

The Rings

a short story
by Denise Vega

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“Welcome to Washington High School.”

I sat in Freshman orientation as the teacher flashed a smile. Dropping my eyes, I focused on my finger, on the lighter skin where the ring used to be.

The teacher was telling us she was “glad to see so many bright and happy faces”—what was this, kindergarten?—and that our “experience at Washington will be one that you will remember all your lives if you put in one hundred percent effort.”

I sighed, still looking at my finger. I knew the white band would fade but for now, it was a bright neon sign, shouting: “Josh is no longer in your life!”

I sniffed, not wanting to go there again. I turned my attention back to the teacher, who had moved on to classroom procedures and locker partners.

“You may not switch lockers without written approval by the administration office,” she said. “If you lose or forget your combination, you may have your locker re-keyed.”

Josh and I had been a good combination. Once. We'd been friends since first grade when he moved in two doors down. We played on the same T-ball and coach-pitch teams through the Y, skateboarded like wild things down the block, and played endless games of Monopoly and Risk, games from our parents' childhood that we loved.

That was all I really wanted or needed. His friendship.

“You are all on Lunch A, at 11:30,” the teacher announced, referring to her sheet.

“You have an hour for lunch and must remain on school property. Only juniors and seniors may leave campus on off hours.”



Off hours. Josh and I used to sneak into each others' backyards when we were both having a friend sleepover. We'd turn on flashlights and tell ghost stories or play cards.

It was on one of these late night sneaks last summer that Josh gave me the ring, basically as a joke. My friend, Mona, was sleeping over, giggling and squirming because she had a crush on Eddie, Josh's friend. At midnight we heard hushed voices behind the fence, and then Josh and Eddie tumbled over, shoving each other as they stood up and crossed the grass to where we lay in our sleeping bags under the oak tree in my backyard.

“Cass.” Josh motioned me over to the swing set. I crawled out of my sleeping bag and followed him, sitting in my usual swing on the left. He sat in the other one. Pretty soon we were pumping like crazy, seeing who could go the highest, catching our breath when we went high enough for the chains to jerk and drop us back down, afraid that at any moment my parents would wake up and discover us.

When we got tired of swinging, we slowed down and Josh picked up something from the grass – one of those cheap plastic rings you see in quarter vending machines.

“I got this for you,” Josh said, holding it out. We both laughed, but I took it anyway, slipping it on my middle finger because it was too big for any other one.

“Big spender,” I said and he smiled.

We sat in the swings talking and laughing while Eddie and Mona whispered and giggled in the background.

A week later I gave him a plastic ring similar to the one he'd given me. He grinned and put it on his pinkie.

"I guess it's kind of small," I said, touching it. I hadn't realized how much larger his hands were than mine, how strong they looked.

Even though the rings had started as a joke, I noticed we both kept wearing them.

I smiled sadly, remembering.

"Do you find something amusing about smoking and drug use, Miss—" The teacher paused to look at her roster. "Linden." She stared at me and several sets of eyes joined her.

"No," I murmured, annoyed that I'd let my emotions show through. I hadn't cried once. I had looked Josh right in the eye during our break up, nodding at the right times, tugging the silly ring off my finger and holding it out to him.

"Put it back on," he'd said. "We're still friends." He'd held my gaze, waiting. "Aren't we?"

"Sure," I said, wanting desperately to believe it, even though I knew it was practically impossible. That's what they all said, didn't they? "Let's be friends." And then they never were because it was too awkward and weird after being more than friends for even a couple of months.

I didn't put the ring back on my finger. I couldn't.

"Please be discreet in your public displays of affection." The teacher raised her eyebrows. "We know your hormones are raging but we don't need to see this rage in the hallways."

A few chuckles rippled through the room.

I didn't have to worry about PDA. When Josh and I were going out, we kept our kisses to ourselves. I liked it that way, secret and private. His kisses were amazing, warm and soft, sending little tingles through me that I didn't know existed. The first time was two weeks after we'd given each other the rings. We were on the swings again, Mona and Eddie giggling and whispering under the oak tree.

"Want to do the spider swing?" Josh asked.

I looked at him. We hadn't done the spider swing since we were kids.

"You want to?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"I'd have to sit on your lap," I said, smacking my butt. "I'm not a little kid anymore."

"I know," Josh said, in a way that made me shiver.

"Okay." I said. "If you don't think I'll squish you."

It was awkward and uncomfortable. I tried to sit back on his knees, realizing that if I got any closer, he might notice my newly formed breasts under the thin T-shirt I wore to bed.

