

Rose Gold

by Gary Moshimer

He hasn't had a wedding ring in years. When George's knuckles began to swell — a little arthritis — his ring dug into his finger so bad his wife Loren took him to the ER and had it cut off. The ring, not the finger. He never knew there was a tool to cut rings, like a little can opener.

"These rings," Loren says now, opening the little package from QVC over breakfast, "are steel, and can't be cut. If these get stuck we'll need a blowtorch. But they shouldn't, because they're size 10."

This means nothing to George, the size. She shows him the three wedding rings, a special deal, three for twenty dollars — one silver, one gold, and one she calls "rose gold."

"Here," she says, sliding the silver one onto his finger. "With this ring, I thee wed."

He spins it around. "Seems like it has a lot of play. It should be safe."

It looks oddly thick to him, like a curtain ring, and he makes the mistake of saying this.

"What do you mean?" She yanks it off him. She pouts.

"Well, nothing. I was just used to the way the real one looked, so thin. But this is okay. I like them. I can get used to this." He picks up the rose gold one and slips it on. "I really like this one."

"You do?"

"Uh huh."

She hugs his shoulders and gazes at his finger as he holds it up. "I love that one, too." She pecks his cheek.

Wearing his first ring in years, George heads to work at the hospital.

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The first patient he has to deal with is the hundred-and-two-year-old woman, Beulah. She's been dying for days, but fighting, because you can't get to that age giving in. Until she fell last week, she was independent. But now, after hip and shoulder surgery, her lungs

have filled with fluid they can't get rid of. She is constantly wheezing and starved for oxygen. Because she can't get enough oxygen, her heart and kidneys are failing as well, leading to more fluid, a vicious cycle. Short of a breathing tube and ventilator — things that Beulah does not want — there's not much to be done, but still they call George to do something. It pisses him off sometimes, how things are expected of him. All he can do is give the breathing treatments and oxygen. He can't bring back the dead.

Beulah is grunting and groaning and wheezing, holding out her hands to him. He folds them like wounded birds into his own, expecting them to be cold, shocked to find them so hot. He wonders if she has a fever, but her brow is cool and moist. He pushes the hair back from her face. Until she was ninety-six she worked in her hair salon, but now her own hair is wild, colorless, dying. You'd think that her daughter — the eighty-year-old that angrily shows up now and then — would do it up nice for her.

George puts the medicine into the little cup, hooks it to the oxygen, and straps the mask on her face so she can breathe the mist. "You're smokin' now, Beulah," he says, one of his many scripted ha-has which lately make him sick.

"Help me," she gurgles.

"I'm here," he says, like that's a help.

While she's on her treatment, he gets a brush from the drawer and brushes her hair. She closes her eyes. He can hear the thick rumble from her tiny chest, can actually feel the vibration through the wooden handle.

One of the aides comes by to grab the blood pressure machine, and George asks, "Can you do something with her hair?" He thinks he sounds a little desperate.

The girl gives him a funny look. "When I'm done with my work, maybe." She hurries out, like running from a pervert.

George studies Beulah's face, which could belong to a seventy-year-old. He wishes there were some pictures of her around, so he could see what color her hair was. He's sure she must have been

very beautiful. As if knowing what he's thinking, she opens her eyes and looks into his. Her eyes are blue and still sharp.

"Take me out of here," she whispers, something most of the old people say.

"Where to?"

She struggles to get some breath. "Do you have a yard?"

"Sure."

"Can you see the moon?"

"Of course."

"Take me there, then."

That's all she can say. The machine that beeps out the oxygen reading on her finger is alarming, the number falling, falling.

"You'll visit me when you get better," he says, more scripted gloss-over bullshit. She gives him a look that says, *who are you trying to kid?*

He takes the treatment off, puts on a different mask to deliver pure oxygen. She doesn't fight it. She grabs his hands, and suddenly discovers the ring.

She starts turning and turning it on his finger. Her hands heat the ring. He notices she has no wedding ring, although he knows she's had four husbands, outliving them all. After spinning the ring until it feels like his finger is burning, she slips it off and onto her own finger. She spins it there for a minute and puts it back on his finger. Then off and onto hers. Off and on, back and forth. Finally she rests her head back on the pillow, seemingly satisfied with something. George places his hand with the ring on her forehead for a moment, then before he leaves whispers in her ear something unscripted for once: "Look, see the moon."

He doesn't get called again for Beulah, and later when he does his rounds he's not surprised to see her bed stripped. He hopes her daughter was there at the end, or someone.

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In the car on the way home, he takes the ring off. It's still hot, which is freaking him out. He feels it in his pants pocket, branding

its shape into his thigh. That QVC. It's probably made of some alien substance.

Loren notices right away. "Where is it?"

George shrugs, then takes it from his pocket. Loren narrows her eyes. "You don't like it, do you?"

He slips the ring on and changes the subject. "Honey, remember the old woman I told you about? Beulah?"

"The hundred-and-two year old?"

"Right. She passed away today. But before she did, she was just fascinated with this ring." He lets his head droop onto her shoulder. He sighs.

She holds him and tells him she's sorry.

He tosses around in bed that night, and at two o'clock he sees Loren is missing. He's probably driven her to the couch. He gets up and goes to the living room, but she's not there. He eventually finds her on the back porch, and sits on the glider next to her.

She puts her head on his shoulder and says, "Look at that moon. Look at the color."

