

THE ORCHID

by marci stillerman

Her grocery cart contained thirteen items and a baby. I counted her purchases because we were in a long line at the quick-checkout counter---*up to ten items.*

The baby must have been very young—it was wrapped in a grungy blue cotton blanket and no bigger than a six-pack.

She was buying the usual for a young family, extra-large box of Sugar Pops, disposable diapers, a gallon of milk, two loafs of white bread but, surprisingly, tucked in a corner of the cart, an orchid plant in a small black pot, its white butterfly petals set firmly atop a tall curved stem.

The boy at her side, he was about six, hopped from one foot to the other, punching out his fists, like a boxer.

“Stop that,” she hissed at her boy. He was hers all right, the same flyaway dirty blond hair with ragged home-cut ends. They had triangular faces, fox-like, and the hard thin build of angry people. They wore thrift store clothes, denim skirt and jacket for her and droopy jeans on him, She was counting out food stamps. Was she allowed to buy an orchid with food stamps?

The fat lady in front of them looked back.

“I bet you're a good boy,” she said, smiling down at him. “Do you help your mother take care of the baby?”

“MYOB,” the mother snapped, pulling the boy to her side, her fingers digging into his shoulder.

“Mind your own business,” the boy translated, squinting up at her. “Fatso,” he added. He rubbed his shoulder where his mother had grabbed him.

The woman huffed. She frowned at the contents of the cart, glared at the orchid, shook her head, and turned her back to them.

"That was so rude," I heard myself say and was glad the mother didn't hear me. What was it to me? MYOB I told myself.

If I had a child I wouldn't expose him to my disdain.

I thought about treating myself to an orchid next time I shopped. It would be a stretch considering my income selling shoes at Macy's.

Everyone in line had more than ten items. No wonder it was taking so long.

The boy leaned against his mother, a finger in his nose. He kicked the cart. The baby started to cry.

"Will you quit that!" She pushed him away, reached for the baby, knocking a large can of peas out of the cart and jiggling the pot holding the orchid. The can fell on the boy's foot and he yelped, then started to cry. Holding the baby against her, she grabbed the boy's ear and twisted it. Crying harder, he swung his arm out and punched his mother in the stomach.

"You *idiot*," she yelled at him, slapping his head with the palm of her hand.

Everyone in the line stared at them, looked away.

"Get away from me. Go!" she barked. "Get out of here. Hear me? I want you gone. Get lost and don't come back!" She butted his bottom with her knee.

The boy stopped crying, wiped his face on his jacket sleeve, left the line and straggled toward the exit. I was sure she'd call him back or go after him. She certainly didn't mean for him to leave the store. Shaking the screaming baby in one arm, she stuffed the food stamps into her purse, up righted the orchid, picked up the fallen can and tossed it into the cart. She did not watch the boy on his way out of the store. She did not call him to come back. She did not leave the line to get her boy. The person ahead of her had a check that needed the okay of the manager. It would take time.

"Your son left the store," I said, touching her arm. "I'll keep your place so you can get him." A line had formed behind me.

She laid the now quiet baby back in the cart and began putting her cans and boxes on the counter to be checked. The orchid trembled on its long stem.

"Did you hear me?" I asked. "The boy..."

"He can take care of himself," she said. "Don't worry about him." She searched in her large purse and retrieved the food stamps.

I pushed my cart out of the line and left it next to the ATM machine hoping no one would take it, and hurried out of the store onto the busy parking lot. That little boy was out there probably wandering among the moving cars. He could be hit. I shaded my eyes from the sun and scanned the area.

If I did find him, what would I do with him?

And then I saw him. He'd crammed himself into an empty cart left between parked cars, his knees pressed against his chest.

"Hi," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," he said. He ducked his head between his knees.

"I'm going to push you into the shade," I said. "Then we can talk."

I sat on a wrought iron bench near the automatic doors, the cart in front of me.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Luther," He was grasping the sides of the cart, his small smile telling how he'd enjoyed his ride.

"Luther, let's go back inside. Your mom will wonder where you are,"

"I'm not going back," he said, his face clouding, eyes on the ground. "She don't want me."

"Sure she does. She was upset because the baby cried and you punched her and the can fell on the floor. Come on. I'll help you get out."

"No." He tightened his arms around his legs.

"So what will you do? You can't stay here."

"Go to foster care," he said, "Like she says she'll put me."

"That's not very good," I said.

He shrugged. "I don't care."

I'd have to get him out of the cart and back into the store, bring him to his mother. What she'd do with him was her problem. I'd worry about him, but I'd have done all I could.

"Luther," I said, "I have an idea. You must be thirsty, I know I am. Let's go buy an ice cold Coke. Then we can talk about what you're going to do."

Blinking back tears, his eyes met mine for the first time. His face had already lost its baby softness and needed a good wash. His eyes were clear amber, his lashes little-boy long. After a moment he looked away and I followed his gaze.

We caught sight of her at the same moment, his mother, in the crowd of people wheeling loaded shopping carts out of the store. The groceries in her cart crowded the baby. Her large purse hung lopsided on her shoulder. The orchid plant, unwrapped, sat haughtily in its space. She saw us where we sat just outside the automatic exit doors. Her eyes skimmed over me, cold, accusing eyes.

"Luther! Get out of there this minute, you fool, and go open the car door," she said, mean-voiced, mean-eyed, continuing on to the parking lot. Luther pulled himself to his knees and I grasped him under his arms and hoisted him out of the cart. His feet hit the cement and without a glance at me, he was off running, threading his way through parked and moving cars to find hers.

My cart awaited me along side the AMT machine and I pushed it to the end of the long line.

