

Substitute

by Fred Osuna

It had been two months since he carried her to the hospital and asked for relief for them both: no more seizures or blindness for her; no more heartache and worry for him. After the deed, the doctor's assistant put her arm around him and leaned into him but he just stood there, mouth half open, gasping silently. Within him, the pain created a tension that coiled in his chest like a bungee cord stretched to its limit. That loss stayed there for weeks, drawn and taut.

Yesterday, he saw a peace plant in a store. It sat drying in dust on the 75% rack, next to three broken bags of peat moss. He paid the cashier \$5.49 and took it home. He manicured its errant stems, the brown, withered ones, its torn leaves. He wiped it with a damp cloth. He set it in a glazed clay pot next to the sofa and admired its scrawny handsomeness.

Then he slept.

Just before dawn, he awoke and listened. He expected something, but there were no feet padding down the hallway at the sound of his rustling. There was no early morning litter-box smell, no pukey gift in the hallway, no hairball-hacking yack yack from under the bed. He walked into the living room, settled into the easy chair, and stared at the peace plant. It stared back, living but lifeless, bracts raised as in a shrug: Now what do I do?

Spathiphyllum, he thought, you are no *Felis catus*.

