

MOTHER'S RING

by Teresita Z. Dixon

EVEN THE SKY was cloudless: I would have a nice trip to Manila the next day. While packing my things eagerly that afternoon, deciding which clothes to bring with me or to leave so as to lessen my baggage, I heard father say, "Don't take the seven o'clock bus, Dina. It'll be too early."

He probably noticed that my disappointment was great for I glanced furtively at him and kept silent. Stopping once in a while with my packing, I would place my arms akimbo and try to figure out why he had to postpone my trip so. "Nardo and Tito need you to teach them in their lessons," he continued.

Even towards evening, at supper, the trip was still in my mind. I could not help staring at father. He sat at the head of the table, chewing quietly, his mouth half-filled. Once in a while he glanced

at me, trying, it seemed, to find something on my face.

I noticed the extraordinary silence. Usually there would be incessant remarks and loud chuckling over Nardo's foolishness until supper would be over. The spoons of the two boys clattered on their plates. Then I would look at their innocent faces. If possible I did not want to leave them. Yet I was wishing all the while that they would be intelligent enough to finish their lessons earlier so I could leave the next day at my pleasure.

MY EYES travelled across the table. I saw mother. She was silent. I dared not look at her face. I might find tears. Judging by her sad face, which I could only picture for my eyes were cast down, she resented my departure. I noticed her gold ring which glistened under the light. It look-

ed like a band of light itself wound around the slim ring finger of her right hand. Since I was sixteen I had admired that ring. It was an old-fashioned one, with no stone at all. On its flattened surface was delicately inscribed a crown. It was old but always shiny. My grandmother gave it to her, she once told me. That was when she was married to my father, she said. "I will give this to you someday," she assured me.

In that silence my mind seemed to whirl. It circled about the ring.

The afternoon before a letter had announced the approval of my application for a job with the Surety Insurance Company. The manager was expecting me for an interview the next day. I hurried to my friend Alu and told her. Alu had just graduated from the Manila Central College. I considered her lucky for during her third year in college she had met her fiance.

"I can imagine the joy of having a monthly salary," I said to her. "Maybe I will be able to buy all the things I have been dreaming of. Even a bungalow someday, who knows?"

"You silly dreamer. But I don't blame you, you are still young." Alu was older than me by one year. How dared she regard me still young at nineteen. Her face was flushed, and I knew by then she was thankful for me.

"Come, let us celebrate the

event. Let's go outing," she suggested.

"That is a nice idea. But, you know, I have to be home before six. Mother needs me to cook supper."

"Oh, we will be back even before sundown. Don't worry, dear," she said.

ALU DID NOT have to worry about coming home early. Purita, her eldest sister, would take care of everything.

We sauntered along the stony road. Hand in hand we walked along. At first I did not notice the roughness of our path.

By the roadside were stray weeds with red and yellow flowers. Brilliant ones.

"Alu, these are beautiful," I exclaimed pointing to a cluster of red ones.

"Yes, they are, but they are only weeds. Let's look for roses over this way," she said, dragging my right hand along.

We searched for roses but we could not find any. We saw only the bright-colored blossoms of the weeds.

"We can get some real roses over there," she said, pointing towards a clump of bushes.

The way was rough and we jumped from one stone to another like acrobats.

"I am tired," I said with a moan. "Look at those spines. Do you think we can go over that muddy creek down there? I tell

you, it is impossible to get those roses."

At my insistence we turned back.

A plate on the table was empty. No more rice for serving. I took the plate and filled it up in the kitchen. Three scoops of the ladle was enough.

"Please pass it over," father said. Then I placed two spoonfuls on each plate of the two boys and gave the half-filled plate to mother. She scraped some on her plate and handed it back to me. I laid it gently on the table. I enjoyed seeing the process.

"Eat some more," mother said. "You have to prepare yourself for tomorrow's journey." Her voice refreshed me. I drew a deep breath.

A FEW HOURS AGO Tito had been playing "Remember Me" on the piano while Nardo stood in front of the mirror squaring his shoulders, trying to balance them with great effort. Just two weeks ago he had arrived home with a sprained shoulder. He had been playing ball with some of the kids in the neighborhood.

The living room was bright for the lights were all on. At the center, father and mother sat conversing. Tito spotted me at the door. He called out to me to play "La Boheme." Everybody was attentive. My fingers glided among the keys smoothly, for I knew they were listening.

