THE RING

by Poppy Z. Brite

This story has never been published and never will be, except on www.poppyzbrite.com. I'm making it available not because I think it is some sort of lost masterpiece (far from it), but because it may give readers a look at how my fictional voice developed. In other words, it is just for fun.

Please read it in that spirit.

All I can remember about this one is that I wrote it for an arts-center creative writing class in Hillsborough, North Carolina around 1986, and that it was required to contain a gold ring inscribed with the date "1801" and found in a mountain stream. Though the story takes place in a different part of North Carolina, and he pre-dates both of them, I feel certain that Jack Hummingbird is kin to Kinsey Hummingbird, the modern-day operator of Missing Mile's Sacred Yew, and Miles Hummingbird, the boy killed in the War Between the States, to whose spirit Ghost talks in the graveyard behind his house in Lost Souls.

Jack Hummingbird felt as if he had sliced off a fragment of ancient Egypt to being home to his love.

It wasn't as if Annelise had never seen a ring before. She had thrown away a box of cheap, gaudy costume jewelry piece by piece on the eve of their wedding, smoke-eyed and strong tight as a wire, hurling the baubles into the city river: "This is for the man with the sticky hands! This is for the man who told me I should never dream!" And she'd sobbed as the red and green and blue sparkles sank through the layers of dark shifting water. The next day he had put a tin ring engraved with their initials and the date and a rough heart on her finger and kissed her forever, and he had taken her away from the city that had pawed her body, up to his cottage in the greening mountains, to love her with his hands and his lips and his stories. And now one of those stories was to be published in a magazine, a MAGAZINE as Annelise said with the sound of the capital letters in her voice, and anyone in the world might read it, and at last he had enough money to buy Annelise a gold ring.

Jack had no horse and did not want one; he had no idea how to care for such a thing, and if it died, he would feel bad. He had walked the thirty miles to the city to buy the ring, and it was almost midnight, and he was almost home. They usually shopped in the village five miles down the mountain, a fine walk except when the Ritchell brothers were working in their yard or drinking on their ramshackle front porch. The three rawboned men showed soft black nubs of teeth when they smiled, and their smiles were not well-meant. If they had been drinking long enough, they would yell about Annelise's breasts and origins. They were the only reason Jack had ever considered keeping a gun — how primally satisfying to blast the biggest Ritchell's jaw away even as he mouthed the hateful words — but today the Ritchells could not intrude upon the starburst of his thoughts, could not cast the ghost of a shadow on his happiness.

The ring was a hard little circle of preciousness in his pocket, a treasure such as Cleopatra the jet-eyed queen might once have worn on her golden finger. Annelise thought he had gone into the city to set up a bank account with the money from the magazine. He was only a mile away from sliding the ring onto her sweet stubby finger, hearing her howl of disbelief and maybe tears and laughter at once, seeing her hold her hand toward the fireplace to let the soft metal-glow mingle with the light of the flickering amber flames that heated their tea. He thought of lifting her lace skirts and kissing her knees, her thighs.

His foot was cold and sopping. Great fool, he said to himself. He'd mused himself right off the path into the shallow stream that laughed along

beside it. The moonlight played like silver spangles on its surface, and it was a good stream, a lovely stream, an almighty cold stream. Jack bent to wring out his pants leg, then, for the thousandth time, slipped his hand into his pocket to make certain the ring was still there.

"Not bad enough that ye scribble lies, have ye got t'play with yerself, too?" Jack took three steps backward, away from the rough tall figure that had appeared around the bend of the path. He could see no face, only a faint dull shimmer where the moonlight hit the eyes, but he knew the voice. Azarias Ritchell, the biggest brother, the hardest drinker. Tonight he smelled as if he had topped his own record: the sour odors of corn likker and drinking-sweat touched Jack's nostrils.

"Let me pass, Azarias." Jack's voice was thin in his own ears; he was suddenly conscious of the paleness of his eyes, the softness of his hands. "I'm going home to my wife."

"Yer whore, ye mean." The Ritchells had used that word before, but never had it sounded quite so demeaning, so obvious that to them, his moth-winged Annelise was nothing but a piece of raw, used flesh. "Ye had to bring her from the foul city, didn't ye? Ye don't care if yer woman has already seen a hundred men unbutton their trousers? I reckon she *liked* it, too."

That was too much. He knew Annelise's history; she had told it to him in trembling, torrential installments long past midnight, in their dark bed. She had lived hungry, and alone, and each time had killed her a little —

He stepped toward Ritchell. "You're one to talk, Azarias," he said. "I know you and your brothers are just part of Emily Ritchell's filthy litter. You're all three ugly as sin, but beyond that you don't look much alike. I've heard your mother spread her legs for any trash that gave her a drink."

The knife was in Ritchell's hand before Jack finished speaking. In the instant that his words hung like embers in the night air, he was sorry. Sorry because he knew he had done a foolish thing, had wasted himself. Sorry for the stories he would not write. Infinitely sorry for Annelise, who would watch the moon rise and set that night, who would wait, and wait. As the knife glittered at his throat, then in it, he did not know the ugly man who killed him. He was with Annelise. He did not feel ribbons of his blood flow from him, flood the water, spiderweb among the shiny rocks. He did not know that the ring had slipped out of his pocket and tumbled away with the laughing stream. He was intertwined with Annelise, and her lips were as hot as whiskey, as sweet as wine.

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