

Old Friends

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To save money the two women shared the rent of a four-room flat for a spell that turned into seven years without either of them taking much notice. Everyone in town, except for they themselves, knew that they were longtime partners: and thus New Beginnings Daycare lost a few customers each year. They were the type of women who could probably raise your children better than you could, though you would never give them credit for it. Parents seemed to intuit that they were to be preferred over the bright, young, perky types who acted a bit like children themselves.

It was Helen who did most of the raising, aided by a few motherly teenaged-types. Marge handled the business end of things with a sort of tired efficiency. She didn't seem to be a "kids-person" or even particularly like them, but Marge could take an unruly child and make him quiet and wide-eyed with a few words in her "adult voice." Helen was delighted to ignore the presence of business transactions and gaze into the sweet, sweaty faces of the active toddlers, who affectionately called her "Ms. Honey." Helen and Marge worked well together and they lived well together; outside of work, the two women congregated in the living room of their apartment, which was old and colored enough to feel like a home, and read quietly or dusted or simply stared off into space.

Their quiet routine was interrupted on a Sunday evening by an unexpected occurrence on the dating website which Helen had recently joined. They gathered around their shared computer with a vague sense of discomfort as they studied a man's headshot and the words which were supposed to tell them what kind of man he was.

Marge edged her wire-rimmed glasses up her nose as she peered at the profile photo on the chunky desktop monitor. "He's not quite the sort of man I had pictured you with."

He looked positively flawless, with a bright, untroubled smile which beamed out of the screen to intimidate her. As if he were saying loudly that he was happy, and why wasn't she quite so happy? Long dreadlocks twisted out of the back of his head in an intricate pattern which shamed her limp, deerskin-hued hair.

"Helen, he's twenty-six years old." Marge leaned back, as if the matter was settled, but Helen recaptured the computer mouse and scrolled down the page.

"But he sent me a wink!" Helen tapped her nail lightly on the screen over the rose-colored notification. "It's the first one of those I've gotten. I haven't a clue how he came across me. Do you think I should write a note to him?"

"Hm," Marge said, not quite catching the other's excitement. She couldn't be too harsh, as she had practically pushed Helen onto the site, right down to taking her plain, slightly off-putting headshot. She knew she was a coward but didn't see anything wrong with getting her friend to test drive online dating before she gave it a go. Marge was no fewer than fifty-three years, and had tired of coming home late each afternoon, with her hands sometimes stinking of diapers and only Helen to share meals with. She could make enough dinners by now to please a husband, and had thought of settling down. Helen was rounder than she, but with quite pretty, dark eyes and a tinkling laugh that was smaller than her size. She was a few years younger and her wrinkles had yet only congregated in attractive periorbital troughs. Helen should have good success, and if she didn't then Marge would know not to try the whole thing herself.

"This is all very silly." Helen had read Marge's energy and fluttered around the mouse as if to click out of the page. "I don't know why I even bother with it."

"Someone will come up, I'm sure." Marge righted herself with a small wash of relief. Without another word, she disappeared into her bedroom to ready herself for bed.

"Yes, I'm sure," Helen responded remotely. She sat for the moment without object, her body gratefully cleaving to the chair, her mind resting. She figured she should also ready for bed. Before she clicked out of Domenic's page, Helen winked back.

Those who had known Marge from her youth may have said that she ended up where they thought she would. She was a local girl, who somehow turned into a local woman and then a local fixture, known through town with a mixture of respect and distaste. But Helen, the offspring of a strict English father and a calm mother with roots in the Pennsylvania Dutch, seemed meant for a great happiness.

Helen had quietly started talking to Domenic of the internet, and had, sooner than expected, arranged for her first date in many years. Marge did not pretend to understand as Helen spent each evening close to the computer, chatting silently with her fingers but laughing heartily in real life. Marge did not wish her friend good luck with her date, but her good will came from making the point of being out in the living room when Helen returned at a respectable time, ten o'clock. Supper at a restaurant out near his house, closer to the city, had been followed by an evening walk around an outdoor mall with some nice chatting. Helen was communicative and still winding her hands around each other when she came in, her cheeks stained from the bite of fall-turned-winter.

