

Appearances

by vic fortezza

Vito stood before the mirror combing his dark, freshly-cut hair. He trimmed his thick mustache, then buttoned his black vest. He liked its tight fit against his muscular torso. He had difficulty fastening the top button of his white shirt, the collar tight around his thick neck. He gasped playfully, sticking out his tongue as he straightened his tie. He felt entrapped.

He checked his wallet and frowned as he found only \$27. He hated being money conscious, but had no choice at present.

He went out without a jacket. It was a warm early fall day, an orange sun filtering through the hazy skyline. The smell of burning leaves was in the air. It felt great to be alive.

"Hi, Vee," said a dark-haired woman of 35 who was leaning against a cyclone fence that enclosed an untended garden.

"What's up, Nee?" he returned, stopping, pulling a leaf from the hedges for luck.

"I'm not useta seein' you dressed up," she said, eyes wide. "You look great."

He looked away, uncomfortable. "I feel like an undertaker."

"Are you still bartendin'?"

"Yeah. I'm on my way to the city for an interview."

Her dark eyes stared into his. "I thought you had a job."

"I quit."

"You quit before you had another job? How could you?"

He shrugged. "The pay was lousy, and it was strictly a service situation, no tips. And the owner was a jerk. And, most importantly, I wasn't meeting any women there."

She shook her head. "From a teacher to a bartender...."

"Dumb, right? I hated school, though. I had no business there. I like bartending. I'm good at it now. The restaurant was great experience, if nothing else." He looked about. "Where's Paulie?"

"He didn't come home for lunch today."

He smiled sheepishly. "Boyfriend on his way?"

She smirked. "What boyfriend?"

"You still haven't straightened that out yet? Why don't you give up on the guy? He treats you like dirt. You'll find somebody else. There's so much out there."

She did not reply. He believed he could have her any time he wanted, as she'd dropped several hints, but he wasn't attracted to her physically, mentally or emotionally. She had a defeatist view of life, a poor self image. He preferred solitude, frustration, to her embrace, to any lies he would have to tell to bed her. And she had a ten-year-old son, which complicated the matter. How could he continue to play catch with the kid, look him in the eye, while all the while using his mother just to get off?

He wondered if his standards were ridiculous, inhuman. Many men he knew wouldn't think twice about such a situation. He just wasn't comfortable making love to a woman to whom he wasn't attracted merely to satisfy a physical urge that could be appeased by his own hand. He wanted something true or exciting.

"Gotta go," he said, backing away, fighting temptation.

"Good luck."

He approached the elevated tracks. His eyes spread wide as he spotted a young woman who turned past the fruit stand at the corner. Where'd she come from? he thought, amazed such a beauty had heretofore escaped his attention. He assumed she was new to the neighborhood. He could not help staring. She looked him in the eye. He liked that. They passed. He thought she'd spoken. It sounded like: "Well, say something," as if she'd seen him before. He did not turn around. Broke and out of work, he was ashamed to face her. He didn't even have a car. Where could he take her? He was certain she would have no patience for the quest for the literary golden grail. What woman in her right mind would? He was light years from being worthy of such a jewel. He would have to shun his goals in order to win her. Was he prepared to do that? The fact that he had to stop and think about it proved to him he wasn't. Yet, if he were so far from commitment, why wasn't he taking his pleasure

with someone like Nina? Did he feel unworthy even of casual sex?

As he climbed the stairs of the station, he gazed along the street. She'd disappeared. Had she gone into the salon? Given her impeccable attire and grooming, it seemed reasonable to assume she was a hairstylist. He suspected they were opposites dwelling in entirely different worlds. He was sure she'd been attracted to him, as Nina had been, because of the way he was dressed, a complete contrast to the athletic wear he was usually wearing. He then wondered if she'd seen him pass, if she knew more about him than he thought. Yeah, right, he told himself, chuckling at his ego.

Given her occupation, he assumed she was more concerned with appearance than substance. He imagined how disappointed he would be, she would be, to discover the truth. However, he was glad he would have the pleasure of seeing her whenever he passed the shop. He considered going to her for his next haircut, then cringed at the thought of entering the place. Its heavy, ornate atmosphere and perfectly coiffed barbers gave him the creeps. He'd been going to the same barber for years. He realized he might be able to learn about the woman from friends who had their hair cut at the salon.

He frowned as his bankroll diminished further upon the purchase of tokens. He hoped he wouldn't have to ask his mother for a loan. He hadn't even told her he was out of work. Something'll turn up, he assured himself.

As he waited for the train, he read the advertisements and the graffiti that had been scrawled across them. Most of it was crude and unimaginative. One item brought a smile to his face: "A good man may be hard to find, but a hard man is good to find." He assumed a woman had written it and wondered what she looked like.

The car he entered was empty except for himself. A number of people boarded at the next stop. He recognized an attractive, modestly-dressed, short-haired, blue-eyed woman whom he'd designated "the reader." He could not see the title of her book, as

she was holding it in her lap. She seemed very married. He believed he would have surmised it even if not for the huge diamond ring. She exuded virtue.

