

RINGTIME

By Thomas M. Disch

One day (my story begins) I found myself on the shady side of Memory Lane, which is a place, like Wall Street, that can be anywhere the sellers and the sold chance to collide. In this case, in the IRT Antique Arcade, between Twenty-third and Twenty-eighth, where I had come with four hundred in over-the-counter unregistered cash and a need to spend it all immediately. I knew where. At the downtown end of the Arcade was a dealer ostensibly dealing in old paperbacks, most of them just powder sealed in cellophane, but who was in fact a fence for hot rings.

Morton Shure had the pale skin and opossum eyes common to the denizens of the IRT Arcade and a straggly beard that looked like acne that had undergone a sea change. With browsers who stopped to inspect his baggies of powdered prose he affected the Cranked-down speech of a zombie in custodial care. With real customers he revved up to a laconic mumble. Not a candidate for Salesman of the Month, but Morton's merchandise sold itself. I told him what I was after, and we stepped to the back of the booth. Morton drew the curtain and brought out his black velvet tray of lost silver souls. Most of the rings on the tray were familiar to me from earlier shopping expeditions. One or two I'd tried on for size and resold to Morton. The selection was as varied, and as tempting, as the index of a sex manual. It is my opinion that anyone who buys a ring as an alternative to getting laid in the phenomenological flesh has his ass screwed on backwards. Orgasm is like the sunrise; another will be along soon. Most collectors of any affluence agree, and so raw sex is a buyer's market on Memory Lane. Four hundred dollars would have bought up half the rings on Morton's tray and left me change for a doughnut and coffee. On the other hand, I knew that four hundred dollars wasn't going to buy me the bluebird of happiness. A felony was as much as I could hope for.

"How about a life of crime?" I hinted.

Morton blinked his opossum eyes. "You, uh, wouldn't want me to break any laws?"

"Laws? Morton, we're grown-ups. Grown-ups can distinguish between entertainment and real life. If I can put on a ring, I can take it off. Right? At my age, with my blood pressure, do you think I can be corrupted by The Adventures of Robin Hood?" I continued babbling in this vein until Morton had been soothed sufficiently for his greed to get the better of his distrust.

"There's one item. I personally know nothing about it."

"Right, right. Show me."

He unlocked a metal file and took out a cassette. He plugged the cassette into a pair of video specs and handed them to me. "Personally . . ." he began again.

"You know nothing about it."

I turned on the spectacles. They bubbled with blue blips, and then a man in a facemold of the aged Woody Allen told me what to expect from the ring he was pawning. I will not anticipate the ring's spinning of its own tale except to say that the masker (who was not the ring's maker, only its third owner) admitted candidly (and a little nervously) that it recorded the commission of a felony. To be found in possession of such a ring brings a mandatory sentence of a year's imprisonment-longer, if the nature of the crime is particularly nasty. It's odd, but when you know a ring is hot, it starts to look different. Evil has its own glitter.

On the whole, I am a law-abiding citizen. I understand the reasoning behind outlawing the merchandising of murder, rape, or any other actionable offense. Surely it will not do for honest citizens to subsidize the corrupt elements in crimes they have committed in order to market their transcription. Surely to traffic in such wares is irresponsible and deserves reprobation and punishment. Even so, consider how common it was, in the days before micro-memory transfer, for the public to be offered as "entertainment" lurid fantasies of criminal behavior. True, in the movies and novels of the pre-now

era, law and order usually wound up winning, but you don't have to be Diogenes to suppose that the prime fascination of all those criminous heroes, otherwise known as villains, was the possibility of the audience sharing vicariously in their wickedness. I'm a guilty wretch, I don't deny it, for buying that ring, but am I any guiltier than the wretches who flocked to see Little Caesar or Death Row Studs or How to Dismember a Body? (Or than the readers of this confession?)

The long and short of it was that I gave in to the temptation I'd come looking for. Morton, with a merchant's mysterious sixth sense for any pocket's exact depth, would

not budge from a price of four hundred dollars. The only concession I could pry out of him was to throw in a couple of blank rings, which came with the proviso that he be allowed first refusal on anything I recorded.

