

JOHN O'NEILL

SHIVA DANCING

WHEN HE ARRIVED HOME, he thought their place had been robbed. The couch cushions were on the floor, puffy paisley islands sprouting from the hardwood. The drawers of the sideboard stood open, and the two chairs that faced the couch had been turned around, so the living room seemed that of a misanthrope, seating arranged to prevent human interaction. Contradicting this impression, the curtains in the dining room were drawn back. They always kept the curtains closed because they faced the kitchen window of the house opposite, *fishbowl style* as his wife complained, and he could now see that their own window was filthy and mouldy in places, like a weedy vertical garden. He wondered if thieves ever abandoned their work because a house was just too dirty.

Then he remembered that he'd used his key to open the front door. Perhaps the thieves had come in through the back or the basement. He felt some anxiety that he'd be blamed. Adrienne had been telling him that they needed security bars installed on the basement windows, but he insisted she was worried over nothing, as the crime rate had been dropping. He had to admit that, yes, there were some less-than-desirable streets around them (including the provocatively named Craven Road—a street crowded with tiny, run-down, pre-World War I box houses) and that, yes, they were very close to Little India (or, as it had recently been christened, the Gerrard India Bazaar), but there was also a new Starbucks opening just a couple of blocks east. Their neighbourhood was up-and-coming rather than down-and-out.

Where was Adrienne? He assumed that he'd beat her home, as she often worked late on Fridays. Also, the place where she worked had let everyone out early the day before, as it was Halloween and many of her younger co-workers had small children. He was glad he was the one to discover the break-in, as Adrienne would fly into hysterics and assessing their violated home would go on the backburner behind calming her down.

Then she appeared on the stairs. Ryan froze at how she looked. Her

curly black hair was an exploded nest, her face was pale but spackled black, and her eyes were big and hollowed out. But the strangest, most disturbing thing was that she was completely naked, her thin sharp knees, elbows, and hips going in all directions. Before he could speak—she didn't even look at him standing in the foyer, laptop case in hand—she said in an afflicted way, “My engagement ring is gone.”

He thought, for a moment, that she meant it had been stolen in the break-in. Maybe, too, she'd been assaulted, stripped bare, and God knows what else by the burglars, but her tone of voice—more frantic annoyance than fear or horror—made him realize that the state of the house was *because* of Adrienne—that she'd torn it apart in search of the ring.

He relaxed. Was that all? She'd misplaced her ring many times before, and he'd learned—through trial and often through painful error—not to make obvious, unhelpful, *husbandy* suggestions like *Did you check your purse? Did you check the bed? Have you retraced your steps?* He'd learned to bite his lip, and he suspected that he'd soon need cosmetic surgery because his lip was likely bitten right through.

He also knew that silence was equally, or perhaps even more, perilous. Confirming this notion, Adrienne snapped at him, her tears beginning again, “Well, don't just stand there. Have any ideas?” All he could think to say was, “Let me think about it.” He put his bag down by the exploded sideboard, replaced one of the couch pillows, and sat.

His wife was now under the kitchen sink. He considered how he'd never seen her naked in such a pose, at least not since the first months of their marriage. His eyes lingered for a moment on the compacted rolls of her stomach and the flesh swinging under her arms. She emptied out a ceramic container. Scissors, twist ties, scouring pads, and a single white ankle sock spilled onto the floor. Then she growled and was up and clearing the fridge. He was reminded of the Tasmanian Devil in the old Warner Bros. cartoons, frantically locked in a whirlwind that was both comical and dangerous. Perhaps this was why she had shed her clothing, he thought. She was the eye of the storm but was shielded by the tumult—the havoc of her mission.

