

False Gods Kelly Cherry

It had been a mistake, she realized—of course she realized this: did you think she was a fool?—to lend him money. It was not that he wanted more, however, but rather that he now seemed to think he owned her.

As if, lending him money, she had given him herself.

Henrietta was sixty-six; she had retired last year, a single woman in Richmond, Virginia, once the capital of the Confederacy, staid and conservative, belated in so many ways, now a place where you could actually buy a drink. Or go to dinner with a black man.

He had been so sweet in the beginning. He wasn't *un*-sweet now; he was just clinging and pressuring and wanting to get too close too fast. She had met him in the park near the Mosque. She had been eating a chocolate bar and had forgotten that she was still holding it, watching all the young people strolling or hastening by, young people with lives of adventure and passion. She had thought she would have adventures, too, and passion—how could there not be passion? Everyone's life had passion. Everyone's but hers, as it turned out. Going to work in the bank each morning, returning home to *La Petite Maman*, who needed dinner, some conversation, and later on, to be moved from chair to sofa to bed, and later on than that, to be turned in the bed, massaged, medicated, to have her thin white hair combed, her face washed and teeth brushed, to be changed, to be sponge-bathed, to be this, this, this, and this until the *thises* ran together into one long hiss like the sound of air escaping from a tire, life going flat.

Henrietta, lying on the hallway floor just inside her front door, was getting a stitch in her right side and rolled to the

other side. Now she was facing into the living room. She had lived in this living room for over forty years, first as a trainee fresh from Mary Baldwin, her diploma framed and hanging on the wall alongside the class photograph taken on graduation day all of the girls in cap and gown and the snapshot of the synchronized swim team she had been on every year of her college career, and then as she made her way up through the bank's ranks, as a single woman looking after her mother. Her girlfriends used to tell her she needed to look after herself, but someone had to look after her mother, and it clearly was not going to be Bob or Clinton, both of whom had been in favor of putting their mother in a rest home as soon as the home would take her. *La Petite Maman*, as Henrietta, following family tradition, had come to call her—because she wasn't quite five feet tall and had the dainty, painted porcelain features of a doll—needed company and attention and, finally, care. Henrietta couldn't bear the thought of her sitting unspoken to all day long or plopped down at a cardtable to fill out a bridge set. Children owe their parents. Think of all those years of instructing, protecting, entertaining, think of all the Christmas presents and Easter baskets, the pets who had to be fed and walked and came to a bad end anyway (run over, stolen, lost), the report cards that had to be signed, the lunches that had to be packed, the clothes that had to be washed, the advice, the tears, the hopes. Children owe so much. Children pay so much.

Girl children, anyway. Bob and Clinton had got off almost scot-free. Henrietta pressed a palm hard against the floor.

La Petite Maman would never have thought of it like that, but she had expectations, that was for sure. She expected certain things of Henrietta. Things she didn't look to her sons for, such as attention or companionship or, finally, care. Or the time of day! Bob and Clinton sent their mother money, and later they began to send it to Henrietta, counting on her to use it wisely. They knew her as a fiscally responsible sister. She had welcomed each niece and nephew into the

world with a General Electric stock certificate. She had never played bridge for real money. She paid her credit card balance promptly upon receipt of the bill. Could there be a more fiscally responsible person in the whole trickle-down goddamn world?

The chocolate bar had melted in the hot sun, and she had said, "Oh!" when she discovered that her fingers were covered with chocolate. He had been walking past just then, and he took in her predicament and offered her a tissue. "Thank you," she said. In spite of herself, she hesitated before taking the tissue, but she really had no choice unless she wanted chocolate all over her skirt.

"You're welcome," he said.

"You are not from around here," she observed.

"I've come down from Providence," he said.

At first she thought he was some kind of crazy preacher.

"In Rhode Island," he added.

"I know where Providence is."

She was trying to decide how old he was, but he could be fifty or seventy-five. His hair was gray.

"Ah, yes. I should know by now never to underestimate a Southern woman."

It had been a while since anyone had made much of her Southern womanhood. Being Southern was practically the same as being an anachronism these days. Not even Southerners were very Southern anymore. Even Henrietta had changed.

