

THE RING

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2806 WORDS

“Wake up, Jeffery!”

Jeff Roundy grunted an abrupt snore and turned over in his sleep.

“Jeff! Wake up!” yelled the ghost.

One of Jeff’s eyes snapped open and he murmured through his crooked mouth, “Who the hell is it?”

“It’s your grandfather, Byron, that’s who it is, lad! Wake up!”

Jeff was bolt upright in his bed now, rubbing his eyes and breathing heavily. He must be dreaming. Standing there imperially was his grandfather in a very ragged suit that was ruined beyond repair. The pocket hung like a miss-tacked memo, time had caused a disappearing act using buttons on his suit-coat, his moth-eaten tie dangled askew. Grandpa’s face was chalky white, mottled with a tinge of unhealthy green.

“Grandpa Byron? You can’t be here! You’re dead, and I don’t believe in ghosts!”

“Neither do I,” said the late Grandpa Byron, “but that is irrelevant now, isn’t it son? Not believing in somethin’ doesn’t seem to drive it away, and believing in it don’t make be, so, boy, get up! We’ve gotta talk!”

Jeffery was awake now. *Really* awake.

“Look, my boy, I don’t like this any more’n you do. I was sleeping more soundly than you when another spook woke *me* up! Damn! I’ve been sleeping gloriously for twenty-five-years! Now, *that’s* sleeping, son!” The ghost looked bothered and bared a few teeth in the picket fence that served him as a mouth.

“Okay!” said the Jeffery, as he stood at attention near his bed, “Just so we understand each other. I don’t believe you are my grandfather. Maybe I’m sick, or I’m still dreaming or something.” He looked at his pillow, but he didn’t see himself there.

“Doesn’t bother me a damn, boy! All that matters is that we have this little talk so’s I can get back to my eternal rest and you can go on ‘bout your life courting that pretty little girl I see twinkling there behind your sleepy eyes.”

“You know about Celia?” he asked.

“Don’t be a horses ass, Jeffery,” Grandpa Byron said. “I don’t know no more about any of this than you do. Fact is, it was your grandma Jane who kept nagging me ‘til I woke up in that there comfy casket. I do love that woman, but she’s still the naggin’est old broad in town after all these years. She figured her request would best come from me than from her and I learned during the fifty-five years we were married that I’d better do whatever the hell she says if I want any peace, so here we are a-talking.”

Grandpa’s shoes were ancient and Jeff studied the toe-bone that peeked out of a separation between the sole and what was left of the upper.

“How is grandma, grandpa, if that is who you really are?”

Grandpa wagged a bony finger before his withered nose. “How do you *think* she is? She’s *dead!* Dead like *me!* You saw her buried last year, didn’t you boy?”

Jeff looked sad and Grandpa Byron felt a little bad at his outburst. “She’s fine, son. Looks a lot better’n me right now, I’ll tell you that right now.”

“What does she want,” asked the boy.

“She wants me to tell you something. Ah ... Let me see now ... don’t have many neurons left ... Oh, yes! Okay, okay, okay! She wants you to have her wedding ring to give to that little Celia girl you’re courting.”

“I haven’t asked her to marry me yet, grandpa.”

“You will. Oh, you will, boy,” grandpa said.

“How do you? ... Oh, yeh, you don’t know any more about this than I do. But grandma took that ring with her. I saw it on her hand when they closed the lid.”

The boy’s eyes suddenly flared. “No! No, no!” he yelled, “I’m not digging her up!”

“No, no, my boy! It’s nothing like that. There’s seeing a thing, Jeffery, and then there’s what’s actual. Your aunt Betty has it.”

“Aunt Betty has it? How in the world, yours or mine, did she get it?”

“Well, now, that’s the rub, isn’t it? Your old Aunt Betty sneaked into the funeral home before your grandmother was transported to the plot and she stole it right off granny’s finger.”

“What? Why would she do something crazy like that?” the boy spat.

“Oh, hell, boy! Why does a woman do anything? Women! You can’t live with ‘em, and you can’t sleep in a grave next to ‘em! Anyhoo, grandma says she can’t have another minute’s final rest until you retrieve that ring from her sister and put it on the finger of that little girl of yours.”

Jeffery pondered for some seconds before he looked up. “Grandpa?”

“Yeh, boy?” the ghost asked.

“You and Aunt Betty didn’t have something going on did you?”

The ghost looked insulted then calmed. “Well ... well, not *exactly*.” Jeffery knew it was impossible, but Grandpa seemed to blush, but then this whole night seemed to be impossible. The old ghost was fidgeting from one foot to the other.