"He looks exactly like his picture," she said. "He's as handsome as his picture."

"What do you think of his long hair?"

"I quite like it actually," Helen admitted quietly. "I think it's sort of...masculine."

The two women exchanged glances from across the table and giggled in spite of themselves, Helen feeling delightfully absurd.

"He works, right? Yes, he's twenty-six, he must work."

"He's in business," Helen quickly said, realizing that they had somehow forgotten to discuss that at all. It didn't matter; she felt wonderfully, delightfully new and different. Seeing a man like Domenic was something she would never do, but it was more about being seen by him. She irrationally thought of her late mother, and the look she would give hearing what Helen was up to. Her online profile got a few more hits, but she was taking a break from that for the moment.

Every Friday afternoon saw Marge walking through town to the public library, where she picked out a fresh, promising book and returned the used one, read cover to cover. She would have been a great woman of routine if she had need for it, but her life was entirely too simple. Spending her days with humans less than three feet tall had turned her into quite the bibliophile. Each evening after five o'clock, she filled her time by living through other people's lives and soaking in the culture she didn't court in her daily life. She loved old books in which the people talked and dressed smartly, and thought she would have fit in well in a 19th century society, though the heroines never seemed to fit her particular view.

Another reason kept her reading rigidly on schedule. Marshall was the head librarian and had been for many years, long enough for him to slowly bridge a relationship with reticent Marge. She often volunteered there, organizing book drives and reading to the children, and had

grown used to his kind, predictable ways. He was an early sixties widower with wisdom but no degrees, and pale, papery skin which often stretched kindly on his face. He felt a book with all five fingers, took at least a full breath before he spoke, and didn't seem to think her at all distasteful. Most importantly, he seemed to pay attention to what she said in a way no one else seemed to. Marge was certain that he knew how she felt about him, but he failed to do anything about it as he should. She had waited long even for a woman of her patience, and had made up her mind to give him up. That didn't mean she would give up her books, however, as she told herself.

"And what is it this time?" he asked as she brought up her book to check out, turning it over with interest. She grimaced as his face lit up with expectation, wishing she had not chosen one she'd read many times, but his expression didn't alter. "An old favorite. Like an old friend."

"Indeed."

"We're still having Storybook Corner Tuesdays at noon. I've been reading but my voice isn't as expressive as it used to be. The children would love to hear one from you again. You do the character's voices so much better."

"It's troublesome for me to leave work and go back again within the hour. Maybe I can try again soon, when the weather is better."

Marshall nodded, and quickly checked out her book, no card needed. He stamped it and returned it to her. "Enjoy your old friend."

Marge took it and paused before turning away. She had wanted something more to say, something to stretch out the time to make it worth the time she'd spend thinking about it, but nothing came to her.

That evening Helen walked past the living room with soft, quick steps, but Marge was reading in the gingham arm chair and saw. She glanced up from her book with a scholarly look and said, "Helen...?"

They were going to some fashionable bars in the city, and all of the women dressed like this, Helen said, it didn't matter their age. She had seen it once before. She edged the hem of her skirt down, her tight pencil skirt that wasn't nearly as threatening as the chintzy, sequined top. Had she gone shopping without Marge? Helen didn't know it was worse to admit that she had, or that the outfit was something she already owned.

There was a small, peeping knock at her bedroom door. Marge slept lightly but didn't move immediately in thoughts of hearing things, but it continued like a quiet roll on a snare drum. How very strange, she thought, as she eased her sleep-ridden legs onto the floor. On the other side of the door was Helen, still dressed from the bars and with the sickly sweet scent of booze.

"I'm sorry to wake you."

Marge put the kettle on in the kitchen and made two fresh cups of tea, which Helen drank thirstily. In the white, hot lights of the crowded bar her outfit had glittered like the New Year's ball, and she was stunning. He had actually called her that, "stunning." But here Helen was reminded of who she was and the clothes looked strange and didn't even seem to fit right.