At one time Henrietta had been a believer in states' rights. She *had* thought restaurant owners should serve blacks, but because blacks were human beings and it was the morally right thing to do, not because someone in power said they had to serve them. After all, it was the restaurant owner who owned the restaurant, not the federal government.

She would not admit to anyone now that she had thought that. Now she was ashamed of her ignorance, ashamed that she had been prejudiced and didn't even know it. She hid it the same way she hid the information that she was

a descendant of slave owners. There had been plantations, ladies in hoop skirts, dreamy gentlemen who could recite Latin poetry and oversee the tobacco harvest, and Henrietta had never doubted *La Petite Maman* when she told her that *her* mother, Ma'am, had said the slaves were so well treated that after the war they didn't want to leave *Grandmère*. (Her friend Betsy said that all formerly proud Southern families consoled themselves with this myth.)

"We've had to learn to make our way in the world," Henrietta said.

"It must not have been easy but I can tell from your red hair that you have a lot of spunk."

Henrietta stiffened. She thought he must be making fun of her.

"You have beautiful hair," he said.

"I want you to tell me," Henrietta had instructed her hairdresser repeatedly, "when it is time for me to stop dyeing my hair red. I don't want to become one of those little old redheaded ladies!"

Her hairdresser, an overworked survivor of two marriages with three children, two of whom were in college and the third of whom, six years old and not yet in school because his birthday fell in April, she brought to work with her, would not tell Henrietta that she already had become one of those little old redheaded ladies.

"Hon," Henrietta had said to the six-year-old, "I don't think you should play with the scissors."

The hairdresser had snatched the scissors from little Leon's curious hands and replaced them with a toy video game.

Henrietta did not understand video games, toy or otherwise, and she did not know how to talk with a child, although she was vaguely acquainted with several. Among her friends were whole families, and there was nothing provincial about them. One family was Cambodian; another had come from Saudi Arabia. But their children waited in the background, seen, not heard.

If she thought about it, she had to admit that she couldn't stand that kid, the hairdresser's kid, Leon. She had once heard him ask his mother why she was fixing the hair of "that old lady." "She'd look better with a bald head," he had said, laughing at either his wit or the image—who could tell with children. Boys were brutes. His mother had smacked him on the top of his head, but he just stuck out his tongue at his mother when she turned her back on him. Henrietta had seen it, the disgusting, bumpy pink tongue. "You look like a frog," she had said to him when his mother went to mix the color, "a stupid frog with a stupid long tongue. If you don't watch out, you'll catch a fly."

Leon had started crying loudly. The hairdresser rushed over. "What happened?" she asked Henrietta.

"Nothing," Henrietta said.

"She called me a frog," Leon said.

"A frog?" The hairdresser raised her eyebrows at Henrietta in query.

"Children," Henrietta said. "They have such wild imaginations."

Leon wouldn't speak to her after that. He didn't even look at her again until his mother had rotated Henrietta in the styling chair in front of the big mirror, holding a hand mirror up in back, waiting for Henrietta's approval. "A good job," Henrietta pronounced. The hairdresser sighed a sigh of relief. She went to the cashier to give her the total while Henrietta gathered her purse and glasses and magazine. Before she followed her to the counter, Henrietta stuck out her tongue at Leon.

Thank god she had never had kids. Girls were no better than boys, just different. The girls were liars. How could she not know this, having been one herself? To fool people, to hurt people, to make people feel *good*—girls told lies because that was the only kind of power permitted to them, the power to alter the world of appearances.

Jesus, did her hairdresser really think Henrietta should still be dyeing her hair red? Did she really think Henrietta

did not know she was a pathetic, skinny-ass spinster who should have quit wearing high heels a century ago? Did she really not know that her son was a six-year-old creep with a scissor fetish who in all likelihood tortured small animals for amusement?

The black man sat down beside her, which was somewhat forward of him. Though it was, after all, a public bench. “Let’s be realistic: time gets to us all but I can tell that you were a beautiful woman. Still are, if you ask me.”

She took off her glasses so he could see her eyes. She rubbed the top of her nose where the glasses pinched so he wouldn’t think she had taken them off just so he could see her eyes. She placed the glasses back on her nose. She had recently been toying with the idea of having Lasik surgery.