Yet the ring *did* mean something to him, as he was also locked in its hard little circle, if only by virtue of memory. He'd proposed to his wife four years ago on one of the bridges that overlook the Seine in Paris (the part of the story he disliked, as it was so clichéd and obvious), but her yes hadn't been followed by unreserved enthusiasm. In fact, her smile seemed wan and

tentative, as if she were simply conforming to an already established pattern—an inevitable and inescapable romantic routine that included their agreement to go to Paris on the one-year anniversary of their first date; their huddling side-by-side in his cold bachelor flat to visit the websites of several Parisian hotels; their excursion to Kensington Market to buy him some bohemian clothes for strolling the Parisian streets (he looked ridiculous and unaccountably old in a beret); and finally the turmoil of travel and their late arrival at the little boutique hotel on the Boulevard Raspail (even the rudeness of the concierge seemed to be part of the stereotyped narrative). Had all these things obliged her to say yes? She was swept up in the moment, but the gravity of her yes gradually sank in, and she couldn't help but strain in the other direction—against the breathlessness and the romantic clichés.

Later, when he brought this up, she insisted that she had been afflicted not by second thoughts but rather by the immediate environment, which wasn't consistent with her idea of Paris. They had been surrounded on the bridge by groups of what she called *swarthy types* and, even though he had shunted her off to the side, dark eyes followed them, unsettling in their intensity. She wasn't racist, she insisted, but just caught off-guard. She might have expected to look up beyond them and see not the Eiffel Tower but rather the Great Sphinx of Giza or the Taj Mahal. And this fleeting impression accounted for her apparent reluctance or lack of enthusiasm.

So the ring did carry some weight beyond its purchase price, as he had a sense that the giving of the ring had been fraught and that their engagement had, in a small way, been earned.

He still couldn't think of anything to say to impede her crazy dismantling of the house. He stood and walked over to where she stood, her head in a cupboard above the sink. It occurred to him then, suddenly, that she always wore two rings: the engagement ring *and* a wedding band identical to the one he wore, which he never took off and never lost.

“Did you lose . . . I mean, did you misplace *both* rings?”

She turned to him. Her sagging breasts seemed angry, as if they were scowling at him. “No, that's the bad thing. I have my wedding band.” She raised her hand. “I always take them off together. It must have slipped off.”

“Where did you find it before?”

“You're not listening! I've never lost *just* the engagement ring. I always take off *both* rings. I'm sure I had it on yesterday, at work. I was playing with it at my computer.”

“Playing with it?”

“Twirling it.”

“Twirling it?”

“*Fiddling* with it. What, you don’t do that?”

“Where should I look?”

“How should I know? If I knew where to look . . .”

“I mean where *haven’t* you looked?”

“Up your ass.”

“It’s not my fault you lost your ring. I should be the one who’s upset.”

“So why aren’t you?”

“I am, but I need to think. I’m gonna go throw the pumpkin away. It’s starting to smell.”

He went out onto the porch as his wife emptied their kitchen garbage can onto the floor, and he wondered if it was significant that she had lost not her wedding ring but her *engagement* ring, which was much more expensive than the wedding bands they’d ordered from a small Irish shop above Yonge Street (their wedding bands were both a Celtic design, interlocked trinity knots in sterling silver). It seemed as if she were subconsciously rejecting not the marriage but the engagement—their *particular and specific* journey to marriage—as if she regretted saying yes to him but was now willing to live with what he had become. Then he remembered that the day before had been Halloween.

“Weren’t we *both* giving out candy last night?” he asked.

He wouldn’t have thought it possible, but his wife’s face went paler, and her drained expression made her look even more naked. She was picturing herself as he was, leaning over in the doorway, chirping *Happy Halloween*, plunging her right hand in the candy bowl, and then opening it to let the candy drop inside various receptacles—plastic pumpkins and skulls, pillow-cases, garbage bags, etc. It was not certain, but it was *possible*. When the children went home and their parents scattered the chocolate bars, bags of potato chips, and gummy worms across a kitchen or dining room table to inspect it all and make sure that none of the treats had been tampered with, one of them might spot a shining diamond ring. *This isn’t yours, this isn’t a toy*, they might say as they hid it away with a conspiratorial lip curl.

He spent the evening typing up a notice to post around the neighbourhood, which announced that a ring had been lost and offered a reward for its return. The notice emphasized that the ring had tremendous *emotional*

value—that was the word Adrienne suggested—though they couldn't agree on the exact amount of the reward, which was unspecified.