He became conscious of a persistent noise. The rear door of the car was moving from side to side, slamming shut without securing, rolling open at each swerve. Soon the train settled on a straightaway and the door jiggled with the swaying of the car. The metal latch at the top slid in and out of its hole gently. He grew excited and flushed, covering his mouth with a hand, concealing his mirth. You're no good, he told himself, carefully crossing his legs, with difficulty, gazing about to see if anyone else had reacted similarly.

He seemed alone. 30, he still had an adolescent-like fascination with sex. He wondered if he would ever lose it. He hoped not. Maybe if you ever got any, he thought.

Two women boarded, one middle-aged, the other barely out of her teens. He surmised they were mother and daughter. They sat further up the car and across the aisle. He guessed they were Hasidic. The older was wearing a light blue dress emblazoned with flowers. Her hair seemed heavily frosted, unnatural, as if it were a wig. Many of the Hasidic women wore it that way. The younger woman's hair was natural, a soft honey brown cut short, styled simply yet beautifully. Her complexion was flawless. She gazed at him. He looked into her dark eyes and saw fire, although they had not changed expression. She was wearing a light blouse and long skirt. He was unable to distinguish her bosom, as she was hunched forward slightly, thighs pressed together firmly. Her skirt had rolled up a bit, revealing some leg. Although little more than her ankle was visible, there was no doubt in his mind that her long legs were well-defined. He couldn't take his eyes off of her. She was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen, and this without the advantages of cosmetics and liberal attire. He was sure she would earn millions as a model.

She was holding a copy of the Torah bound in a black vinyl cover. She prayed fervently, eyes closed, lips moving silently. Her mother sat carefree, knitting. He was intrigued by the contrast. It seemed

their activities should have been reversed. You have no real sins, he thought as the girl lifted her head and looked his way. He sensed she was fighting her sexuality - and losing. He also sensed she was not one of them, at least not in nature. Indeed, she seemed to be fighting her soul, beseeching the Lord to save her from it, as if it and not her environment was its enemy. He feared that it would perish, that she would do what was expected of her, live falsely, making her old before her time. He was certain he understood her thoughts - why would God endow us with fierce desires that were to be ignored? He often asked himself the same.

She said something to her mother, and they rose and came toward him. His heartbeat accelerated. Her bosom was proportionate to the rest of her figure. She seemed flawless physically. He had the urge to bolt.

He guessed she'd told her mother that the sun shining through the window at her back had made reading difficult. She sat beside him at the edge of the bench, back turned to him slightly, and resumed praying. He sensed she was putting her sexuality to the test in hope of conquering it. He wondered if her mother knew this and approved. The poor girl was years from her peak and already suffering. Was she older than she looked? He doubted it. A marriage would have been arranged for her.

More Hasids boarded at ensuing stops. He did not understand their regimented way, their refusal to explore the vast possibilities of life. To his chagrin, he was uncomfortable in their presence. He admonished himself, but it failed to change his feelings. He was saddened by the sight of little boys in traditional habit, curls at their temples. It was as if they went through Holy Communion or Confirmation every day of their lives. Suddenly, being Catholic seemed easy.

He marveled at the girl's classic profile. He wanted her. It would be a brief affair, he knew. Even if she broke from Orthodoxy, she would never marry a gentile. It might be enough to convert her to secular Judaism, however, to help her find her true self. You're not one of them, he wanted to say; I can see it; I can

feel it; it's so obvious.

He had his name and number written on slips of paper in his wallet, which he kept should he meet a woman to whom he was attracted. He'd yet to use any, fearful it was tacky. Do it, he urged himself, studying her delicate neck, imagining the thrill it would be to deflower her. He was angered at the thought that she fall into the hands of a lout. Do it, he thought, calculating the consequences: the girl's outrage, feigned or not; her mother's indignation, her brethren's wrath. So what? he thought; she's worth it.

His thoughts became explicit. He would bet all the money he had she was aroused. He fought the temptation to drop something intentionally, squat and look for a moist stain. He chuckled as the train penetrated the underground, at the hackneyed metaphor that, at the moment, seemed appropriate. The car was plunged into darkness a moment until the lights were illumined. You're just like me, he thought; dyin' to bust out. He imagined her shyness, her initial timidity in making love, her gradual acceptance of the naturalness and beauty of it.

Stations passed and he did not make a move. At DeKalb Avenue the women rose. He was certain he would never see the girl again, and certain he would never forget her. He stared at her lovely back. She did not turn around, did not so much as peek. He watched her through the windows. Soon she was out of sight, gone from his life. He wondered if she would test herself with another male, another gentile, when she made her connection to another train. To his chagrin, it seemed she, despite overwhelming circumstances, had a greater chance of achieving her potential than he. He wondered if he would ever overcome whatever it was that kept him from being bold with women.

Better not think about it, he told himself, leaning back and closing his eyes, daylight filling the car as the train mounted the Manhattan Bridge; can't go to an interview lookin' depressed.

The image of the hairstylist came to mind. He wondered if it were time to surrender his dream, get a teaching position, marry and become a real man.