He leaned farther back into the bench, stretching his legs out. She could smell the sweat on his skin, see the muscles moving in his neck. But he was not a teenager, not one of those young men who travel in packs for the express purpose of frightening women, but a middle-aged, well-spoken African American (such a mouthful to have to remember!) gentleman. He took the used tissue from her and wadded it up and set it down on his side of the bench.

“Thank you for assisting a lady in distress,” she said, drawling only a little more than normally and cocking her head to the side and smiling slightly to let him know that she was being ironic.

Wait! Wait, now! Henrietta was *not* a fool: She thought women should get equal pay for equal work. She thought there was nothing a man could do that a woman couldn’t do, and if she found modern technology perplexing and untrustworthy, she had friends her age and older who could email their grandchildren, take digital pictures of their trips to Europe or the Orient, trade stocks online. But a man was not a piece of technology, and neither was she. She was a graduate of St. Catherine’s and Mary Baldwin. She had made her debut in 1953 in a strapless white tulle with black velvet sash, and she hadn’t needed glasses yet, and although her

father had not been able to attend, it was because he was in Washington on important business at the State Department, and her brothers had been there to act as escorts. That had been a night—the air scented with lilac, all the debutantes in white or pastel, their skirts swishing over the dance floor, rose petals floating like dream boats in crystal bowls on white linen tablecloths. Henrietta's red hair, natural then, made her shine as bright as a candle as she danced, as if she were a moving flame. She had felt dangerous and even powerful in a way she had never heard anybody talk about.

Things had been lost that could never be recovered: private nightclubs where you could wear a cocktail dress and smoke with a cigarette holder; a respectful, exciting flirtatiousness; the reciprocal promises of submission and protection. How Henrietta longed to be have someone at her side, a defender, a companion. She had been on her own all her life, not counting *La Petite Maman*; but how she longed for company, a partner, as one might long for a cup of cocoa on a cold day or money in the bank.

"I've had my eye on you," he said. "I've seen you around, walking into that bank you like to go to."

And right then a warning bell had gone off in her head. How could it not?

But he said, "I just couldn't take my eyes off you."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" she asked.

"Believe it or not, it's true," he said.

She knew it was not true but nothing about flirting had ever been true, had it? The whole point of it was that it was a game. And how could she argue with him? If she did, she would appear needy and desperate, hungry for compliments. Which maybe she was, but she would not allow herself to appear that way.

He offered to walk her home. At first she demurred, unsure whether she should let him know where she lived, but then she remembered the speaker system, her friends in the building, his thoughtful tissue, and allowed him to accompany her. She was as liberated as the next woman.

When he held out his hand to say good-bye, she looked first at her own, turned it over as if inspecting it for chocolate stains, laughed lightly, and then shook his hand, thanking him sincerely.

Then, before he turned away, he asked her out for a drink. “I do love a cocktail,” she murmured, remembering that in the old days it had not been possible to go out for a drink in this city, but now it was, now there were singles bars and theater lofts and jazz clubs and karaoke. Now there were poetry slams and cineplexes where the soundtrack from another movie was always leaking in from the theater next to the one you were in. In the movie you were watching, a man and a woman would be speaking quietly, urgently, their monstrously long legs and arms entwined with one another and the bed covers, and next door you heard gunshots, heroes and villains slugging it out on a cliff or suspension bridge, a car chase. Now the once-glorious azaleas in the median strip on Monument Boulevard were pinched and scrawny (they were aging, she thought, like herself).

She remembered having read at Mary Baldwin a description by Henry James of her city’s “historic poverty” and her professor’s explaining that James had meant that Richmond’s history had been one of worshipping idols. *False gods*. She remembered that phrase. Now that she was old enough to have a history of her own, she could see that it was just like James had said Richmond’s was. She had always valued the wrong thing, and by the time she realized it, it was always too late to redeem herself.

So of course—of course!—she said yes.

A shooting pain in her left hip woke Henrietta around three in the morning. She woke up breathing wood. She listened carefully for any noises from the outside hallway. There were none so she stood up, wincing as she let her weight settle on both legs evenly and compressing her lips to keep from groaning. There were rails in her panty hose. She crept to the door, put an ear to the crack. Still nothing. She looked out the peephole. The hallway bent and curved

as if she were viewing it through a fishbowl, but Bill was gone. All the same, she did not want to risk turning on the light—he might return—and felt her way to her bedroom in the dark. She got into bed still in her clothes and pulled the top sheet up to her chin, clutching it with both hands. The window's drawn shade had begun to define its oblong shape, the sky beyond it lightening, before she fell asleep again.