"And if you think you might do anything, um, undignified or"-he twiddled the four-hundred-dollar ring thoughtfully-"devious, stay away from mirrors, hear. You'd be amazed how many guys get busted cause they get careless about that." "Just call me Dracula."

Morton smiled a pallid smile. "And don't rob any cradles, either. I got principles."

The deal was sealed, and I left Memory Lane fizzing with a sense of personal dignity. It had been quite a while since anyone had suggested that I make a recording. I went up the stairs like they were an escalator, whistling the theme from The Myth of Progress.

Arriving home cured me of those delusions. Home is where the heart breaks. Home is what's left when all the collectibles have gone to the auction block. Home is a plasterboard box fourteen feet long, twelve feet wide, and eight feet high, the largest of ten spaces sliced up from what had once been a dentist's office. I still have Dr. Moss's chair, back sprung and vinyl patched, bolted to the center of the floor. Beside it, where once the drill was mounted, is a rented Ringmaster, my central and sustaining self-indulgence. Twenty years ago, when my recording career began to founder, I had the foresight to sign a long lease for both the office and the Ringmaster. Now the rent from the space I sublet is all that keeps me afloat financially.

The Ringmaster is a metered, not a monthly, charge, and since, alas, I so rarely use it, my bill is less than I'd pay for a phone if I had one. I have a small stock of rings,

but they are either crude mass-market simulations or my own botched jobs of later years. The day a picnic didn't pan out and I, undaunted, recorded eight hours spaced out in a Laundromat. The day I bused upstate to view the autumn leaves and sprained my ankle leaving the bus. Those failures were at least vivid. Most of my unmarketable memories are just dull-so many soft, tasteless noodles in the soup of the past.

The fun past, the yummy past, the past one sings of on New Year's Eve-all that is unrecapturable, sold off in weekly and monthly lots. There is one entire year, my twenty-ninth, wiped from the slate of memory. What seas of pleasure I cruised that year, what wine cellars were plundered on my behalf, what dainties ravished my tongue, only the directors and patrons of the Albright Know Museum are privileged to know, since the public, which includes me; is denied access to the documentation (never mind the use) of those three hundred sixty-five rings. But even unremembered pipers must be paid. One cannot gourmandize through the day and into the night and then, just by turning the lights low, summon Romance or even Raunch. Eventually there is an energy crisis. Instead of resisting that eventuality when it came upon me, I began unwisely to live higher off the hog and, at the same time, to sample my own tapes (with the excuse that I would do my own documentation and thus save gallery fees). Alas, pleasures that are remembered cannot be repeated with equal pleasure. I went through cycles of hunger and satiety, excess and disillusion. Instead of living for my public, I began to live for myself, with predictable results. My life fell apart, and my recordings got so bad that

even I was bored by them. Bye-bye, career.

All that was Auld Lang Syne. To return to the present, there I was in my humble (one-hundred-sixty-eight-square-foot) home, with my own recent acquisition around my finger, itching to be unveiled. I climbed into the antique dentist's chair, fastened the seatbelt, and stuck my ring-hand into the Ringmaster's maw. I thumbed the switch and felt the prick of the recall needle as it passed through the center of the ring and pierced my finger. The filament began to revolve, and then, poof, nada, night and fog.

I thought (that much of me that could still think independently), I've been had! But, no, the ring was functioning, and I-the other "I" of the recording-was walking through a foggy night, heart speeding, muscles tense, ears alert to the traffic noises. I was conscious, too, in an amateurish way, of the energy belt that powered my ring.

A city street, but what city I couldn't tell, for my eyes avoided all telltale specifics-street signs, shop fronts, the license plates of cars. The mind of the woman behind the ring was almost as featureless as the pavement underfoot, a blur of anxiety and fear, with some black purposes locked in its back room. As the ring's previous owner had warned, this was a rather unprofessional recording, but in a way the very lack of definition added to the fun, if you count suspense as fun.

