

A RING

Frank de Zanger

a novella



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Gezien de Gekte, 2014, psychologische roman

De Ring, 2010, roman

Wereld-Impressies van een Jetplane-Nomade, 2000, geïllustreerde reisverhalen

Nobel Was Hij, 1999, roman/spannende fictie

Een Zee van Zacht Geruis, 1997, roman

Foreword

A writer can find himself in strange circumstances. The idea of novella 'A Ring' - based on a stay in St. Petersburg in 1998 - came into my mind during a solitary lunch at the beautiful Rynek Główny main square in the old city of Krakow, Poland. This was in 2001 and it took me about twenty minutes to put the core of the story on paper. Since then, I have been writing and communicating about the manuscript, and the story was even shelved for a long time. My contact person in St. Petersburg was Julia Sundstrem. I thank her for the valuable information that she provided for the manuscript. Also I would like to thank Bea Cordes, Nick Garner and my wife Agnes for their efforts in editing the English version of novella 'De Ring', that was originally written in Dutch. I often thought I would never finish the book. But each time I read the manuscript, I was convinced that I *had* to finish it. Well, it has been finalised in ... 2010. Because of my consultancy work overseas, I worked on 'A Ring' in Ethiopia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Samoa and the Netherlands. But even when I was in the tropics, I never had any problem remembering the atmosphere of St. Petersburg; a city that one will not forget.

The lyrics of Chris de Burgh's song 'Moonlight & Vodka' are used with kind permission of Hornall Brothers Music Ltd.

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1 AN OLD WOMAN

Central Park was at its best. A young man walked to one of the benches by *The Pool*, which was his favourite place to relax from the hectic life he led. Summer or wintertime, the season didn't matter. What was important was that the sun was shining, because without the sun, it could be just as depressing as a dull day at Rockefeller Square. However, the sun *was* shining on the white frozen lake, the snow-white lawns, and the large trees that had adopted soft contours from the snow. Brushing the snow off the seat, he sat down and leaned back, with arms crossed, eyes closed. His intention was to think about nothing, but thinking of nothing proved to be very difficult. He was not able to keep images from popping up unbidden and the images were not pleasant. The images were of the events in recent weeks. To get the message that your father died in a car accident is shocking. While on a business trip, a German driving at high speed on an 'autobahn' near Munich caused the accident. It had rained heavily; the man's car went into a skid, shot against the guardrail and caused a gigantic pile up. The result was three dead, including his father. How undignified, how undeserved, and how suddenly a man could die. The trip back to Europe, the emotional reunion with his mother, sister and brother, and the poignant reality of a funeral took its toll. Processing those events would certainly take a long time. However, the immediate consequence was that he had to give up his studies at the University of New York. His father's allowance would enable him to live another three months, but then it was over. Sure, he could try to get a job or apply for a scholarship, but that would take time and time was the crucial factor. In the middle of a vivacious thesis that consumes lots of energy, you want to keep the momentum going, knowing that it must be done *now*. If not completed within two years, it would be lost and you would never be able to maintain that intellectual drive. Because he knew that his thesis would be of great importance, it did hurt. While he was sitting on the bench, trying to let go of his dark thoughts, someone sat down beside him.

Turning around, he looked into a friendly but deathly tired face of an old woman. Actually, she looked ill, but her kind face overshadowed that fact. There was a comment about the snow; that it had snowed already more than last year at this time. After another question and answer, the conversation suddenly took an unexpected twist.

"I know things are difficult for you," the old woman said.

Her observation shocked the young man.

He asked, "How could you know?"

"Young man, it is not very surprising with my contacts in New York and at the university. By the way, I see you as you are now, young, but I see you old as well. People don't hold many secrets from me anymore."

"Oh, is that so?" stammered the young man, not knowing how to respond.

"I want to tell you a story," continued the old woman, "at least, if you have some time."

Ironically, in his current situation he had developed a different idea of time. There appeared to be more time than he had ever imagined, so when she looked at him, he nodded for her to continue. Therefore, she started telling her story, which was not so much long as heart breaking, and he found it difficult to keep his eyes dry. From behind the bench, on which the two were sitting, one could have seen that the shoulders of the young man had slowly begun to rise. Yes, he asked some questions, but mainly the old woman was speaking. Suddenly, from a pocket in her thick winter coat, she cautiously dug out a plastic sachet. Pulling two photographs out, she handed them, with trembling hands, over to the young man. The young man took them and studied them carefully. He gave them back and the two pictures were pushed laboriously back into the plastic sachet. From her other pocket, she pulled out a small box, which she handed to the young man.

After the old woman had finished her story, the young man said, "I don't know what to think, and I don't know," he hesitated before continuing, "if I can trust you." He ran his hands through his hair, looked at her, and turned his eyes back to the white, sunlit park.

"Yes," the woman said, fatigued. "I can imagine, but sometimes, you need to do something and must have that confidence. I leave it up to you, really."

The young man sighed, looked up exasperated at the snowy branches, and then to the ground, where he moved his shoes around in the snow.

"I'm sick," said the old woman. "I won't leave many more footprints in the snow." Then she mentioned his name. Now, he was not surprised to hear her say his name, because it fitted into her story.

Slowly and carefully, in order not to slip, the old woman stood up. She reached out a hand, so the young man stood up and took her small frail hand in his. She looked him straight in the eyes. "Do it," she said and then she started walking cautiously along the path.

"Thanks!" he shouted to her, but that was only after she had already walked away. She did not look back. Her bent body disappeared from sight, slowly engulfed by the enchanting white world.

He sat on a bench in snowy Central Park, holding a box in his hand. Opening the box, he saw a gold ring. He took the ring out, turned it around in his fingers and brought it closer to his eyes. Inside the ring, he saw the inscription – worn but very readable – about which the old lady had spoken. In graceful, slanting letters had been inscribed: 'Love, Richard, New York, 1926.'