"You look so tired, Marge. I'm so sorry." Helen covered her face in her hands, looking weepy.

Marge waited patiently for Helen to calm down, just like would with the children. Finally, she said, "Something went wrong, I suppose." It wasn't said as a question; Helen had a right not to answer.

"No, truthfully everything went right. Do you know how long it's been since I danced like that?" Helen's face started to glow again as she thought of it, and she became animated. "If you could have been there. What a wild night. I mean, how bizarre."

"I don't think I could have kept up, unless they were playing Debussy," Marge said dryly.

"Maybe at somewhere classier," Helen said, fingering the fabric on her lap. "I'm having such a great time, and then suddenly sometimes I just feel so silly, and I try to figure him out but he really seems to like me. And then he calls me 'stunning,' or something of the like, and it doesn't even matter all of the sudden. You'd think a woman of my age would know better." Helen felt strange, talking like that. She looked at Marge, who was silent as the seconds seemed to pass slowly by.

"I think," Marge said finally, "if he says that he likes you, and he acts like he likes you, then you may as well believe that he likes you." It was more than Marge could say she believed herself, but Helen wasn't looking for her opinion, so much as for her permission. Helen accepted it with a small smile, seemingly appeased, and sipped meditatively on her cool tea.

"How is Marshall?" Helen nodded her head toward Marge's new book, which her friend had unintentionally laid her hand on.

"Fine. Same as ever." Helen raised her brows, so Marge continued, "He's asked me to read to the children on Tuesday. I said I'd think about it."

Helen knew better than to slip in her own opinion. She found herself thinking about Marge more than herself as she finally got in to bed around three o'clock; she had been home for a while but had been sitting up. She found it much easier to sleep, now, and soon did so.

Helen and Domenic had two more dates before Marge laid eyes on him, and she didn't like it but she had to admit that he did look like the pictures. He was oddly, irritatingly at ease in their home. At first he looked stunned, but then he looked around with interest at their knick-knacks and baubles that he had no right to feel interested in.

"Oh, don't mind these silly things," Helen said, and she shut the shutters of the cabinets.

"Those are collectables." Marge couldn't help it. She was stung.

He smiled at her gallantly. Then he glanced into the kitchen, and said, "I thought it would be bigger."

"We like it cozy," Helen said. She was wrapping a scarf around her neck.

Marge had kindly planned to let them have the living room and the kitchen to themselves that night, and she would stay in her room and even stop up the door if they wanted, but they were going out, anyway. They went to Helen's favorite restaurant; they had both agreed that they liked to eat and that restauranting around was the best way they could spend their time together. They never spoke of their obvious age-difference, but Helen couldn't help but to wonder whether her neighbors thought that she was doing a nice thing mentoring a young man.

"I suppose you wouldn't want to turn out like me," Helen said, shyly avoiding his eyes. She supposed that she wasn't able to blush anymore. The restaurant was, embarrassingly, more romantic than she had expected, her having gone there mainly for casual lunches. Soft tea-lights peppered the tranquilly-darkened room, though she had her back to it and really could only see the one in front of her.

"You've done it right. I don't see why I should marry. It just makes people unhappy. I'd rather just spend time with you." He reached across the table to stroke her hand.

"I was married, actually. A long time ago."

"Oh." Domenic didn't expect her to be married, and he didn't expect her to admit to it either. He couldn't help but to think more of her then, imagining a man's arm encircling her shoulder, her short, black hair flipped near his face, though he couldn't picture the man at all. "What sort of man was he?"

"The wrong sort," Helen said. "He was a doctor, almost a doctor. A moderately smart man working his way through med. school. Actually, I worked his way through med. school." Helen had a distant look on her face and seemed to be shutting her mouth to the subject, but Domenic was prepared to draw her out.

"And what happened?"

Helen thought, as she had done every day for the last fifteen years, of the war-zone destruction that had taken her over when her husband ran off with his secretary, which would have been laughable if it wasn't so tragic. Only he hadn't ran, but walked, confidently and serenely, so that she could mark every step. Her life had changed course but she still hurdled in the same trajectory, waiting as she did with her family's ghosts for life to catch up to her. Because there was never a way to put that into words, she simply said, "He left," though that didn't begin to cover it or even remotely describe what had happened.

