

The Ring

Henry wanted to tell Francesca his mother didn't know they were married. He planned to tell her at House of Nan King, where they had pot stickers and flower tea after they eloped at San Francisco City Hall. Francesca was always asking him what his mother was like, what she thought of the elopement, if she wanted to help plan the real wedding someday. When he told her his mother didn't know about any of it, she would likely storm out of the restaurant or, worse, start pelting him with pot stickers, the fish sauce later staining his dress shirt. But before he could say anything, the waitress came with the bill because there was a line out the door and she wanted their table.

When they saw Mark Murphy at Cal Performances, the dancer contorting his body into impossible positions, he had the dangerous impulse to brush back her hair and whisper into her ear: "My mother doesn't know we're married. For a long time, she barely knew we were dating." But when he leaned in, Francesca pushed him away. "Shh. I'm watching this."

Two months ago, when they went to visit her parents in Italy, Henry decided it was finally time to tell her. At a café on *Piazza Unitá*, while pigeons pecked at the crumbs from their custard tarts, he told Francesca there was something important she needed to know, something about his mother. But when she grasped his hand and asked *what, what is it*, he couldn't tell her. "She's allergic to roses," was all he said. Francesca sulked the rest of the day, still pissed he had once teased her about mixing up the concept of mother-in-law with the holy virgin. But it was worth it. They would put off a visit for a serving of his mother's tea and coldness, hopefully forever.

But now here they were, his car parked over the old oil stain from his father's sedan.

"What if she doesn't like me?" Francesca asked.

"She'll like you."

"What if she doesn't?"

"She will."

As they walked hand in hand up the brick steps onto the porch, Henry tried to convince himself his mother wouldn't notice. After all, the ring wasn't gold. They couldn't afford gold.

Rose started clearing away the silver tea service she had set up on the glass-topped table in the kitchen.

"I'm afraid the tea is already cold. I put it on over an hour ago."

Henry squeezed Francesca's hand, the flowers etched into the side of her ring no doubt leaving a mark on his skin.

"Mother, it takes over ten hours to drive from Berkeley to Portland."

"I know that dear. I was just expecting you earlier, that's all. Oh well. I don't mind." She slammed the milk jug down on the counter. "I'll just make another pot."

While his mother wiped down the already clean table with a sponge, Henry squeezed Francesca's hand even harder, the ring pressing further and further into his palm, until she elbowed him. "What?" he mouthed, but loosened his grip.

Rose poured the contents of the pot into the sink, the dark orange tea swirling down the drain. She lifted the lid and started scrubbing the inside of the teapot with a

brush. Francesca elbowed Henry again, this time nodding towards his mother like she wanted him to explain what was going on. His mother, the five-foot-four dynamo of scrubbing power. She had always puzzled him. How could he explain her to someone else?

“Go up to your room and rest. I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

“Wait, no wait.” Francesca wrenched her hand free and started waving it in front of her, her ring lit up under the bright tract lighting, exposed for all to see. She rummaged through her leather duffel bag and pulled out a can of coffee with a purple bow on top.

“It’s Illy. From Trieste. Like me. The best coffee in Italy.”

Rose looked at Francesca like she’d just noticed there was a third person in the room. But then she smiled and took the coffee. “Thank you. I’m sure it is.” She placed it in the cupboard without taking off the bow. “I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

Henry’s bedroom had changed little in the years since he had moved away. His twin-sized bed was still covered with the same dark green comforter, the same dented, orange lamp on the bedside table. The poster of Picasso’s dove he had bought on a high school trip to Paris was taped to the back of the door, its curled and yellowing edges the only sign how long it had been hanging there. The only changes were the closet—his mother had turned it into a second linen closet—and a couple of shelves on the bookcase, once home to the writing notebooks he had taken with him to college.