The first time Bill picked her up at her apartment, he was wearing brown trousers, a blue shirt with a tie looped around the open neck, loafers, and a brown leather jacket. "You look nice," he said to her.

They went to a restaurant in a mall, a place more comfortable, more for older people than the restaurants in her neighborhood, which were always crowded with students shouting over the earsplitting music. They chatted over drinks and then he urged her to stay for dinner. He told her about growing up in Providence, about his physician father and seamstress mother. He had been an only child.

His attractive appearance, the drink, the baked swordfish, the murmurings at adjacent tables, the reduced lighting, his soothing voice, good manners, soft laugh—all these worked in her a mood of relaxation. She let her hands linger on the tablecloth and he reached over and clasped both of them in one of his. She had a B&B. He paid the check.

She didn't invite him into her apartment, and he seemed to respect her for it, but she was in turmoil. She had gone to her gynecologist for her annual checkup. Her gynecologist had talked to her about vaginal atrophy and had given her a prescription for a medicinal cream that was to help her with that—because when she asked Henrietta if she'd like something for that, Henrietta had said yes, because you never knew—and Henrietta had gotten the prescription filled but she'd never opened the box. She dug the box out of a bathroom cabinet and read the instructions. The box warned her against using the cream for very long. Death was a possible side-effect. She put the box back in the cabinet. She

would wait to see how things developed.

She went out with him several times—to the park, to the museum, to a movie—and then he began to turn up unannounced. At first she liked this, liked that he felt close enough not to stand on ceremony, liked that he liked to be with her. She thought he might be falling in love with her. He might even want to marry her.

At this late date! But Henrietta thought, Well, it's my turn; it's my turn to have some happiness. She thought about Bill all the time. She thought how she'd show people, getting married at last. She thought about his good manners, his take-charge profile, his large, capable hands. She began to forget that he was black, or, no, she began to think that if she were married to him, she would never again have to wonder if she was a racist. She began to appreciate the distinguished sound of "African American." She might be falling in love with him.

But then he told her he needed money to pay off debts, to clear his name—Bill Crowe was his name—so he could find a job. If his name were cleared, he said, he could find a job as a night watchman, a campus security guard, a crossing guard—things he had done before. (He was good at protecting.) "What have you been using to pay for our dates?" she asked him bluntly, modernly. "I saved some cash before coming south," he said. By then she was ready to believe anything he said. It never occurred to her that he might have conned it out of another woman.

At first, it felt like she was paying him back what he'd spent on her, and that was all right; she didn't mind going Dutch. And at first, she had given small amounts to him over deli or sushi or miso in her apartment or at a neighborhood restaurant, but he began showing up at all hours, leaning on the buzzer and banging on the outside door until she had no choice but to let him in, and frequently he was high. That was where her money was going, of course, crack or pot or pills or something she didn't even know the name of. She no longer let him into the apartment. She suggested he might

get help. She threatened to call the police. Her neighbors complained to her and told her that if she didn't get rid of him, they might have to take the problem to committee. But she had been in this apartment forever! Henrietta would wait until the banging and shouting stopped. When it was clear it was not going to resume, she would get up from the floor and go into the living room. If she were the type she supposed others thought of her as, she would pour herself a drink, and it would be on top of others, but she was not the drinking type. You couldn't be the drinking type and still lay out your clothes for the next day. She had *absolutely no vices*, she thought, seeing the words like the lead in an ad. *La Petite Maman* would have told her that it was high time she got some.

He wasn't always high. Sometimes he was as courteous as he had been that day in the park. When he was, it made her heart ache, an actual pain, as if someone had hurled a baseball smack into her chest. A pain that tore at her all the more because of the hopes she had had. But sometimes at night, he would wait until someone was entering the building, and he'd come in with them, and then he'd talk to her through the door about how much he wanted to make love to her, and she would curl up on the floor inside where she could listen and not have to do anything.

