

THE RING

“Is this your card?” he asks, flourishing the Two of Hearts.

The young woman bites her lip. She wants to help him, he can tell, but she’d showed the card she’d chosen before to everyone, they’d know she was lying now. She shakes her head.

He sighs and tucks the card back into the pack. Second failure in a row. “Guess maybe I should have stuck with the coins, right?”

They all laugh, at least he can laugh at himself, that makes it less pathetic. Closer to the baseline sadness of a magician at a cocktail party, less of the extra wretchedness of screwing up the finale of a ten-minute routine that had been, until now, pretty slick. Worthy of stopping conversation and paying attention to the guy in a dress shirt and maple leaf-patterned tie, sleeves ostentatiously rolled up. They’re ready to drift, but he keeps them close with a gesture.

“Hey, how ‘bout that painting, historical dudes playing cards. Anyone seen that one before?” Weirdly, the magician’s commenting on the host’s décor. Pointing at an oil-on-canvas across the room, four Renaissance figures gambling around a table, mostly ignored by guests wondering if the Picasso next to it is real, or maybe one of those fancy replicas insurance companies make rich people have.

“Not a famous one, right? It’s by Georges La Tour. ‘The Cheat.’ Guy on the left,” says the magician. “Dude with no hat. Total shyster, ready to scam the table and walk away with the cash. His hand’s behind his back, he’s holding a card.” He puts his hand on the volunteer’s shoulder and points. “Is that your card?”

The young woman laughs, he’s really grasping at straws now, but the stockbroker closest to the back of little audience by the open bar walks over, looks at the painting, and calls out “Ace of Diamonds!”

The audience turns, moving vaguely toward the wall. Sure enough, the painted card player on the left is a cheat, looking over his shoulder at the viewer as if to say, “Don’t tell!” The cheat is extracting the Ace of Diamonds—her card—from his wide belt, his Tudor-necked woman opponent distracted by the servant pouring wine, the painted fop on the right concentrating on his own cards.

There is applause, there is relief on the face of the young woman, there is a check at the end of the night and an extra bottle of something expensive in a gift bag, he’ll sell it to Jimbo next door and then it’s a bonus instead of a shade rattling down on his future, *one mouthful is one too many, one drink is never enough.*

He’s putting his case in the trunk when the girl from the trick walks up behind him. In the yellow light of covered parking, her skin and her hair are the same color,

even alone she's not the prettiest girl in the room. He never picks the prettiest one, figures that one gets enough attention already, spread it around a little.

"Can I ask how—" she starts.

He cuts her off. "Sorry. I never tell. It would spoil the magic."

"No—" she bites her lip again. "How come you're a magician?"

"I like working for myself. It's fun to be magic." The standard answer, the truth. A truth.

"But you're wearing the ring."

He glances at his right pinky, the dull metal facets picking up a little of the streetlights. "I'm wearing a ring, yes." His breath blows out in a cloud.

"You're wearing the ring. You're an engineer."

"Any law against engineers being magicians?"

"Did you quit?"

"I never started. Look, as charming as this is, I gotta go." Somehow it doesn't surprise him when the girl gets in the passenger seat.

"You want a glass of water?"

His apartment is charm-free; not even a poster on the wall, eighteen stories up with no view. She looks in the other room—a mattress on the floor, the flannel sheets tucked in all around and folded back at the top. He expects her to say something about the place, which is about as opposite from the party condo as possible while still having walls and a roof.

Instead she asks, “What was it like?”

“What was what like?” He wants her to say it.

“Getting the ring.”

“Unreal. Not the feeling, the ceremony.” He sets a glass on the narrow counter for her, takes a gulp of tap water. “Buncha guys in robes. One guy I graduated with wouldn’t take the oath because it said “God” in it. Felt like maybe we were joining the Masons, instead of getting engineering degrees.”

She stops poking around and leans across the counter, stretching out her fingers to touch the ring. “You got one of the iron ones.”

“It was my granddad’s. 1936. Not from the Quebec Bridge, that’s an urban myth.”

“I know.”

“We all held a chain with a bolt on it, from the bridge, though.” He takes another slug of water, *too many, never enough* and thinks about Sam Hayworth standing up and refusing to say “Amen” and being asked to leave.

“For want of a horseshoe nail.”

“Yep.”

“*I will henceforth, not suffer or pass, or be privy to the passing of, Bad Workmanship.*” She takes a sip and makes a face.

“Lead pipes.” He’s not curious enough to ask how she knows at least some of the oath. Only words, he told Sam, only words, what does it matter? And Sam said it mattered a lot, if you’d give in on one word it made the whole oath not count. He’d told Sam, just say the words, or mouth them and let the group say them, or say nothing and

put on your ring and join the great network of Canadian engineers Called to the Ring, forever a fraternity of favors and influence and better-than-entry-level positions.