One shelf was full of pictures of Henry: Henry lying on a crocheted baby blanket; Henry being pushed on a swing by his father one of the weekends he wasn’t away on business; Henry wearing one of those Christmas sweaters his mother always made him

wear until he finally put his foot down his freshman year of high school; Henry in a tux for his high school portrait, badly in need of a haircut.

The other shelves had framed pictures of the family: his father, his Uncle Ron and Aunt Shirley, his cousins Joey and Marianne, Marianne with her husband and kids. The last time he had seen them was four years ago at his father's funeral. Everyone had come back to the house for the post-funeral reception after the service at his parent's Lutheran church. He pictured them, his family, his father's friends and colleagues, all milling barefoot around his father's chair in the living room. Since it rained heavily that day his mother had everyone remove their shoes, lest they permanently stain the white carpet.

Henry flopped down on the bed. Who was he kidding? His mother would notice the ring. Of course she would. Something had to be done.

Francesca picked up the picture of Henry on the baby blanket. "Do you think your mother was thinking I was strange when I gave her the coffee?"

"No. She's just not used to being around people like you."

"People like me?"

"People who are direct."

She put the picture down and wrinkled her nose like she always did when an American said something she couldn't understand. "What is so direct about giving someone a can of coffee?"

"I don't know."

"How is that direct?"

"Come here." He pulled her onto the bed. "Everything is going to be ok. You know that, right?"

“I guess.”

“But maybe it would be better if you took it off.”

“Took what off?”

“The ring. My mother. You know.”

Francesca frowned. But he could see the respect thy in-laws wheels turning in her head.

“Ok.” She slipped off the ring and put it on the shelf next to his baby pictures.

“But tomorrow it goes back on.”

“Fine.” If nothing else, Henry would at least survive the night.

Rose and Earl invested in new living room furniture a few years after Henry was born, furniture with quality frames, as they’d told him over and over. Though expensive, the furniture was worth the price because they’d never had to replace it. Whenever Rose felt the need to add new flair or modernize, she simply had the furniture re-upholstered, changing the wood and window treatments to match. Since she never rearranged the furniture, the couch in the corner by the window would suddenly be green instead of beige floral, the photograph of Rose dancing the Viennese waltz framed in birch instead of ash. When Henry’s father died, the room had been all burgundy and teak. Now it was eggshell, dusty rose and pine. The only thing that had not changed was his father’s black leather easy chair, which still stood in the middle of the ensemble, looking like it had dropped down from mars.

Rose gave the usual family report while they had their tea, the silver tea service set up this time on the coffee table in the living room. She mostly talked about Henry’s

cousin Marianne. Marianne's husband Rob owned a landscaping business she helped him run and, as far as Rose was concerned, they led the perfect life. She told them about the new house they had bought in Lake Oswego and the private French school where they sent the twins. Henry was sure the only thing his mother thought Marianne had ever done wrong was having her sister Ruth for a mother instead of herself.

“Ruth says the girls speak the language beautifully but I don't see how she would know since she doesn't speak a word of French.”

Francesca tapped her foot beside him, impatient she had no part in his mother's monologue. When Rose paused to pour him another cup of tea, Francesca asked about the photograph above the couch.

“Didn't Henry tell you I danced?”

“No, he didn't” She glared at him. “Why did you not tell me this?”

“Of course, my hips were too stiff for Latin, but quick step, foxtrot, waltz, those were my dances. I would have liked to dance professionally, maybe even open up a school, but I met Henry's father and Henry came along soon after, and that was that.”

“Was Henry's father your dance partner?”

Rose shook her head. “Poor Earl wasn't much of a dancer. But that is how we met.”

She told the story Henry had heard so many times when he was growing up: His father had gone to a dance with his fiancé when he saw Rose in a green satin dress—low-cut, his father sometimes added, much to his mother's chagrin—with her hair pinned up beautifully in the back. He asked her to dance while his fiancé danced with her brother. Soon he'd forgotten all about the other woman. “My Rose danced me right out of her

arms.” Henry always had a hard time believing the vivacious red head in the story had really been his mother. As far as he could tell, the only passion his mother had was for putting hospital corners on beds.

