

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Rebecca Simons

HUNTER GATHERER

The old man tugged at the end trolley, free hand braced against the rest and grunted. His face turning a deeper shade of red he gave it another tug and it released. He staggered back and glared, daring anyone to acknowledge his embarrassment – no one was looking. He stared at his wife's bent back as she sidled through the controlled gates, her head down as she studied a piece of paper, pen hovering.

He clattered his way behind her closing the gap.

She was standing in front of the flower section, head craning toward a brightly coloured bunch of blooms. He drew level.

"There's no time for that. Besides, since when could you eat flowers?"

Her eyes dropped to the piece of paper as she whispered.

"Frank used to give me flowers..."

He audibly drew in air through nostrils.

"What did you say?"

A young mother passing by visibly flinched, lent forward over her trolley and cooed to her child.

"Did you see those beautiful flowers my Sweet?"

The little girl remained mute, wide blue eyes, slack pink mouth pointed in his direction. The young mother hurried on to the fruit section.

He returned his attention to his wife.

"Well?"

Her hand holding the pen jumped.

"Do we need cauliflower?"

He kept his words tight, controlled.

"Is it on the list?"

She frowned slightly, sighed, and shook her head.

"Well then, might I suggest we stick to the list? We'll get the job done that much quicker if we do."

She took a deep breath.

"Onions... We need onions."

And stepped lightly toward bags of glossy onions.

He blocked her way, pointing toward the loose onions, tumbling and bruised on another table.

"No, not those ones. How many times have I told you? The loose ones".

She tucked her chin a little closer to her chest.

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"And make sure you don't..."

Ignoring her bad behaviour he continued.

"And make sure you don't get any bad ones."

An elderly man carefully picking through the selection looked up as they approached.

He looked from his wife to the elderly man, and gave an apologetic smile.

"Women..."

The elderly man blinked.

"My wife died three years ago. I'd give anything to have her back."

He looked back to his wife.

"Hurry up, we haven't got all day you know."

She knotted the bag of onions, placed it in the trolley and carefully marked it off the list. After vegetables came fruit, then meat, then dairy and he made sure each one was methodically marked, cross-checked with in-store specials.

Everything was running smoothly until they reached the cat food section. When he saw her hesitate he sped up, but she stopped.

He gripped the trolley tighter.

"You won't be needing any of that."

She turned her head slightly away from him and stepped toward the refrigerated shelves.

He could feel his colour deepen.

"Did you not hear me?"

He watched her carefully fold the crumpled paper, slide the arm of the pen over the thickest part, and place it neatly in the trolley. His jaw slackened as he struggled to find the words. He followed her now empty hand as she raised it to trace the outline of a black and white cat.

She turned and looked at him.

"I'm leaving you."

He became aware that his mouth was open, spittle forming, closed it and swallowed. She might as well have said, *I think we should get turkey*. He stared at her face, but her expression told him nothing.

Wordlessly he watched her turn, cradle a pottle of beef and lamb from the shelf and walk away.

He swallowed again, hard.

"You can't."

But she kept walking. His body began to shake. He watched her straight back and added.

"You stupid old bitch, what do you think you're doing."

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He was oblivious of the young mother hesitating over cartons of custard exchange looks with an elderly man, basket of meat and onions in hand. He didn't see the elderly man's nod, or the young mother turn to her daughter and stroke soft golden curls.

"How about we get the large carton?"