

The Cactus

by Ashley Poulter

The man had never taken much account of the life beyond his small apartment. It was there, of course, still breathing and beating onwards like his own small self. He watched from behind the curtains, observed the lives of others and what made them tick. "That man in the red coat walked by with his dog again today," he said to Prickles.

Prickles was the potted cactus he'd purchased from a door to door salesman many years before. And ever since that time the man had tended to Prickles' every need. Not that cactus' had many needs to begin with.

For hours the man would cower behind the cover of the curtain and peer around at the street below. Each person that passed by the window would be given a brief examination by the man until he seemed to be assured that they were decent enough to be on the street. Though these people never knew they'd been under the microscope during their daily commutes.

Each evening the man allowed himself an hour of fresh air. He and Prickles would situate themselves on the tiny balcony overlooking the same street, a blanket bundled around them both for warmth. These were the times he liked to talk to Prickles the most for he felt the small, perfectly green cactus enjoyed evening conversation more than daytime.

"You know I could go down on the street," he spoke with a finger jutting out toward the city beyond them.

Prickles said nothing.

"I have nice clothes in the closet. Suits and everything! I could buy a dog and walk it around like the man in the red coat. We could avoid the puddles and stop to get the paper. Then I'd fold it beneath my arm like all the other men I see. It's a very classy thing to do, don't you agree?"

Prickles again said nothing. One of his thorns poking through the soft linen wrap draped over his back and head. The man took this as

some sort of sign, his expression changing immediately as he regarded Prickles with face of watered-down ire. A hand rose to ruffle at the deep fold of flesh, his chin long abandoned from proper shaving. Clumps of grey stubble dotting his chin and neck like a newly shaven show poodle, fingers itched at his neck while reddened sight studied the indignant Prickles. As the years had multiplied the fight for existence had landed squarely on his face and body. Clothes hung to his coat-tree like figure, shoes always seeming to be too large for his feet. The man had been quite handsome once upon a time. Handsome in the ruffled way, at least. Sporting a cleft chin and curly brown hair, his eyes had been bright and never lacking in detail. The last few years had not been kind to the man in the least. Eyebrows were tattered and worn, lips cracked and caked with dried blood from his fingers nagging at the loose skin. Even those eyes, so shining and proud, had sunken lower into his face with each passing year like the age rings of a tree.

A few more moments of fresh air was all the man could take, his mood having plummeted at the realization made clear by Prickles. As the flares of a fighting city began to light before him and his silent companion, the man slumped sideways against the wall. How he wished to walk his dog in the streets down there, wear a red coat, and get newspapers just to fold them.

The man had shut himself off from the general population for one reason, he was tired. Tired of waking up from his bed each morning, waking up to a lonely apartment and all the quiet morning rituals that would ensue, he just grew tired. He was tired of the place he worked and the people that he mostly feared for their fantastic lives, or the stories he heard of them anyways. And after years of growing too tired to even keep himself upright, he retired. Retired to the four walls of his world and the only real friend he'd had, Prickles. In the recesses of his mind he knew that this wasn't the correct way to live. But the tired side of him argued that there was no correct way to live.

For another minute he wallowed in the glow of lights and buzz, bleary eyes seeing Prickles from between the slits in his fingers.

"I need something," came the choked words of the former man, not the tired one.

Prickles said nothing against the man then. It was not his place to. Man and cactus went back indoors then. Prickles was placed tenderly on the couch cushion, cover still wrapped lovingly around his small body for warmth. The man went into the kitchen and returned with an aged phone book, more green than yellow. He flipped through the pages while continuing his conversation with the silent Prickles.

"The city couldn't have changed that much in fifteen years. I know it's still in here."

Prickles rocked back and fourth with each movement made by the man, the blanket was the only thing keeping him upright. As the man muttered various names and numbers, his gaunt finger running down the list of shops, he finally yelped with glee as he found the title he'd been searching for. It was early morning by this time, most shops would be long closed but he had faith.

Shakily he reached for the phone, an inch of rust rising from its surface as he jostled the receiver nervously. Sweat sprung to his brow as he looked down into the tiny holes covering the top and bottom, immediately he thrust the object back down onto the floor. He couldn't call, he had to go.

And so he went. The shop was still open, never closing until the late hours of the morning. The man walked in with nothing and came out with a plastic bag. He kept his head down, collar of his coat pulled up around his neck, and each moment he was away from his four walls and Prickles it was almost as if he were losing hours of his life. But he had made it out, he thought, and that was a very good thing.

That night he couldn't sleep. Nerves and excitement jostled in his stomach, sweat soaked the figure of body into the sheets below. He could hardly wait until the real light erupted through the windows of his room. Eyes found the plastic bag heaped on his floor then, Prickles at its side, and finally the man rested.

He awoke to the light burning his face, the beautiful light of morning he knew it was. Springing to his feet he snatched both bag and Prickles from the floor and raced to the bathroom. When the man emerged his body was new.

A worn red suit coat covered his chest, the sleeves much too big for his lithe frame and so only the tips of his fingers poked out from beneath the cuff. Black slacks clung to his legs, having been rolled up at least five times to keep him from tripping over the extra fabric. The man looked much like a child playing dress-up, but the scruff and sunken eyes displayed a very different view of this faux-son. It was now the man emerged from his abode and out onto the street. After descending the stairs to his apartment he placed Prickles down on the ground, a tight cord having been fashioned around his pot as a leash. Slowly he proceeded; always keeping an eye on the small cactus to make certain he was okay.

The nearest newspaper stand was less than a minute away. Across the street from his window, it was. Timidly he asked the man for a paper and paid with quarters and dimes. Stepping back from the stand he moved back toward his apartment, stopping beneath his balcony above to read his paper. But instead of reading the mess, the man simply pretended. Sight cast to Prickles from time to time, always wary of the other people. They, in turn, were wary of the man pulling a cactus around on a string.

But the man was proud. With the newspaper folded beneath his arm he stepped out from the shadow of his balcony, head tilted back and sight staring up at the small metal platform. He was up there only a few hours before. Looking down on all the people below with their dogs and newspapers and now...he was here. Unaware of the odd looks he was receiving from others the man could only indulge this moment for what it was, some kind of freedom.

"Let's go home," he called to Prickles still waiting silently on his leash.

And so the man in the red coat, with his classy newspaper beneath his arm, and cactus on the leash, returned to where they belonged.