“But Earl was a fine man. A good man. Henry was lucky to have a man like him for a father. A man who knew how to work.”

Francesca frowned. “Henry is having a lot of his work published these days. In some of the bigger magazines even.”

“Well. Isn’t that wonderful.” She put a spoonful of sugar in her tea and stirred. “I have to admit I can’t decide why you two chose now to visit.”

“I wanted to meet you.”

Rose smiled. “I just wish you could stay longer.”

They huddled together on the bed, Henry’s right arm wedged against the wall, his left arm draped across Francesca. He knew she would steal the blanket later; she always did. At home, he added a third blanket to the bed just in case. But tonight he didn’t care. It felt good to be close to her, to feel her heart beat through her silk nightgown.

“Henry.”

“Hmm.”

“What was your father like?”

“I don’t know.” He traced his fingers across the silk and onto her neck. “He worked a lot.”

“You know, your mother. She is jealous.”

“I told you she could be difficult.”

“She is not difficult. She is jealous.”

But Henry was in no mood to talk about his mother. “Do you know what my biggest dream was all the years of my tortured adolescence?”

“What?”

“To be in bed with a beautiful Italian woman,” he said in his worst fake Italian accent, while he slipped his hand under her nightgown.

“You are too much,” she said. But then she kissed him.

*

Henry met Francesca two summers ago in Café Milano. His studio was cramped and stuffy, so he always went to one of the cafes near Cal. His favorite that year was Café Strada. He’d sit on the patio under an olive tree and go over his student’s writing, as well as work on some of his own. But one afternoon all of the outdoor seats were taken up by a group of Germans; since he didn’t like the inside of the café, he headed back down Bancroft to Milano. When he got to the café, a Mediterranean-looking woman was bent down behind the counter, stabbing at the bagels under the glass-topped counter with a pair of silver tongs. Her t-shirt had ridden up in the back, exposing a tattoo of the sun. Henry cleared his throat to get her attention, but she just continued her attack on the bagels.

“Hello?” Nothing. He was nearly at the point of walking out, when Francesca finally shot up. When she did, he forgot why he was even there.

Francesca wasn't a particularly beautiful woman. Her nose could easily be described as absurdly Roman and her eyes, though dark and fierce, were set slightly too close together. But her mouth was small and sensual, he already imagined kissing it, and she had a beautiful nest of chestnut curls. But it was something more, something electric about her, that struck him most. If someone had asked him right there in the café to describe it, he would have said she was the most alive person he had ever seen.

Francesca glared at him. "Well?"

When he came to his senses and told her he'd like a latte, Francesca rolled her eyes.

"In Italy, if you order a latte, do you know what they will give you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you? A *glass of milk*. That is what's wrong with this country."

She slammed the coffee dispenser against the edge of the trash can while Henry stood there, dumbstruck. "A latte. Ha!"

The milk foamed noisily in the cup when she turned and, as though nothing had happened, asked, "For here or to go?"

From that moment on, Henry was in love.

For the rest of the summer, Henry spent nearly every afternoon in Café Milano. Francesca only worked part-time, so she often wasn't there. But he needed those days. When she was there, he barely got anything done. He watched her work the machine from under the sunroof upstairs, barking out orders to the second barista when it got busy and she was no longer working alone. Francesca never talked to him again, not even

when he ordered a *caffé* latte, trying to convince her he wasn't just another stupid American.

The fall semester started at Cal and the café was busier than it had been all summer, and this put Francesca in a very bad mood. She snatched dollar bills out of people's hands like their very existence somehow offended her. When a girl in an oversized Cal sweatshirt six people in front of him in line ordered a non-fat gluten free blueberry muffin, Francesca shoved it at her with such force the girl looked like she wanted to cry. When it was finally Henry's turn at the counter, she grabbed his hand, lifting it to make space for someone else's drink. Though she only held it for a few seconds, Francesca's grip was so intense, he knew he couldn't wait any longer. That night, he finally asked her out.

