

Numb And Number

by vic fortezza

He looked up as he reached the intersection, and crossed as it cleared. His head was down again as he walked toward his car, which was parked beside a schoolyard, where junior high students were involved in an after-school game of touch football. He smiled wistfully, the boundary lines he'd painted long ago almost entirely faded. His sport now was golf, which he would not play again for months. Leaves were massed along the base of the cyclone fence that surrounded the playground.

"Vito?" said a woman.

He recognized the sweet voice. He was not surprised. Life did these things. There was no sense fighting it.

"Hey, Jen. I always forget you teach here."

They exchanged pecks without looking at each other directly.

"I thought you were ignoring me," said Jen. "I called you three times."

His broad shoulders sagged a bit. "Sorry. My hearing's shot. All these years in the pit have taken their toll."

"I can't believe you're still down there."

"Nor can I. I can't complain, though. It's been good to me. It's just way past played out, especially now that the world's in peril and gold's in demand again. It's tough in there. I don't have an alternative. I'm stuck getting yelled at all day unless I get a big payday for a screenplay."

A smile brightened her lovely pale face. "So how've you been?"

He shrugged. "Fakin' it."

She looked away, throat clenching. "Yeah, well...."

He sensed she didn't love her husband. He hoped it was just one of those rough patches all marriages suffered.

"If it's true that we are what we pretend to be, I'll pretend to be happy and hope that I can deceive myself."

She chuckled, although she seemed unsure if he were joking. "You look the same except that you're finally getting gray."

They'd run into each other only twice in 20 years, ten years ago at the bank, and two years ago when her sister moved out of the apartment across the hall.

"You look as youthful as ever."

Only her short dark hair indicated middle age. She didn't have a single wrinkle.

"I can't believe you've had all those stories published. I read everything at your web site. Do you get paid for that?"

He did not scoff. "Of course not. Money's not in the cards for me. I haven't been able to crack anything but small press magazines."

"I still haven't bought a hard copy of your book."

"You don't have to. You bought the electronic version. That's enough."

"I'd still like one for my shelf."

"Hold on." He opened the door of his car and reached into the glove compartment. "I always have one with me, especially when I'm in the neighborhood, just in case."

He handed it to her. She reached into her bag and started violently as the football struck the fence. Vito did not even flinch.

"I can't take money from you. I was so afraid the book would open old wounds for you, even though twenty-five years've gone by. I knew the grapevine would eventually reach you. You and my sister were the only ones I was worried about. I was so uncomfortable when she started talking to me about it." He imitated her accent: "'My favorite part was the conversation between Veenie and Kathy.'"

Jen smiled. Her family had been his mother's tenant for 30 years. Now she was working just up the block from the house. It was odd how things worked out.

"For seventy-plus years she had no idea how pathetic her brother was, at least on the inside."

"We should all be as pathetic as you. The book is so good."

"Only people who know me think so, and you're all biased. Some people at work think I'm ready to snap like the character in the book, and maybe they're right, although I've been feeling nothing but weak and defeated lately. Maybe they see me better than I see

myself."

"They do not."

"They used to think I was gay."

She smirked. She knew he wasn't gay. He did not regret that they'd had sex, although it'd ruined their friendship. He'd used her, knowing he was light years from settling down.

"I'm so proud of you. It's such an accomplishment."

He was unmoved. "It's self-published, Jen. Anybody can put a book out in the digital age. Besides, it's a complete flop. I've sold a hundred twenty-eight copies in three years. It's too hardcore, too dark for most people. One reviewer called me a misogynist."

"That's only one opinion, and it's wrong."

"Even the one bookstore I got it into didn't re-order, even though he sold all five copies. He told my niece it was vulgar."

"Compared to what? I see the same stuff on prime time TV nowadays."

"Customers must've complained, and the market's always right."

She shook her head with disbelief. "It ripped me open."

The compliment had no effect on him. He sensed she'd been affected not by the account of the assault but by his feelings for her, which he'd kept hidden.

"You should be so happy. What's the matter?"

He did not want to discuss it. He was bored with his angst, with the age of angst. What good would it do to complain that he had no wife and children, that his sex-life consisted of a twice-weekly visit to a porn site. He thought it best to ignore his sorrows, to throw himself into his work, into his nickel and dime efforts on the web, into the guitar and movies on DVD. He walked past Ground Zero twice each work day; young Americans were sacrificing their lives on the forefront of the battle for civilization — everything else seemed small compared to these epic events. Besides, at 53 it would be the height of selfishness to father a child. It wasn't as if he were rich, able to hire help in its upbringing.

