

Virginity

by Paul Hargreaves

“Every detail matters,” says Miss Baker as she orchestrates a cascade of wine-spattered orchid blooms in a narrow crystal vase. It rises rigid and plumb from its heavy base, the severity of line yielding to grace only at the throat where it crests into a subtly constrictive pinch.

Her hand is guided not by aesthetic passion or creative impulse, but by a determined knowledge of what looks proper and right. And she should know. The little flower shop has succeeded under her family's stewardship for three generations, and she intends that history repeat itself. Indeed, with the exception of one extended absence during her mid teens, Miss Baker has made the shop the locus of her labour and livelihood for the majority of her thirty-three years.

Her church friends, who always pop in during their Wednesday tour de ville, nod approval as they inhale the complex of essences emanating from their coffee cups and from the surrounding rows of galvanized pails. Each registers a distinct floral note — the lilies and gladioli for the funeral parlours, irises and tulips and birds of paradise for the wives of contrite husbands, pink and crinoline-white carnations for the velvet lapels of hopeful prom kings, thorny roses for the lovers and poets and perky daisies and mums and marigolds for the pick-me-ups and get-well-soons.

Miss Baker glances over her narrow wire frames at the clock above the front door, and notes that its hands are rapidly descending upon the arrival time of her after-school assistant.

“I cannot tell you what a comfort it is to have my Maggie here with me,” she tells her visitors. “Such a diligent worker.” And with a broad sweep of her hand, Miss Baker confides, “I sometimes think she'll end up running all this some day.”

“You've known her a long time, then?” asks Lorna, the middle of the klatch trio.

“Oh yes, I baby-sat for her parents when they first moved to town. I was quite taken with her, right from the start.”

“Quite a lively young thing, isn't she?” asks Beth, another of the group.

“She is of an age,” admits Miss Baker, lowering her spectacles onto her bosom, held there by chains.

“I try to warn her about certain perils, shall we say, of flirtation.” But, she reluctantly admits, Maggie just smiles at these admonitions. One might almost say mockingly.

There are secrets Miss Baker does not reveal — that she often lies, awake at night, distraught by the permissiveness of Maggie's adoptive parents. It's not how she would handle things.

She has tried, in her way, to exert a firmer moral influence, but it isn't always easy. She sees Maggie's school friends, hears their rock and roll music and notes with disapproval how some of the boys wear dirty leather jackets and T-shirts, and how they speak and behave so boisterously when they — what's the vulgar expression they use — hang out?

“Why just yesterday evening,” Miss Baker confides, sorting tulips for a new floral arrangement, “there was a young girl down at the ball park who looked precisely of Maggie's age and size.” She places a single, virginal stem into a bud vase. “Night was falling, but I caught a glimpse when she lit a cigarette. Scandalous to see such young girls smoking.” She looks up from her work and out through the window, settling on a distant point, far down the road.

“She was sitting atop one of those disheveled boys, the kind with the slicked-back hair, and straddling him shamelessly on those creaky old bleacher boards. They were laughing and kissing and God knows what besides. If the poor girl only knew...”

Her focus shifts as she notices her Maggie carelessly walking up the street. She watches as Maggie peeks into the soda shop window and waves, continues past the mercantile and the post office, a slow dance of billowing black hair, swishing pleated skirts and softly clinging sweater fabric.

“Boys like that,” Miss Baker says, returning to her story, “can be so heartless.” The last word hangs pregnant while her visitors fix each other with polite but wondering smiles and Miss Baker recollects her rigid composure.

The little bell above the door jingles as Maggie prances into the shop and twirls herself into a starched white apron. Miss Baker lowers her voice. “Looked a bit like her but couldn't have been, of course.” She adds in an almost secretive whisper, “She's far too smart a girl to make that kind of mistake. In fact I often flatter myself that she's a lot like me.”

And Miss Baker throws her Maggie a smile that is warm and welcoming. One might almost say motherly.

