

SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2017

HIGHLY COMMENDED

HERE LIE THE DISCORDS by Sharon Boyle

‘They’ve turned it into a competition.’ Delia drummed a finger on the kitchen table. ‘Winner is the last to have their crooked wee pinkie prised off the mortal coil.’

I said nothing, feeling ploughed up with fussing and fetching and quarrelling. It was unusual for Mother and Father to do activities together, but circumstances had contrived so that Mother was dying upstairs in her bedroom and Father dying downstairs in the converted dining-room. Delia and I wanted them to die in the hospice but they, and the overstretched NHS, insisted on a pantomime of clan amity. Delia had come to see out their last days, agreeing (and we don’t agree on much) that they were taking their time about it.

‘They’re pimping out the guilt card,’ she huffed. ‘I mean, I’ve got a family to look after.’

That rankled. She meant I should look after our parents since I did not have a self-made family. But she didn’t look after her libidinous husband, Tom, nor her wayward, back-chatting children. But to be fair to Delia we had just endured a twenty-one minute moan from Father who ended it by tossing up a weak hand and whispering, ‘I am dying because there is no cure for a broken heart.’

‘Daddy,’ Delia, hands on hips, ‘you’re dying because you have been an outrageous alcoholic for the last forty years; and Mother because of her lifelong worship of cigarettes.’

Father roused himself to yodel, ‘I’m dying because I am unloved by that frosty bitch upstairs!’

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‘Mother stopped loving the dirty bastard when she found out about his shenanigans,’ said Delia as we settled on the couch to watch telly. She licked a length of cigarette paper, pressed it and lit the end. ‘The quicker those shits go, the better. Preferably at the same time.’ She cocked her head. ‘What was that?’

We listened. It was Mother shimmying downstairs. We met her at the bottom.

‘I need to talk to the arse alone.’ Her words were spoken through a wodge of phlegm.

‘You haven’t talked to him in months,’ said Delia.

‘Well, I’m fucking talking to him now.’ Mother’s breathing deserted her and we grabbed her arms and hirpled in tripod formation to the dining-room.

‘Okay?’ Delia asked as we deposited her over the threshold.

‘It’s enough.’

Mother hadn’t always been bitter. Old photographs show a young woman posing for family outings, neighbourly get-togethers and drunken parties. One shows her milky-young face glowing into the camera as someone (Father?) is doing something to her from behind. I use this as evidence they once shared passion. But in the passion was violence. The parents of my ken are not the celluloid parents of brimming smiles and ice-jangling drinks. I remember only a woman who fought Father’s jigs of slaps with her own drill of punches. I mind too the morning-afters when they dragged the drugged-out versions of themselves downstairs, yipping in pain at any noise. Mr and Mrs Discord, that was them.

After the doctor confirmed their deaths and left, I set my brows to crease-mode, mustering an impression of concern.

‘Don’t bother, Helen,’ said Delia. ‘I know you don’t have it in you.’ She sighed, ‘He didn’t have much of a life in his last year. He was only seventy eight.’

‘Seventy eight is a good age.’

‘Seventy eight is not a good age. It’s a crap age. It should be banned.’

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‘Ban the number seventy eight?’

‘And while we’re at it, sixty nine. That’s when Mother cacked it. Or to be precise, sixty nine and a half.’

She knew I was fond of numbers. Fond enough to know that Mother died at sixty-nine years, nine months and two days. To be precise. But I reigned in my annoyance and said, ‘Sixty nine and a half is indeed specific.’

‘Numbers *are* pacific.’

‘Fractions are, not integers.’

‘Bugger integers,’ she hissed.

I like integers; they may be tamer than fractions but they’re cleaner. However, I knew to follow Delia’s line of conversation and said, ‘I don’t like forty. At forty your body thinks it’s time to pack up.’

Delia, thirty nine and three months, glared at me. I needed to extricate myself as I wasn’t sure how to keep things neutral, and I didn’t know whether to hug her as perhaps befitted the situation. I’m not tactile, my body would rather fold in on itself than be entangled with another.

‘Where are you off to?’ Delia stubbed out her cigarette. ‘And stop rubbing your face, it shows there *is* something wrong with you.’

‘To sort out their things.’

‘The charities’ll be grateful, they love tat.’

‘The rugs aren’t tat.’

Delia’s face slackened. ‘The rugs? You’ve never shown any interest in them. You know I’ve always wanted them.’

‘I am interested in the rugs. Banging on about stuff doesn’t give you right to ownership.’

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I had never seen a reason to express an opinion about the five Persian rugs hoarded in the attic. When Delia oozed out her adulation I had not seen she was staking a claim on them.

She stood. 'We'll soon find out who Daddy left the rugs to. My bets are on me.'

She strode from the kitchen, like a tank cruising over already-conquered lands.

'What's the problem again?' Delia asked.

We were sitting in the lawyer's office waiting for him to return with some papers and Delia had taken the chance to drill me about the headstone.

'I had to ban a few words to up the veracity.'

'Veracity, Helen? Do you think anyone in our family gives a feck for veracity?'

