

The Pawned Ring

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There once was a black high school student from South Florida named Darnell who got into a little bind with money so he asked his girlfriend Denise if he could pawn the ring he'd given her with the promise to return it as soon as he earned enough to buy it back. She agreed and he took a part-time job at a fast food restaurant, and two months later he was able to honor this commitment.

But when Darnell arrived at Denise's apartment with the ring her sister said she was at his friend Edward's house, so he walked over there and Edward answered the door in his underwear. Moments later Denise came up beside him, her shoulders bare and her body wrapped in a sheet. "I brought you your ring," Darnell choked.

Denise said that he could keep it since she didn't want it anymore. When he protested by explaining how hard he had worked to get it back because he thought they loved each other, she rolled her eyes and told him that guys gave her stuff all the time. As Edward was closing the door she said, "You're such a little boy. Why do you think I never slept with you?"

Darnell, being rather sheepish and not one for fighting, lingered quietly on the stoop. His heart filled with dread picturing Denise back in the bedroom with Edward. At last he shuffled away, clenching the ring in his fist as the hot Florida sun bore down on his drooping head.

On the way home some local tough guys who had seen him earlier at the check cashing store surrounded him and demanded the money. When he told them he didn't have it anymore they grabbed him and searched his pockets, and, finding nothing, began to punch and kick him until he fell down and dropped the ring. After pocketing it they

yanked off his sneakers, tied the laces together, and threw them over a power line. “Now you ain’t got no shoes!” they laughed and sauntered away.

Bruised, bloodied, and with his nicest polo shirt ruined, Darnell crawled to the curb and sat there in despair. “What am I gonna do now?”

After a while he glanced up at his shoes dangling in the breeze, then looked over at the corner shopping center and the people going in and out of the liquor store, the Chinese BBQ, the payday advance, the barber shop. Discarded lottery tickets danced up and away as passing cars swept them in their wake. A crusty homeless man leaning against a pay phone muttered to himself between sips from a paper bag, and nearby a deal was going down in a parked car.

A sick feeling of futility boiled up from his stomach. He saw the bleak scene so clearly—with himself stuck right in the middle—and it was pitiful. “What am I gonna do? How am I gonna get out of here?”

He eyed the army recruiter’s office next to the BBQ and shook his head. Enough local guys had come back hurt or messed up in the head that Darnell knew better than to sign up for that. A quick way out with too many strings attached. Some other kids from around town went off to college on football and basketball scholarships each year, but a lot of them messed around and fell right back into the soup. He couldn’t shoot a free throw to save his life anyway. A lot of people were in jail, too many, but that was no way out either.

He thought back on those weeks spent flipping burgers to pay for the ring, how he hadn’t even minded the work because all the while he still thought Denise loved him. It was maybe the only time in his life when he had been able to focus on something and not

worry about what was going on outside. Life felt good—it made sense—when you knew what you had to do to get something accomplished.

But in one afternoon he had lost it all and come crashing back down. And standing tall above him now were all the lies, violence, and ugliness that no tropical rainstorm could wash away from his world. “Oh no, no, no, no. What am I gonna *do*?”

That evening as the sun slowly made its way down in orange majesty, and the birds fluttered playfully among the treetops in a ritual older than time, young Darnell dragged himself home in sock feet pulsing with that same ache all sensitive souls have felt throughout the ages, men too simple and pure to bear the vicious daily scum that plays out in the mean streets and trailer parks, even the gated communities and mansions beyond.

Yet at the end of this sad day, despite it all, Darnell finally cracked a small smile when he figured that his momma would probably give him a few dollars to buy a pair of used shoes from the thrift store in the morning. Then maybe he'd go and see about getting his job back at the restaurant. Who knew what could happen after that?