My temporary self stepped into the recessed entrance to a narrow brick building and reached into her pocket for the simple tools of her trade. Even numbed with cold, her fingers were quick in solving the riddle of the lock. After taping over the tumblers so the door would not lock behind her, she set off, in deeper darkness, down a corridor, up two flights of stairs, and along a longer corridor until her flashlight's beam picked out, stenciled on a gray steel door, the number 33. Here her task was more delicate, her workmanship more ingenious, but on that first viewing it was the thrills more than the skills of the burglary that I

took note of. What clarity there can be in a fear defied! What pleasure (impossible to describe, except that it is intensely, specifically visceral) in the slow winning to the forbidden goal! What triumph when at last the till was open and the money in our hands! And (for it would be dishonest to edit out this final act) what a blast-of panic, horror, and guilt-when she shot the guard returning with his takeout order of pie and coffee! After the murder (if it amounted to that; she didn't stop to find out) she walked (resisted running) four blocks (I counted them) to a public park, where she sat on a bench and wolfed down the pie and coffee. A cherry pie, and never have I taken greater pleasure in a meal than in that one slice of pie. (And I am accounted something of a gourmet by those who've collected the rings I've made.)

After she'd wiped her fingers on a napkin, she counted her take-eighty-seven dollars. She seemed quite satisfied. At that point she stopped recording. To speak in greater detail of what the ring revealed would be to betray the teacher to whom I was to owe so much. (As it is, I have had to disguise the more incriminating facts: 33 is simply the number I favor at roulette; eighty-seven dollars, the going price for a blank ring.) Through her I learned not only (on later viewings) effective methods of picking locks and disabling alarms but, more critically, the tao of criminality. Just so, a student learns from the ring of a virtuoso musician not only the feel of his fingerings but whatever of elan, judgment, and sublimity his artistry can bring to bear. Let me lay a wreath, therefore, on the grave of the Unknown Felon and pass on to my own malefactions.

As much, at least, as I know of them.

My own criminal career was, from its inception, undertaken less for the sake of immediate gain (that eighty-seven dollars was no great incitement) than for the sake of art. Once I had practiced lockpicking on my own and my tenants' locks (some of surprisingly good quality), I determined to profit from my new skill by recording burglaries that would be, like virtue, their own reward. My objective: not

loot but luminescence. I have an abiding faith, which no amount of experience has ever been able to shake, in professionalism and quality. From an aesthetic point of view the ring I'd bought from Morton Shure was rankly unprofessional-hasty, unstructured, and fuzzy. While, even at their most minimal, on days when I had accomplished little more than tying my shoelaces, my own recordings had been clean, clear, and well-paced. "A born recorder," Art Scene called me, back in my golden youth, "with a knack for making something miraculous out of the most obvious materials."

Now that the gun of present purpose was loaded, all I lacked was a target. It didn't take long to decide what I wanted for Christmas. What else but rings? I wheedled a back issue of Ringtimes from Morton Shure and compiled a list, from its classified pages, of Manhattan dealers whose offerings were modest enough to suggest that their security systems would not be beyond my still-untested capabilities. List in hand, I began to scout the land and found, like Goldilocks, that most candidates were either too big or too piffling, too posh or too drear.

Until I came to, lucky number, 33 New Soho Square. One look at its degentrified facade of sagging black iron and flaking rose-painted brick, another look at the lock on the door in the foyer, and instinct told me that here was my target and now was the hour. As Shakespeare says, present mirth hath present laughter. I wired ring to belt and started to record.

I woke the next morning in my own room, finger ring-less and memory's tabula entirely rasa. No memory even of having come home. Which meant that, as so often in the past, I'd been brought home and put to bed by friendly elves. The elves had left behind, in exchange for yesterday, two rings, a sealed eight-hour blank, and a second, fully recorded and set to replay, molded in a lion's-head design. Beneath the rings was a note in my own handwriting:

Once more, with feeling. Come at 6. Meanwhile enjoy your plunder.

