

Always Vera

by Matt Potter

"How much more of my money are you spending, Phil?"

My mother watches through thick glasses, chin wispy in the sunlight, as I put her old-fashioned bank book back in her bedside drawer.

"The price of everything's gone up," I say. "But I don't have to buy you chocolate if it's costing too much."

She says nothing and bends her head again, gnarled hands slowly breaking a family-sized chocolate block into pieces.

I brush chocolate crumbs off the white sheet before they melt and smear, then thump her pillows into submission and replace them behind her back.

"No one listens to me here," my mother says, leaning back on the pillows. "You're never here long enough, and none of the nurses or carers or cleaners or cooks can be bothered." She pops two chocolate pieces in her mouth. "Thank God for Vera. *She* always listens."

Only friends four weeks and it's always Vera now.

I put my hand to my mouth, stifling a yawn.

"It's good that you have a new friend," I say. Though I want to say, *Why don't you get Vera to do your personal shopping and pay your bills and keep you connected with the outside world?*

"Vera brought me a cake last week. 'Course I couldn't eat it — too rich." She pushes two more pieces in her mouth, her teeth gooey brown. "If you stay, you can meet her later. She's bringing me some magazines."

I open my mouth to answer, but stop. And watch as she munches more chocolate.

We meet in the nursing home car park, out of sight of my mother's window. Vera looks exactly like the photo she sent responding to my

ad: piggy eyes, doughy face, wiry salt-and-pepper hair. And chin stubbly in the sunlight.

"It's nice to see you again, Vera," I say.

"Yes," she says. "Where's my money?" She laughs her smoker's rasp.

I only half-smile, and place \$100 of my mother's money in her open hand. I notice the magazines she's brought are dog-eared. The print will probably be too small too.

"That's \$25.00 for one visit a week," I remind her.

"I baked her a cake so I'll need to get my money back for the ingredients too," she adds.

I slap another \$20 in her palm. "I'll see you in four weeks' time. Make sure she doesn't find out."

Vera reaches into her blouse and stashes the money in her stupendous bra. "Mum's the word."

