

NUMB

**A short story by
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I walk into the bar to find my buddy Vic, drunk off his ass. Now, I've seen him get a little buzzed here and there at parties, but never like this. To be honest, the sight scares the living shit out of me. He's slumped over on his barstool and is unshaven. His hair is a wild mess, like somebody had taken an air cannon and unleashed it right at his face over and over again. His shirt and jeans have nothing but crease marks in them—perhaps from sleeping in them all day long.

If I didn't know this was Vic, I would have mistaken him for a homeless bum. That's how bad it is.

Vic sees me and slurs loudly, "Gavin! Dude, so glad you're here! How the hell are you?" He tries pointing as he says this, but the drinks have thrown his coordination off, so random fingers go up and down. He looks like somebody who just walked into a spider web and is trying desperately to get it off of his hand.

I take a seat next to him and the bartender gives me an odd look. She rolls her eyes, like she was trying to say, "Oh brother, this can be trouble." My association with Vic has already labeled me as a problem, and I haven't even had a fucking drop of booze.

"Vic," I say. "What the hell are you doing?"

He doesn't answer because he's busy drinking his beer. I repeat the question and he looks at me with squinty eyes. Goddamn, they're really bloodshot. It's amazing he can even keep his eyes somewhat open.

"Having a good time. What else would I be doing?"

"You do know it's Tuesday, right? Tuesday."

"Tuesday. So?"

"You're having a good time on a *Tuesday*?"

"I'm having a good time on a Tuesday. What's it to you?" He burps real loud and the stench is overwhelming. I begin to cough, but Vic pays me no mind. He has other important business. His beer bottle is empty, so he begins to pound on the bar with his fist to get the bartender's attention. "Hey! Hey! You! Miss! I'm on empty, goddammit!"

The bartender gives him a nasty look, but delivers a beer as requested. “Buddy, why don’t you cool it? Just for a little bit? Seriously.” She looks at me again and frowns. This bartender, she’s not what you would call attractive. She looks more like a trucker than a bartender, with her baggy and wrinkly skin, short hair and big size. She points at me and is about to say something, but then she shakes her head and says, “Forget it.”

When she walks away, Vic bursts out in laughter. “Cool it? Who the fuck says shit like that anymore?”

“Maybe she’s right,” I say. I honestly don’t know what the situation is with Vic, but I’m already siding with her. This was embarrassing as all hell.

Vic points at me. “Cool it,” he says and then bursts out in laughter again.

It’s such an odd sight. Seeing somebody you’ve known practically all of your life getting hammered—and keep in mind that this is somebody who *never* gets balls-out drunk. The most I’ve ever seen him drink was two, maybe three beers. There has to be a reason for all of this. Something isn’t right. Vic is causing all sorts of looks from the various bar patrons around, and these were *professional* alcoholics. They don’t lose their shit after a few beers, and I highly doubt that they respect lightweights who get annoyingly goofy after just a couple of bottles.

“Why don’t you have a beer?” Vic asks.

“Nah. Not really thirsty.”

“Who the hell said anything about being *thirsty*? Since when do you have to be thirsty to drink, goddammit?”

“Vic, what the hell is wrong with you?” I ask. It was pointless to beat around the bush. It was time to get a straight answer on what was going on with him. “I’ve never seen you this wasted before.”

“I’m just having a good time, is all,” he says while taking a drink from his bottle. “Let’s just say it hasn’t been the best day.”

“Okay,” I say. Now, we’re getting somewhere. “Why hasn’t it been a good day?”

“I’d rather not say.”

We *were* getting somewhere, and then out of nowhere a roadblock. A horrific ten car pile up and an officer ordering us to take a detour. So much for me thinking that I was actually making some headway.

“So, you’re just going to sit here and drink? That’s your answer?”

“Now you’ve got the idea.”

There is no talking to him. Not that it’s ever easy to get a straight answer out of a drunk, but this is ridiculous. I know I wasn’t going to be able to do this alone, so I excuse myself to the men’s room. I take out my cell and dial Randy’s number. He’s another one of my really good friends. Maybe he can help me out.

