

# SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2017

## FIRST PLACE

### JIGSAW AND CLOWN by Helen de Burca

I am the jigsaw girl.

Every day, there are missing pieces. I search for them as soon as I drag myself from sleep, when I open my makeup-crusting eyes and unwind myself from the sweaty sheets, or the sawdust, or the pile of sequined costumes, wherever I find myself upon waking – I rarely remember how I ended up there. I scrabble for the bits of the puzzle, try to fit them together to create a whole.

Some days, the pieces fit, or fragments of them fit, at least for a while. But mostly they are just inexpressive, jumbled shards. Significance dissipates like melting ice. Yet every time I wake, I start over again.

At a certain stage of my search, I become aware of Pierre watching me with his sad crooked eyes. He would like to help. He would like to see a whole girl before him, a girl who does not vary from one instant to the next. Don G says I am a firebird. I think perhaps he means a phoenix, rising each day from its ashes. Certainly I create a lot of ashes. But with Don G it's impossible to know quite what he means. Maybe his firebird is something other than what I imagine.

Don G keeps us in thrall. He is the great dark presence we look at so often that we can no longer see him. But we know he's there. I know he's there, watching, ready to hurt. His whip whisks by just next to my skin – so close that I feel the tickle of the whistling scarred air – but it never quite touches me. The spectators gasp. The smell of their aroused horror meets the stink of the lions and elephants. Beasts take no

notice of pain; humans secretly desire it. The spectators desire my pain. Somehow they know I deserve it. Every night, they await the unspeakable thing that never quite happens. They file out with an obscure sense of disappointment, for was this not all that they had been led to expect? – and yet, not quite what they thought they would get?

When Pierre takes me in his mournful arms, sometimes I twine myself around him. He can make himself think, for a while, that there is a centre to Jigsaw Girl and that it is he. He makes himself believe that I have returned to him in the teeth of his despair, and maybe I have. He has no choice but to believe this, for every time I abandon him, he dies a little. I know it, for although his skin is hidden, it speaks to me nonetheless from behind the mask of his makeup.

More commonly, though, I push him away and stare at him and wonder, possibly aloud, where his face is. I don't do this to be cruel, or at least I don't think I do. I just forget; it's one of those missing pieces.

There are nights when I watch Jigsaw Girl's reactions with the hauteur of an older child observing a younger one: she gasps at each caper under the spotlights, her pupils dilate, her hands clutch at the air, even the stink of the urine-soaked sawdust awakens her. In this state of rising elation, Pierre's non-face becomes again and again an object of repulsive wonder to her; and the Gemelli's beauty becomes newly irresistible.

Our natures are worn literally on our sleeves under these spotlights, within this magic ring. The Gemelli are long and angular and metallic in leotards that outline every hair, every bulge of elongated muscle and inevitable masculinity. They are better than naked. They are like those sets of twins in Greek legends, those inseparable demigods who must always fight to the death. The Gemelli do not fight –

they move as one – but they are unnatural and fascinating as doubled demigods. They are irresistible in their multi-limbed dexterity, their creeping cruelty.

My costume too shows what I am. I wear a dress of silken jigsaw pieces that reveals more than it hides. I am the counterpoint to the arachnid Gemelli, though we never appear together in the ring. My delicate throat can swallow a sword and emit balls of fire. My teeth are diamonds. My pearl-like skin is impenetrable and invites violence.

Don G, unimaginably huge, wears robes that are some shade darker than black. He is, in reality, the shadowy tent under which we all scurry about. We remain under his protection only for as long as he wishes to extend it. The spectators do not know, although surely they must sense, that one day Don G will decide to bring it all crashing down on us. He loves chaos and misrule and disguises this cleverly through our show. He feeds upon laughter, fears, desires, devouring the spectators' reactions as they watch us caper and suffer and swoop before them, and of course he feeds upon us too.

And poor Pierre is Pierrot, of course, grotesque and asymmetrical. His skin is his costume, although the spectators think it is something he peels off at the end of each night. If only he could! The only tears he can weep are those that are painted onto his face. His face is a puzzle, oddly fit together. It should be my face; it is the face that I deserve, the one that matches my nature, just as the beauty of Jigsaw Girl matches that of his nature, trapped within his great twisted, torn bulk. The makeup covers and augments the scars, allows his mouth to stretch into a smile. If he were not always disguised like this, the spectators would flee at the sight of him; but, painted, he becomes an object of laughter. His performance is comic because he is abject, crushed. He looks impossible and it makes the spectators laugh. We, too, laugh but it

is laughter that brings burning bile to the throat and so we hate him even as we look merry.

