

Fairy Tale

by vic fortezza

Laura slid across the front seat and slumped against Vincent, who kissed the top of her head.

"You okay?" he said, eyes on the scenic campus road.

She shrugged.

"It's time they fly solo, babe."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it."

They fell silent. The road took them further from their children.

"Highway," he said. "Buckle up."

"Why? There's nobody to set an example for."

His eyebrows arched. "I should've known that was just a brave front back there. It's a new beginning, Laur', for the boys and us."

"I know. I just hate losing them at the same time."

"They're not lost."

"Just let me hold on to you right now. I feel lost."

He wondered where the years had gone. "Seems like yesterday you told me they were gonna be twins."

"I'll never forget the look on your face. You were so happy."

"And why not? All those years worrying about not having any kids, then bam! - two in one shot. It made up for so much lost time. All those sleepless nights the first few years were worth it."

He leaned toward the cassette player. Soon Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" filled the car. Laura looked up, smiling wistfully. Vincent felt a familiar stirring. There were lines in her face now, and some puffiness, but the sweetness was still evident. He loved her as much as he had in the beginning. He'd played this tape while taking her home from their first date.

"Where'd you find it?"

"The attic."

"I can't believe how clear it sounds." She gave his bicep a squeeze.

"I was so afraid you'd hate it. I was sure you were into screaming divas, you being in your mid-twenties back then."

She made a face. "Why do you have to like one and not the other?"

He shrugged.

"I was impressed, though."

"I don't think I could've loved anybody who didn't appreciate such beauty. Were you surprised at what I listened to?"

"No. You were different, a mystery to everybody. You never looked up from your newspaper on the train. You said 'Good morning' to me maybe three times in six years, 'Excuse me' another five."

He hung his head. "Are you ever gonna let me live it down?"

"Never," she said.

He wondered how many times they'd discussed this. It never got old. It was their miracle. "If we hadn't bumped into each other so hard...."

She coiled in frustration. "You were so distant. When I asked you for the closing prices, you said: 'They're on the board, Miss.' You wouldn't even look at me."

He remembered as if it were yesterday. "I suspected you had an ulterior motive, then I thought: Nah, what would a young beauty like that want with a middle-aged weirdo like me?"

"Then that time I grazed your finger - twice! You froze. I didn't know what to think. I thought you might be gay."

He slumped. "I didn't think I could win. I was sure I'd lose the minute you found out how old I was, not to mention what I was making at the time. And I knew it'd set your parents off. I still think you're nuts."

"We proved everybody wrong."

"We were the one of a hundred May-Septembers that work."

"Even now nobody'd guess your age."

"I owed it to you to take care of myself. And I didn't want the kids to feel as self conscious as I did about my parents, God rest their gentle souls."

"Maybe we should both stop coloring now."

His head snapped toward her. "No! You're too young."

She chuckled. "I'm too young?"

He flushed. "Vanity." He was comforted by the brush of her cheek against him.

"You're so easy. It's not even a challenge any more."

Miles Davis joined them.

"Sounds like how I'm feeling," said Laura.

"Well '*Saeta*' does mean arrow."

"Perfect."

"And look at the beauty he made of it. Makes me green with envy."

"You may make it someday."

He tilted his head, puzzled.

"I've been sending your stuff out."

"You sly fox." He nudged her with his hip.

"I've always felt you gave it up to take care of me and the boys."

"Baloney. It just wasn't very good. You're wasting time and postage."

"We'll see."

He wondered how many earning-years he'd sacrificed in that pursuit. They might have married much sooner, had more children. Would she have eventually come to her senses and left him, found someone more worthy, had not his meager portfolio caught fire? The windfall seemed God's blessing on their union. He doubted there was a luckier man than he.

"I used up all my luck when I married you."

"Oh, stop."

"You're the most decent person I've ever known. I can't believe Mags saw it before I did. Then again, I doubt it was your decency he was attracted to. 'She's just a kid,' I told him."

"It's a miracle we got together, knowing how rigid you can be."

"The most selfish thing I ever did was marry you. I really thought it was over for me. One day I saw this little girl at a corner, looking both ways, waiting for traffic to clear so she could run across the street. I was terrified she was gonna get hit. It took all I had not to yell: 'Wait for the green!' And I got to thinking - if I acted like that about a total stranger, how would I be with my own kids? How would I stand such stress at my age?"

"What's life without stress? It's not really living."

"Well, listen to the philosopher."

"Well, what d'you expect, being married to you?

"I pray I don't have a stroke and leave you with an invalid to care for. You're in your prime."

"You're not gonna have a stroke."

"Your lips to God's ears, girl scout, but be prepared. Worst thing is I don't ever want you to love anybody else."

"I don't think I ever could."

The sounds of Louis Armstrong's All-Stars flowed from the speakers. Laura and Vincent sang along, imitating the rasp. "...I'd rather be here than any place I know...." They fell silent at the start of the trumpet solo, marveling at the artistry, the depth of feeling.

"I'd've never heard any of these tunes if it wasn't for you."

"Life'd be so much poorer without them."

"Duke!" she said, releasing her hold and snapping her fingers in time as "Take the A Train" began.

Vincent was surprised she remembered the lyrics. She botched the scat, however, which set them both to laughing. At the end of the piece, he lowered the volume.

"Isn't it something how these guys approach beauty differently?"

"Brubeck's intellectual. Miles gives you a dark introspection. Satch is melancholy, and Duke's an elegant, black tie, limousine, night-on-the-town-with-your-best-girl sound."

Laura again slumped against him. "What do I do now?"

Vincent fought back tears. He'd hoped the reminiscence would appease her. "Go back to work. Better yet, volunteer to tutor in school. You're a born nurturer. So many kids out there need that. We've talked about this before."

She nodded.

"You can also work on your handicap."

She pushed away from him. "I'll beat you someday."

"Never, not even when I'm reduced to a walker."

"I wish the clubs were in the car. The way I feel right now I'd have no problem whipping your butt."

"I have a better idea." He batted his eyebrows.

She flushed, understanding immediately. He basked in her glow.

He did not understand how she could stand the sight of him in the flesh. She wouldn't allow him to wear a T-shirt while they were making love. In his mind, it proved she was too good for him.

"First one we come to."

She leaned against him, dreamily now. "Tell me more."

"Once upon a time there was an odd couple, Vincent and Laura...."

"Beale Street Blues" W.C. Handy

"Take the A Train" Billy Strayhorn

