



Maryanne Chrisant

The Gift

I.

She had to go to a funeral.

Vale ran for the train, its whistle blowing and the conductor calling. The train started out full as it left Grand Central Station, but she managed a window seat. Heading north and east, Vale let her eyes rove across the vast swaths of compressed homes lining the tracks. She wondered about the people living as she did not—in her twelfth-floor apartment with high ceilings, stylish interior, and a look across the Hudson River. This train, these tracks, and their ramble along the Connecticut coast. This train, these tracks, taking her to Simon’s funeral.

Once in the New London station, she’d still have to get a taxi to bring her north a few miles to Quaker Hill. The town curled around the crook of Smith’s Cove in central Connecticut, where it still snows in winter and the local orchard gives hayrides in the fall.

Vale had been there a few times over the years, to attend some event at the home of Simon, his wife, Nadine, and their two daughters. The wife had only polite relevance for Vale. But she and Simon would sail out of Four Bells, the small marina. Sometimes his daughters would come. That’s what old friends do. Old friends—

One row up, a boy of about nine knelt on his seat and made faces at Vale. They smiled at each

other. His mother pulled him down. “Sit properly! You’ll get a spanking when we get home.”

“Don’t,” Vale said softly. But he sat, turning his face to the outside. They saw each other in the glass, each hypnotized by the train’s sway and the pull of the tides passing out the window.

II.

When she was a child, Vale’s mother would take her on a train from Connecticut to New York. She would dress Vale in traveling clothes—a tidy coat with matching hat and purse. Her mother was excited to go to New York, even if the visits were to see Vale’s aged grandfather in a place called The Upper East Side.

Vale’s own father went with them to The City, once. While Mother visited, Dad took Vale to the zoo in Central Park. They ate hot dogs while sitting outside on a bench. They walked around the reservoir. It was a wonderful day.

Vale was nine when her mother received a call that her father was failing.

“Failing? Like in school?” Vale had asked. She carried her dog Toto, the little salt-and-pepper terrier.

Mother was pulling down the suitcase from the top of the closet.

“Failing, as in sick,” Mother said. “Go fetch your things.”

Vale was in her room with the door open when Dad came up the stairs.

Vale heard him knock then open the door to the bedroom he no longer shared with Mother.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

The door closed. Vale crept softly and stood by the door.

“Father is ill,” Mother said, her voice muffled.

“I’m sorry to hear. Shall I go with you?” Dad’s voice.

“You have to work,” Mother said.

“Well, Vale can stay with me, then.”

“Father will want to see her.”

“He’s ninety-two and has dementia. I don’t think he’ll know if she’s there or not.”

Mother was silent, likely putting on makeup.

“Seeing him at the end may not be good for her,” Dad said.

“You don’t know what’s good for her,” Mother said.

“You’re already dressed like you’re going to a funeral.”

“Just because I’m wearing black? No, I’m dressed like Jackie Kennedy.”

“You always dress the part, Louise,” Dad said. “Are you going to see your—friend?”

Friend? Vale thought. *What friend? Mother had never—*

“You don’t understand,” Mother said.

“I understand plenty. Don’t bring my daughter into your—affair.”

Mother laughed. “Really. You have quite the imagination.”

Vale knocked and brought her clothes into her mother’s room. Mother was seated before her mirror, adjusting her hat. She wore her black suit with beaver around the jacket collar, a triple strand of pearls, and button earrings. Dad was standing by the door. Vale stood next to him. He put his hand on her head. Vale felt his warmth, and the smell of Old Spice. Toto put his paws on her knee. She picked him up and stood closer to her dad.

“Why don’t you leave Vale home,” Dad said. “That way you can do whatever you want, whatever you need.”

Mother silently arose and put her makeup case and a pink nylon negligee and peignoir into the overnight bag, along with Vale’s pajamas and change of clothes. Everything of Vale’s was mixed in with her mother’s.

“Well? I’m speaking to you, Louise. Vale shouldn’t miss school.”

