

RINGS

By Lucrecia Guerrero

It is a balmy late afternoon in early October 2000, and you are in Manhattan to present a media arts lecture, “The Murals of Portsmouth, Ohio: Mystery and Tapestry.” You are particularly fond of the artist’s superimposition of the faces of present-day Portsmouth citizens on the bodies of historical figures. Someone once told you that *all* artists are obsessed with time. The rain has let up and, on impulse, you walk toward Casa Brasil, the restaurant where twenty-three years ago you caroused with friends, your last night out as a bachelor. You are two blocks away, standing at the corner of 53rd and 3rd, waiting for the crosswalk light to give you the go-ahead.

The concrete pulses through the soles of your shoes. The city inhales, exhales, blowing its halitosis of soft pretzels, lamb seasoned with oregano and garlic, hot dogs, sauerkraut, something sweet and fatty, and beneath the heady bouquet, an undertone of decay. But your thoughts are not on decay. The city is alive. You are alive. You are *you*. Not husband, not father, certainly not grandfather. Your only daughter—your little princess—recently gave birth to your first grandchild. Your best friend teased you and called you *grandpa*. You didn’t realize you were scowling until he quirked his eyebrow. You explained: It isn’t being a grandfather that bothers me, it’s thinking of my daughter as a mother, that’s what I can’t get used to. He nodded but said nothing. He is your best friend.

The light changes and you enter the crosswalk. In the distance thunder rumbles. More rain tonight, probably. Your hotel room looks out on 45th and Broadway, and you will be able to watch

the umbrella parade of theatergoers if you want. You are alone in New York. You can do as you wish.

My ring, a woman calls out from the curb across the street from you. Her hair is red, a jungle of curls. She stretches out a model-thin arm and points to the rivulet that runs along the gutter. Inches from the drain, a glimmer of gold catches your eye. You dash across, swoop up the ring, and offer it to her. She is young and her gaze is soft, yielding. Your fingertips graze her palm. There is a connection. You feel it; you see it in her eyes of velvet-blue.

Thank you, thank you, she says. And for some reason you both laugh, which makes you both laugh again. I'm Jennifer, she says.

You offer your name, your hand. When you pull away, her heat lingers. Is she always so warm? Jennifer is beautiful, a dream realized. You are a dragon, an eagle. No, you are a dancer of Samba. You are *you*. Your feet tap a tune, leave the ground, dance high, up into the tangle of her hair, catch in the ring-lets of fire, higher, higher, into the abstract and away from the concrete.

One of a kind, a keepsake, she says, and holds up the solitaire diamond in the old-fashioned setting. She glances at your left hand, the gold band grown tight with the ten pounds that have crept up on you over the years in spite of the jogging, the racquetball.

Her eyes quickly return to yours, linger.

Can I buy you a cup of coffee? Anything? she says. She is young, your daughter's age. My ring's irreplaceable, she says, my grandmother's, family, you know?

Your grandmother's, you repeat. Irreplaceable. You smile sadly. A cool breeze chills you, and you slip your hands into your pockets to warm them. Sorry, you say (and you are sorry). There's someplace I should be.

You don't look back even though you feel the blue gaze following you. The Casa Brasil isn't far now, you are thinking, just as you spot the pile of rubble. You pull the saved matchbook from

your pocket, double-check the address printed beneath the half-moon of dipped stars. You stare at the rubble. You cannot see your memories in the broken pieces before you. As you walk away, you try to recall the happy beat of Samba in your step. In the distance the thunder rumbles.