When he picks up, I immediately tell him the situation.

“Vic is drunk? Really? Vic? Since when does he ever get drunk?” he asks in amazement.

“Since today.”

“Fuck, man. Well, guess it had to happen sometime.”

I look at the dirty and scratched up mirror in the bathroom. There are some random curse words carved into it. Some words, I think are made up and don’t really exist.

“No, I think it goes deeper than that,” I tell him.

“You sure about that?”

“Yeah, and I can see it going to a really bad place real soon.”

“So, what do you need me for?”

“I need help, man. I can’t do this on my own. Something’s bugging the crap out of him, and he won’t tell me what’s what.”

He’s silent for a moment. “He didn’t drive, did he?”

“No, I think he took a cab or something. Or I hope to God that he did.”

“Then all you can do is stay with him and make sure he doesn’t do anything retarded.”

“I think you’re talking about something impossible here.”

“I know it’s a crap situation, but what else can you do? If he’s not going to blab, he ain’t gonna blab. So, sit tight and just look out for him. He sure as hell can’t do it himself, you know.”

It’s simple advice, but it’s also the truth. There’s really not a whole lot else that can be done other than to play babysitter until he decides he’s had enough. “Thanks. I better go and check on him. Plus, the florescent lights in here are giving me a massive fucking headache.”

I get off the phone and exit the men’s room. I pray to God that Vic hasn’t done something stupid like take the entire bar hostage, or worse, sing some terrible 80’s song while naked. Trust me, the whole hostage thing would be less embarrassing. When I’m able to get a clear view of the bar and where we’re sitting, I’m relieved to see that Vic is right where I left him. Just sipping on his beer quietly and not being a nuisance. I’m relieved, but I’m not naïve. I know that this can very well be the calm before the storm, and I have to make sure I don’t lose sight of that.

As I take my seat, Vic is giving me a really stern look for some reason. One eye is open more than the other and he’s just staring at me.

“Took you long enough,” he says. “Were you on the phone?”

“Yeah. Randy called and I didn’t hear it, so I called back,” I lie.

“Really?” He’s quiet again. He doesn’t blink. A soft belch comes out of his mouth and he says, “I think you’re full of it.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s right.”

All I can do is shrug and say, “Not my problem.”

“Says *you*.”

“Look, I was on the phone with Randy. He called and I didn’t hear it. So, I gave him a call back.”

“Yeah?”

Jesus, what was he doing? Interrogating me? “Yes. Fucking, yes. Who else would I be on the phone with?”

He shrugs and lifts his bottle up but doesn't drink. "I don't know. You're acting very defensive."

"I'm acting defensive because you think I'm up to no good."

"I didn't say that."

"You said I was full of it."

Vic drinks while still looking at me from the corner of his eye. When he's done, he's still holding it up to his lips. "I think you called Regina."

"Fuck. Why would I do that?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"I didn't call her. Why would I do that?" Regina is Vic's girlfriend. Why he would think that I called her is beyond me. What? Did he think we were screwing or something?

He's quiet. He finally puts his bottle down and wipes a drop of beer away from his upper lip. "Nevermind. I don't want to talk about it."

Odd. That's the only word to describe it. I shrug and mumble, "Whatever." We sit quiet for a while. Vic continues to drink and I just stare off into space. I'm trying to put it all together in my head. Maybe Vic was drinking because he wanted to. I mean, who was I to say? Maybe he woke up and decided for the hell of it that he was going to get trashed at a bar. Still, it didn't make a whole lot of sense. Something's bugging him, and it's bugging the hell out of me that he isn't coming clean.

Vic is almost unable to keep himself on the barstool. He looks like he could fall down at any minute, so that's when I try to tell him that maybe he's had enough and that he should probably switch to water.

"You ain't my mom," he jokes.

"I don't care. You really need to cut yourself off."

"Shit, man. I've seen you drunk plenty of times."

"Not on a fucking Tuesday night."

"Oh! Excuse me!" he says, throwing his arms out and almost losing his balance. "So it's wrong to get fucked up on a Tuesday, but not on a Friday or Saturday!"