Perhaps, she thought, her apartment was a bit fussy, cluttered with the memorabilia of a lifetime, perhaps a stale odor had settled into the corners of the kitchen, and perhaps the picture frames had dulled, the hall floor sagged. It was hard to see these things when you lived with them, but she saw them from the perspective of her position on the floor behind the closed front door.

She didn't call the police. She couldn't stand the thought of the humiliation that would cause her, plus she didn't want to get Bill into more trouble than he was already in. Maybe, she thought, he had planned something like this from the beginning, picking her out as an easy mark, but she remembered the things they had shared, the meals they

had eaten, and she worked hard not to believe this of him. At the same time, she could not bear the thought of moving out of her apartment building, so she continued to give him money just to make him quiet down. She would slide an envelope with cash under the door to her apartment, and he would seize it as soon as the tip of the envelope appeared on the other side. Then he would crouch down and talk to her some more through the crack under the door. "Henrietta," he would say softly, "sweet Henrietta, don't you miss seeing me? I miss you. I miss you so much."

In the beginning, he used to joke about how they could hold up the bank where she had worked. "I'll drive the getaway car," he said, "and you'll come out with the money and we'll drive away to California." Was he joking or was he serious?

What she needed was a man—not money, not cocoa. Feminism was good but the only thing that protected you from a man was another man.

Or a woman so old that no man wanted to have to deal with her. If *La Petite Maman* were alive, Henrietta would not have to lie on the floor like this, rigid and breathless, until he got tired of trying to entice her to open the door and left.

La Petite Maman had known how to handle men. She had known how to keep men at bay. And even when she didn't—even after her mind had failed and she had forgotten who her daughter was—Henrietta had known how to use her to keep men at bay.

La Petite Maman had made decisions, acted, started things and put a stop to them. *La Petite Maman* was never at a loss, and she had made sure Henrietta wasn't either. If *La Petite Maman* were still alive, Henrietta would not be in this predicament, this absurd predicament. If only *La Petite Maman* would come back to this world right now, scold Henrietta and say, "Go wash your face, dear, and comb your hair nicely; I need you to accompany me to Mrs. Lipschitz's house. She's not doing well and we must cheer her up." If only *La Petite Maman* would say, "Henrietta, stop this this

minute. Get up off that floor and call the police or a friend. Get hold of yourself.” She would say, “What do you think you’re doing, crawling down the hallway as if you were a soldier in enemy territory. You live here!” And so on. “Don’t you dare walk down the hall to the liquor closet, don’t you dare open that bottle, don’t you dare pour yourself a drink, don’t you dare, don’t you dare.”

But it served *La Petite Maman* right if Henrietta crawled on her stomach. *La Petite Maman* was not around to tell her to stop being afraid.

La Petite Maman was not around to stop her from giving money to Bill Crowe.

La Petite Maman was not around to tell Henrietta that if she was smart enough to become a bank manager, she was smart enough to make some new friends and forget Bill Crowe. (Until she retired, there had been co-workers.)

La Petite Maman was not around to buy her a Valentine’s Day card. One that said something like, “To my beautiful daughter.”

In the morning Henrietta dressed in the outfit she had set out the evening before: a pale yellow wool suit with brass buttons on the jacket and gold braid edging the slanted pockets; a crisp white cotton shirt; bone-colored heels and matching stockings. February in Richmond was chilly and often rainy, and sometimes there were sudden deep snowstorms, but today the sky was bright blue, and there would be neither snow nor rain. Crocuses were pushing their way up through the small patches of lawn in front of renovated townhouses in the Fan district, and cherry trees and dogwood were poised for spring, bark of bare limbs glistening, buds swelling. A few porch lights left on all night, by design or because someone had forgotten to turn them off, flicked off now. Cars seemed to awaken with a slight shudder, a soft moan, as if the night’s dreams had been indulgent and persistent, hanging on a moment longer.

Not long ago, Henrietta would have walked from her

apartment building to the bank where she worked, stowed her purse in the bottom righthand drawer of her desk, and reviewed her file of current work while drinking the cup of coffee she allowed her assistant, Owen, to bring her. Owen was now Ralston 's assistant. He greeted her warmly as she walked through the doors and across the lobby to his desk. "Henrietta! What brings you here? Shouldn't you be on a cruise, or at least sleeping in?" She had started as a teller and worked her way up to manager of her branch.

