

The Magic Ring

Story by Linda Ferguson

For my 13th birthday, Mom has a surprise for me. Instead of a family dinner followed by a round of *Sorry!* she's hired a magician. After eating make-your-own-tacos, we gather in the living room, where she's dragged all the furniture against the dark paneled walls. Dressed in a shift (sleeveless, although it's January), Mom stands in the center of the room, her sandaled feet sinking into the thick green carpet that makes me think of a forest floor—moss and ferns and damp earth.

"Introducing Umberto Delconte!" she says, and then there he is in all his tall, Italian splendor—dark hair swept from his forehead, billowy white shirt, slim

black pants tucked into black leather boots.

"Oh, my," Marnie, my grandmother, rumbles and sits up straighter beside me on the flowered couch.

Umberto Delconte sweeps his arm across his waist and bows, and Marnie makes a circle in the air with her long, slender foot.

"And which one of you is the birthday girl?"

the magician asks in an accent that's both food and dancing—melting chocolate and limber muscles. His eyes survey our faces—Dad in his mushroom-colored recliner (currently upright); my two older brothers, both with bowl haircuts, at the far end of the couch; and Mom, who's now sitting in the maple rocking chair with her feet hooked around its smooth legs. Tonight



Artwork by John Barrows

we're also joined by Aunt Millie (actually not a relative—don't ask) and Marnie's brother, Uncle Dale, who used to work as a window dresser downtown. A man I've never seen before is sitting near Mom. I'd tell you his name, but we haven't been introduced. All I can say is he has wavy brown hair and is wearing a wide, striped tie with a shirt that's worn thin at the elbows. Also, he had seconds and thirds of the tacos.

When I don't claim the title of "birthday girl," Marnie jabs my ribs with her elbow. "Here she is; this is Virginia," she barks. As I reluctantly rise, I look back at the couch and catch my brothers smirking and rolling their eyes. The magician makes another low bow in my direction, and one of the women (Mom? Aunt Millie?) sighs.

"Yes, she is lovely, no?" Umberto Delconte says, ignoring the fact that my thick plaid skirt makes my legs look extra skinny and that a strawberry stain cradles part of my left jaw.

"It was there when she was born," Mom always explains before dropping a quick kiss on top of my head.

"A beauty mark," Dad always says.

"Mt. Rushmore," my brothers secretly call it, referring to the stain's rugged outline. "Washington, Jefferson," they chant when no adults are around. "Roosevelt, Lincoln."

The magician's eyes are deep, black. I could watch them for hours, like ocean waves, like flames. "For you, my gift," he says. He reaches inside one of his abundant sleeves, then pulls out an orange and balances it on his palm. Everyone claps politely. He taps the orange, and it opens like a flower.

"Ah!" we all breathe.

"Have a bite," Marnie calls to me.

I'm not crazy about oranges. I prefer peaches covered with down, ruby-red strawberries, scarlet-centered nectarines, but Umberto Delconte is holding out his elegant palm. I pull off a section of the fruit and taste its sweetness, which is like a pool of sunshine in my mouth, like how I imagine kissing must be.

"Pass it around," Marnie says.

Mom is closest, so I offer a piece to her. She pops it in her mouth and makes a low, rough sound that reminds me of a dog with a fresh bone. Everyone else is silent as they eat. I see a drop of golden juice roll down the stranger's smooth chin while Uncle Dale dabs his gray, neatly-trimmed mustache with a napkin. My brothers have taken the fattest sections and wedged them between their lips, giving themselves big grins.

When the orange is all gone, Umberto Delconte motions for me to sit down. I take my place next to Marnie, and she squeezes my hand. Her fingers are soft and a little sticky.

“And now, I should like another volunteer,” the magician says. My brothers both shoot a hand up, but the magician beckons to Aunt Millie, who flutters her fingers to her heart as if to say, *Oh, you don't mean me!* even as she lets him pull her to her feet. As she teeters on her dyed-to-match heels, the chiffon of her lavender skirt sighs around the shiny stockings stretched over her calves. Beside me, Marnie snorts.