“Her grandfather is dying. I think she can miss a couple of days of school. Besides, Vale wants to come, don’t you?” Mother said.

Vale nodded, once. She didn’t dare—

Mother stood close to Dad. “He *is* my father, after all.”

Vale heard a slight tremble in her voice. Dad moved to embrace Mother, an attempt she returned with three pats on his back. Pat-pat-pat.

“It’s time to leave,” she said.

III.

Mother stared out the window of the train as the Connecticut shore sped by. Vale wished she sat by the window. She dangled her feet and let them bounce on the seat-back in front of her. The man turned around and glared.

“I’m so sorry.” Mother smiled. “My daughter needs a spanking.”

Vale stopped and sighed. She’d never been spanked, though she heard about it often enough. She wondered what it felt like. Vale looked up at Mother, but she was staring at the passing scenery.

“Not fast enough,” Mother said, shaking her head. “And all too fast.”

“What is?” Vale said.

Vale’s mother looked at her. “Don’t get stuck, the way I did.”

She ground out her cigarette in the little ashtray on the armrest of the seat.

“Stuck in what?” Vale asked.

“Connecticut.”

The shoreline sped by in a blur of grass, sand, and water.

“Mother? What’s an affair?”

Mother scowled at her and stood up. “Come with me.”

Vale took her mother’s hand and let her lead to the club car. The bartender wore a white jacket and black bow tie. Mother ordered a Shirley Temple for Vale, and for herself a Coke and a mini-bottle of Bacardi.

“Cuba Libre,” the bartender said.

Mother smiled thinly.

“It’s four o’clock somewhere,” he said and smiled. He put two cherries in Vale’s drink.

“My daughter is going to be a doctor,” Mother told him. She smiled down at Vale. “Aren’t you?” Vale nodded.

IV.

Vale adjusted the triple strand of pearls under the beaver collar of her mother’s suit. When Mother died, Vale had brought the best of her wardrobe to the church consignment shop. Dad would take Vale

there after mass on Sundays, just to look around. Sometimes. Often. When Mother was—occupied.

Vale was going through the clothes with the woman who took donations—and she stopped, as her hand rested on this very suit. She'd never be able to afford any of this. Vale had the clothes altered to fit her smaller proportions. She fitted them to herself.

“The perfect suit for a funeral,” she said softly.

On the collar, she could still smell the cigarettes and Chanel No. 5.

Vale got out of her seat and made her swaying way to the club car. A thin young man in a short-sleeved blue polo shirt with the railroad insignia on the breast was sweating as he poured coffee from a large thermos dispenser and passed out packaged pastries. Vale stood back and waited to be last. He pointed at her.

“Coffee, light with cream—if you have it,” she said. “And let me have one of those little bottles of rum. And Kahlua.”

He glanced up. “Never too early for Jamaican coffee,” he said. “Where you headed?”

“To a funeral,” she told him.

“Friend or foe?”

“Friend,” she said.

“When your friends start to die, you know you're getting old,” the barman said, and smiled.

V.

“I didn't want you to go to your mother's funeral alone,” Simon had said.

Twenty-five years ago, he held her hand as they rode the train back home, from Connecticut to New York. They were finishing their medical training. Simon had put the small overnight bag that held both their things on the rack above their seats. Vale wore a black dress under her black raincoat. She'd bought them both the day before, on sale at a chain store.

“Mother would hate this dress,” Vale said. She gazed out the window. “It was all so sudden.”

“Your mom *was* old.”

“But I didn't have a chance to say goodbye,” she said to the passing shoreline.

“You just did. And if it's any consolation, you look pretty,” Simon said, kissing the back of her hand.

Vale squeezed his hand, then let it go.

“Not *too* pretty, I hope,” she said. “It was *her* funeral. She liked being the center of attention.”

“She was. Everyone cried,” he said. “And who was that classy old gent in the expensive suit?”

