

## Djinni

by Caren Gussoff

About this story:

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Jessie comes home early from her date. The ring catches the light as she turns the locks on her front door. "This one," she says, "is still hung up on his ex." She sighs. "No wonder it's been *so long* since I was in a relationship."

"Yeah," I say.

"Know what he told me? His ex could find four-leaf clovers, anywhere, anywhere in the world. He said she'd just close her eyes and imagine where they'd be." She sighs again. "Then he pulled out some crumbly stem from his wallet to prove it."

Already I think of Jessie as an extension of myself. I look at her face how I imagine mothers look at their children.

She screws the ring around her finger. "Maybe it's this thing. Maybe it's bad luck. You want it?" she says.

"You keep it," I say. "It looks pretty on your finger."

"Well," Jessie says. "That's one thing I've got."

"You got me," I say.

"Yes," she says. "I got you."

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The ring was how I came to be here with Jessie. I followed the ring. I leaned on her doorbell, and when she opened the door, I knew she was the one.

"Hi," I said. "You've got my ring?"

She's looked at me, then down the hall past me. "Who are you?"

"You've got my ring?" I repeated. "The ring Thomas gave you? It's my ring."

She pushed her bangs off her forehead and slammed the door open. "That piece of shit," she said. She held out her hand, showed me the filigree ring. "This one?"

"Yes," I said. "That's it."

Jessie closed her eyes and let out a breath of air, long and slow. "What the hell?" she asks. "Who does that?"

"Who does what?" I asked.

"Gives one girlfriend another girlfriend's ring? I should have known something was going on." She looked me up and then back down. "I guess we need to talk." She held up an arm. "You want to come in?"

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"Now," Jessie says. "Cross your fingers." She bends over a scratch-off lottery ticket. "Maybe I'll win a million dollars." She blows the dust off, then moans, "Fuck."

"No?" I ask.

"Nothing," she says. "I should have saved the dollar."

I shake a cigarette from my pack, light it.

"That shit's going to kill you," Jessie says.

"I'm not afraid of death," I say.

She studies the ticket.

"Did you wish you'd win?" I'd ask.

"Wishes don't come true," she says. She crumples up the ticket and runs her hand through her bangs. The ring catches the light. "I just want to be able to do something special," she says. "Like find four-leaved clovers."

"What's so special about four-leaf clovers, anyway?" I ask.

Jessie frowns. "When I close my eyes, all I see is darkness," she says.

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"You're a good houseguest," Jessie says.

"Shush," I say, the way I imagine a mother would to their child. "Be quiet now."

"You're a good friend," she says, and lays her head on my shoulder.

We sit still. Time moves; I don't know how long. We might have sat there all night if the phone didn't ring. Jessie picks it up. "It's Thomas," she says, slamming it shut. It rings again and she sticks it under a cushion. "I don't want to talk him." It rings and rings and Jessie finally pulls it back out and flicks off the ringer. "I wish he would stop calling me."

"You mean you wish you'd get over him," I say.

"No," she says. "Wishes again." She looks at me.

"Try it," I say.

"Fine." She scrapes a fist across her eyelids. "I wish I'd forget him totally." The ring catches the light.

"OK," I say.

Jessie looks down at her phone like she's never seen it before. She lays it quietly on the table.

"OK," I repeat.

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Thursday nights. Jessie watches television.

I know what the characters would do before they do it, say before they say it. "People are the most predictable creatures on earth," I say.

"Oh, come on," Jessie says.

"Really," I say.

"Whatever," Jessie says, and lays her head on my shoulder.

We sit still. Time moves; I don't know how long. We might have sat there all night if the phone didn't ring. Jessie picks it up. It's her mother.

"Hi," Jessie says. "Yes. No. No. Not yet. I will. I will. No. Yes." Jessie rolls her eyes. "I have to go, mom. Yes. Yes. Love you too." She snaps the phone shut. "It's the same every day," she says.

I smile. "See?"

"Don't start," Jessie says. She sits next to me.

"That's got to be nice, though," I say. "I can't remember the last time I heard my mother's voice."

"We should trade," Jessie says.

"That's not what you want," I say.

“No,” she says. “Know what I want? I wish, I wish I could do just one thing right.”

“OK,” I say.

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The room fills with the smell of salt and lemon, simmering pork. Jessie jiggles the frying pan, stirs in potatoes, garlic.

“What’s this called again?” I ask.

“Pork chops Vesuvius,” she answers.

“It smells delicious,” I say. It does; pungent and bright.

Jessie brings over plates, a fistful of utensils, cups of wine. We eat. Jessie sucks a dollop of sauce off her finger. The ring sparkles in the light.

“This is the best meal I’ve had in ages,” I say.

“Really?” she asks. “Really? I didn’t use a recipe.” She hugs me, emptying a little wine onto the carpet.

“Really,” I say.

“This is so great,” she says. “I’m so happy I met you.” Jessie’s cheeks are flushed. “This is great.”

I chew a forkful of potatoes.

“I really can cook,” Jessie says. She smiles. She looks happy.

“It’d be nice if things stayed like they are right now,” I say.

“Oh!” Jessie says. “Yes. I wish they would.”

“OK,” I say.