He enjoyed feeling useful as he typed and retyped the notice, highlighting the word REWARD and arranging the lines of their phone number and email address in rows at the bottom of the page, but he was surprised to hear noise from downstairs. His wife was tearing up the house again, and when he asked her why she said she wanted to be absolutely sure it was lost before they started plastering the *stupid neighbourhood* with signs. Then they had another argument, though he believed the idea of the flyer—his idea—had settled the issue.

“I'll go door to door first thing tomorrow,” she said.

“I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Why? Why not use all the methods at our disposal?”

He didn't want to say it was too much work or that he'd feel obliged to help her, or at least accompany her, so she wouldn't throttle any of the neighbours, which was his real fear. “Even if someone has the ring, they might not admit it,” he said.

“I can tell when someone's lying. They go shifty-eyed.”

“I go shifty-eyed when you question me. It doesn't mean I'm lying—it means I'm embarrassed or annoyed or distracted or sleepy.”

“I want to try.”

“It's dangerous.”

“Come with me.”

“Let the posters do the work.”

“So that's it—you're too lazy.”

“Why are you naked?”

“I thought maybe the ring got caught up in my clothes. I was sweating like a pig anyway.”

The next morning, Adrienne was still angry. She called Ryan *perpetually unsupportive* and told him that she was going to visit her mother while he posted the notices. When he said, *Don't leave angry*—he had a vision of her driving her baby-blue Mini off the Gardner Expressway and straight into one of the condos that lined it—she said, *It's the best way to leave*. He was relieved he had an immediate task and that he didn't have to accompany her to the nursing home. He found those visits supremely depressing, but not so much because of Adrienne's mother, who barely registered any

reaction when they appeared at the foot of her bed, or the smell of the place, which was almost unendurable. It was the idea that this was the road they were all headed down and that Adrienne would one day be looking at him with the same helpless eyes, although in her case they would be tinged with fury. It was also seeing the effort his wife made as she roused her mother out of bed, lifted her into the wheelchair, and steered her onto the patio, where she snuggled up to her with her head on her chest, just as she had done as a child. He was at once horrified and in awe of the effort his wife made, though he always felt that he existed in some strange bubble outside their commiseration. If he tried to help his wife would say, *No, let me*, and if he didn't he was sure to hear about it later. It was hopeless. He and Adrienne were both perpetual mourners, but his wife's active grief remained inaccessible to him.

He started with the lamppost in front of their house and immediately discovered that the stapler he brought wouldn't penetrate the wood. Instead of purchasing an industrial stapler, he decided to use packing tape, which was more arduous than expected. It was a blustery November 2nd, and he had to keep a firm grip on the notices, holding them under his arm without crushing them while affixing one to the poles. And the packing tape was old, so each time he unwound some it broke off in slivers or the loose edge disappeared. In addition to his annoyance, he also felt guilty, as if his effort was a breach of neighbourhood etiquette—a feeling for which he couldn't account. Eventually, though, his annoyance gave way to a sense of purpose—of simple occupation—and he became lost in the task. This was a common pattern in their interactions: he and Adrienne would often wrangle about what repairs needed to be done around the house, like the sagging eaves troughs, the porch, or the old windows (there was always something), but as soon as he agreed to one of her projects he felt better—partly because, of course, the negotiations were over.

After lining their street with posters, he was soon on Gerrard in the India Bazaar. He wondered if he should have made the notices more “Indian-friendly” by translating the headline *Reward: Lost Wedding Ring* into Hindi or Punjabi. Perhaps he should have put a graphic on the flyer with an image of Shiva or some other Indian god. The notices should have at least been in colour with lots of red in curlicued letters, just like the neon signage. But, of course, the notices weren't exclusively for their South Asian neighbours. Maybe he should have made more individualized notices, such as one

with Chinese imagery and one with Polish. He grinned at the notion.