I was relieved when the lawyer returned.

It was like when there's a war on and the psychopaths come out to play and rip through the ranks to become the cruel rulers and droolers over corpses. Personality disorders become hip: Hitler was a charmer, apparently; Stalin a ruthless rascal; Delia a demonic presence in front of the lawyer.

'Ha!' she clapped her hands. 'The rugs are mine. All five! They're worth a bloody fortune.'

The lawyer sniffed. 'It must be a traumatic time, especially the unfortunate manner in which your parents died.'

Delia stopped whooping. 'Unfortunate? Those buggers deserved it.'

We heard a clatter and ran into the dining-room where we'd left Mother nine minutes before.

'Fuck!' whispered Delia as she entered. 'Double fuck!'

Father's body hung backwards over the bed, his spine bent awkwardly, his head spewing out the fierce red of his brain.

'She's pulped him,' Delia cried.

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Mother lay across Father's feet, her arms in crucified mode, her chest jumping under great gasps. A solid-looking torch in her hand.

Delia shook her head. 'You realise we helped her murder him? We actually carried her through to do the deed.'

Mother rasped out a laugh at that, so much so she choked to death three minutes later.

We buried her two days ago in a humanist service as per her wishes. Her nicotine-riddled body is under a tree. There is no stone; nothing to say Mother Was Here. No treasured wife. No adored parent. She left me her jewellery.

Today is Father's turn. His few relatives, who appeared like mystery guests in their best blacks, head to the hotel for after-burial tea and gossip. Delia and I stand at the headstone which reads: *Gordon Ives, age 78 years, 8 months and 8 days. Husband to Grace. Father to Helen and Delia. May his soul rest in peace.*

Delia sniffs. 'Did the stone mason refuse to write, *Gordon Ives, An All-round Bastard?*'

'Should I have asked him to do that?'

She studies me, perhaps to see if I am being truthful or joking. I am always truthful and I never joke.

'Perhaps,' she nods, 'or, *Here lies a full-blown monster.*'

My mind flicks back to me in my tenth year – the main bedroom door opening as if onto a stage where the lead was in bed, his hips grinding in a way I didn't understand. I had watched fascinated as his blue hummingbird tattoo writhed on his shoulder, steadily, with purpose, flexing and waning as if ready to shimmer off his skin. I stepped forward to touch the tattoo and it was then I saw a pair of feet underneath, spread apart and not moving, and the body the feet was attached to was not moving either or even speaking, and that wasn't like Delia.

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When I gabbled this to Mother she hurled vomit onto the kitchen floor, ran into Father's study, threw everything of his out and dragged everything of hers in. In the evening I asked what was for tea.

'You'll have to make your own tea from now on, Helen,' she said from the threshold of the study, a cigarette bouncing on her lips.

'What about Delia? Will you not go and see her?'

She closed the door. I stood, not moving but listening. The fact that no noise came from the other side told me Mother was listening too – both of us standing rigid, eavesdropping on one another's silence.

I climbed the stairs to the main bedroom. Delia was staring at the ceiling, her hands clutching the duvet hem.

'Are you all right?' I asked, staying by the door as if she had something contagious.

'I don't know.' Her eyes turned my way. 'What's Mother doing? I heard banging.'

'She's claimed the study.' I broke the stare to study the necklaces Mother kept on a wooden tree mug. Thirteen junk necklaces I liked to play with, rattling the beads like an abacus. They were decoys for burglars – the good jewellery being hidden in a kist.

Father returned when he ran out of money. He battered on the study door bellowing for Mother to get out, before sobbing for forgiveness. But Mother didn't answer. She hibernated in that room for eighteen months before moving upstairs when the filth grew too much. I saw her occasionally on the prowl for booze and cigarettes. The need for food did not concern her. Nor the welfare of her daughters.

Mr and Mrs Discord lived in perfect separateness while their daughters toadied around, counting the days till childhood captivity ended. One more so than the other.

'I like to think he didn't touch you after I saw you that day.'

'I'd like you to think that too,' Delia says.

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I stare at her. She has earned those rugs.

She nods at the headstone. ‘The wording’s still not right – he shouldn’t be allowed any peace. He should be chopped up and made to rest in pieces.’

I hesitate. ‘That’s a joke, isn’t it?’

‘If you like.’

I reach for her hand, something I haven’t done since we were little. ‘Delia, I think we’re survivors.’

She shakes me away. ‘I think I’m a lesbian. I just can’t love Tom the way I think I should. I suppose that’s why he runs about like Pepe Le Pew.’ She faces me. ‘I’ve met a woman. She likes the kids.’

‘Really?’

Delia snorts, ‘Your social awareness classes are full of shit, you know that? Don’t say anything to Tom when we go in. Still to tell him.’

‘I don’t want to head in. Our relatives are awful.’

‘But your small talk is so scintillating.’ She catches my look and shrugs. ‘C’mon, a half hour with the two of us will scatter them. Winner is the first to insult someone, intentionally or not. My bets are on you.’