Months later, when they were already living together, he asked if she had been flirting with him. But Francesca only wrinkled her nose. "Your hand was in the way." That's what he loved about her. Though hot-tempered and prone to melodrama that would have made even Verdi blush, when it came down to it, Francesca was direct; matter-of-fact. Not like his mother. If his mother's life were a book, the real story would be the one you somehow read between the lines.

Henry and Francesca lived well together. She didn't mind the stacks of paper on his desk and the piles of clothes and books that often littered the floor. He didn't mind the magazines she bought and insisted on keeping. Though Francesca liked living in the Bay Area, she found it hard to be away from her family. To help them feel closer, she painted their portraits. Soon her paintings were hanging all over the apartment: the portrait of her niece cupping a small bird in her hand was next to the stove; one of her sister holding a

white bowl of peaches was in the bathroom; another of her grandfather leaning on his cane hung over the bed. Though her paintings were far from perfect, their intimacy made up for any lack of technical skill. When Francesca painted, she didn't just put pigment to paper; she loved. Henry found it touching that Francesca, normally so gruff, was tender when it came to her family. But he had a hard time understanding it. Duty and responsibility, those were the words he knew for family, not tenderness and love.

Francesca painted Henry's portrait for his birthday the first year they were together. In the portrait, he was walking in a field with a violin tucked under his arm. His right side she painted in bright colors with clearly defined lines, an ironic smile on his face, his red hair disheveled and his glasses slightly awry. But his left side she cast in shadows; the lines were somewhat dissolved, his mouth turned down and melancholy. She had achieved the same effect with the violin: on the right, the instrument looked Bach and mostly Mozart, but on the left, it looked as though it would only ever play in the most mournful A minor. When Henry saw the painting, he knew he wanted to marry her. Luckily, he already had.

When they met, Francesca was working illegally under a friend's social security number. She had already dropped out of Cal and her student visa was set to expire at the end of the year. So, they decided to elope. Someday, when they had the money, they would have a real wedding. Francesca's friends and relatives would come over from Italy for a huge church ceremony with a white dress, three-tiered cake, the works. In the meantime, there was only one thing Francesca couldn't do without: "A ring. I need a ring. I won't feel right unless I have one." They chose out a sterling silver ring with wild flowers stamped onto the sides from a vendor on Telegraph Avenue.

Henry told her he wasn't close to his mother. She was difficult and needed time to accept the elopement. In fact, Francesca should never mention it in her presence when, someday, they met in person. But soon the questions started, and they often fought about when they would finally visit her in Portland. A few weeks ago, Francesca called Rose behind his back and got them invited for a three-day weekend. Henry was furious when he found out, but when Francesca burst into tears, crying *you don't know how much this means to me*, what could he do? They had to go.

It was too late to call his mother. "Oh, by the way," he might say after talking about the weather, "I forgot to tell you. Francesca and I are married." Francesca wouldn't mention the elopement; she was too afraid of disrespecting his mother. As for Rose, she wasn't the type to bring up weddings and marriage. The ring, though discreetly silver, was the only thing that spoke the truth.

He had to get rid of it.

Henry woke a little after dawn, smashed up against the wall and blanket-less, as predicted. The ring. If Francesca put it on, he would obsess all day whether his mother had noticed. If she did, when she did, he might die right there on the spot.

He eased himself out of bed, careful not to wake Francesca, who was wrapped up in the blanket like a cocoon. He tiptoed over to over to the bookcase, grabbed the ring, ran into the bathroom and locked the door.