After breakfast, for which I lacked my usual appetite, I decided to try out the new ring. Like an informer's hand slipping a secret accusation into the stone jaws of the Bocca del Leone, the needle of the Ringmaster entered the lion's-head ring, and I found myself at the bottom of a well. The water was up to my knees and rising. Rats squeaked nearby, while far above a witch cackled with glee. Things quickly got worse.

I was lucky to have grown up before the entertainment industry had made cradle robbing a temptation available to the working class. The equipment needed to make recordings was still too bulky and expensive then, and Memory Lane was a county fair compared to the bustling bazaar it's since become. It's no credit to my parents, therefore, that my lousy childhood belongs to me and not to a collector hungry for wonder and innocence.

There was a case in the news lately of parents who had been restaging Baby's first Christmas every day of Baby's young life from age four through age seven, when the IRS finally caught them. (They got ten years for tax evasion. In Utah there's no law against robbing your own children's cradle.) This recording was more like Baby's first Halloween. The hours I spent trapped in rapport with that child's

terror were the supreme bad trip of my life. My own adult knowledge that I was being tormented not by literal witches and ghosts but by everyday human monsters was no proof against panic terror. When the ordeal was over and the needle retracted from the ring, I lay a long time inert, reeling with the aftershock. Slowly my heart's roller coaster eased to a stop, and I got off. I swore revenge and washed my pants at the sink in the hallway.

It was dusk when I returned to New Soho Square. The painted brick of Number 33 had dulled from rose to sepia. The metal gates of the shops about the square had been drawn down, giving the neighborhood a battered, embattled look. Pigeons fluttered to their roosts in the junked cars stacked monumentally in the basin of the defunct fountain at the center of the square. It seemed as though nothing had changed for a hundred years. Machu Picchu has nothing on Manhattan, if you catch it on the right day.

I loitered in the square some minutes, circling the stacked cars in the fountain, establishing mood. Who knew but that this would be my last recording? So it had better be good. My eyes' cameras panned across the concrete stumps of benches toward the doorway of Number 33 and then, feet assisting, zoomed in to the shallow foyer and the laminated plastic nameplate of the Happenings Gallery, M. Ruyk, Proprietor. A ringed finger rang the bell. Silence.

The door was locked. With the ease of borrowed expertise, I entered. The gallery, on the third-floor landing, was double-locked. I entered again. The place was an ice palace carved from white light-no walls for miles, no furniture, just a pure and tasteful void. M. Ruyk didn't worry much about the electric bill. Illusions like this cost money.

The cinematographer in me was delighted, but the thief was taken aback. Feeling less and less like an avenging angel, I inched forward through the mirage until my hand encountered vertical solidity.

"Mr. Whelan, we're so glad you've decided to return." The voice came from the four corners of the void, a flat, throat-milked contralto like the voice announcing time on the telephone.

In the white glare behind me, where the door should have been, two images formed, his and hers: both young, both dressed in icy shades of blue, both upside-down.

"You're inverted," I told them.

"One moment." The man's hand disappeared to the left, and the image righted itself and then sank through the white glow to just below floor level.

"Better?"

"You need some vertical adjustment, but that's okay."

The sofa on which they were seated sank another two feet.

The woman leaned forward-seen right side up, she came across as expensive rather than young-and addressed my midriff with an earnest, placating smile.

"Excuse us for keeping at such an unfriendly distance, Mr. Whelan, but the metal indicator suggested you might be armed."

"Excuse me for breaking and entering. And no need to worry about the gun. It's only imitation. Look." I took it from my pocket and fired off a blank.

"Oh, my!" She fluttered her hands expressively. They were white and bony and roped with veins and about fifty years older than her face. "How violent! Let me say at once, Mr. Whelan, that I am a great admirer of your work. You have such . . . Flair scarcely does justice. Regrettably, I can't claim to possess any of your more notable recordings, but I have been allowed glimpses. Such glimpses!" She cocked her head and squinted at my knees. (The image had continued sinking, and now their feet were coming into view in the air above their heads.) "Rudy, can't we get better focus?"

Rudy gave a martyred sigh. His hand vanished to fiddle a dial.