As he taped a poster in front of a restaurant called Gautama, a little boy tugged on his pant leg. The boy was elegantly dressed in a long multi-coloured jacket, which was buttoned down the front and tightly at the throat, and his hair was slicked shiny. Ryan turned and said, "Hi," expecting that the kid would ask a question about what he was doing. Instead, the boy just stared at him. He tried again, "Hi, how are *you*?" No response. Perhaps he'd mistaken Ryan for someone else. Ryan returned to his work but then turned back again when he heard a woman say, *Sorry, sorry*. The woman, who was dressed in a red and orange sari and had a determined expression on her face, took the boy's hand and led him and two more little boys away. She was cradling them and a stretched-to-the-limit plastic shopping bag with her other arm, saying, *Don't doddle, we're late to begin*. Despite her efforts, the little boy who'd tugged on his pants kept turning and looking at him. Ryan wondered if he should hire the curious boy to advertise the lost ring by outfitting him with a sandwich board or taping a notice to the boy's face to prevent his rude staring. He shook off the encounter and continued.

As he neared Coxwell Avenue, he passed a jewellery shop. He paused and read the sign in the window that read, *Gold Exchange! We Buy Your Gold & Jewellery, 10K to 24K. Instant Cash. We Pay Top Dollar!* He backtracked and went into several jewellery shops in order to give the clerks a copy of his notice and ask them to contact him if anyone came in to pawn a ring fitting the description. This took some time, as they all had locked cages inside their main doors so that he had to look longingly through the bars before the proprietors buzzed him in. The very first clerk, a small South Asian woman in a yellow blouse with thick black eyeliner and a pouty mouth, asked how this would work. Would *they* buy the wedding ring and then be reimbursed? Ryan suggested that, if the ring fit the description, they could offer to take it on consignment, but she insisted, *People want cash money*. The next clerk agreed to look out for the ring and to try and get the name of the seller if he came across it. The next said he only did jewellery exchanges, while the fourth said it might lead to problems: *I shall be essentially stealing ring to give to you*. When Ryan explained that the seller would have acquired the ring by accident and shouldn't be trying to sell it, the clerk shrugged. He then offered Ryan a cup of tea.

The strangest encounter, which discouraged Ryan from going into any more jewellery shops, was in Ashira Jewellers. The owner was surly at first

and said in a pained voice that he *never* took things on consignment. How did he know Ryan wasn't lying to get a free ring? Ryan pointed out that this didn't make sense, as he was providing a detailed description, and that he was essentially asking for a favour. The owner mumbled, *One doesn't stay in business by doing favours*. Then his tone changed, and he laughed heartily as he came around from behind the counter. Ryan could see that he was missing a leg, as his left pant leg was folded up and he was using the counter to balance himself. Then he abruptly lurched away from it and put a heavy arm around Ryan, although Ryan wasn't sure if this was some form of intimidation or an attempt to compensate for his previously gruff attitude. The man was dressed in a white linen shirt and half a pair of beige pants. His hair was thin but combed across a liver-spotted, dried-patched skull. During this interaction, a woman in a long tunic and loose pants sat on a stool behind the counter, half hidden by a statue of Ganesh—the half-human, half-elephant god—sitting in a lotus position, its trunk curled around its body. Ryan recognized the god from his high-school world religions class, but he wasn't sure if the woman was a wife, mother, or daughter, as she seemed weathered but childish with a small body and large eyes. Once the man had stopped laughing, he swung around and hugged Ryan, saying, *My name is Ranjit*. Then he shook Ryan's hand, balancing on his leg, before lurching against the counter again and making his way behind it. Ryan, trying to recover from the shock of the proximity and Ranjit's musky scent—he smelled like the incense that was apparently piped into all these shops—said that he was offering a reward to anyone who helped him recover his wife's ring. *Yes, there will not be reward at the other end*, Ranjit replied. Ryan didn't know what he meant, just as he didn't know what Ranjit's hug had meant, but they smiled at one another as Ryan placed one of his notices on the counter and left the store, unsure whether the man had agreed to the consignment idea or not. He was relieved to be outside, and he shuddered to rid himself of the feel of Ranjit's weight. He tossed the remaining posters into a recycling bin.