Henry sat down on the cushioned pink toilet seat next to an open jar of lilac-scented potpourri. He opened his fist and stared at the ring. What now? Should he open the window and fling it into the garden? No. Who knew where it would land? He

imagined his mother, in garden clogs and floral gloves, finding the ring in a bed of pansies. What then? Flush it down the toilet? That seemed too rash. In the end, he wrapped the ring up in a wad of toilet paper and put it in the trash can, pushing it deep among the used Q-tips and cotton balls.

Rose was in the kitchen, reading the newspaper. “You’re up early.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“I bought some of that orange juice you like.”

Henry yanked a dead leaf off one of his mother’s African violets on the windowsill and crushed it between his fingers. He had to get out. Clear his head.

“Why don’t you have some of the orange juice?”

“I think I’ll go out for a walk.”

“Suit yourself.” She put down the newspaper. “Pick me up an extra can of Sprite while you’re out, would you? I’m making my pancakes.”

Shivering in his light California jacket, Henry walked past the Craftsmen and Tudor houses lining the streets in Laurelhurst. Many of the houses had well-pruned rose bushes in their front yards, their buds shrunken and covered with a black film. The roses had been attacked by a fungus this year, his mother had told him over the phone. She was probably the only person who was happy the rose season would be meager. His mother, born and raised in a place called the City of Roses, named after a flower whose perfume had always made her sneeze and her eyes well up with tears.

What had he done? Francesca would freak when she couldn’t find the ring. Ring or no ring, any melodrama might let the truth about their marriage slip. He took off his

glasses and wiped away the drizzle, the edges of the buildings blurring as a wave of *mea culpa* came over him. Yes, he was to blame.

But, standing by a shelf full of pretzels and mixed nuts at Plaid Pantry, he regained his conviction. It wasn't too late to make things right. All he had to do was keep things together for the next two days. Just two days. A can of Sprite in hand, he headed home.

When he got to his mother's house Francesca was outside in a t-shirt and jeans, pacing back and forth on the porch. She rushed over when she saw him.

"Henry. My ring. I can't find it."

"It's freezing. Why don't you go inside?"

"My ring. It's gone."

"My mother's making her special pancakes."

"Are you not listening to me?"

"Ask her about the pancakes."

Rose opened the can of Sprite and poured it slowly into the pancake batter while Henry and Francesca hissed at each across the kitchen table.

"Is something wrong?"

"I can't find my ring."

"Oh dear." The pancake batter bubbled in the pan. "I'm sure you'll find it."

After breakfast, Henry helped Francesca look for the ring. He checked under the bed but, of course, only found fresh tracks from the vacuum cleaner. When Francesca started ripping clean sheets off the shelves in the closet, flinging them onto the bed, he half-considered retrieving the ring from the trash, pretending he had found it somewhere

on the ground. But no. All this fuss over a fifteen-dollar ring from Telegraph Avenue. The more he thought about it, the more ridiculous it was. They argued for a couple of minutes, the argument ending with Francesca accusing him of not taking her seriously and swearing profusely at him in Italian. By the time Rose drove them downtown, they were no longer talking to each other.

After lunch at an Italian place his mother liked, they went to Nordstrom so his mother could look for a new pair of shoes. Francesca stomped off while Rose busied the salesman, asking for every pump and mule they had in size six and a half. Henry wandered towards the café, but darted up the escalator when saw Francesca glancing moodily at the glass display cases in the jewelry section.

The pianist played a florid arrangement of Ave Maria while he walked past women's wear, the well-groomed saleswomen pacing the islands of carpet, smiling, greeting, folding. Nordstrom on Pioneer Courthouse Square. His mother used to take him shopping here. She made him try on heaps of clothes and he had to see if she smiled or frowned when he came out of the dressing room. God, how he'd hated it.