"Is it because of that girl in your stories? She has no idea what she's missing. You always used a different name, but it's obvious it's

the same girl. All the names begin with an L."

The thought of her no longer sent a shock through him. It wasn't about her any more. He hadn't written about her in a long time, which was just as well, as he was certain those stories, perhaps his entire body of work, were redundant.

"Don't be too hard on her. She's even younger than you. She has an acute common sense that would never let her be with a guy so much older than herself, especially one in my financial position. She came to me with the vagueness she'd show a guy her own age, then told everybody it was me. And maybe she's right. She certainly has no problem hooking up. She's even with child now. She's got a guy at least ten years younger than me who makes twice as much money."

Jen was deflated by what seemed compassion. "I always said you'd never get married."

"But you thought it was because I was a horndog. I tried being one, but I couldn't pull it off."

"You're too good."

"Yeah," he said ironically.

She shook her head. "How can a guy like you be alone?"

He had his response memorized. "Some people can't quit smoking or drinking or doing drugs or sleeping around — I can't quit being alone."

"I can't believe you didn't call me back."

He was glad she'd broached it. He wasn't going to overlook it as he did the overtures of young women barely out of their teens.

"You're married. You have a beautiful son."

She twisted in place. "That's...."

He waited for her to finish, although he knew she wouldn't. He'd called her on her vagueness. He hadn't called the other on hers because he'd wanted her to cross the line without prodding, to prove his age didn't matter. He suspected that Jen's subconscious had wanted an affair to evolve, one that would have seemed spontaneous and, therefore, less sinful. Now that things hadn't gone as she'd hoped, she was mortified, faced with the fact that she'd intended to

be unfaithful.

"You gave me your cell phone number, Jen. It was a dead giveaway."

There were tears in her eyes. "I've always loved you."

"I know. I loved you too."

This felt like a lie, as he had not loved her as he had the other. He hadn't thought of her in so long until she'd called about the book.

"We chose our paths long ago, and they've diverged. Be true to your husband and son. Don't join the douche bag part of society. You're too good for that."

He took her in his arms, although he was devoid of feeling. His own tears had dried months ago. He noted a woman staring at them, books cradled to her chest. He assumed she was on the faculty and was certain rumors would be flying. He didn't care.

"Let me sign the book."

She chuckled as she read the inscription, which matched what he'd written in her eighth grade autograph book: "The chemistry is just right."

"I want to pay you."

He wasn't going to argue. He was certain that it wouldn't be a financial strain, that her husband was a good provider. And it no longer mattered that he would never break even on the book. It'd been a point of pride, not financial necessity. He'd saved so much money, hoping the other would abandon common sense and come to him.

"Since you paid five for the e-book, give me five for this."

She handed him the bill and kissed his cheek. "Bye, Vee."

"Bye."

He waited until she'd pulled away. He would not allow sorrow into his heart. What was he to have done — ask her to abandon her son, or to bring him into a broken home? He supposed he might have suggested she leave her husband, especially if she were being deceived, but he did not want to be responsible for that. He would not even allow himself to wish for it, as it was base, something that would doom a subsequent relationship. And dare he ask her to have

his child? She had to be 40 by now.

And so he, unlike his best friend, had shunned an affair with a married woman, with someone he loved. He wondered if those at work who thought he was crazy were right. It was more evidence to corroborate what a friend had said — that he was the most sexually repressed man in history. He hadn't even been angered by the comment. There was no defense against it. He wasn't even sure it mattered any more.

He gazed at the playing field as an urgent patter of feet approached. It was followed by cries of “Yah!” He recalled how important sports had once been to him. Now even his golf score seemed meaningless. What would it prove should he finally break 80? Where would it rank him — ten millionth in the nation?

He did not feel like listening to music. He tuned the radio to an all-news station, reminding himself that others had it much, much tougher than he, that he was actually lucky. 17 U.S. soldiers had been killed in a crash of helicopters near Baghdad. He supposed suicide attacks on American soil were imminent. He wondered if it would be bad to die childless.