“Paid mourners,” Vale said. “I only recognized a couple. Not him, though. He's probably from New York. Mother had friends.”

“Did he say anything to you?” Simon said.

Vale shook her head. “The usual. I don't even know his name.”

“What was Louise's thing with New York? She had everything she could want in Connecticut.”

Vale laughed shortly. “She didn't like sex. She didn't like kids. She didn't even like dogs. You know she got pregnant, after I was born. I have no idea how. Maybe she got drunk and gave in one night to—someone. She went to New York and had an abortion.”

“That's quite a disclosure.”

“She told me—in one of her rants a couple of years ago.”

“What did your dad do?”

“The deed had been done. She hated Connecticut. Hated my father. Hated me.”

“Oh, come on, she didn’t hate you,” Simon said.

“Well, tolerated me. She tried to mold me in her own image. Ice Queen, with pearls and a Chanel suit.” Vale shrugged.

“Did she succeed?”

“She did push me to have my own profession. That was one good thing I got from her.”

“That and her jewelry.” Simon smiled. “Well, she’s going back to Manhattan, all right.”

Vale laughed. “In an urn.”

“It’s a very nice urn. She’d approve.”

“She picked it out.”

“What are you going to do with her?”

Vale shrugged.

“What do you think I should do?” she asked.

“There’s a nice reservoir in Central Park,” Simon said. “The Jackie Onassis Reservoir.”

Vale laughed and nestled closer to Simon.

“Vale?” he asked.

“What?” she said. Her voice was sleepy.

“Marry me.”

“What would Mother say?” Vale said.

“Ask her,” Simon said.

“I did. She said, ‘Simon loves the idea of a wife, two kids, one dog, and a center hall colonial. And you love going to the theater and Saks.’”

VI.

The house Vale grew up in was an old center hall colonial—brick, black shutters, and stone walk. Dad kept it well, trimming the hedges and mowing the lawn. He kept the garden, planting a rose for each year of her life. When Vale was thirteen, she left it for the last time—forever embedding in her memory the sound of the closing door and the sad, lonely way the allée of roses looked as her father backed down the drive.

They were moving closer to The City.

“Vale understands,” her mother said. “She’s going to be a doctor—and she’ll live in The City.”

Vale had come to believe she had no choice.

“I don’t want to move,” her dad said.

“*You* have no choice,” Mother had said. “The house is in my name. That was your one good idea.”

Before the movers came, Vale had taken a last walk around, snapping pictures with a little camera Dad had gotten her for Christmas. Mother’s room—her dad was here too, buried someplace in between the clothes, pearls, and perfume. Now Dad slept in the small guest room. She opened his closet and caressed his nicely tailored suits. Pushing her way in, she hugged one of his jackets, embraced by the waning scent of Old Spice.

Vale walked outside into the garden. She stood by the big rock, which now looked small. It was

surrounded by delphiniums. Toto had died of age a few years ago, and Dad buried the little dog where she stood. They said an “Our Father” and offered his loyal spirit up to heaven. She wanted to take Toto with her when they moved, but she knew—all that would be left would be bones and fur. Her father found her there, crying. He held her, quietly.

She remembered this about Dad—his silent decency, as she’d come to think of it in her adult years. She couldn’t remember her father’s death or his funeral. How did she let him go from her?

VII.

At the New London train stop, there was one cab parked by the station. Vale stared silently out the window, all the way to Quaker Hill.

She arrived at the church after the service had begun. Simon’s wife, Nadine, sat in the front pew. Beside her were their two daughters, both grown and grieving, on either side of their mother.

Vale sat in the last row. The casket remained closed. There hadn’t been a wake. Simon had fallen from a ladder while cleaning out the gutters of his center hall colonial. He’d clung to the gutter for some time before dropping to the stone walkway below. Death came later. Vale considered the medical possibilities, the various neurologic injuries, to shield herself against the grief emanating from the many congregants, the hymns, and the eulogy.

