

Perfect Number

by Roland Foster

She sat on the love seat reading her magazine, and he was in his recliner, reading his book. This had become their custom when there was nothing of interest on TV — which seemed to happen more often as they grew older.

After a while he laid his book aside and said, "Hon, what's your favorite number?"

"My what?"

"Your favorite number."

"My favorite number? I don't have one. Why on earth would I have a favorite number? Why would *anyone* have a favorite number?"

"Come on, be a sport. Think of a number that could be your favorite."

After a moment she said, "Fifty-seven."

"Why fifty-seven?"

"I knew that would be your next question. Heinz 57, okay? Or I could have said 'five,' for the five French mother sauces. Go read your book."

After about a minute she lowered her magazine and asked, "What's *your* favorite number?"

He smiled and replied, "Fourteen."

"Why?"

He laid down his book. "I don't know. I just started thinking about numbers, and I wondered if I liked one number especially, and I realized I do. I like fourteen. I have no idea why. It just seems ... friendly, somehow. Or fresh, or clean ... I don't know."

She raised her magazine to start reading again. He said, "Come on, Bethie, talk to me. Tell me about your favorite number, or what numbers you like or don't like. This is interesting stuff."

She ignored him and kept reading.

He raised his book to read, then lowered it again. "Did you know there are perfect numbers?"

She sighed. "Are you heading into the Bible with this?"

"No, the ancient Greeks. Euclid, Pythagoras, that bunch. They decided that numbers with a certain property ought to be called 'perfect' numbers."

"Why perfect? What property?"

"See, numbers *can* be interesting, even for you. A perfect number is a number that is equal to the sum of all of its proper factors. Six, for example. Six is divisible by one, two, and three, and if you add them up, one plus two plus three equals six."

"Congratulations. You would get an 'A' in first grade arithmetic."

"Don't be huffy. This stuff is interesting."

"Tell me, Calvin, Darling, what was your major in college?"

"Mathematics, as you already know."

"Well, I went to cooking school, so I find food interesting. Numbers, not so much. What are perfect numbers used for? What good are they?"

"So far nobody seems to have come up with a practical application for them. But they've given mathematicians something interesting to work on and talk about for centuries. Anyway, 28 is also a perfect number. One plus two plus four plus seven plus fourteen — they add up to 28. See how it works? Oh, hey, *that's* a reason to like 14 — it's half of a perfect number. How about that?"

"What I don't see is why anyone would take the trouble to figure out all the factors and add them up, just to find out if a number is 'perfect.' Seems like a lot of wasted effort to me."

"Perfect numbers are rare. That's probably why the Greeks called them 'perfect.' After 28, the next one is 496, and the one after that is 8,128, and the one after that is over 33 million. You really couldn't go beyond that without either a supercomputer or a formula — but Euclid came up with a formula, about 3000 years ago."

"Euclid."

"Yeah. But his formula only finds *even* perfect numbers. So far nobody has found an odd perfect number, even with supercomputers. There may not be any."

Apparently deciding to ignore him, she went back to her magazine.

"What are you reading about that's so interesting?" He asked.

"Recipes for party dishes."

"Like what?"

"Right now, 'Orange Snails.'"

He made a face. "Orange-flavored snails? It sounds disgusting. Or is it recipes for cooking snails that are orange-colored?"

"Neither one, dear. These aren't actual snails; they're little marzipan biscuits that are made so they look like snails. Cute, and probably very tasty. You know I love marzipan."

"Oh. Are you gonna make some?"

"Maybe. I could make them for the next pot-luck dinner at church."

"That would be great." He laid his book aside, rose, and walked over to her. He leaned over her, placing his hands on either side of her, on the back of the love seat behind her. "There's another number I'm very partial to," he said. "I think it's a perfect number, even more perfect than six."

"What is it?"

"Two," he said, smiling.

She smiled in return and placed her hands behind his neck to pull his face toward hers. "Eureka! At last, a perfect number with a practical application!"

"Mmmm hmmm."