Shortly after he got home, pleased with himself for having gone beyond the call of duty, his wife returned. Her face was drawn, and he suspected that something had happened during her visit with her mother. Indeed, something had happened, but she didn't start with this. "Did you put up the flyers? Any response?" she asked.

He tried to sound casual. "I just finished. It's too early for a response."

He didn't mention the jewellery shops. They were long shots anyway.

She began to cry, and he tried to console her, but she pulled away. "Mother isn't good," she said. "She wouldn't get out of bed, and she hardly noticed the flowers I brought. But guess what? She noticed my *missing ring*. Can you believe it? She looked at me like this was a horror—for *her*. Then she accused me of not visiting often enough. She always seems so out of it, but she has no problem noticing what's gone."

He shrugged and said, unhelpfully, "Let's wait and see."

Three days passed. Adrienne swept the house again as well as everything in the immediate vicinity of the house, including the lawn, the backyard, and the sidewalk. On the fourth day, a plumber came and dismantled the pipes under the sinks and the drains of the bathtub and shower. Drawers were emptied. Shirts and pants and dresses were pulled inside out. Adrienne emptied the vacuum bag and picked through the dirt. Ryan felt like he was in a recurring nightmare. He couldn't concentrate on the work he'd brought home. There was always the sound of something being emptied, unscrewed, or turned upside down. He assumed that her manic search would lessen over time, as she was gradually forced to accept that the ring wasn't coming back, but it didn't. The lost ring was a threat to their future.

He was relieved when, on the evening of the fifth day, they received a phone call from the nursing home. The flu was going around, and Adrienne's mother was sick. This time Adrienne wanted Ryan to come with her, and he was glad to oblige. The visit would provide a welcome break in their new routine.

They found her mother curled in a ball, shrunken under the damp sheets, a mouse of her white hair visible. They were required to wear surgical masks, and a new Filipino nurse followed them into the room and whispered, "She needs sleep. Maybe you come back." But Adrienne, fear in her eyes, said, "I'm afraid if she's really sick . . ." The woman understood and nodded. At that instant, her mother stirred and let her face emerge from under the sheet, her eyes red and her mouth crusty.

Adrienne sat on the bed, pushed her face close, and removed her mask. She placed her hand on her mother's forehead and said, "How you feeling, momma?"

Her mother said, in a croak, "Your ring's still gone."

Adrienne shot a look at Ryan and said, "Don't you worry about that."

Worry about getting better.”

“Too old for better,” she replied.

Adrienne went out and found the nurse. When Ryan followed, he felt his shoulders bunch. He knew his wife’s tone of voice, the thin line of it that was about to crack and inflict damage. She was saying, “She’s got a fever. Why haven’t you called the doctor?” He was glad he was wearing the mask.

Ryan positioned himself several feet from the confrontation, between his wife and the nurse. He felt the woman’s smallness. She barely came up to Adrienne’s chest. He was careful not to stand with her. His wife would make note of this and, during some later argument, use it against him. The nurse removed her mask and said, “She doesn’t. We took temperature. Doctor coming in the morning. If you like . . .”

“When did you take it? If she’s taken a turn for the worse . . .”

The nurse stepped forward and put one hand up. “You right. I’ll taking temperature again, buzz doctor. You good daughter to be caring.”

Ryan went breathless when he saw that Adrienne had steeled herself and wasn’t letting this go. His wife said, throwing an arm towards the dull greenish hallway, “I shouldn’t have to be caring. These people, some of them are alone. So they’re neglected if a relative isn’t here, making a fuss?”

Under attack, the nurse’s eyes softened. She nodded and said, “You right. Good to be reminding we must be vigilant. Apologize.” Ryan could hear the emotion in her voice, as if the woman was somehow atoning for the inevitability of sorrow, the sad vagaries of life, and the helpless injustice of institutions. He didn’t believe that she was just using a strategy to deal with an angry relative. He and Adrienne always seemed to be employing strategies; that’s what their marriage had become.

Adrienne didn’t acknowledge the apology but gripped Ryan’s arm, pinching it so hard he almost cried out, and said, “We’ll wait for you in the room.” As his wife stretched out full beside her mother on the bed and gathered her in, tucking her head into her neck, Ryan hovered, hands in his pockets. *Fucking ring*, he thought. Then he thought of how much easier life would be when his mother-in-law was dead.