The little church overlooked the cove. Vale could see Four Bells Marina through the open window. She thought she saw Simon’s boat—with its red hull—bobbing in the slip. She felt the breeze through the window, and the pitch and roll as she stood with Simon in the small cabin. Vale leaned into him for support.

Leaning into Simon, feeling him pressing into her.

He kept a second boat at the Longshore marina in Westport, eighty miles down the coast and closer to New York. That boat had a blue hull. He called it the *Miss Christina* for no particular reason, he said when asked. Vale’s middle name was Christina. Vale would meet Simon there. People assumed they were a couple.

The first time was years ago. The first time—

“Nadine doesn’t sail,” he’d said.

The boat had a cabin, and a bed. When they made love it left them both breathless. They lay, the boat undulating with the low waves. Pitch and roll. Pitch and—

“Why didn’t we do this before?” Simon had asked.

“Before what?”

“You should have said, ‘Yes.’”

“To what?”

“To me.”

Vale had gotten dressed without answering.

“Well?”

VIII.

The funeral was perfect—the beautiful day, and the ringing of eight bells—the end of the watch. Simon chose a family plot on the small rise by the cove—a fitting end for a sailor, to rest on the banks of a river on its way to the sea.

Looking down into his grave, she felt unsteady, for just a moment. She threw in a handful of dirt. “I’m sorry for your loss,” Vale said to Nadine.

Nadine pulled Vale to her and cried into her shoulder.

“Simon valued your friendship so much,” Nadine whispered. “I’m sorry—for your loss as well.”

Vale stood stiffly. She silently lifted her hand and patted Nadine on the back. Pat-pat-pat.

“He left you something,” Nadine said. “Come back to the house. We have a lunch ready.”

In the parking lot, Vale saw the minister folding himself into the driver’s seat of a Mini Cooper, with a plate that read, “JsSavs.”

“Reverend,” she called, waving. “Are you heading to the house?”

“For a bit,” he said. “Would you like a lift?”

She nodded and got in.

“You’re Simon’s friend, from The City?” he said.

“Yes,” Vale said. “How did you know?”

“We men of the cloth know everything.” He smiled.

“I see,” she said. “Well, then you know we were in medical school together.”

“I didn’t know that specifically,” he said. “I knew you’d been friends for a few years.”

“Twenty-five years—more or less.”

They were stopped at a light and they regarded each other. He took in her vintage black suit and gave a slight appreciative smile. Vale saw he was slim, with thinning hair and a pleasant, lined face.

“Did you know Simon well?” Vale asked.

“We sailed together. He was a friend.”

“Why didn’t he have someone clean out his damn gutters?” Vale said.

“Why do we do anything?” he said. “Why did you wear that suit?”

“Because it’s a classic, and it’s black—the perfect suit for a funeral,” Vale said. “Seriously, why did Simon take the risk?”

The reverend shrugged. “Maybe it was just his time.”

“Now you sound like a preacher,” Vale said. “Less like a friend. He should have hired someone.”

“Frugality is endemic around here.”

“But his home, his cars, his boats? He was hardly frugal.”

“He still mowed his own lawn,” he said.

IX.

They ascended the hill to Simon’s house. His center hall colonial well trimmed. The only blemish—the front gutter was turned down, just above a second-floor window.

Vale wandered through the rooms, avoiding people, most of whom she didn’t know but who seemed to regard her with some recognition. She looked at the family photographs on the walls.

She found herself standing with Simon’s widow.

“Will you stay, do you think?” Vale asked.

“The girls are in school. The house is paid.” She shrugged. “Simon loved this place. We never thought—but I suppose no one ever does.”

“He loved Connecticut,” Vale said. “Remind me, do either of the girls sail?”

“They’re not quite as taken with it as their father. I was hopeless at it. Motion sick, you know. Not

like you.” The widow shook her head. She put her hand on Vale’s arm. “Wait here.”

Nadine returned with a large envelope.