The magician dangles a midnight blue satin bag in front of Aunt Millie.

“*Signorina*, will you do me the favor of taking it?”

She bats her eyelashes and smiles as if she's waiting for further instructions.

Dad clears his throat. My brothers snicker. Mom rocks her chair. Uncle Dale traces a line on his palm as if it's the path to a new and wondrous world. The stranger watches Aunt Millie with shining eyes.

“Take the bag, Millie,” Marnie growls.

Aunt Millie gives her head a little shake, sending the sparkling baubles on her earlobes swinging from their delicate gold chains. “Dear

me,” she giggles and reaches for the bag.

“Take note, *tutti*, completely empty,” Umberto Delconte says, and we nod in agreement as Aunt Millie makes a show of holding the bag open for us to see. “If you will permit me,” he says, his hand disappearing in blue satin. This time he pulls out a bouquet loaded with enough pink roses for a roomful of brides.

“Heaven!” Aunt Millie says, burying her nose in an ocean of blossoms. Their fragrance is a dense sweet cloud I could sleep on, like a floating cushion.

“Humph!” Marnie looks inside her shiny black purse, pulls out an embroidered hankie and presses it to her nostrils. She crosses her legs, then flicks a shard of taco shell off her smooth black skirt.

“Bravo! Bravo!” Mom says, and Aunt Millie bobs a curtsy, and then another one, before returning to her chair, where she hoists the bouquet up to her powdered cheek. The stranger strains forward as if to ask why she isn't sharing the flowers with us. Mom has slipped off her sandals and is kneading the carpet with her bare toes. My brothers sit with their bowl-cuts close together, bent over a crumpled piece of notebook paper. Dad slumps in his recliner, his head resting on his open hand, while Uncle Dale makes

a careful fold in a white paper napkin.

“And now,” Umberto Delconte says, “I shall need a very special assistant.” The stranger’s face wears the eager expression of a puppy pulling on its leash, but the magician has turned to Dad, who’s eyelids are beginning to droop.

“Bobby, are you awake?” Marnie says. Dad’s eyes fly open, and he springs up, looking dazed.

“*Fantastico!*” Umberto Delconte says.

My dad may wear the buzz cut of a former marine, and yes, he’s got his bulky flannel shirt buttoned to the chin, but he’s taller than the magician, and he has long, graceful fingers.

“Someday, we’ll get a piano,” he’s fond of saying.

“If you please, *signor*, will you look into the stereo cabinet?” the magician asks.

Dad cocks his head.

“Yes, inside,” the magician says patiently.

Dad goes over to the corner where Mom has pushed the coffin-sized cabinet, which is my job to dust, along with the rest of the furniture, every Saturday morning, while Mom cleans the kitchen and Dad has the boys doing who-knows-what in the garage.

In the cabinet is a turntable, and on either side of that are compartments for my parents’ records, mostly original-cast recordings with songs like “Some Enchanted Evening” and “Wouldn’t

It Be Lovely”—all gifts from Marnie, as was the stereo, when she decided to “liberate” herself from her beloved “flotsam” (silver, china, house) and move into a tidy “widow’s flat.” Since I’m the only one who uses the stereo, I tend to think of it as mine. Sometimes when I’m home alone, I pretend our living room is a stage, and I’m giving a performance. One afternoon Dad came home early and surprised me. I was wearing Mom’s scarlet wrap-around skirt and was singing along with Ella Fitzgerald’s “Mack the Knife.”

“Easy there,” Dad said. “You’re all elbows and knees.”

I’d like to dance with the magician right now to Lena Horne singing “It’s Alright with Me,” but Dad is lifting the door of the cabinet.

“Is this what you’re looking for?” He pulls out a gilded birdcage.

“*Eccellente!*” Umberto Delconte beams as if Dad had performed some magic of his own. Who knows, maybe he has. The cage hadn’t been there when I played a record the day before. “If you will please bring it to me? Yes, over here. Empty, as you can see,” Umberto Delconte addresses us.

