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Feline Friend

 As he walked through the door, the little ding of the bell followed him. His ancient nostrils filled with the smell of cat litter and bird droppings instantly as he rushed through the store. Zigzagging through the maze of fish tanks and bunny hutches, he pulled his tote bag closer, careful not to knock anything over. The bird cages nearing, the man turned his hearing aid off and picked up his pace the best he could. He felt the years in his steps, each one he feared his lower leg was going to detach itself and run off. The birds eyed him as he trudged through the aisle as if they recognized him. They followed every painful movement with their tiny beaks moving like puppets, making no noise at all.

 Once through the wat zone, he swiftly glided by the cage labeled “CATS” and scooped one in his arms. It was a large cat with hair the same color as his own, a grayish white, though the cat had much more hair than the man did. As the man struggled to keep the cat in his arms, he felt the pain shooting through his elbows. He let out a small grunt and the cat’s startling blue eyes shot up at him. The man looked away. He turned the corner and got in line for the cashier.

 He recognized the woman at the cash register and hoped that by the time he reached the front of the line her shift would be over. She was a real pain in the ass and he had neither the time nor the patience to deal with her today. She was currently ringing up some woman who must have purchased 100 pounds of dog food which was probably for her own consumption because she sure looked like a bitch. The next man in line was buying an iguana and appeared to be alright at first glance, but then he grabbed the man’s hand standing beside him. The woman just in front of him in the line had a pair of twin boys who were running around the store making little guns with their fingers and pretending to shoot at each other. Every once and a while one of them would shout to the other, “You’re dead!” This game they played was nothing like what he remembered of Korea and watching his comrades bleed to death in the muddy trenches. The naivety they played with was shocking.

 He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to see an obese black man. The black man’s fat lips appeared to be moving and trying to make words. Realizing that he never turned his hearing aid back on, the old man did so and heard the booming of the black man’s voice, “could you move forward sir?” The woman at the cash register must have finished with the bitch and moved onto the gays. As the old man turned to make some rude comment to the black man, his knee sent a sharp pain up his leg all the way to his hip. He threw the cat over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes with one arm and with the other tried to reach into his tote bag all the while tears hiding in his wrinkles. His hand fumbled around in the bag and finally pulled out a bottle marked “Rheumatrex.” He poured two small white pills into his hand and threw them to the back of his throat.

 By the time the old man reached the register, he could feel the effects of the medicine, but the pain was still debilitating. The woman at the register sighed and recited, “Welcome to The Pet Palace, how can I assist you with your pet needs today?”

The man plopped the white cat on the register and groaned, “I would like to buy this cat.”

“Sir, this is the third cat this week. You have been told, we will not be selling you anymore cats,” the woman explained.

Pretending to have not heard the woman the old man asks, “How much for the cat?”

“My manager explained to you, we can’t allow you to purchase anymore cats.”

“He doesn’t have to know,” the man insisted.

 The argument continued and finally the woman snapped and asked the old man to leave. He did as he was asked. He picked up his tote bag and threw it over his shoulder, while calling the woman a whole string of cuss words. Then he left the store, the little ding of the bell ringing in his ears.

 The stress of arguing with the woman brought back the pain in his knees. He struggled down the street and watched as children rode bikes and cars zoomed by. He watched as people jogged in the streets and couples walked their dogs; the pain ever present in his knees. He came upon a food truck and could see through the window an Asian woman who was painting a marinade on a piece of pork. The motion of the woman’s arm was all too familiar. He associated it with the relief of the pain which haunted his joints. He associated it with the drink that was better than anything doctors in America had provided him with. It was one good thing that he had found in Korea. The image of a Korean woman with a knife in one hand, holding a cat by the tail and gently skinning the animal stuck with the old man. The elixir that could be made with the juicy meat of the poor animal was the only thing that stopped the old man’s pain. Some would have called it a folk remedy, but the old man considered it the highest form of modern medicine.

 By the time the man reached the next corner the pain in his legs had gotten to be too much. He tried to convince himself that he could make it to the bus station, but he knew that it would be a miracle if he made it another block. He stopped and leaned against a tree to rest, one arm supporting his weight and the other massaging his knees. This only provided temporary relief though. The man took his tote bag off and rested it on the ground. He heard a *meow*. The taste of the sweet Korean elixir filled his mouth.