It turned out that his mother-in-law did not have a fever, but on the way home in the car Adrienne said, “I feel like she’ll die unless I find my ring.”

“Great,” he replied, and they proceeded to argue. He hadn’t meant it as a statement about her mother’s possible demise—he didn’t *really* want her to die—but rather as a recognition that there was now even more pressure

to recover the unrecoverable—to find the irretrievably lost.

The next night, when his wife was off visiting her mother again (she didn't want him to come, saying, *I need some alone time*), he received a phone call.

“Ranjit here,” the voice said.

At first his mind was blank. His shoulders and chest tightened. He smelled something burning. He thought he might be having a heart attack.

“Ranjit,” the voice repeated. “Ashira Jewellers. You came about engagement ring? Last week? Maybe I recovered it.”

“Be right there,” he said.

He went with misgivings, as Ranjit was the only jewellery store owner he'd found strange and wanted to escape. It wasn't the man's affliction (Ryan always supported, even admired, people with disabilities); rather, it was his over-familiarity—his presumption. This time he would stand back from the counter so that the one-legged man would have to hop several feet to embrace him.

He found Ranjit smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk in front of the store propped against a column of red brick underneath a hand-written sign that advertised *On Special: Real Diamond Gold Nose Pins and Nose Rings!* Ryan could see that he was half-leaning on a shining silver metal cane moulded like a stalk of bamboo and that he recognized him as he approached. Ranjit nodded, swung his leg around the still point of the cane, and led Ryan inside.

The impervious woman was sitting in the same place behind Ganesh but was now showing signs of life, as she brushed her fingers against an iPhone before buzzing them free of the cage. The two men then walked down the length of the store along the glass counter and stopped before Ranjit's wife/mother/daughter. She placed her iPhone carefully on the glass, leaned forward, and cupped her hands above where the ring was displayed. It did appear to be the genuine article, as Ryan recognized the lovely but subtle starburst of blue, but he needed to see the inscription to be sure. “I'm pretty sure that's it. Does it have the inscription?”

“*You have my heart,*” Ranjit said, smiling. Then, “It will be twelve hundred dollars.”

Ryan felt something twitch in his throat. “Excuse me? What do you mean? Didn't you take it on consignment? I don't understand.”

“Lady would only sell. Very great quality. Gave her cash money. What else was I to do? Said she would go elsewhere. Ring would be lost.”

“It wasn’t her ring. You gave her *twelve hundred dollars*?”

“What was I to do? Better to have ring. You give me eleven hundred sixty-nine. Best I do.”

“It’s stolen property. Basically, she stole it. Who is she? Maybe I can talk to her.”

“Difficult to have business. Too many jewelleries. On corner is new café. On corner is new pizza. People not come here anymore. Brampton they go. I do my best.”

“Don’t you keep information from sellers?”

“Chinese lady. Lots of Chinese. Eleven hundred fifty, best I do.”

Ryan didn’t know what to say. He was sure he was being tricked and that Ranjit had paid only a couple hundred for the ring—five hundred at the outside—but his anger was less because of the difficult negotiation they were having than how the man seemed so different. He couldn’t imagine Ranjit hopping over to hug him now. Even his face had changed, eyes half veiled in a kind of sleepy defence or weary resignation. Ryan recognized this as his “hard-sell” persona, and he imagined now—his imagination finding an irrational yet satisfying focus—that Ranjit had sold his own leg for financial gain or perhaps fallen into debt with loan sharks in India, who settled the score in a brutal way. In any case, there was no nobility or even vague martyrdom about his disability, and a smugness had overtaken him—a smugness that he shared with the impassive, useless woman, who continued staring, big-eyed but emotionless, from behind the counter. At least *his* wife showed emotion. At least *his* wife cared about things, got involved, argued, fought for justice, and would certainly intervene if her own husband were trying to rip someone off.