Pierre watches me with his sad irregular eyes as I watch the Gemelli, but where his body expresses longing gracelessly, Jigsaw Girl is the purest possible construction of desire. Her dress of multi-coloured scraps is made to measure; from it, her bust and neck and arms bloom like a rose unbudding itself from its green scabbard. Jigsaw Girl's legs are long as stems. The eye cannot resist climbing them to the very top – almost – to the source of the nectar they promise, that is just hidden by the jigsaw dress, the better to be hinted at. Jigsaw Girl blooms under the crawling eyes. The eyes of the spectators are ants and caterpillars on her skin, a faint tickle. The eyes of the Gemelli are spiders, and Pierre's eyes would be nourishing bees; but they are bees with torn wings. Don G's eyes are the secateurs that hover over me and may plunge and cleave at any moment. His are the only eyes that count, and it is they, more than any, that palpate the innermost parts of me and cause this frantic tautness in my body that pulls all other eyes toward me.

Jigsaw Girl does love Pierre, I swear she does, for she knows he is the promise made to her by all the stories. And yet, when the spectators have left and the ring is a pool of harsh stinking light surrounded by something deeper than blackness, she cannot help succumbing to the Gemelli. Her nectar flows for them as their metallic limbs approach and grip her like pincers. Their tongues are long and extensible. They scatter petals in their haste, tearing at them, coldly savage. They are soundless while she shrieks and writhes between them. She gives herself up to them over and over in an attempt to draw from them some proof that their raw and wounding pleasure is as monstrous as her own.

Beyond the ring, beside the cage of the lion – an ancient and crippled beast, though his infirmity is concealed in the ring by Don G’s art – Pierre crouches in the shadows and watches the kaleidoscope of bodies in the ring. If he were a man, his jealousy might explode in deadly shards that would pierce us all; but we all believe him to be not much more than a simple beast. His heart is smitten and rent every night, only to grow back whole during the day – the only part of him that is whole – a heart so faultless and pure that it makes me ashamed at those times when I know that I love him. His love is tender and heart-breaking, even for Jigsaw Girl.

When finally the Gemelli withdraw and leave her smarting and disintegrated, Pierre creeps forward, childlike despite his great bulk. His tears fall on the scattered jigsaw pieces and blur their edges. He cannot understand that this rending is an addiction for Jigsaw Girl, although afterwards, cradled in his tender arms, she wishes that it were not so. She wishes that she could be a wife to match his perfect heart. But as she cannot, she draws out the beast in him to justify her own. She makes his body rise and devour her, so that afterwards he weeps without tears for the harm he thinks he has done her, and she wishes that she could shed tears for the harm she has, in truth, done to him.

All of this Don G sees from some eyrie, though we do not observe him. He does not reward, but only punishes. Once he punished Pierre for wishing to be a normal happy man. He released the lion – young and fierce and savage, then – to devour his face and rip his body. He waited until that poor bestial instrument completed his work before beating it back, striking it until he transformed that proud beautiful beast forever after into a pathetic cripple, to cower in its cage and shamble around the ring for the mocking spectators.

One of the jigsaw pieces that sometimes fits and sometimes does not: Don G as my father. It seems impossible. But nothing is possible here, so perhaps nothing is also impossible.

I remember his obsidian eyes watching me as I watched Pierre falling deeper and deeper into love with me. He fell when he still had a face, and he fell despite himself, for he knew that I belong to Don G. Sometimes I know that this was the reason why Don G punished him, by exchanging his angel's face for a putrefying one. And he also punished me for being beloved by Pierre; only when Pierre had been transformed into a faceless beast did my father give me to him.

Pierre should be a beast; but Don G did not count on Pierre's beautiful heart. It is the only thing about which he has ever been wrong. Pierre's heart is formed of perfect clockwork, and creates light out of the obscurity; it illumines the tent, that otherwise would contain only Don G's infinite darkness. Perhaps one day Don G will yet prevail entirely. After all, he wields the perfect tool in Jigsaw Girl. When she can find the right jigsaw pieces, she knows she is unwilling, and attempts to escape his impenetrable pattern by dispersing herself, covering herself with regret, rolling in the dung of her body's demands, but all the while she knows, somewhere, that every action of defiance simply delivers her up to his plans.

Don G knew when he gave me to Pierre that I might make any man a beast. But Pierre knew it too, and loved me anyway, and his love created a new jigsaw piece, that I cannot always locate, but that is bright and can be named hope.

Every night I scatter the pieces of Jigsaw Girl, and every night I wait for Pierre, the clown with no face, to gather them up and keep them in his bosom, where I will not be able to scatter them again.