“It’s not right for *you*. I’ve never seen you like this.”

“There’s a first time for everything, I guess. You only go through life once, so what the hell?”

“And that’s what you decided today?”

“Pretty much.”

“Why?”

“Does there have to be a reason?”

“I don’t know. Does there?”

This, for some reason, brings Vic to a halt. His eyes roll upward and his mouth hangs open as he tries to figure out something to say. He’s making it out to be like I asked him some complex question, like what’s the meaning of life? Then, when he finally finds the answer, his eyes go back to me and he says, “No,” and takes another swig.

Was I wrong? Maybe there really wasn’t a reason. I guess I think it’d be easier to justify his actions if there were some legitimate reason. If he had been laid off, or a loved one had died, those would be easier reasons for me to accept than him just deciding to get boozed up for the hell of it. Not to say that I always had a reason for getting trashed. Sure, I enjoyed it as much as the next guy. You know what? People expect it from me. Plus, I usually do it in a more friendly environment, say at a friend’s house or at a party. Never once did I hit a bar and drink by myself, and certainly not on a goddamned Tuesday.

On the TV, there’s a news break about some celebrity douche-bag who beat up his girlfriend pretty badly. I mean, he really fucked her up. They’re showing us pictures of the woman and her face is all swollen. There’s hardly a spot that isn’t black and blue. The news break isn’t about the beating. This was a few days ago. No, the break is about the woman taking him back.

Vic gives a scowl as he looks at the TV. “Do you fucking believe that shit? She takes the prick *back*? After *that*!? He beats her to a bloody pulp, and his reward is that she forgives him and acts like it never happened.”

“They say he may end up doing some jail time.”

“That ain’t the point, goddammit.” He pauses. Then, another belch. “What I’m talkin’ about here is the fact that this guy... beats the ever-loving shit out of her... Right?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“He *beat* her! And she’s taking him back! What kind of bullshit is that?” He shakes his head and sighs. “The whole fucking system is flawed, I tell ya.”

I don’t know what he means by that. Before I can ask him, Vic notices his bottle is empty. “Oh no,” he says under his breath. “Uh oh. Uh oh. This can be a problem.” He calls for the bartender, and I swear he only mumbles for her twice or so, but he feels like she isn’t paying attention to him. This is when Vic decides to scream in a nursery-rhyme fashion, “BARTENDER, BARTENDER, DON’T BE A CLIT! COME AND GET ME LIT!”

The bartender flinches and has had enough of Vic’s piss-poor behavior. “Okay! That does it!” she growls. She storms right over to us and points. “You two. Get the fuck out of here. Now.”

Vic stares at her with a puzzled look. “Come again?”

“OUT.”

“Fine,” I quickly say. I get up and put my hand on his shoulder. “I think we should be leaving.”

“*Leaving?*” he asks, slapping my hand away. “No, no, no. That won’t do.”

“Vic.”

“Fuck that noise! I want another drink.”

“Well you ain’t gonna get it,” the bartender snaps. Her hands are at her sides. Seriously, she looks like she would be able to kick both of our asses without much of an effort.

“But, didn’t you hear me?” He looks at me and drunkenly grins. “She didn’t hear me, Gavin.” Back to the bartender. “I told you *not to be a clit, come and get me lit.*” He starts pounding onto the bar with both hands. “LIT LIT LIT LIT LIT LIT LIT LIT LIT, GODDAMMIT!”

A guy who is twice the size of the both of us and who looks like he does quite a bit of working out, pulls Vic right off of the barstool and drops him to the ground. Vic tries to get back up, but the man throws him down again and even kicks him a few times in the gut.

I run for him, only to try to stop him from pummeling Vic to death, and the guy comes close to clocking me right in the face. I lunge back and throw up my hands. “Hold it! Hold it! Wait! It’s cool! It’s cool! Just let him be and I’ll get him out of here.” I pick up Vic from the ground, who is coughing non-stop. The bartender is screaming at us to leave and that if we ever come back, she’ll call the cops.

My first bar banning, and I hadn’t touched a fucking drop of booze tonight.