"Ali, that's better. No doubt you're impatient, Mr. Whelan. There's so much to explain. And I'm so bad at explanations. The loss of short-term memory is the price one pays for a lifetime of vicarious experience. It does something to the synapses." (Now only their heads were left in the lower image. Slowly they sank from sight and were reunited with their bodies in the image above.)

"Consequently, my memory of yesterday is very little better than yours. Though I do have the advantage over you in having just sampled this." She touched the ring on her left forefinger. "Exquisite! You have not lost your touch, Mr. Whelan. Your palette may be darker, so to speak, but your palate is unchanged. Forgive the pun. I was saying?"

"You were explaining to Mr. Whelan," said Rudy, "why he's here."

"Oh, yes. Oh, dear. Why is he here, Rudy? I remember, from the ring, how he got in yesterday. That was fascinating, all that business with the locks. But then, after the guards had got him and he was handcuffed-which in its own way was most absorbing-after that I'm afraid I rather lose the thread. Mr. Whelan himself became confused, and I stopped paying attention. Until dinner. The dinner was superb, as I believe I've said already. You explain, Rudy. You do it better."

"Maybe you could begin with introductions," I suggested.

"Of course. Excuse me. This is my mother, Muriel Ruyk, who founded, and owns, this gallery. I'm Rudolph

Ruyk. Fortunately for yourself, you do not need an introduction. Muriel recognized you at once from your recordings. Her short-term memory may be poor, but her recall for the more vivid sketches of her past-any time before the last ten to fifteen years-is often proportionally acute. You, Mr. Whalen, are one of my mother's most vivid memories."

"Aruba!" she exclaimed. "And the oysters on Belle Ile! I'll never forget those oysters."

"You were there with me?"

"Goodness, no. You were there. Isn't that enough? The way the waves pounded on the cliffs. And you on those slippery rocks! Oh, my! We did meet once, in passing, at Dar es Salaam, but nothing came of it. I am proud to say, though, that I was one of your first collectors. So long as I could afford your prices. Once you'd moved up to Knoedler, you zoomed out of my range."

"All that was quite a while back. I'm surprised you recognized me."

"Your hair is thinner now, certainly, and you've put on weight, but the indescribable something is still there. If I hadn't recognized you, I'm afraid Rudy would have turned you over to the police directly, and that would have been a shame."

"Mmm, yes, it would."

"Such a daring, such a desperate thing to do! I've always said, haven't I, Rudy, that there is a deep affinity between artistry and criminality?"

"Yes, Mother. But crime is crime, for all that."

"Yes, of course, one must take precautions. But I can't help admiring those like you, Mr. Whelan, who are headstrong and act out of impulse. I do hope we'll work something out."

"We already have, Mother. We have his agreement on videotape. And as a pledge that he'll honor that agreement, we have his own recording of how he broke into the gallery. In fact, with the recording he's making now, we have two such recordings. He can scarcely refuse to cooperate."

"That sounds like blackmail to me."

"It is, Mr Whelan," Muriel said pleasantly, "but I'd like to think that our arrangement would appeal to you on its own merits. You've been leading a rather mean sort of life. We're offering you a new chance at the good life. We're offering you, in fact, a comeback."

Despite myself, the word worked its magic: a comeback! I resisted the bait long enough to ask, "On what terms?"

"On our terms," said Rudy. "Five nights a week you'll record for us. The recordings will be the property of the gallery. All recording expenses will be approved in advance and charged to the gallery."

"It all sounds rather . . . unilateral."

Muriel touched her ingenu smile with a crone's finger. "Isn't that always the way of it with galleries, though? But is self-advantage that important to you as an artist? What does money matter if you enjoy abundantly the pleasures it can buy?"

"Yeah, but you'll enjoy the reruns. You and your customers."

"I wouldn't deny that. But what better defense against satiety than to awake each day to a present unshadowed by the past? Candidly, I consider the loss of short-term memory a great blessing. It allows me to live for the moment."