“He left you one of his boats, Vale. The *Miss Christina*. The one he keeps at Westport. He had told me how much you enjoyed sailing with him there,” Nadine said, with a sad smile. “I think he did this years ago. He was always so well prepared. Here’s the deed, and the lease for the slip. He was a permanent member at Longshore—and up here too, at Four Bells. He’d sometimes sail back and forth—alone. It’s a long sail. He’d spend a day or two there. But you know that.”

Vale looked at the envelope, and her eyes filled at the sight of her name in Simon’s writing. She looked up at Nadine and shook her head.

“I can’t.”

“You must. It’s a gift he wanted you to have. You must take it. From Simon, and from me—so you can remember the many times you were out sailing together.”

“Remember? But—I can’t—sail. Not without Simon—” Vale fumbled.

“I know,” Nadine said, starting to cry. “I know it’s hard for you—his passing. But please, take it.”

“Nadine, I—”

“He cared about you, Vale, perhaps more than he should. He worried that you’d live out your life alone,” Nadine said.

“But I wasn’t—I’m not—not completely—” Vale stopped.

“Of course not. You have a busy life but—Simon never believed you’re happy—not all alone in Manhattan. That’s why he did this.”

“But The City is my home—”

“We tell ourselves things,” Nadine said. Nadine’s voice was full and she stared at Vale with her kind, sad eyes.

Vale pulled back and turned away, but Nadine caught her arms and pulled her closer. Nadine needed to hold Vale, to hold what was left of Simon, and Vale gasped in her vulnerable embrace. She patted Nadine’s back.

“You’re such a good person,” Nadine sobbed. “You were a good friend to Simon and to me. He valued you—more than you know. You shouldn’t be alone. Oh Vale, dear Vale—I hope you get—the happiness that Simon and I—”

Nadine was crying outright. Vale pulled back. She glanced around the room. They were all watching.

Then Vale reached forward and pulled the sobbing widow to her chest.

“Vale, dear Vale! We *must* remain friends,” Nadine said. “That’s the real gift. Simon wanted us to be friends.”

She held Vale and wept into the beaver collar of her black suit.

X.

Vale went up to the second floor to use the restroom. She gripped the sink and turned on the tap. She felt a scream building up inside of her. She held her hands to her mouth, stifling her scream and her sobs. She tore at the buttons and pulled off the jacket, then splashed her face with cold water. Vale stared at herself in the mirror.

Voices rose and fell from below. She thought she heard her name.

The reverend was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

“Nadine said you were catching the three o’clock. I can drive you,” he said. “It’s on my way back to town.”

“Yes, please,” Vale said.

She sat quietly in the reverend’s car.

“Sad that he’s gone,” he said. “Just sad. This is the part of my job that’s tough. Burying friends. Happens a lot in a small town.”

His face was set.

“You’ve likely seen your share of death, being in medicine,” he said.

“Can you tell me something, Reverend? Do you think God is merciful?”

“God—gives the gift of mercy to those who ask,” he said.

He dropped her at the station, and she watched for a moment as “JsSavs” vanished over the small rise.

On the train back to New York, she realized two things. She had left her jacket on the floor of Nadine’s bathroom. And she would never return to Quaker Hill.

Maryanne Chrisant, MD, has been published in *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Apricity Magazine*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Freshwater*, *Isele Magazine*, *JONAHmagazine*, *Open Ceilings*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Platform Review*, *Shark Reef*, *Sand Hills Literary Journal*, *Spotlong Review*, and on the podcast *Anamnesis: Medical Storytellers*. She has attended writing workshops with Jericho Writers, The New School, Tufts University, and in Shaker Square, Ohio. She studied poetry with Galway Kinnell and Denise Levertov. Her short story “Dia de los Muertos” was nominated for a 2024 Pushcart Prize. Maryanne is a physician and has held leadership roles at many prominent health-care institutions in the U.S. An advocate for children’s health, she’s currently a medical director at Joe DiMaggio Children’s Hospital in South Florida.