Marnie and the stranger and I all nod silently while Aunt Millie strokes the roses in her lap. Uncle Dale, who’s been making more folds in his napkin, looks up and smiles briefly. Mom,

who's been in the kitchen, comes back carrying a tumbler filled with red wine.

"What's he going to do?" the younger of my two brothers asks.

"What do you think, Hopscotch?" my oldest brother says.

"*Per favore, signor*, if you will permit me?" the magician asks.

Dad steps back so Umberto Delconte can drape an emerald cloth over the cage. "And now, *signor*," the magician instructs him, "please close your eyes." Marnie nudges me with her elbow and nods toward the stranger, who has closed *his* eyes, displaying thick, long lashes that remind me of the cherubic toddler next door.

"And if you will turn around yourself three times," Umberto Delconte says.

The stranger opens his eyes and blinks, blushing. Marnie and I look away, pretending we haven't seen.

"Ah, very good." Umberto Delconte touches Dad's shoulders to steady him after his final turn. "And if you will remove the cloth."

Dad complies, revealing two milk-white birds. They have little crooked black feet and have already splattered droppings all over the floor of their cage.

"And shall we set them free?" the magician

asks.

Alarmed, Dad and Mom turn to Marnie, who nods, although her lips wear the grim, pressed look they have every time Aunt Millie sings. Birds, to put it mildly, are not Marnie's thing. Whenever we cut through the park on our walks, I run ahead and flap my arms to keep the pigeons and geese away from her.

After one last furrowed look at his mother, Dad unlatches the cage door, and one of the birds soars straight for Marnie and lands on top of her spun-silver hair. Aunt Millie buries a smile in her bouquet.

"What a pretty bird," I say and blow a sharp puff of air in its eye. With an indignant chirp, it flies back to its cage.

Umberto Delconte frowns at me as if I'm a heckler, as opposed to what I am—a decidedly ardent fan.

Marnie grips my hand, and I lace my fingers with hers, rubbing my thumb over the onyx ring that she's worn as long as I can remember.

The second bird circles the room, then joins its mate in the cage, and Umberto Delconte takes his final bow.

The stranger and Aunt Millie are on their feet, clapping.

"Keep your seats. There's still birthday

cake!” Mom sings. “Ginny, find out who wants what in their coffee,” she says to me on her way back to the kitchen.

“We’ll have ours black, Skinny Ginny,” my oldest brother says.

“Thank you, Princess,” Aunt Millie says. “Cream and sugar, please.”

“I’m fine, dear,” says Uncle Dale, who’s still preoccupied with his napkin folding.

Mom brings in the cake. My favorite is the lemon one she always bakes for me. This time, though, it’s store-bought. Chocolate, with “Thirteen!” written in curlicue pink icing.

“Happy birthday to you,” everyone sings.

“Make a wish!” the stranger urges.

I close my eyes and picture myself on a cliff, swaying, with Umberto Delconte swooping in to catch me before I plunge to my death.

“Come on,” I hear my oldest brother mutter. “We don’t have all day, *Princess*.”

I glare at him before blowing out all 13 candles with one breath.

After we eat, Marnie helps me gather the empty plates, although she pretends not to see when Aunt Millie offers hers. Everyone is getting up to leave. I want to thank Umberto Delconte, but he’s talking with Uncle Dale. Mom catches my eye and vigorously pantomimes wiping the side of

her mouth. “*Chocolate!*” she stage whispers. I turn to find a napkin, and when I turn back around, everyone is crammed by the front door, saying their goodbyes.

“Look,” Uncle Dale says to me as I join them. He’s folded his napkin into a crane, and I imagine the bird dipping its beak into a perfect oval pond.

“Happy Birthday!” Aunt Millie says, careful not to crush her roses as she leans forward to drop a peck on my thin cheek. “Wait for me!” she calls to Uncle Dale, who’s giving her a ride home.