“I’ll give you three hundred,” Ryan said, turning away as if this might make them more malleable. Then he noticed a statue of Shiva dancing, and he began to study the details, believing this might calm him: the bracelets on the ankles and four wrists, a flame in one hand and a drum in the other, one of the legs raised with a hissing cobra coiling it, and the blissful expression on the god’s face, all within a sort of flaming halo. In contrast to the dancing god, he felt vulnerable, human, and heavy as he waited on the mercy of these strangers—these *immigrants*—who were being chased from the neighbourhood by gentrification. He had the happy thought that one

day this place—sans metal cage—would be a trendy diner or café.

“I lose money then, doing you favour. I take one thousand. Is all. If you don’t want to buy, kindly go.”

Ryan considered grabbing the ring and running. Even if he got caught, he could make a good argument in court. But the ring wasn’t accessible. He’d have to jump the counter and push Ranjit and the woman out of the way.

He quickly thought of a strategy. He said, trying to keep his voice from shaking, “I can’t believe you paid that much. I hate to tell you, but it isn’t worth that. It’s a cheap ring. It only has emotional value. I only told you it was valuable so that you’d watch out for it.” As soon as he spoke, he realized he’d made a mistake. What mattered was what Ranjit had paid for the ring. Now, Ranjit would feel more aggrieved. Ryan decided it didn’t matter. This was a man who wouldn’t be convinced. This was, after all, a man who’d sold his own leg.

“Do not play game. Ring was worth money. More than I gave. Know my business. Doing before I’m in Leslieville—before I’m losing money in Gerard India Bazaar.”

“Thanks anyway,” Ryan said. “I hope you sell it. I really do.” He turned and put his fingers into the bars of the cage, waiting for Ranjit to buzz him out. Once he heard the buzz and pushed the unlocked cage open, he reached out across the counter and dragged the Shiva statue towards him, surprised at its heaviness. It fell and exploded on the floor, its arms and legs shooting in all directions. But Ryan didn’t leave. Instead, he stepped back inside and turned to face Ranjit and the woman. The woman moved first, hurrying into the back room with her iPhone against her face. Then Ranjit pushed himself against the counter and balanced his silver cane in both hands.

“Tell your wife I’m not going to hurt you,” Ryan said loudly, but he was aware that he already had. The least he could do now was wait. He was perturbed, yes, but he was still reasonable and civilized. He wasn’t a common criminal. He wished that Ranjit would break from his pose, hop over, and hug him again. Was the ring worth all this trouble? He noticed now, pinned to the wall behind where the Shiva statue had been, a scroll with fancy writing, presumably some sort of prayer. It was faded around its perimeter with a dark silhouette where the god had blocked the sunlight. Ryan found himself wondering how long Ranjit and his wife had occupied this space. When he looked at Ranjit again, the man was holding a long skinny blade that

he'd slid from inside his cane. Ryan almost laughed, *You gotta be kidding. Halloween is over. Stop acting like a villain in a James Bond film.* He was relieved that the man didn't point or wave the blade but just held it at the ready.

"Maybe I will buy back the ring. I just need to discuss it with my wife," Ryan said.

Ranjit didn't respond. His wife was peaking through the door from the back room. Ryan smiled at her and leaned up against the cage. He tried to look thoughtful. He didn't look at the exploded Shiva or the faded prayer.

After a few minutes, Ranjit slid his blade away. Ryan kept his smile, but his jaw was beginning to ache. Two police officers appeared from the back room, while a third came through the front and waited inside the cage. One of the officers shouted that Ryan should put his hands spread apart on the counter, which he did. Then he heard the cage buzz open, and the officer from the front moved behind him.

Ryan was escorted from the store in handcuffs, while Ranjit and the woman talked with one of the officers. As the youngest of the policemen walked to the driver's side of the patrol car, the other, who was swarthy, pushed Ryan's head under the roof. As he settled into the seat, trying to appear at ease though the handcuffs were tight, he pleaded with the driver, though he wasn't sure the man could hear him through the clear plastic barrier, "I love my wife. I really do." He thought of this as a kind of prayer. The officer didn't respond.