We leave the bar and Vic is still coughing and moaning. I support him by having his arm over my shoulder. We walk for a couple of minutes and Vic pulls away from me saying that he’s fine and doesn’t need my help. There’s a bench by a bus stop that’s empty, so we go over to have a seat. I let Vic cough for a few more minutes just so he can finally catch his breath before I start questioning him. There’s a few times where he thinks he’s going to puke, but he maintains. Surprisingly.

When I think he’s had enough time to recover, I say, “Dude, what the fuck was that all about? Seriously?”

Vic is feeling around his ribs. “That fucking gorilla really did a number on me. I should sue that goddamned place.”

“You were out of line tonight. Can’t say the shit you’ve said and not expect some sort of a beat-down.”

“He fucking physically assaulted me!”

“Yes, we’ve established that. And they’ve banned us.”

“Fine by me. You think I’m gonna give them my business after *that*?”

Unbelievable. I shake my head and am frustrated as hell. “Really, what is this all about?”

“Nothing,” he says while still feeling around his ribs. “Everything is wonderful.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s NOTHING!” he snaps, and pounds his thighs with his fists like a little kid throwing a tantrum. “Nothing is wrong with me! How many times do I have to say it?”

“Fine,” I surrender. “Have it your own goddamned way.” We sit in total silence. There was no point in questioning him anymore. He wasn’t going to give me the real story. Not now, at least. If asking him was only going to get him more riled up, then I wasn’t going to push his buttons. I stare ahead at the oncoming cars on the street. My eyes follow the headlights, and as I follow the cars I think to myself what I wouldn’t give to switch places with any of those people inside. Anywhere was better than here. I didn’t care what kind of money problems that person may have, or what the state of their health was, I just wanted out of here. I pretend and daydream what it’s like to be somewhere else. *Someone else.*

After fifteen minutes, Vic breaks the silence. “Regina left me.”

I feel like somebody’s knocked the wind out of me when I hear this. “What?”

He nods and is very somber. “Yeah. Yeah, she’s gone.”

“Why?”

Vic is silent again and looks like he may start crying. I tell him that he doesn’t have to talk about it if he doesn’t feel like it, but he shakes his head. “She said that I was boring her.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah. She was getting bored of the relationship... and bored of me.”

“She *said* that?”

He nods. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“Jesus. Buddy, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“You’re the only one I’ve told. Christ, my mom doesn’t even know it, yet.” He sighs and shakes his head. He puts his face in

his hands, but he isn't crying. "I wanted to feel something else tonight. I wanted to feel something other than this pain. So, I decided to get wasted... To get numb, I guess. Hell, I was even willing to get in a fucking fight, just as long as it made me feel something else. Something other than this."

I don't know what to say. It all makes sense now. Now that I have my reason for his behavior tonight, I don't know if I'm relieved or more depressed.

Vic starts to sob in his hands. "It didn't work. None of this shit worked, goddammit!" He's saying this very slowly, and slurring a few words here and there. "And the topper, the real fucking topper... is that some abusive PRICK is back with his girlfriend. She welcomes him with open-fucking arms... and here I am." He looks up at me with puffy and red eyes. "I've never hit a woman. NEVER. My only crime? Guess I'm not *exciting* enough. I mean, I'm *me*, right?"

I nod. "Yeah. Of course, yeah."

"I know I'm no prize. Okay. I get that. I'm flawed. Just like everybody else, but I have *never* hit a woman. Not once did I think about hitting Regina. Not once." He's silent for a moment and looks like he's going to break down again. "I get broken up with, and some... abusive... ASSHOLE gets to sleep next to someone tonight. How the hell is that right?" He puts his face back into his hands and I can hear him drunkenly sob louder. It was all coming out now.

"It isn't," I say, finally knowing what this was all about. I now know exactly what he meant back at the bar, and the sad truth is that he was right. He was right about it all. We sit in silence and I look at the oncoming cars, this time not wishing that it was me who switched places with any of the random people in those cars. No, I was wishing that Vic was able to do that. Unfortunately, life isn't so simple.