They finished the meal in silence, with Domenic making cute faces at her to draw her out again. He asked her if she wouldn't mind paying for a portion, and when the check came Helen quickly slapped down her card, thinking how things had changed since she had last been out with a man. She was quietly unconcerned when his wallet failed to appear at all.

Marge was an exceptional read-alouder, and if the children noticed that her hand shook as she fumbled to turn each page, it didn't show in their faces that seem to leaner nearer with every word. Kneeling on the thick-matted rug of a bright, block pattern, their expressions comically reflected the tone of the reading—delight and fear at the romantically suggestive scenes, bug-eyed excitement when Marge used her loud, throaty "villain" voice. Marge believed in reading aloud and she believed in fairy tales, even if she secretly thought the children should hear the real versions with the fratricide and bloody organs every once in a while.

Marshall was organizing a shelf nearby, but she could tell he was listening. When she closed the book with an exhausted little sigh he clapped louder than anyone. By the time she worked herself up to look over at him, he was already back to squeezing books into their proper places. It was a scene that had occurred so many times, but this time, in her heart, Marge was saying goodbye. She sat there with seeming serenity, waiting for something to change her mind, the gaudy red-plastic book balanced on her lap. The sheer humiliation of her being there brought a lump to her throat. Marge finally got up to abruptly leave, and as she did he called, "Thanks again, Marge!"

In the apartment, she clutched the copy of Emily Dickinson's poems and leaned her back against the closed door. She listened for sounds of movement before deciding that it was safe to allow herself a moment for the panic and despair to cloud in. Marge was not afraid of disappointment but it had somehow bested her this time. What she heard as she rubbed her thumb self-soothingly against the rough, purposely unmatched pages of the volume was not Helen's slow tread and her fixing the house or fixing dinner, but the less-human sounds of object meeting object, wood against wood. Marge walked silently down the hall, her moment of self-pity forgotten. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to remain undetected, but she had become quite good at it and finally stood in Helen's doorway. It was a doorway she had rarely, if ever,

passed, as both women respected each other's rooms with exaggerated seriousness; Marge felt herself an intruder merely standing on the precipice of it.

Helen was rifling through drawers, laying each prized chosen article carefully in a dirty canvas duffel bag. She held a stretchy brown sweater up to her body in the mirror and sighed, throwing it on the floor in a pile with the other undesirables.

"What are you doing?" Marge said, and Helen jumped, caught. Marge's voice was mostly incredulous, but had a hard edge to it, and her eyes blinked several times behind her round glasses.

"Oh, Marge, hello," Helen said breathlessly. "I'm...well, I guess I'm packing. We're going away for the night, Domenic and I."

"To an inn?"

"It's a bed and breakfast, actually. Should be lovely." Helen colored deeply, but seemed unable to resume her packing.

Marge was silent for a moment, too lost in thought to release her friend from her uncomfortable gaze. They hadn't been apart for a whole weekend in years, maybe even as long as seven years. "I suppose it's getting serious, then."

"He likes me," Helen affirmed, and she straightened some. Helen herself had decided that a night away would be just the thing, was exactly the thing that adults in her situation did. She had reached into her savings and ordered up a room at the little place, which should be lovely and classic despite some reviews mentioning bugs in the bathrooms. It didn't bother her because she truly believed that, without knowing it, this was what she had been saving for all along—and Domenic had seemed to think that it was perfectly natural and said he would of course go.

Domenic dropped his bags as soon as he walked through the door, and Helen had to peek around him to inspect her purchase. It was faded, and she had the sense that it had been lived in at one time and not much changed since then. Linens were folded neatly on the double-bed, and there was a faint aroma of dried flowers. She was satisfied, on the whole. The two planned to stay in for most of the weekend, maybe tour the area if they got bored, and they had already secured permission from the inn's owners to use the kitchen to make a smart dinner tonight.