Sam wanted the ring to be more. To really be the lives at stake as his drafting hand moved across the great sheaves of paper, the pinky ring softly scratching a reminder. Sam had walked out of the Ceremony and the University and the country, emigrating to the States where only some engineers wore rings, smooth instead of faceted, modern stainless steel, and it didn't matter as much. And he himself had used the ring, shamed the ring, walked into a bottle and only just swum back out.

“So why aren't you practicing?” Her face was round and wide under the dining area lamp, her hair thick and some middling color she'd been born with. He wondered if she was Dutch, way back, or Norman, she had the same look as the woman in the La Tour painting. That had been a stroke of luck, to have the painting there already, not have to hide a card in a book or a vase, both of which had been in short supply.

“Hmmm?” she prodded, and he realized he hadn't answered.

“Didn't work out.”

And of course it didn't stop there, it couldn't stop there, the tap water somehow burning down his throat as if he'd opened the gift bag and uncorked sloppy hands and muffed patter and dropped coins in a silver path to the gutter—did anyone really end up in gutters these days? No, the path to the side of the TTC platform where one smelled of urine and asked for quarters, or these days, loonies and toonies. He leaned across the counter and kissed her and she didn't shy away.

He woke in the night, wondering where he was, and she still slept beside him,

her round rear end a white hill in the artificial light that always came in through the window. He took his fingertips down her spine, wanting but afraid to wake her, and then put his arms around her. She rolled into him, a boneless child carried in sleeping from the car, and the light hit the side of her wide white face, her cheekbones somewhere underneath the flesh, and suddenly she was bloated and drowning and crawling out of a barely-cracked car window, then pressing against the glass from the inside, her hair streaming like a mermaid as bubbles screamed out of her mouth.

In the morning, he was up and dressed and at the bagel shop, that was the sort of thing one did, the sort of thing he'd wanted to do *before*, before compression flanges and lateral torsional buckling and the discovery that everyone, not just him, needed to instead brace the top tension flange and at least knowledge had been advanced.

She sat up when he opened the bedroom door, and he was struck by how much his bedroom looked like a place where a person wasn't staying very long, how much it had looked like that for nearly ten years, and that perhaps he should buy some new sheets or a bed frame or put an IKEA print on the wall next to the mirror where he practiced sleights without looking himself in the eye.

He sat down beside her and offered the bagel bag, "I wasn't sure what you'd like, so there's a mix."

She pulled out an 'everything' and took a bite out of the side before rooting for the plastic knife and a napkin. He took the bagel away from her as she sawed at it, put the point of the knife in and cut it through. She nodded when he held up cream cheese, and watched him spread it evenly, all the way to the edge.

When he handed it back to her, she paused for a moment and then addressed the bagel. “My brother had the ring.”

He remembered a movie where the boy reached out and touched the girl’s shoulder every time the music swelled, but he thought he would probably do it wrong.

“His first building fell down. He didn’t know the software well enough, he’d always done hand drafting, but he wanted to impress the client.” She still spoke to the bagel. “The chapter guy came by, some old guy who’d been an engineer for donkey’s years, and took the ring back. I mean, they were very nice about it, but the letter said you give it back when you’re dead.”

“Was he in the building?”

“No.”

And here he did put his hand on her shoulder, and she very carefully set down the bagel on the bed and put her hand on top of his so perhaps it wasn’t wrong, and she said, “A couple of homeless guys were.”

He thought of holding the chain with the bolt on it, and of the Quebec Bridge and the Twin Rivers Bridge and bridges that sometimes collapsed even before being finished, the girders twisting in the air like snakes, scything the next span over of the still-in-use old bridge, concrete raining down in great lethal chunks on children and pregnant women and ironworkers and one woman trapped in a car, not knowing you could crack the window and relieve the pressure, sometimes one moment of planning was the horseshoe nail. Sometimes you got a shelf full of books to hide a card in and sometimes you got a painting of the Ace of Diamonds.

He squeezed her shoulder, and knew that the expensive bottle was one salve and

the edge of the balcony was another.

She took a bite of bagel and swallowed hard. He took his hand from her shoulder to her soft, round cheek, and that wasn't wrong either. She set the bagel down and kissed him, and then they nearly squashed the entire bag before he moved it to the floor.

When he pulled up to her house—her parents' house, the ring still binding their remaining child to the wide gardens of Rosedale, perhaps the trade was never having to live in a fifteen-hundred-a-month studio, but that bargain was too dear.

“Don't walk me,” she said, and he leaned over and kissed her cheek instead. She put her hand on the door and he needed to know.

“Do you think—my place is pretty bare. Maybe you noticed. I've been meaning to get something, want to come help me pick?”

She smiled like another truth. “Tomorrow?”

“Great, I'll pick you up at ten? More bagels?”

She waved when she reached the door. He watched her in, then pulled away, turned left instead of right, taking the on-ramp to the Don Valley Parkway, the sun shining on the girders as it crossed the river, each bolt chosen, every beam set.

The painting is real; you can see it here: <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/cheat-ace-diamonds>