After supper mother started washing the dishes. All the while the trip the next day and the ring seemed to haunt me. I felt uneasy. I looked at her directly. She was still young. Her tightly pursed lips made her more beautiful. Maybe she wanted to cry but my presence held. I groped for a topic of conversation but could not find any. One by one the plates came out clean and shiny. Their pure white appearance thrilled me. I wiped them as she handed them to me.

"Dina," she said at last, while she continued scrubbing the plate. She rinsed it and handed it to me, fixing her eyes on mine. "Tomorrow you will go. Keep in mind that in Manila you will meet different kinds of people. Be good to all of them and everything will go well."

"I won't fail you, mother."

I noticed her transfer her glance from me to the plate I was holding. This made me move my fingers with more precision and care. I feasted my eyes on the whiteness of the chinaware which glistened the more after I had wiped it dry with the cloth.

"Do as your father tells you. It would be better to help your brothers first before you go. Your father needs rest, you know that."

"Yes, mother, I will."

I cleared my throat. There was a lump in it. It was painful. I tried to swallow hard to keep back my tears.

But the ring. How I wished

she would give it to me now. Tomorrow I will go, I said to myself.

"Keep those dishes now. Be careful with them," she said as she entered the *sala*.

OUTSIDE, the street was thronged with people. It was still early. I watched them scurry away as I sat near the window. My chin rested on my arms which in turn rested, coiled, on the window sill. Then I heard a thousand voices. I knew them to come from nowhere. Streaks of mist passed my eyes. They glided one by one with ironic ease. I did not move.

Under the trees not far from where I was were two young people. They were lovers. At first I tried to avoid them. I found my eyes fixed upon the moon. It was round and bright. But farther north were little masses of clouds, dark ones, which seemed to threaten its brightness. A slight fear crept over me. I tried to conceal my annoyance. Again I found the two lovers. The mist passed by me, floated to them, covering their faces once in a while. I recognized her face at last as the moonlight penetrated itself through the trellised pattern of the leaves. She was young, about eighteen. Her yellow dress with black buttons running across from her collar to the lower portion of her skirt clung to her slender body.

It seemed I heard the boy say, "When I will go home I will bring you some fruits of the trees my

father and I planted near our house. Oh no, I will just reach them out to your hands because you will be there with me."

The girl smiled. She seemed to understand.

"By the way, here take the handkerchief in exchange for the one you gave me yesterday," the boy continued. He handed her a maroon and white one.

"This is a nice hanky!" she exclaimed.

"You know I took that from my mother's store. That is the best of the lot.

He grasped her hand tightly. He tried to kiss it.

"Don't," she said, as she tried to shake off his hand.

"Why?" he asked. "Lovers usually hold hands," he continued, as he tried to catch her hand once more.

He began to hum a song.

"That is 'You,' my favorite," she said, her smiling eyes fixed upon his.

"Yes, I'll sing it to you to remember me always," he answered.

I KNEW THAT FACE, a handsome one. He had a muffler around his neck. His cream-colored shirt was pale white in the moonlight.

Now he was singing the song softly. The thousand voices grew softer. The hush of the leaves as the cold wind passed through the branches of the trees provided the accompaniment. She raised her face. Her eyes were closed. "If this is but a dream I hope I will

never wake up," I heard her utter.

The little masses of clouds were moving towards the moon. "Too near. Too near," I murmured.

Now the voices drew near me. The mist flowed back and forth. The song ended. She opened her eyes. She looked around.

"Where are you?" she queried. He had disappeared.

"Where is he?" I asked myself as I peered through the darkness. The handkerchief was there. She held it firmly, looked at it blankly and cried.

At last I felt the flow of blood in my veins. The wind had swept away the mist. It was dark all around. The cloud had touched the moon. I noticed that I was crying. I felt weak, stood up and walked, stumbling in the darkness. Finally, I reached the room. Mother was there waiting.

"Where have you been?"

"I didn't know you were waiting for me. I was just at the window."

I dared not look up. She might see my tear-stained face. I was ashamed of it.

"Dina, here is the ring. Take good care of it."

I stared at it. The two . . . the two lovers. I was hurt.

"Mother, please keep it for me. I will ask for it some other day. I have decided not to take it just yet."

THE NEXT DAY I took the trip to Manila. Neon lights greet-

ed my squinting eyes as the bus arrived along the boulevard. I held my grip tightly as the machine dodged here and there from the other running machines. It tooted its horn, pushed itself through the crowd who stopped to make a way for it. We passed by the window displays. Bunches of roses caught my attention. Up on a signboard was boldly inscribed: Artificial Flowers For Sale. I twisted my lips wryly. "Artificial, everything!"