The stranger is zipping up a puffy orange coat. “Don’t you remember Mr. Chadbury?” Mom asks. “He was your third-grade teacher.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I say, although I have no memory of him. Then again, I don’t remember much about that year. Except that I was the only one in the class who always carried a purse that matched my shoes (gifts from Marnie). And that I missed Mom, who’d just gone back to working full-time. Before then, she’d pick me up from school, and we’d make dinner together. Once in a while, for a treat, we’d go to the mall, and she’d buy something new for each of us. My favorite dress of hers was grass green. She bought me a paler version, with crisp narrow pleats that made me think of celery. “We’ll be twins!” she said.

Third-grade was the year Marnie started meeting me after school. My brothers got home later, and Mom didn't want me to be alone. Marnie and I would walk to her apartment and sit on matching peach brocade chairs and eat hard cookies she'd taken from her freezer. She subscribed to *Imagine This! The Magazine for Kids*, which she kept folded back to the page with instructions for a new art project, which we tried each month. I still have the daffodil we made out of pipe cleaners and muffin cups.

As if he knows I'm thinking of crafts, Mr. Chadbury pulls a construction paper card out of his pocket.

"Oh yes, show her, Larry," Mom says, her fingertips pressing into his puffy orange sleeve.

Larry? Larry Chadbury? A rhyming name! I can't help but smile.

Encouraged, he holds out the card, which is a valentine, faded and pink and decorated with crayon hearts. "To a nice teacher, Sincerely, Virginia Reed," it says in carefully rounded letters.

"How about that, Ginnykins?" Mom cries. "He's kept it all this time!"

"Wow," I say.

Satisfied, Mom and Mr. Chadbury beam, and then he too leaves.

Umberto Delconte is wearing his black coat

draped over his shoulders like a cape. He shakes hands with my brothers. "Gentlemen," he says, bowing over them. He kisses my mom on each cheek and then repeats the performance with Dad. When he turns to me, my heart beats so hard I'm afraid it's going to knock me off my feet. "And for you, Ginny, I am wishing you a most happy birthday!"

Mom's fingers pinch my shoulders. "Thank you so—" I begin to say, but Umberto Delconte has disappeared.

Marnie is the last to leave. As I help her into her creamy wool coat, she hands me a small box covered in burgundy velvet. "Just a little something," she whispers. "Don't open it here."

I don't go to Marnie's apartment after school anymore. I ride the city bus home. Sometimes I find Mom has left little notes in my room. They say things like, "Can't wait to see you tonight!!" or "Hope you had a *fabulous* day!" On the Monday after my 13th birthday, I find one that says, "Darling, could you tidy up the living room this afternoon? We made such a mess of it at your party!"

Sometimes I save her notes in the top drawer of my desk. I wad this one up and toss it in my recycling basket.

I do my math homework and then check

my answers. I jot down an outline for the rough draft of a report that will be due next month. I write my name on a piece of scrap paper: Virginia Reed. I wad this into a ball too and lob it across the room. My parents gave me the wrong V name. Clearly, I'm a Veronica. I let my hair fall over one eye and write on another slip of paper, "Veronica Delconte."

By 4:30, the gloom of evening has settled in my room, making even the yellow comforter on the bed look gray. I go to the living room and push the couch and chairs back to their usual spots, matching their legs with the dents in the carpet. I try to shove the stereo back too, but I can't budge it. Aunt Millie's plate, with its film of hardened frosting, still sits on an end table. I carry the plate to the kitchen and leave it soaking in the sink, then I go back to the living room and pick up the cake crumbs around Dad's recliner and plump the couch cushions.

At the end of the couch where my brothers had been sitting, a piece of folded white paper is tucked behind a pillow. I open it and see a cartoon drawing of a wavy-haired man wearing a clownish tie. He's on one knee and offering an enormous bouquet to a stick figure enveloped by a plaid skirt. My brothers have drawn me with a

wide grin and a strawberry stain so big and dark it looks like I have a beard.

I march back to my room. On my bookshelf, behind *I Capture the Castle* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, is the velvet box Marnie gave me. I take out the onyx ring inside and slip it on my finger. Then I sit at my desk and with fast, firm lines, I draw two boys, bowl-heads bowed as they kneel before me. Cartoon-me is resplendent in black cape and boots as I present the back of my hand to their orange-wedge mouths. Below the drawing, I write, "You may now kiss my ring."