

The Lovely Numbers

Bob's alarm went off at exactly 6:00 am every morning, on the dot. He turned it off by the 3rd beep, without fail. He sat up immediately, and did his morning stretches, working out the kinks as his mother used to say. He was in the shower promptly at 6:05, shaved and dressed by 6:20, microwaving his bowl of oatmeal by 6:25, and out the door by 6:40. He would catch the 7:00 bus to work. Lunch was at 12:00 sharp after a morning of lining up lovely numbers in rows, always a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, carrots, and pudding. Then back to work, lining up the lovely numbers, until 5:00. The 5:30 bus would get him home by 6:00, where he would enjoy a simple dinner and a little tv. Once the dishes were cleaned, the coffee pot filled, and his lunch packed for the next day, Bob would brush his teeth, put on his plaid pajamas and slide into bed promptly at 9:15, ready for a little reading. His favorite book was his Chinese-English dictionary. He could keep words in line with rules, just like his numbers. Lights were off at 10:00 and he would drift off into a dreamless sleep, lulled by the comfort of his beautiful schedule, safe in the anticipation that he could do it all again tomorrow, with no surprises, upsets or disruptions.

One of the few times in his day that he interacted with people was on the bus to work. He managed to stay protected in his cubicle, but on the bus he sometimes had to touch people or respond to a question. It was hard. He tried to keep all of this to a minimum - but he did enjoy watching others on the bus. He enjoyed being with people, just not too much interaction. This day, a woman got on the bus that he had never seen before, Her hair was long and brown, and as she looked at him and said "excuse me" before sliding past to sit in the seat next to him, could see that her eyes were brown too - his favorite color and he loved it when things matched. Her clothes looked soft and

kind, loose and flowy like water. She smelled clean, like Ivory soap. When she brushed his arm momentarily he froze - a little jolt of electricity ran up his arm and spread throughout his body. This was unexpected and surprising but not altogether unpleasant. Bob stared straight ahead and breathed deeply until his heartbeat slowed to normal.

Every day he saw her. She got on at his stop and off at his stop, but where she came from and where she went he never knew. He found himself looking forward to seeing her each day. The heat of summer was giving way to the cool of autumn. Each day, Bob would look for the brown-haired woman on the bus, feeling uncomfortable until he found her. He never spoke and tried very hard not to stare, but he didn't feel right until he knew she was there. Days passed and the temperature dropped. He had to pull out his winter coat. She wore a bright red coat that looked soft and squishy - he thought it would be nice to sit beside her in that coat,

He began to have dreams in which she would appear from time to time, always sitting on the bus looking out the window. He could sometimes imagine her with him, inserting her silent, kind presence within his beloved schedule - eating oatmeal with him in the morning, watching NOVA after work, preparing lunch for the next day, silently walking by his side on weekend mornings. He had never desired another person's companionship although his mother had told him he might one day. He didn't know what to make of this feeling. There were a few times that she didn't appear on the bus, and he became slightly irritable; his brain felt foggy, he felt sideways and cross. She would reappear in her usual spot the next day and he could breathe easy again. The thought did cross his mind that she did not know how important she had become in his

schedule and his life. What if she just disappeared one day? How would he ever find her?

When the snow melted and he could trade his winter coat out for his spring jacket, he wondered if he should speak to her. He wondered if she would be interested in him. He was interested in her - he wanted to know more about her - this surprised him. He even thought he could alter his schedule for her (not a lot, just a little) if it meant he could see her every day.

One day, she sat beside him again on the way home from work. She was clutching a fistful of balloons, a stack of greeting cards and a book to her chest. He glanced at the title: *Chinese-English Dictionary*. A shock of pleasure ran through him.

He swallowed hard and nodded at her book. "Chinese?"

"Oh, yes." She smiled. "I'm being transferred to our office in China. I have always wanted to live there. Today was my last day. I'm moving next week."

"Oh. I love Chinese. I have that same book."

"That's nice!" she said. Then it was their stop. He stepped off the bus behind her and watched her walk away. He couldn't quite describe what he was feeling. He had never felt it before. As her long brown hair was swallowed up in the crowd of people heading for home, he realized he was going to be late getting home. Late getting home meant late getting supper, which meant late getting to bed, and then everything would be off. . .then nothing would be lovely anymore.