The house of Tita Binay, mother's twin sister, was in Rizal. I stayed there. Everyday I took a ride to the office to be once again with the typewriters and adding machines. I befriended them reluctantly.

The letters from home, kissed by the tender lips of my loved ones, were comforting. I did not forget them.

The hall was fastidiously decorated. It was the firm's anniversary. The clink of thin glasses gave an air of monotony in the room. Days before, lavish preparation had been made. The speculation among the employees was great.

"Looks as if the whole month of December's salary would not cover your gown," I heard one exclaim. Only a mild feminine chuckle followed. A faint smile covered my face. Home, the family was in my mind that instant.

From a table where Lourdes, a co-employee, and I were sitting, we saw two men approaching. They were conversing. One of

them, Augusto, an old acquaintance, introduced his companion to us. We danced.

An old song made me shrug my shoulders. I felt hot, irritated. Yes, I remember that night, I said to myself. I bit my lips hard.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked.

"No."

The music forced me to picture a dancing dummy with a mechanical heart pounding incessantly. Unconsciously I drew back.

He clutched my hand, twisted my fingers gently. I stared at him. I remembered somebody, somebody whom I have met before in my dream or somewhere.

THE VERY next day I met him at the corridor of the building. "This is for you," he said. He gave me a white rose. I kept the rose in a vase near the typewriter on my table.

Every morning at the office a white rose awaited my arrival. Well at least I don't have to look for roses here in Manila, I said to myself. They just come.

His curly hair shaven on both sides of his head reminded me often of the boy in the garden. His lips were always parted by a smile. "I love the shape of those lips," Lourdes once said as we paused and took our time out from the piles of desk assignments in the office.

After supper we would converse together. "It's getting late. You better go," I used to say.

He would hold out his hand to me. "Hold my hand please. Press it hard," he would say.

Many months passed away. It was late in the afternoon, I arrived at Tita Binay's house, tired. I wanted to be alone. Walking past the porch, down the lawn, I found myself standing under the trees. There I was alone. I unconsciously inclined my head upwards and sighed. I suddenly remembered. Everything was similar. Those trees, the girl, alone. Afraid and frightened I was about to run away. But, there from the distance I saw him coming.

I looked up at the moon. No clouds. I smiled. He also smiled. As though he knew.

"Yes, I know I would find you here, Dina."

When he leaned forward to brush off an insect that had alighted on my shoulder, his ring arrested my attention. I remembered mother's ring. His ring was different from mother's, though. It had fine little white stones on it. He pulled it off from his finger and said, "Keep it for me, Dina. Will you be the mother of my children?"

"They still need me," I answered as I shook my head slightly.

Soon it was June, three years after that afternoon in the garden I started for home. There was still the winding stony road, the huge acacia trees. Farther in the distance was the house. As I approached the wide-open door,

everything was quiet.

"What happened to him? Why didn't you tell me?"

My questions were left unanswered. I knelt near the bed. Father was pale. He recognized me. A sad smile covered his face. He tried to raise his hand. It fell with a heavy thud. Mother took my hand and led me to the adjoining room. She motioned me to sit down.

WHY DIDN'T you tell me you were coming?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

I looked uneasily at her finger. She noticed and smiled.

"You have come for this perhaps. After all those years I know you would come to ask for it."

"Yes, Mother, we will have some visitors tomorrow—his mother, his father and himself."

"You mean the man you introduced to us a year ago?"

I did not answer. She knew the answer for I saw her nod her head.

"What time are they coming?"

"About eleven in the morning."

"Father is sick. I won't take the ring yet. We can wait."

"Are you sure of . . ."

"I am," I interrupted. "Tell them please. I won't leave you in such a condition. I love him, yes but you also." I buried my face in her bosom tenderly. "I won't take the ring yet." I had no tears then, although in the distance as if in a dream I could hear someone whistling the song, "You."

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Gallant Robot

A towering six-foot man of tin is the friend and creation of Sherwood Fuehrer, a fourteen-year-old inventor from Cranston, Rhode Island. The robot's name is Gismo, and Sherwood made him from a one-half horsepower electric motor, pieces of scrap metal, an old oil burner, a mortar fuse, camera and telephone parts. In spite of his varied anatomy, he has many accomplishments: he can speak, blink his eyes, shake hands, throw a ball, lift a ten-pound weight — and offer candy to a lady!

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