When he was ten, Henry's father gave him money to buy her a Mother's Day present at Nordstrom. He finally picked out a jar of rose scented potpourri in a glass etched with a poem by Robert Frost. On Mother's Day, they went out to breakfast at Pig 'n Pancake. Henry handed her the jar, with a pink ribbon tied around the lid. She smiled, thanked him, unscrewed the lid and immediately started wheezing. They left before Henry could have a bite of his buttermilk short stack. How could he not know she was allergic to roses? Rose was sure he had done it on purpose. She was mad at him for

weeks. But she kept the potpourri. She put it on a shelf above the toilet, the lid screwed shut, and there it stayed for years, the rainbow-colored chips slowly fading to gray.

They met an hour later in the lobby, Rose with two full shopping bags and Francesca drinking an iced-tea with NORDSTROM printed on the front in gold letters. When she saw Henry, she pushed the straw up and down again and again until it made a nervous groan. On the drive home, she stared down at the Willamette river like she hoped to catch a glimpse of her ring glittering somewhere beneath the water's surface.

Back home, Francesca bounded up the stairs, Henry purposely lagging behind her. When he got to his room, Francesca was on her hands and knees, searching through a pile of picture frames she had knocked on to the carpet.

“What are you doing?”

“I want my ring.”

“We already looked there.”

“I want my wedding ring.”

“My mother will hear you.”

“I don't fucking care what your mother thinks!” She hurled the Henry in a Christmas sweater picture at him, which hit him in the middle of his face with a whack.

“Henry. Oh my God. Henry.”

His nose pulsed with pain. “Fuck!”

“Are you ok?” She rushed over and tried to take a look, but he pushed her away.

“No I'm not ok. You just attacked me.”

“Baby, let me see your face.”

“No.”

“Is it bleeding? Let me see.”

When he lowered his hands, she started to laugh. “Your nose.”

“Oh yeah. Very funny.”

“I’m sorry.” She kept laughing. “At least it’s not bleeding. It would be worse if it were bleeding, right Henry?”

He sat down on the bed. “I deserve it.”

“No you don’t. I am the stupid one.”

“I didn’t take you seriously. About the ring.”

“I have you. That is what matters.”

“I’ll get you a new ring. A better one.”

“Shh, it doesn’t matter.” She kissed him. “And I was lying. I care what your mother thinks. I care very much.”

“I know.”

Henry went into the bathroom, to splash water on his face he told her. But he was really there for the ring. He dug the ring out of the trash and, without unwrapping it from the toilet paper shroud, flushed it down the toilet.

The next day, Henry and Francesca took a bus alone to the Saturday Market. She bought a purple hat with a red flower knitted onto the side, and they shared a curry chicken mochi pizza. They looked for a new ring at several of the stands, but Francesca couldn’t find any she liked.

“There is time,” she said.

When it started raining in the mid-afternoon, they headed down West Burnside to Powell's City of Books. Henry always felt a little overwhelmed at Powell's: a bookstore the size of a warehouse, its tall wooden shelves stacked to the ceiling with books. After browsing the poetry section for a while, he sat down in the café and went over a poem he was working on called *I Built My House*. Half-way through, he realized the poem was about his father.

Francesca met up with him later with a large paper bag full of books.

"I have a present for you." She dug through the bag and pulled out a votive candle with a picture of The Fool tarot card on the front. "The Fool represents air and you are Aquarius and that is air."

"It's not because you think I'm a fool?"

"Henry. Such a question."

He pulled her onto his lap. "You know, I'm actually glad we came."

"Really?"

"You wanted to meet my mother. I shouldn't have put it off for so long." He ran his fingers through her hair. "I have a problem with that sometimes. Putting things off."

Francesca smiled. "I have another surprise for you."

"What is it?"

"I will tell you at your mother's house."

"Why not now?"

"No. You must wait. The present is also for her."

"If you don't tell me, I'll have to tickle you."

Francesca smiled. "You wouldn't dare."

“Watch me.”

He started tickling her and she laughed, knocking over his empty coffee cup with her arm. “Ok. You win.”

She pulled him towards her and whispered in his ear: “I’m pregnant.”