I tried to pump. So did he.

"I guess we're too big for this," he said.

I nodded and started to extricate my leg, which was trapped against the chain.

"Wait," he said. His arms circled my back, pulling me close. He tilted his head to look up at me, his eyes holding mine. I put my arms around his neck, leaned down, and kissed him. Just like that. As if that was the plan all along. I no longer felt the pinch in my thigh from the chain or the cool breeze across my arms. I was lost in that amazing kiss.

And then it was over and we looked at each other like, *What was that?* and then I just said it.

“What was that?”

Josh smiled and sighed. “Finally.”

“Finals count for thirty percent of your grade,” the teacher was saying. “We are committed to you and your education. But you've got to do your part. Pay attention. Get involved.”

Josh and I had been involved. Not physically, really, but emotionally. But even though we moved easily from being buddies to boyfriend/girlfriend, we were still *friends*. We still played Monopoly and basketball but when I slammed into Josh to make a shot and caught an elbow in the ribs, we'd stop and kiss to make it better. And we talked every day—about sports and school and whether we'd write our own fantasy novels when we were older. Best friends plus—that's what we were.

Then things started to change. Slowly at first. So slowly we almost didn't notice. But then we did. *Feelings* changed—shifting, ebbing, then disappearing altogether, replaced by confusion and fear and questions... *what now?*

Looks were different. Kisses quick, then absent. It would have been easier if something big had happened, something unforgivable. But it hadn't.

I sighed. I should never have let him kiss me on the swing. If I hadn't, we'd still be friends. Now we were nothing.

“You'll spend twenty minutes in each of your classes, meeting your teachers and getting your syllabus for the quarter.” The teacher was erasing the board. People started shuffling paper, moving their feet, ready for the bell.

It rang a minute later. I checked my schedule. Honors English, Room 203.

Shuffling behind the rest of my homeroom, I stepped out into the hall, trying to remember which way the room numbers went up and down.

“Whaddaya got next?”

Josh's voice was lower than I remembered. He stood in front of me, eyebrows raised. Joy flooded my insides. Josh. Dear Josh. Best friend Josh.

“Honors English,” I said, fighting for calm. “You?”

“Same.” He fell into step beside me, as if the rings and what came after had never happened. Maybe he'd forgotten.

Right. Just like I had.

“Honors?” I asked.

“There's a brain behind this brawn, you know.” He flexed his arm in exaggeration.

“Is that where you keep your brain?” I joked. Dare I touch him? I did dare. I squeezed his muscle between my fingers.

“Funny, Cass. Real funny.” He pulled my fingers away, but held them briefly before letting go. “That's where the excess goes. It won't all fit up here.” He tapped the side of his head.

I laughed. It felt good to joke again, like the friends we used to be.

Room 203 loomed. My heart beat crazily as Josh stepped slightly in front of me, reaching for the doorknob. I knew I needed to say something. I wanted to say something.

“Josh?”

He turned. “Yeah?”

“I'd like to explain. About—you know.”

He studied my face. “About why you

broke up with me?”

I nodded, unable to look him in the eye.

“You already explained,” he said. “I just didn't like it.”

I looked up. “I'm sorry.”

He shrugged. “I didn't understand how your feelings could change like that. Because mine hadn't.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “But after being apart for awhile, I think I get it.”

Strange how I felt a mixture of sadness and relief when he said that. “I miss our friendship, Josh.”

“Me, too. That's been the worst part.” He tugged at the chain around his neck. The plastic sword ring dangled at the bottom.

“No way.” I pulled out the chain I wore around my own neck, with my own ring attached. “So, what do we do now?”

“Play Monopoly?”

I laughed. “It's a start.”

“But don't expect any special treatment,” he said. “You're not getting all of the railroads anymore.”

“And you're not getting Boardwalk and Park Place,” I said. We both smiled and tucked our rings back into our shirts.

“So,” I said, as we entered the classroom. “Friends?”

Josh nodded. “Friends.”

I smiled. It had a nice ring to it.

Denise is the award-winning author of books for tweens and teens, including Click Here (to find out how I survived seventh grade), Access Denied (and other eighth grade error messages) – which is the sequel to Click Here, Fact of Life #31, Rock On: a story of guitars, gigs, girls and a brother (not necessarily in that order) and more. She lives in Colorado with her family and loves to hike and hang out when she isn't writing. Oh, and she hates cheese!

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