Owen was twenty years younger than Henrietta. When he first came to work at the bank, she used to hope he'd ask her out, but there was not only the age difference, there was the fact that she was his boss. She thought he might be homosexual, but then again, maybe he was just a bit effeminate. Many men were, just as many women were masculine, and it didn't necessarily mean anything.

"I need to make a withdrawal," she said.

"Didn't you make one last week?"

She did not answer him. It was not his place to note how frequently she did or did not make withdrawals from her account. She adjusted her glasses and gazed at him expressionlessly, something she had learned to do when she was just starting out and had to find a way to handle the men who were her superiors and wanted to sleep with her and the ones who were her inferiors but would soon climb past her up the ladder to success. Early on, she had decided she was not going to be used, but she also wasn't going to make enemies of people who would be in a position to help or hurt her career. And then later, she had *La Petite Maman* to look after, and she felt it was important to focus on her career since a man wasn't likely to propose if it meant having to support them both. Betsy had questioned her strategy. "Do you seriously think being an independent professional woman is a way to attract a man?" she'd asked Henrietta. "You don't think that when a man is attracted to an independent professional woman, it's in spite of her being independent and professional?" But what was a girl to

do? When her father died, *La Petite Maman* discovered that his money had vanished (like the old Richmond, it had been lost and was unrecoverable); what remained after a series of bad investments had trickled-down straight into the hands of probate lawyers and real-estate agents. Vassar had gone out the window and she'd enrolled at Mary Baldwin instead.

Owen, who surely knew before he asked about the withdrawal that he should not have asked but honored friendship above business had run after Ralston, who came out to say hello to Henrietta and invite her into his office for a cup of coffee. The sun was shining straight through the bank windows onto Ralston's face, and she could see all the pores in his nose as if someone were holding a magnifying glass up to his face. His cheeks were crisscrossed with thin threads of broken capillaries. She followed him into his office. "Henrietta," he said, softly, "how are you?"

"Why, Rals, I'm having the time of my life," she said. "I spend my days doing only what I feel like doing. Retirement is great! You should try it sometime."

"When you have a family—" he said.

"Oh, I know, we can't always retire as early as we'd like. I had *La Petite Maman*—"

"Henrietta?"

"If I hadn't had *La Petite Maman*, I swear I would have taken down my shingle long ago!"

"Henrietta, I certainly wouldn't ask you this if you were just a customer, but we've known each other for a long time, and I can't help worrying about you. Nor can Owen. You're family to us. We've noticed that you've been making frequent withdrawals. Forgive me but you're not in any kind of trouble, are you, Henrietta?"

"Now see here, Ralston Quivey. I appreciate your concern and all, but what business is it of yours when and how much of my own money I withdraw?"

"It's none of my business, I admit. I just don't want you to have to be a bag lady, Henrietta." He smiled to suggest he was exaggerating. "I certainly hope you are going to live

another forty years—”

“Time enough to wander in the wilderness!” she cried, suddenly wondering if the yellow suit with its brass buttons and gold braid was too brazen with her red hair. Why did she say that, she wondered. Didn’t she sound hysterical? Didn’t she know that a professional woman must never appear hysterical?

Ralston leaned back in his managerial chair, looking at her managerially. “I guess so,” he said.

“Richmond was such a proper place forty years ago,” Henrietta said. “Prim and proper. Even after the marches and riots started elsewhere, you couldn’t get anything going in Richmond. Nothing organized, anyway. People didn’t want to muss their clothes is all I can figure.”

“That was a long time ago.”

She was observing that Ralston was in a pinstripe suit, the tie red with dark blue diagonal stripes. “I knew a girl from a very wealthy family who never wore new clothes in public. She would wear her new clothes indoors for a week, until they had gotten rumpled and the shine was gone so when she went out in them she would not look as though she were showing off. This was because it was bad form to display your money. You could have more money than your neighbors, but you weren’t supposed to act like it.”

“I’m just trying to look out for your best interests, Henrietta. It’s what you once said you wanted me to do.”

