

Azaria Brown

Cupid's Zuronia

Richie was my best friend.

"Alright Max, brown or light brown?" Richie asked, holding up two tough pieces of bread that he had stolen from Newman's Deli on 17th and Market. He went there every day around noon, that's when it was rushed with people trying to get sandwiches and chips and throat burning sodas on their lunch breaks. People crowded Newman's tiny store and complained about his beagle, Jaxon, that was tied up to a lamppost outside. 'I'm tired of seeing this damn dog,' and 'it's high time Newman got rid of that mutt,' they'd say. The men would stroke their beards and shake their heads and the women would clutch their purses as if Jaxon was going to snatch it and run.

Richie would sneak into the back during the commotion and nab a couple of loaves from a pile of old bread at the back that Newman used to make the croutons for his 'Salads a la Newman!' that he sold on Mondays. He'd almost gotten caught once; Newman sent Jaxon running after him. But Richie was fast and outran the dog with no problem. Newman always said that he'd chop off his fingers if he saw him stealing again. But Richie still went back every day and he got bread for the both of us.

Richie was my best friend.

"Light brown," I finally said, snatching the bread from his hand and pressing it to my nose. It smelled about three days old, still

relatively fresh.

We sat on the roof of the library; it was the second highest building in town right after City Hall. There were stairs in the back that led right up to the roof, that way we could pretend we were looking out of an airplane down on the old, Podunk town we *used* to call home.

We could see both of our houses from the roof of the library. Mine was squat and painted blue and Mom had planted moonflowers in the front yard. Richie's was right next door, tall and yellow. It was three stories high, but we were always too scared to go to the top floor, Richie's older brother said that there were forgotten children up there from the daycare their mom used to run. We'd get halfway up the stairs and run scared, hiding behind the sofa. Richie was my best friend.

"What'd you get today?" he asked, between wide and difficult chews, tugging on the brim of the old, tattered baseball cap on his head. "It was a slow day for me; all I got was the bread."

"Really? You said the same thing yesterday!"

He shrugged, "Lootin's a tough business."

"Sure is."

We'd started looting because of Richie's older brother, Willie. He brought us on when we were six; he said that our hands were small and quick enough to get the tough things. Our moms worked in some smoke pumping factory across town and barely made enough to survive. We only took things that people wouldn't miss, like old loaves of

bread, old car parts, little pieces of jewelry and clothes that were laid outside to dry and forgotten. Then we'd trade them for food and the occasional crumpled dollar bill. The money went to our moms most of the time, but sometimes we'd spend it on a piece of candy from the corner store. Willie got sent to jail when I was seven and a half and Richie was eight. Three years later we were still looting and we'd occasionally shake our head at Willie.

"Sucks to be him," I'd say.

"Sure does. Good thing it wasn't us," Richie'd say.

"How much longer does he got?" I'd ask.

"Probably a hundred years," he'd say.

I pulled the dingy, tan bag from my shoulders and pulled it open, holding the bread between my legs. I rummaged through the items in the bag. "A blanket, a pair of leather boots--"

"We can probably trade that stuff with Sal for a basket of bread and a jug of apple juice," he said, nodding. He wiped the breadcrumbs off of his mouth with the back of his hand, leaving a streak of brown dirt in its wake.

Something glinted at the base of the bag, catching the slightest bit of light. I narrowed my eyes in confusion.

"Wot?" He spoke around a mouthful of bread.

I reached into the bag and pulled out a silver ring that glinted in the sunlight. A crystal, clear jewel shone at the center of the band making angels from heaven sing like they never sang before.

"What is--Where'd you find that?"

I racked my brain; I couldn't remember the ring. "I don't know."

"You *have* to know, a ring wouldn't just fall into your bag."

I shook my head, "I'm telling you, I don't know where I got it."

We'd have to sell it to someone, then I could afford to send me and my sister to the good school across town for a year. Richie probably wouldn't wanna go to school, he'd wanna buy candy and baseball caps and chewing gum.

"That's probably a diamond."

"You think so?"

"Definitely, or at least a Cupid's Zuronia."

"How much do you think its worth?"

"Probably a million dollars."

I stared at the ring in awe; I had never held something worth a million dollars before. All of a sudden I felt the need to be delicate with it.

"Gimme the ring," Richie said, holding out a hand still covered in breadcrumbs. He was standing over me, his oversized shirt whipping in the wind.

I held the ring against my chest, "Why?"

"Because I get to hold it."

"Why do you get to hold it?"

"Because I said so."

"But, why?"

"Because I'll throw you off of this fuckin' roof, that's why! Now, give me the ring!" Richie looked crazy like the old man that

paced through the streets during the night.

That old man walked around wearing the same old coat and boots, pacing up and down like he'd lost his whole mind. Mom never let me go outside after seven, "That loon's probably out there snatchin' up little things like you and stuffin' em in his pockets. If I find you out after seven you'll wish you was in that thing's pockets when I'm finished with you."

I looked at the ring and shook my head, glancing back up at Richie. "No, I'll hold it 'til we sell it."

"Give me the damn ring Max!" He grabbed me by my shirt collar and the bread fell off of the roof, soundlessly hitting the sidewalk.

Richie, with his baseball caps that hid his hair that hadn't been washed in weeks; with the oversized clothing that he'd taken from his brother's trunk when the cops came and took Willie away and wouldn't let him have visitors; Richie, with his scary third floor. Richie was my best friend.

I shoved the ring in my mouth and clamped my teeth shut so hard that I thought they'd snap. I tried to pry his hands off of my shirt collar, but he was bigger than me.

He smiled, the kind of smile he smiled when some jerk bet him a quarter that he'd beat him in a race. He pushed me down so that my head hung off of the edge of the roof and his fists pressed on my neck. All I could see were the puffy clouds above and the outline of Richie's dark face. Richie was my best friend.

"I'll throw you off Max. 'Swear to God, I'll throw you off. Give

me the ring."

I tried to wriggle free, but Richie was stronger than me, he was stronger than everyone. I nodded and he smiled, letting me up.

I spit the ring into my hand, looked at the sparkling silver. It probably was a diamond; it was probably the most expensive diamond in the world. That diamond was probably worth more than the entire library, worth more than the entire Podunk town that I never wanted to live in in the first place. I glanced at Richie and sighed, quick as a gunshot I chucked the ring off of the roof of the library watching it fall.

Down.

Down.

Down.

I was sure Richie'd pop me one right in the nose like he did the time that I ate his last piece of birthday candy. Instead he went right off of the side of the building after the ring and I watched him fall.

Down.

Down.

Down.

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