

The Cat

By Suzanne Little

The Window.

There is a window; he can see green trees, sky, grass, shrubs. Not what he would call the real world, the world he can no longer enter. A place of crowded pubs, thick with smoke and the smell of beer; the buzz of talk and life, of friends and enemies, and of those who remembered his nights playing guitar under the lights, and his name, because he was lithe and feline, 'The Cat'. Here he is nothing, these women don't know him, who he was, what he could do. Why should he speak in this alien place where he is a stranger marooned in a room where cleanliness is an affront to his humanity, the antiseptic stink overpowering.

Staff Room.

'The old one in No. 3 is acting up again.'

'Acting up?'

'Won't do this, won't do that. He's a smelly, hairy old thing and I don't want to touch him.'

'Aw come on. He's just like some of the others. He hates being here and takes it out on us.'

'OK you have a go. See if you can get him to have a shower, wear clothes, even speak!'

'At least he doesn't try anything.'

'Nah, he's past that. Poor old thing.'

'They do say he could really play guitar. Once!'

A little chat with Matron.

A middle-aged woman, vigorous and forthright, is on the attack; those listening know that Matron is biding her time.

'Of course he won't cooperate. He's helpless. It's humiliating for him.'

'My staff are well trained, very experienced and immensely patient.'

'Your father...'

'It's degrading for him to have carers, however excellent...'

'...use your influence. He refuses clothes. They can't take him into the dining area naked...'

The door closes.

The little chat continues, muffled but the tune familiar to listeners. Words seep under the door in phrases and fragments. 'and he misses... had a reputation... not the same after...'

'But it's a beautiful room... view of the gardens...'

Gradually the heights of outrage and the lows of reason settle into a steady drone. Matron's tone sympathetic as suggestions are made, rejected and then, grudgingly, a concession.

The door opens.

'I'll drop them in on Wednesday.'

Far off through a gap in the trees and shrubs he can see flashes of light, sun glinting on metal; a road, cars going somewhere, taking people who are free to choose, to go where they like.'

Wednesday.

'Looks like there's a parcel for No. 3.'

Wrapped in brown paper and labeled: 'The Cat's pajamas'.

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