall, but not so great if you wanted a ride home from school. McKenzie usually walked there and back. My mom didn't know that though.

Mom frowned. "I bet she's walking home."

Maybe she did know.

"I'll feel terrible if something happens to her," Mom said.

"Nothing's going to happen to her." I looked out my window. Mom was right. It *was* getting dark. I'd feel terrible too. "Get in the car!" I yelled to McKenzie.

"It's no problem driving you!" Mom said.

"My mom texted me she's coming," McKenzie insisted.

"By the time she's halfway home, the sun will be down," Mom muttered.

"McKenzie isn't going to change her mind," I said. Once McKenzie decided on something, there was no going back. She stuck with the things she loved—and hated. For the three years we'd been friends, she'd loved Justin Bieber and the color red, and despised Ally Ziegler.

Mom sighed and pulled away. Then she hit me with her usual quadrillion questions.

I informed her that school was good, lunch was good, and the audition was good.

“Well, good luck,” Mom said. “Oh. I think you’re not supposed to say good luck to an actor. It’s like saying bad luck. I should say break a leg. Or maybe that’s just before a show.”

I didn’t respond.

Then Mom did something weird. Weird for her, anyway. She stopped talking. No rambling about up-and-coming neighborhoods in Orange County, or open houses full of looky-loos, or condos that smelled like cat pee. No more questions about my day. Mom didn’t even ask me about my homework.

Something was very wrong.

I looked at her hands. Yep. The hand that wasn’t on the steering wheel was picking at her cuticle.

What if Dad hadn’t come back last night?

I texted McKenzie.

*Text to McKenzie:* R U walking home?

McKenzie: Yeah

Violet: R U OK?

McKenzie: Fine. Jeez. U sound like ur mom

Violet: Sorry

I wanted to ask her to text me when she got home, but then I'd sound even more like my mom. I couldn't tell McKenzie I was worried about my dad. It would sound too whiny, since McKenzie was walking by herself in the almost-dark and her dad was dead.

"You know your father and I love you very much," Mom said in a choked voice.

Whoa. Where did that come from? I looked up from my phone.

"We've always wanted the best for you," Mom said.

"*Wanted*, as in past tense? You don't want the best for me anymore?"

"We do. We always will." She picked at her cuticle again. "Though it might not feel that way tonight."

We got to our house. A small U-Haul truck was parked in the driveway.

"What's that?" I asked.

"We'll explain." Mom sighed. "Well, your dad will explain."

He said he would. Although . . .” Her voice trailed off. Then she cleared her throat and said with fake confidence, “Your dad will try to explain.”