"In any case," said Rudy, "you'll get a quid pro quo. After each recording session you'll be allowed to check out a ring from the gallery's current collection, excepting some

few rare recordings that have only one or two repays left. I assume that's what you were after when you broke in here."

"If the ring you left with me last night is any sample of your collection, I'm not enticed."

"What ring was that, Rudy?" Muriel asked.

"One of my nightmares, from when I was four. I did warn you, Mr. Whelan, that

it might be too strong for your taste, but you flipped for the price tag."

"I don't believe that was a nightmare. That was real."

"Oh, Rudy had the most vivid nightmares imaginable as a child. Everyone accepts them quite literally. Of course, as Rudy says, they're not to every taste. One sample was enough for me. But people go to horror movies, don't they? It's the same principle."

"Cradle robbing is not the same as anything. It's a crime in this state, and that ring is evidence."

"There was nothing illegal in any of Rudy's recordings. They were undertaken with a grant from the National Endowment and conducted under the strictest psychiatric supervision. Every ring is fully documented. And from a strictly ethical point of view, surely, it was a kindness to the dear boy to exorcise the memory of such terrible dreams."

"Except, Mother, that as a result I went on having the nightmares."

"That's only a theory, Rudy," Muriel scolded. "All children have nightmares. It's a stage they go through. You just had a special talent. Why in the world are we discussing this? I thought we'd settled this years ago."

"Because Mr. Whelan didn't enjoy his private viewing."

"Oh, yes. Well, Mr. Whelan, you must choose more wisely next time. Try athletics. It picks you up wonderfully, and we've got a fine stock. Rudy takes a group of

young men skiing every year, and they all have a lovely time. You can have the same lovely time, and I can have my own collection of Whelans! One comes to the gallery business, after all, because one lacks the means to be a collector. I'm sure I explained all this yesterday"

"You did, Mother. But you also insisted-if you'll remember-that Mr. Whelan should not stop recording till he was back home and put to sleep. You wanted there to be an element of surprise in today's recording. But, as I pointed out then, we would have to explain this all over."

"And so we are. It's good of you, Rudy, to be so patient with us. You won't have to tomorrow. We'll stop recording in a moment, and then, while you put the finishing touches on dinner-how long has it been, by the way, Mr. Whelan, since you've eaten tournedos Rossini? -he can audit the ring he's making now."

"You're assuming that I've agreed to all this," I pointed out.

"And so you did-yesterday."

"Yesterday I hadn't just gone through purgatory."

"Oh, pish, Mr. Whelan, pish. Tomorrow today will be yesterday. We must live for the present. Even the Bible says so, somewhere. Mr. Whelan, I implore you. Try it for one week. You see"-she leaned forward confidentially and went out of focus-"I have been put on this merciless diet. No cholesterol, which means, in effect, no sauces. Virtually no desserts but fresh fruit. No beef in any form. Think of it! And no salt, Mr. Whelan! What kind of life is that?"

"So what you want me to do is . . ."

"To eat for me, Mr. Whelan. Rudy is a wonderful cook, and when he's not in the mood, the city's full of restaurants. My resources are limited, but I can still afford a table at La Pentola."

"But surely you don't need me for such . . . a . . ."

"A bit part?" Rudy asked sarcastically.

"If you meant to say," Muriel said, "that someone else could make such recordings for me, you don't do justice to your own artistry, Mr. Whelan. Believe me, my dinner table has auditioned hundreds of would-be artists. None of them had your taste, your gusto, your concentration."

"Well?" Rudy demanded.

"Well," I replied, "why not? Like Shakespeare says, the best revenge is living well."

While Rudy went off to the kitchen and Muriel replayed our dinner of the night before, I let the gallery's two guards set up a Ringmaster so that I could audit-and thus be able to recall-the recording I'd just been making. There was a flash of discontinuity as the ring was rewound; subjectively no time had intervened since I'd started recording out in the square. But soon the ring

was ready, and I started to relive the last hour of my own life. By the time the ring had finished playing, dinner was waiting in the upstairs dining room, to which the guards had escorted me. At the first whiff of the lobster bisque, I snapped to attention and started to record. The rest is art history.