

Fall

by vic fortezza

Nick frowned, the changing of the leaves reminding him of the graying of his hair.. He'd never appreciated the colors of fall, as they heralded frost, winter, which he hated more and more each passing year.

He glanced at his reflection in the rear view mirror. The silver at his temples was even more obvious after a haircut. Vanity, thy name is Nicholas, he said to himself.

Co-workers teased him as to why he'd stopped coloring. He grinned and bore it, tempering his terror at the advance of age. Plucking had become futile. Time had finally caught up to him, the gray having traveled from his chest to his mustache to his head. He wondered if heartbreak had accelerated it.

He glanced at the statuette of the madonna that stood magnetized on the dashboard. Lately he'd been praying for grace, strength, to no avail. It'd been futile from the beginning. God, if indeed He existed, knew those who truly believed. Nick had been a skeptic since college.

His eyes glazed at the thought of Lisa. "Stupid," he whispered aloud, grip tightening on the steering wheel, which was cracked. "Stop the madness. If she were 'the one,' she would've come to you and said she wanted to take a shot."

He imagined she was enjoying a late breakfast with her new love, perhaps showering with him - and here he was pining for her like a lovesick teenager, which added anger to his despair. He'd never really had a chance. He'd known that 13 years ago, the moment he'd laid eyes on her. He thought she was the mother of his children, despite the obvious, at least to him, gap in their ages. He assured himself he was mad. He was not surprised when a few years later she began dropping hints. He did not react, certain she had no idea how old he was. She chose another. A year ago, the relationship ended, she began again. She was 30 now. He gave her a poem he'd written long ago, and a note informing her of his age. She did not

respond, although he sensed she was aching to defy all common sense and fly to him. He believed he would have won her had he pressed. However, he believed that would have been indecent, immoral. And then there was the matter of his finances. Was he to hold her to a vow of perpetual lower-middle-classness with a struggling artist 18 years her senior? It was absurd. She deserved better.

Now she was with a handsome man three years younger than herself, who came from wealth, who could give her 18 years and so many more things than he. She'd chosen wisely. The young man had a good heart and a winning personality. Still, despite reason, a logic that was crystalline, Nick was crushed. He wanted to quit the job he'd held for 15 years so he wouldn't have to see her, or him, them any more.

Head down, he entered a large department store, chastising himself for not eying the females present. He had to forget Lisa and find someone. Trouble was, no one appealed to him at present. He'd barely thought of anyone else since he'd given her the poem. He'd wanted to be pure, free, should she have chosen to be with him. What woman would want him in his current state of mind?

In the men's clothing department he scanned the sport jackets, surprised, appalled at the prices. Did he really need one? His suit, although 20 years old, was in mint condition and still fit perfectly. He doubted he'd worn it 20 times. The pants were even a bit loose now, as he hadn't much appetite lately. He grumbled, annoyed. What was he doing here - killing time? Suddenly he recalled he'd wanted a black jacket should his mother, who was 90, pass away. His eyes contracted with pain. Why was he thinking of such a thing?

"Nicky?" a female voice called softly.

He looked left. He stared, although he was unsurprised at who it was. "Ro? Hi. How you doin'?" To his embarrassment, his eyes glazed. He looked away, wondering what she must be thinking.

Tense, she tugged at a strand of her long reddish hair, a quirk he'd seen her do a thousand times. It warmed his heart. She was wearing light blue spandex that clung to her legs. He chuckled at her

fondness for athletic wear. In all the time he'd known her, he'd never seen her engage in exercise.

"You look great," he said quietly, "as usual."

She avoided his gaze, apparently struggling with herself. She shook her head, as if amazed. "How do you do it? You gotta be pushin' fifty."

"Steroids," he said lifelessly, his standard quip to the query.

She chuckled briefly, then was again bitten by tension.

"I haven't seen you in front of your mother's lately. Are you and your husband still there?"

She made a face. "Yeah."

He was disappointed, having hoped they'd split.

Soon there was an uncomfortable silence between them. He broke it.

"So how've you been? How's life treatin' you?"

"I'm bored," she said, looking at him, then away, jaw clenched.

He froze. She'd wasted no time. Apparently she'd returned to her old ways, her true self. It was her nature to sleep around, as it was his to sleep alone. She was biting her lower lip, gazing sidelong with what was almost a leer. He recognized the look, one she'd given him 22 years ago on the steps in his hallway, when she 15. He'd torn himself away, believing that in three years he'd be able to do whatever he wanted with her - and he planned a lot. They'd misfired ever since, even after she'd wed, each taking turns at reluctance, despite the lust teeming between them. Now temptation was again beckoning, and Nick was teetering like the last bowling pin standing, more vulnerable to a fall than ever. It'd been so long. Recently, for the first time in his life, he'd contemplated hiring a hooker, not for sex but simply to cuddle so he would again know the relief of being flesh to flesh with a woman. Ro was so attractive, so sexy, so trim, although she was starting to look her age. He didn't want her, however. He wanted Lisa. He was miserable without her, even though he'd never even had her. Ro might afford temporary relief, he knew, but he might be even more miserable later. And he didn't want to be miserable. He wanted to be happy. He wanted to

be decent, like Lisa. Ro had no interest in children. She didn't want to be tied down.

"You might be disappointed," he said, looking at the floor. "I'm not the man I used to be."

There was a puzzled flash in her hazel eyes. Apparently she didn't know what to say or do. Upset at what she might be thinking, at his own unmanliness, he seized her arm. "C'mon," he said, pulling her along. She did not protest. In fact, she seemed to be fighting for breath.

