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CATFISH

by Alex Faletti



We stop at the 32nd Street Market, "Third World Market." It's after midnight, and I look over my shoulder as I leave the car. Sue wants to read, so she stays behind.

"I'll be right out," I say, and I lock the door.

I dodge a half dozen kids carrying groceries for a buck, wonder why they're out this late, and pull myself through the rails that keep carts inside the store. I walk in the out door. Through the glass, I see a man, and he's mad that I come in the wrong way, madder than I figure he ought to be.

I step to the side. The electric doors open and I follow them inside. I'm almost inside, and the man insults me from across the barrier separating the in door from the out door. It's like he's spitting words at me, but they're not really words, just

sounds, and I hear what he says, but I don't listen. Nobody pays attention to him.

I nod at the security guard and push through the one-way stiles. A crowd blocks my way through the housewares, so I take the meat department. The smell of blood and fish halt my breath. A pig's head stares up at me from behind a glass case, and I enter a gap in the crowd.

A glass tub filled with catfish faces the aisle. A mass of mucus and bloody ice, the fish press against the glass. Imagine frying up an unskinned catfish. It's like I test myself, force myself to gag, but I don't.

I get to the milk. I want a clean gallon, one without dirt on it. I find a good one, but the date's bad, so I settle for lowfat. Still fresh, looks good. I leave the meats, look for the *caja rapida*, the fast lane. I wait ten minutes to pass the cashier and decide *rapida* doesn't mean "fast" in English.

The grocery bag digs into my fingers and I work my way to the exit. The guard stands to the left, in the same spot. I nod—whatever I suppose he expects—and wait for the electric door.

Outside, the kids talk back and forth. When they see me, they smile, reach for my bag with one hand, grab my arm with the other. I walk through them to my car.

Sue stops reading. She's looking over the backseat, out the window. I try to knock, but the bags are too heavy. My arm burns from the weight. Sue jumps back, surprised at someone being so close. She looks around and opens the door. I hand her the milk and start to sit down, when a man walks up from the curb. He talks about poverty and children and about having no money. I want to get in the car and ignore him, but he has me in a bad way. I'm saying something sweet to Sue, something like, "I love you," or "Hey, hey, how 'bout some mac and cheese," with a smile and a corny look, something from that part of me that loves her.

And then I see this guy and I remember it's late, and I put the bags on the seat and hope to start the car, but he beats me.

He says he's from the South, moved to California for a new start, says Job Service found him a job and tonight's his first night. He works at the Coliseum and wears a blue and gold "Event Staff" jacket. The story makes sense: a U2 concert, at the Coliseum, ended an hour before. He tells me, "I'm not gonna tell you a lie. I just want to work and make some money for my family. I ain't a bum, but I won't get paid for a couple of weeks. I need food for my kids."

"I don't have any money," I tell him and get into the car. I expect him to get mad, maybe get a bit pushy like some bums do, but he doesn't. The man's face changes from a plead to the most pitiful look I've ever seen.

I want to give him some money, but I'm broke. The milk I bought is for macaroni and cheese, and I don't even like it. So I look at him for the first time and reason with him.

"Do you know how many times I get hit up for money in this parking lot in a week? How do I know you really need money, and that you'll use it for your family? And, besides, I really don't have any money. All I have is a checkbook."

"All I need is some food. You can buy that with a check," he says. He's right.

I look at Sue. She shrugs and gives me an I-don't-know-about-this-but-be-careful look. I turn back to the man and tell him, "Okay."

"I'll be right out. Keep the doors locked," I say.

We walk back. The security guard gives me a long look, makes me wonder what I'm doing with this man. I figure walking into "the 32" with a black man's no big deal if he's another student. But this man's no student, and I walk with him, and it's odd, and we're together.

We take the same path I followed earlier. The crowd's not as thick as before, so we have more room to move. The man pushes a cart ahead of us. I figure we'll head for the milk, buy some mac's and cheese and be out of here. But he stops in the meat department. He eyes a bottom round steak, the cheapest cut.

"Can I get this? It would be good. We haven't had nothing but pancakes for three days," he says.

"Yes . . . that's fine. Go ahead," I say, and I hesitate.

"You sure?" he says. I nod and poke a tenderloin with my finger. I push in the plastic and leave a dent. He throws the steak into the cart and moves up a few paces.

He stops in front of the catfish. I give him a wave of approval, and he tells the butcher two pounds. The butcher reaches under the window and drags out three fish. He weighs them and wraps them in white paper. "Thank you! Thank you!" he tells the butcher and drops the fish in the cart.

We move aisle for aisle through the store until we run out of aisles. I want to get this over with. Every time the man wants something, he asks me if it's okay. I say yes, but I grudge every purchase. Does a beggar get three Hershey's bars? Applesauce? Bread and milk. Bread and milk are beggar food. The cart's half full.

"Come on, let's go. You've got enough to last you a week," I say. He stops and looks around like he's lost something, but then pushes the cart to the cashier. We make it through the line quickly and head for the parking lot.

He holds four bags in one hand, three in the other, and he's staying on 54th Street, South Los Angeles. A bag tears. The milk bounces. I look at Sue, and she shakes her head. She says "No," and I want to say "no," but the milk has rolled close to my feet. It's a foot from me and it's got dirt on it and I don't pick it up.

I drive him, but I don't like the idea. Already, my plan to buy him a gallon of milk and some noodles has cost me thirty-two dollars, and now I'm putting him in my car with my fiancée and driving to 54th Street at 1:30 a.m.

We load the groceries in the backseat, along with our friend, and head for Watts. I don't feel good. My thoughts are bad. I expect him to reach over the seat at any moment, kill me, take the car, rape Sue, and go home to a steak dinner.

"I think I'm going to leave you at the bus stop," I say.

"It's a couple of minutes," he says.

"If it was just me, I'd do it, but I've got my girl here. It's kind of foolish," I tell him.

"It'll only take ten minutes," he says over the seat.

"No. I'm letting you off. I mean, come on, you'd have to walk home anyway."

I turn south on Broadway and find a bus stop. We put the bags on the curb, and I shake his hand. He asks me for bus fare. I give it from the money I didn't have. He waves goodbye, as I walk back to the car, and then he starts to thank me.

"God bless you! Jesus bless you!" he says from the curb, and he keeps saying it, "God bless you! God bless you!" he says.

I sit next to Sue and drive towards school. I feel like crying but don't, which only makes me feel sick. My face tightens and one side twitches. I blink, and I can't stop it. I feel like a fool for leaving him.

I say nothing to Sue. I drop her home. Then I drive to my house. I drive slowly. I see every bus stop. I notice every person. I feel sicker every minute, and I think about him frying those catfish for his family, telling the kids a joke, telling them about the poor man at the market.