“I met Betty first and took her out a couple of times and then I met her sister, your grandmother. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, and she was the sweetest person too. It was love at first sight. She returned my admiration, thank the stars that must certainly still be in the night sky. That was *that!* When Betty found out she was so mad she wouldn’t talk to Jane for years. She didn’t even go to our wedding. Maybe after fifty-five years of jealousy she just couldn’t help herself, but she stole the ring.”

“But, grandpa, I can’t just go as her for it. It would be like calling her a thief.”

“Well, boy, she is a thief, and besides, that’s exactly what Jane told me she wants you to do. Are you going do it now, or am I going to have to haunt you for years until you do? We can do this the hard way or we can do this the easy way. Jane won’t let me back under the daisies ‘til you get that ring.”

The old ghost stood there with his mouth open, a sight that made Jeffery uneasy, what with the staggered picket-fence teeth and the dried up tongue failing to wet the thin lips.

“Grandpa! I just *can’t* do that ...” the boy said.

The ghost rose up like a great genie over the boy shouting, “Enough boy! You do it or neither one of us will ever get any rest! And I mean *ever!*”

“Okay! *Okaaay!*” said the boy.

The apparition vanished from the boy’s sight leaving a swirling of dust in the room. As if from a very long way down the street towards the cemetery Jeffery heard a faint, “Love you boy,” and then there was silence.

Jeff looked around at the glow of the morning moon slanting its soft rays in through the window, spreading mullioned squares of light on floor and wall, a corner of

which spilled up onto the bedspread. He wasn't sure what had just happened, if anything had happened at all. He had doubts. He got into bed and lay back and soon was asleep, but in a short time the alarm went off. The memory was dull now. Must have been a dream.

He went into the bathroom, showered, brushed his teeth, got dressed, had a light breakfast and went to work, haunted all the way with the ever burgeoning dream. It echoed all the way to noontime, distracted him from his duties at the hardware store. Suddenly, as he was reaching up from high on a ladder for a box he was startled to hear, as if from a megaphone in his head, "Do it boy! We both need the rest!" Almost falling he grabbed for a shelf, caught his balance and climbed down. He went immediately to find his boss to ask for a couple of hours off.

On the way over to the assisted living home where Aunt Betty had been for a year, he thought about the bitter old spinster sitting on her cushioned chair doing crossword puzzles with a magnifying glass, all day, every day. She was ninety-five and known to be as cantankerous as hell. She was an uncompromising old spinster and there had been no choice but to institutionalize her. Grandma Jane and Grandpa Byron offered to take her in, but she wouldn't have it. Stubborn to the core.

The idea of having to confront the old bitty with her petty crime was an unnerving thought. He slowed as he decided he just couldn't do it, but the megaphone went off again between his ears and he knew what grandpa meant about having peace. He needed peace and his grandmother was not going to allow it until he completed his assignment. Well, he really didn't believe any of this, but it was, indeed, irrelevant. He had to do it, whether it was only in his imagination or not.

As he strolled up he saw her rocking in a wicker chair on the expansive porch of the facility, a shawl over her shoulders, her nose close to her magnifying glass, her thick spectacles perched on her long thin nose, a pencil scratching letters in the little squares of a crossword puzzle book. She was so engrossed she did not notice his approach.

"Aunt Betty?" he said in a low voice.

She looked up a little startled. Her face showed no emotion at first, but then a sign of recognition floated into her eyes.

"Jeffery," she cried. "What are *you* doing in this neck of the woods?" She put down her stubby pencil and reached her spindly fingers out. He took them in his right hand. They felt like a bundle of asparagus. She quickly withdrew them from his grasp as if she realized she had shown too much interest in another human being.

"Aunt Betty ..." he said with more than a little trepidation.

"What is it, boy?" she insisted, "Spit it out. You must want something or you wouldn't be way out here in the country standing in front of an aging old crone." She went back to peering and scratching.

"Okay, Aunt Betty. It's like this." He screwed up his courage. "Grandpa Byron visited me last night."

Her head spun on her wrinkled skinny neck with such speed he stepped back a foot or so.

"Are you crazy, boy? How in hell could your grandfather Byron visit you last night? The man's been dead for twenty-five-years last Tuesday." Her nostrils flared wide.

"I don't know, Aunt Betty. He told me Grandma Jane had a job for me to do."

"Ain't no such thing as ghosts, boy! Dontcha know nuthin'?"