"Why don't I," said Domenic, "fix up the room just right, and you can go pick up the things for dinner, and then it will be like new to you." He smiled at her, and she was charmed and momentarily lost her head.

"That would be so nice," she said finally. When was the last time a man offered to pick up a room for her?

She had some trouble finding the grocery store, being unfamiliar to the area, but when she arrived she realized that they had never discussed what they would actually make. She stood in the corner of the chilly fruit aisle, away from the doors, and thought hard for a minute. Of course she could make any number of dishes, but she felt that whatever she chose would have some meaning, but she couldn't discern what those meanings would be. Finally she chose a beef and veggie stew, nothing too fancy, and something a young, beautiful man would be able to help with.

The meal came out to two heavy plastic bags, and Helen struggled with them up the narrow stairs of the bed and breakfast. She eased the door open and heard Domenic talking on the phone out on the little veranda.

"No, not that one," he said, his voice breezy and light. His tone was different somehow than what she had ever heard. "The preschool teacher. One from that dating site. But, I've got to go, man, she'll be back soon with dinner."

Helen set the two grocery bags down. Her shoulders were sore and the bags were heavy and it felt so good just to set them down. For some reason, that small sound caused Domenic to notice her, and he looked almost too delighted to see her.

"Ready?" she said, with a big, false smile that hurt her face. Downstairs she got out all of the equipment and he started to chop, chop, chop, with his sleeves rolled up like a real man. She put some water in to boil and quickly, continuously stirred in little pasta rounds.

"This is so great," Domenic said with a relaxed sigh. "We should do this every weekend."

"If only we could," Helen agreed.

"I'm sure you could, if you wanted to."

Helen began to expertly slice the beef, running her hands over it with seasoning salts. "Does that mean I'll see you again next weekend?" she asked, shooting him one of her pretty smiles.

He came up behind her and put his chin on her soft shoulder. "If only I could. I have to make a work trip, damn near one hundred miles away. I was hoping you could lend me fifty to fill up my tank. Gas prices are just crazy for a simple guy like me."

"Fifty what?" Helen asked absently. He was nuzzling her neck; she could feel his rough, unshaven cheeks digging into the folds of her skin, tickling her.

"Dollars."

"Dollars?" she said. "You want fifty dollars?" She looked more stricken than surprised, but recovered. "I would if I could, sweetie, but I have to make rent in a couple days. Everything went into this trip."

"Everything?" he repeated.

"Maybe in a few days I can help you out, after I get paid, okay?"

"You mean, you don't have anything?"

"Well, not in the way you're thinking. I'm just a preschool teacher." Helen felt her cheeks flaming up. "But you don't have to be concerned."

"I had no idea."

Domenic continued chopping; he looked angry. In a few minutes he went in the other room to check his phone, and when he returned he had an emergency—something to do with a sister and a missed train. He started to gather his things from the bedroom.

"Domenic—wait." She grabbed both of his arms, suppressing all thought of how muscular they were. She willed herself to look up into his eyes. "Please don't go."

He allowed himself to be held and met her gaze in a way he rarely did. He was silent for a moment, but then he dropped his head and when he looked up again his face had changed. It was suave, charming, confident.

"You know I wouldn't if I didn't have to. What kind of man would I be if I left my sister at the station? I'll be back before you know it."

He kissed her on the forehead and left the room quickly and efficiently. Helen was too smart and too experienced not to know what had happened; still, she waited another hour before she picked up the phone. She cried a good bit before Marge arrived, who was both pleased and dismayed, and sorry for her friend—pleased that they wouldn't be breaking their one-night streak, but running short of hope for the both of them. They had a pleasant little dinner with a bottle of wine, and Marge thought it best not to mention Domenic at all; mostly they sat in

comfortable silence. Helen brought him up but once, as she ground down the chewy bread dipped in salty broth.

“I know I’ve made a fool of myself,” she said. “But I was a happy fool.”

“It’s very long.” Marshall thumbed patiently to the back of the book. “Over three hundred pages. Should I stamp you with more time?” he asked kindly.