Suddenly he let go of her, realizing there might be neighbors present. He didn't need an irate cuckold in his life. Walking quickly, head down, he led her toward the exit. Not a word passed between them. The lot had filled considerably in the brief time he'd been inside. It was Saturday. Shoppers were scurrying toward the store.

As soon as they were seated in his car, they kissed, hungrily. Ro dug her fingers into his biceps, examined their shape. He surrendered completely, shutting off his mind, until she became bolder.

"Not here," he said, breathless, caressing her high forehead, the only physical feature of hers he didn't like. "If we're finally gonna do this, let's do it right."

Right? he thought, stung by the irony. She was another man's wife. He started the car.

For more than 20 years he'd fantasized about having her any time, anywhere, even in broad daylight. What he wanted now, however, was intimacy, not lust. Would he get that from her? It seemed absurd to think so. He feared he was being as foolish as he'd been in falling hopelessly in love with a woman 18 years younger than himself.

She sat against him, a hand resting delicately on his thigh.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" she said with quiet difficulty. "Look."

She spread her legs, looking away, eyes closing. He shuddered violently, a surge he hadn't experienced in what seemed ages. What was she doing with him? She needed studs to satisfy her. He was amazed at the circumstances, and peeved at himself. He was going

to have sex with a woman he'd always wanted - and all he was feeling emotionally was sorrow. He felt he was spiraling downward. He was about to cede the moral high ground. He would never again be able to condemn adultery. He feared he would weep at the sight of her breasts, feared he would be thinking of Lisa's, feared he would hurt her.

"This old car's just like you," she said dreamily, stroking the velvet interior - "well-preserved."

He imagined Lisa's beau had a beautiful new car. The young man was more worthy, better for her than he, even if his love for her were only half as deep as his own. He was jolted by this truth.

As they approached his building, he kept his head down, ashamed. Residents were finally seeing he wasn't gay, and he was unable to enjoy the moment. He'd fantasized about making an entrance with Lisa, showcasing the pearl he'd been awaiting. And although Ro was more attractive, physically, than Lisa, Nick was not proud. She was beholden to another, wedding band conspicuous. He was surrendering to impulses he'd thought he'd outgrown, which were now motivated by anger and despair rather than desire and fascination. Would he give in to other negativism as well? What did he wish - suicide by dissipation like the jilted suitor in Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin*? That would be so easy in the age of AIDS.

As soon as the door of the elevator closed, Ro pounced on him. Nick recalled Maggie, "The Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."* * * He matched her ardor. When the door opened he pulled her by a damp hand toward his apartment.

She didn't even give the place a once-over. She attacked his clothes. Lips glued to hers, hands undressing her, he backed toward the bed, falling onto it, she atop him. Suddenly he balked, breaking from their kiss, conscience intruding. The situation was moving at a dizzying clip completely foreign to him. Only moments ago he'd feared he would never lie with a woman again.

"What?" said Ro impatiently, respiring heavily, clutching his unbuckled belt.

"You're married."

She coiled in frustration. "You think you're the? You know me better than that."

She yanked the belt from around his waist. His throat clenched.

"I'm gonna be godfather to my niece's daughter tomorrow."

"That's great." She tugged forcefully at his pants.

He felt base. Was this his true self - deceiver? He recalled lying to the priest who'd granted him permission to act as godfather. He looked the man in the eye and swore he was a good Catholic who attended services regularly. He hadn't been to mass in 30 years.

He closed his eyes. "I'm sick about a girl."

"Well, where is she?" said Ro, looking around mockingly. "Gettin' off with somebody else, I bet. Takin'...."

Kill me, why don't you? he thought, as she became more descriptive, more vulgar; stick a knife in my heart.

"One part of you's not sick over her." She reached for it.

Was his love false, then, his despair contrived? he wondered.

"Screw 'er. She's not the only girl in the world. I'll do you like she never could."

As far as he was concerned, Lisa was the only girl in the world. Ro didn't care. She took whatever she wanted. He did not try to stop her. He was stunned at how different they were. And to think he'd once believed they were a match. Given her experience, she would accept his wild, dark (were they base?) thoughts, which he was certain would scare Lisa to death. Suddenly he believed he was with the right woman.

Her husband's a slob, he assured himself. No doubt she'd married such a man simply for the sake of appearances, so she'd have someone to accompany her to family functions, someone she would not feel guilty about betraying. She didn't want to work, to support herself. She wanted to be free to roam. If this tryst were wrong, he thought, why was he so aroused? If it hadn't been meant to be, how was it seemed Ro had come out of nowhere to find him? Lisa had a lover - why shouldn't he? What sense was there in being good, honorable, when most of the world wasn't? Why was he always the fool?

He lost himself in Ro.

Hours later, he awoke abruptly, glanced at the clock, and despaired. He was to have purchased a savings bond for his godchild-to-be. The banks were now closed. His sister would give him hell. His nieces words, explaining why she'd chosen him as guardian, now mocked him: "You were always the strongest and most stable of us." What would she say if she could see him now? He'd made a fool of her. She'd chosen unwisely. God had tested his worthiness, and he'd failed miserably. Or had the devil called? He rose, an ache in his gut. Ro was dozing peacefully, demon satisfied, at least temporarily.

He closed the bathroom door, pressed a towel to his face, sat on the floor with his back to the tub, and wept.

Soon Ro tapped at the door. "I gotta get goin', Nick."

He did not respond. She found the door locked.

"Nicky?"

* * *Tennessee Williams

