

The Ring

by Colin J.S. Thomas, Jr.

For reasons unimportant here, I feel compelled to write about my grandson. Often that relates in some way to his friend, the old man. As a child, my grandson fished with the old man. As a boy, he had continued to fish with the old man. With the old man's help, the boy had gone to the old man's boarding school. In the middle of his last year at boarding school my grandson had, as a young man, been one of the old man's pallbearers. As a man, while a VMI cadet, he had been required to make a decision about truth, honesty and duty. He did so in the presence of several of the old man's pallbearers who had come to help.

I have only one grandson. I think of ours as a special relationship. Was I ever jealous of the old man? I am human. On the way home from the old man's funeral, my grandson and I had talked. We didn't talk much, but it was enough. I understood. My grandson loved me. He also loved the old man. I can't recall exactly what he said, but I felt better.

I think that it was not until his graduation from VMI that he and I again spoke about the influence the old man had on his life.

"May I tell a United States Marine Corps Second Lieutenant that I am very proud and love him very much?"

"Yes, Granddaddy. Can a newly minted Marine Corps Second Lieutenant say that he loves you, too?"

It wasn't what he said, but how he said it that made me love him. For one reason or another, we had been together so much. Together we shared much of his early life and much of my later life. I gave him his first fishing rod. We were together when he caught his first fish. We were again together when he caught his first trout on a fly that he had tied by himself. When he first saw the old man, we were again together. Now that I was without a wife, he was, to some extent, what I lived for.

Graduation was a happy time. I wished that the old man could have lived long enough to see the boy graduate. I remembered the old man's funeral and hearing one of the pallbearers say that a lion is dead, long live the lion. Those same pallbearers had never interfered, but they had always been there. Even after death, the old man's care continued. Four of those pallbearers attended the graduation. My young lion was also theirs.

The old man's widow had also come. She came with Judge Harrison.

"I wish he could have been here to see this. He would have been so proud."

Short and thin, she looked almost child-like, standing before this boy, now a man, who had been a part of her husband's final years.

"If there is an ocean in heaven he is probably fishing."

"I have spoken to my children. They understand. I have their permission. I want to give you something."

In her small hand she held up what appeared to be white tissue paper. Her eyes started to tear.

"The old man, I know you call him that, was very proud of this when he was about your age. I had it cleaned. It can be made any size."

My grandson took her hand and the tissue paper and with his other arm he held her close. He said nothing.

"I know about you and Catherine," she said. "If you and she ever . . . You can always trade it in."

My grandson stepped back and opened the tissue paper. It was her engagement ring. Again, he held the old man's widow.

"If Catherine will have me, she will want to wear this ring. It's beautiful."

"You don't have to . . ." She stopped because the boy had put his finger against her lips.

"I have told Catherine all about the old man. She will be touched. His ring—your ring—is beautiful. I hope you will sit with Granddaddy at our wedding."

I turned away. Judge Harrison was beside me. I was glad to see tears in his eyes, too. Damn. When we get old do we begin crying just as we did when we were children?

I knew how my grandson felt about Catherine. He had brought her to meet me.

"Granddaddy, this is Catherine."

"Hi, Catherine, I've heard a lot about you."

"Hi Granddaddy. Can I call you that?"

"Yes."

"I've heard a lot about you, too."

He told me that for him it had been love at first sight. It was for me, too.

It wasn't long after graduation that they again together came to see me. The old man's ring was on Catherine's finger. They said they wanted me to read at their wedding.

I started to protest and to say that their friends should read. In my mind's eye, I suddenly saw the widow holding up the tissue paper. I saw my grandson. No polite protest. Gratitude, understanding, acceptance.

"I'd be happy to read." 🙏

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