It wasn’t a Friday but there she was, bundled up in a shiny green overcoat and a scarf wrapped three around her neck. “No, that’s not necessary,” Marge said. “I’ll take that bookmark though.” She pointed to a stack of red “Dream Big, Read!” bookmarks and pressed two dimes and three nickels in his direction.

“Good choice,” he said. “I’m so glad you read for us this week.” But Marge didn’t answer. “And that’s all,” he murmured conventionally. He slid the book across the counter to her, its cover gaping open with the bookmark placed carefully inside.

“Actually, that’s not all,” she said, grabbing the book and snapping it shut. She thought she was angrier than she’d ever been. “I’ve put up with things for this long because I wanted to give them their time, and I know that sometimes women have to wait. I understand that. But you know I’ve cared about you for this many years, and you’ve said nothing, and just let me go on as if you knew nothing about it. I don’t like a man like that and I don’t respect him either. Now, what will it be, Marshall. Shall we continue on or should I take my business somewhere else?”

“He said he would have me.” There was a look of wonder on her face as she sunk down into the armchair, grasping the armrests heavy-handedly.

“What does that mean, exactly?” Helen asked gently. “Has he asked you out?”

“No. Marriage.” Marge smiled a little as she said, “He wants marriage.” She looked stricken, with a kind of maniacal glaze in her eyes, younger and crazier. “Marriage.”

“That is so, so lovely,” Helen said with her normal kindheartedness, and only a little sadness. It was something that, knowing Marshall as well as Marge’s feelings for him, she had expected to a certain extent, but perhaps not quite so suddenly.

“Well I haven’t accepted him. I wouldn’t leave you in that manner.”

Helen went to speak, but found that her voice failed her. She drew her hand across Marge’s, who flinched from the unfamiliar touch. “You are,” she said, recovering her voice, “my oldest and dearest friend, and I want nothing to do with making your unhappiness.”

“I’m not unhappy here. I thought, before, that it was what I wanted but, no. No, no. It’s better to stay here with you. It’s, a nice life.”

“I know that you love him, Marge.”

Marge frowned, and blinked several times behind her glasses. She sighed like Helen was a teen who she knew would put up a fight. “It’s the passing kind.”

Helen looked at her friend, pinning her down with her gaze as Marge had done to her before the weekend trip. She supposed that she knew her better than anyone, and at this particular moment, even better than herself. She knew what she saw but she didn’t know how to change it. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you, and I think that now is the right time. Our lease is ending.”

“Yes.”

“We always renew, year after year. I’m thinking about things differently, I guess. I want a fresh start. I’m going to move down south, down near the water. My sister lives there and I think I would like it. She thinks I can get a job at the school where her son goes. I know you can

find someone just as good to replace me.” Helen breathed. It was maybe the hardest thing she had ever said and it was over.

Marge wasn't the type to cry, but she could have. She wanted to ask a question but she had heard her friend perfectly well. She looked around the old familiar room, the knick-knacks she collected instead of travel pieces, everything quiet and serene. Now they looked temporary, on the verge of destruction, as if they were ready to be all whisked away at a moment's notice. She couldn't afford it by herself. “Now I have nothing,” she said.

“But I won't leave,” Helen continued, “unless there is a suitable arrangement for you. With Marshall.”

Marge's voice was small: “But I don't know how to be his wife.” She blinked harder, but Helen smiled back at her.

“Just try,” she said, and it was the most ridiculous but best thing she could have said. “Promise me you'll try,” and Marge said she would think about it. She wasn't one to decide things so easily.

Helen came back up north for the wedding, a small ceremony that suited the couple's lifestyle and personalities. She was friendly but sat mostly alone, as most of the other guests were family members she didn't know. She watched Marge snip and fuss at Marshall as well as any wife, and felt happy. A man came up and asked Helen to dance but she politely turned him down. She knew that had it been a few weeks ago, the man never would have asked. Things had changed. Helen slipped out of the reception early, thinking of maybe catching a movie, but not before an emphatic embrace from her truest, oldest friend.