“Oh, it is, it is. I just—it’s just—things come up, you know?” She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness, a gesture she had made so often in her life that it now occurred to her that she was acting a role, something staged and set and not particularly meaningful anymore.

“Well, you were a manager before I was, Henrietta. I imagine you know what you’re doing.”

“I imagine I do,” she said, as sweetly and dangerously as Scarlett O’Hara might have said it, but on the way out, she saw herself reflected in the polished elevator doors and thought, Scarlett O’Hara! Baby Jane in *Whatever Happened*

to *Baby Jane*? is more like it! And the thought made her so sad that instead of going to the park where she still liked to sit watching the students and noticing all the latest fashions and ornaments—even with shaven heads or green hair, they looked so beautiful, full of life—instead of going to the park, she went back home, where she took the money from her purse and slipped it into a plain white envelope.

But after her neighbors threatened to call the cops themselves if she didn't put an end to Bill Crowe's loud intrusions, and she stopped giving him money, Bill stopped calling. A year later, her heart lurched like a sailor on shore leave when she spotted the card under her door. She opened it with shaking hands.

It was a valentine.

A week late, but a valentine.

Sweet Henrietta, he had written. And he signed it *Love, Your Bill*.

She showed the valentine to Betsy at lunch.

Betsy ran her fingertips over the paper lace edging.

"He signed it 'love,'" Henrietta said.

Betsy handed the card back to her. "Henny," Betsy said, "sweetie, you know that doesn't necessarily mean anything."

Henrietta's face felt as fragile as fine stemwear; it felt as though any expression she might make would shatter it to shards, and she tried to show nothing. "I guess not," she said. They had both ordered chicken croquettes and the house salad with ice water to drink. She had never told Betsy about the sums she had lent—given—Bill.

"It could, though," Betsy said. For thirty years, Betsy had been the secretary for Epiphany Episcopal, and Henrietta had often thought that her voice had acquired a sort of carpeted sound, a hint of the vestry, something efficiently organized and quietly liturgical. "I had an aunt who fell in love and got married at eighty-eight."

Every time Henrietta left or returned to her apartment,

she thought that this time Bill might be waiting for her. She kept an eye out for him when she went to the bank. With the valentine in her purse, she had been relieved and rejuvenated to think that he had not been after her only for her money but had indeed been smitten by her, had maybe even been in love with her. As time passed, she began to hope—how could she ever explain this to anyone—that what he had wanted *was*, after all, the money, because she still had money in the bank, but every day she lost a little more of her looks. If he waited too long, he would run in the opposite direction when he saw her. If he waited too long, she would be eighty-eight.

Sometimes Henrietta bought herself a chocolate bar and ate it while she sat on the bench. She couldn't always finish it and pitched the uneaten part into the trash bin. Brand-new spring leaves put in an appearance and deepened into dark green as summer came and went. The grass became brown. Fallen leaves were raked. Corn husks and snaggle-toothed pumpkins turned up on front stoops. It turned cold. Now there was an electric candle in every window, and through some of the windows you could see Christmas trees or a menorah on a mantel. Henrietta understood that Bill Crowe was never coming back.

"I should have trusted his feeling for me," she said to Betsy over the phone.

Betsy didn't say anything.

"I should have married him," Henrietta said.

"Sweetie," Betsy said, "he didn't ask you. You have to tell yourself the truth about this, Henny."

"He might have. You don't know for sure that he wouldn't. I should have slept with him."

"You didn't?"

Now Henrietta was silent.

"You really didn't?" Then Betsy laughed. "Now that was probably a mistake."

Henrietta told her hairdresser about Bill and they talked

about the vagaries of men, how even the best of them needed a woman to provide them with a sense of direction. “A moral compass,” Henrietta said, remembering that her father had thought that weasel McCarthy was right about the Communists. He had also thought J. Robert Oppenheimer was a security risk. He had been a warrior for The Cold War. But who was she to be angry with him for his bad judgment? Her father’s daughter had always been a step behind the march of time, too. Freedom riders had been shot while she was *dancing*. There had been rioting in the streets while she was taking a seminar in *mutual funds*. And you couldn’t blame it on merely being a little slow to catch up; she was not a good person. She knew it by the way she kept tripping over her own emotional circuitry, setting off alarms and starting small fires that she had to rush to put out. She knew it and knew it was something she had to hide from others.