“I know, Aunt Betty,” Jeffery said, “but when I tell you what he said grandma wants, you may lose your peace and rest like I did. Grandpa says he won’t leave me alone until I get something from you.” The boy was feverish with fear now. There was a sizeable hole forming in his stomach.

“What could I have that my sister would want you to have, Jeffery?”

“Aunt Betty, I’m going to marry Celia Hammond this spring ...” he paused in his thought and noticed a strange look come over his aunt’s face.

A little mist rose in the old woman’s eyes.

“Jeffery, That’s a good thing. I don’t know that young lady, but I know this after a lifetime of being alone, decades of watching others bond and put lives together. Nat King Cole used to sing a song. How did it go? Oh, yes. The last line was, *‘the most important thing you’ll ever learn, is just love, and be loved in return.’*” She looked up at the clouds and the blue of the sky and a tear ran down her cheek. She pulled a hanky from her bosom and daubed her eyes.

Her nephew was stunned at the words. It was the first time he had ever seen her break the hardness of her shell, the only soft thing he had ever heard come from her lips. He was not sure he could go on with the huge lump that had formed in his throat.

“Go on, boy. Tell me what it is.”

“Grandma Jane wants you to give me her wedding ring so I can give it to Celia,” he said, barely squeezing the words out.

“Well I never,” she said with a withering glare that was colder and deeper than he had ever experienced before. He was pinned in place like an insect in a collection, could hardly breathe, but after several seconds he saw the ice thaw and the old woman began to wail heavy sobs, her back heaving convulsively

Jeffery did not know what to do. He feared this frail old woman would die in her rocking chair on the porch of the last place she would ever call home, and worse, he would have been the one who killed her.

He reached to put his arms around her. She did not resist. Her sobs turned into deep swells of wailing, rolling like waves from beneath a tumultuous sea, welling up from the depths of an entire lifetime held in abeyance. She seemed clutched in the claws of some misery she thought would never end, but grew each year, a scar that had crusted formed a crusted over her wounded heart. The beast was now drowning in an ocean of tears, huge breakers pounding on the shores of her anger.

He held her through a series of coughing fits and endless moans. No, not endless. Nothing is endless. Not joy, not pain, not misery, and certainly not life. Everything has a rhythmic set of breakers counting out the existence. The tide of Aunt Betty’s life was flowing slowly out. She began to calm, her breathing slowed, until only an occasional ripple spread upon the waters of her soul.

She wiped her tears and loudly blew her nose. “Help me to my room, would you boy?”

He gently helped her rise from the rocker. Her pencil stub and book fell from the chair. “Leave them,” she said, as she shuffled on his arm through the front door and down the hall to her room. The only furniture in the room was a single bed, a dresser, a ladder-backed chair, and a small table on which sat a tiny lamp and a framed black and white photograph. Jeffery recognized the image as his grandfather at age 20 or so.

The old woman reached into the top drawer of the dresser and brought out a small cedar box. She opened it and brought out a simple gold band.

“Taking this ring was the most terrible thing I have done in my life,” she said, “and mark my words, boy, I’ve done some doozies.”

She sat down on the bed and patted the quilt to have him join her. She pressed the ring into his hand.

“I loved my sister Jane, but I loved your grandpa Byron more, a possessive sort of love. He never really belonged to me, but my love for him destroyed the love I had for her, my own flesh and blood. Something died when he picked her over me. I never looked for anyone else to share my life with. If I couldn’t have him I didn’t want anyone. It is a terrible thing to know that I took the wrong turn so long ago, and the road no longer is there to walk.”

She smiled the only smile the boy had ever seen on her face.

“This ring belongs only to you, Jeffery. It was so important to your grandmother that she reached out of the grave to make sure you have it. It had to be her, no one else knew the terrible thing I had done. It is a symbol of the love between your grandmother and grandfather and I hope you and Celia will be as happy as Jane and Byron were.”

“Thank you,” he said, unable to think of anything else to say.

Finally he thought of something.

“Aunt Betty,” he said, “You *will* come to the wedding, won’t you?”

“If I’m still around, dear,” she said. “I’ve run out of new crossword puzzles and I’m anxious to see Jane soon. We’ve been apart way too long.

“I’ll buy you a few more,” he said.

She chuckled and hugged him close.

He turned to leave, but turned back. “Did you hear something?” he said.

“Yes, Jeffery, I heard it. It was just a whisper, almost like the wind, but I couldn’t tell from where. Someone said, ‘Thank you.’”