With a well-tailored suit. Classic gold jewelry, including an expensive but unostentatious watch. Good shoes. Good manners.

Yes, she had tried to look after *La Petite Maman* better than her father or brothers had, but only because society said it was the daughter’s responsibility to look after the mother.

She had tried to hide that, as well—hide the resentment she felt—but *La Petite Maman* had known, she was sure of it. Had known and had found every possible way to flay her daughter because of it. *Bring me an iced tea. Wash this blanket. Come here. Do that. Don’t do that. Do this. Bring me an iced tea. What a pity you never married, then it wouldn’t be just the two of us. Come here. Bring me an iced tea.*

The hairdresser spun her in the chair. “How is Leon doing?” Henrietta asked, thinking how much more pleasant her salon appointments were now that he was in school.

“Oh, he’s reading like a house afire.”

“No more video games?”

“Well,” she said. “I don’t think I’d bet on that.” She blasted Henrietta with the hair spray. “You think he’ll be back? Mr. Crowe?”

“What do you think?” Henrietta asked, knowing the answer would be a lie but wanting to hear it and take heart from it anyway.

“I think that if he could see you now—”

She wandered down to the bank for a visit. Were they weary of her, she wondered, but she had nothing else to do. She was reassured when at the bank, Ralston said to her, “You always brighten our day.”

Owen came into Ralston’s office and handed her a cup of coffee. In a real china cup, not Styrofoam. Not a mug. He stood by her elbow while she stirred. The spoon clinked against the saucer. “How are you, Owen?” she asked.

“It’s not the same place without you,” he said. “It never will be.”

She peered at him through her new glasses. She had splurged on the frames, gold wire in the small, rectangular shape that had become fashionable. She took a good look at him, trying to decide if he was a homosexual.

It was no use. She just couldn’t tell.

“You’re looking well,” Owen said—ungrammatically, in Henrietta’s opinion, but she didn’t say anything because she knew the modern world didn’t care that *well* was an adverb.

There was a time when she would have said, “I should hope so, Owen! These glasses cost me a fortune!”

“Your hair is lovely,” he said.

Rals Quivey tapped his pen against the edge of his desk. Maybe, Henrietta thought, he believed his assistant was being too forward with her.

She put her cup and saucer on his desk and stood up. “It’s always nice to see you both,” she said.

“You too, Henrietta,” Ralston said, also rising.

“Owen,” she asked, turning to face him, “won’t you see me out?” She slipped into her red coat, which she’d never really taken off but had kept draped around her shoulders.

“Of course, Henrietta!” Owen held out an arm for her. Maybe she was an old fool, looking for love in all the wrong

places, but she had once been a show-stopper in a one-piece swimsuit, and weren't those suits, not the tank suits that squashed you up top and sagged in the seat but the ones the Mary Baldwin team wore for their end-of-year performance, with structured cups, and crotches tucked away beneath the latex sheath, weren't they more tantalizing than a Brazilian thong? She had once been a redheaded show-stopper, a dancing debutante, a graduate of the class of 1957, and a sleek and lively teller tackling a man's world of privilege and perks, and there was at least as much hope for her as there had been for Betsy's aunt. She took his arm but in the lobby Owen reclaimed it, said "Don't be a stranger," and turned back toward the elevator. She was on her own.

She experienced again that sensation of performing a role for the umpteenth time, of pretending to be herself. That old worn costume, her body, weighed on her, dragged her down. Would she be able to make her arms and legs go, could she ever say anything she had not already said? She felt trembly and faint, or maybe just faintish..Cold and sweating, she put out a hand and touched the outside wall of the bank to steady herself and then made the mistake of looking at her hand. The skin was thin, the blue veins raised like elevated trains. Her knuckles had thickened with arthritis. She was old. Too old to begin again. What was she to do? How would she traverse the long, lonely, empty years ahead? She took one step, then another. Ahead of her, a young mother pushed a pram. A cat slept on the sidewalk in the shade of a parked truck. She stopped where she stood, watching the carriage recede, the cat uncurl and stretch. Oh, she felt lightheaded and dizzy, and for one wild moment, as she looked around, she did not know where she was.