
Pride

by Toni Houston

(Official longlist, Fish Short Story Competition, Ireland)

Jonas finishes polishing Papa's black Rolls Royce, and steps back to admire his handiwork with Pride.

Pride stretches its wings on Jonas' shoulders, and flaps. It's a familiar feeling, and for a moment it gives Jonas pleasure.

Papa would certainly approve. The car is so clean that the bonnet is reflecting blue sky, white clouds buckling on the windscreen. A small bird hovers nearby, confused, momentarily flapping against metal and glass.

"Shoo," Jonas says, re-polishing the place where feet and beak made invisible marks. Taking a deep breath, Jonas opens the driver's door and sits behind the steering wheel. For a moment he's distracted by the unsettling sight of his normally bleached white hands stained black by car polish. Pride falters for an instant, and Jonas hastily drops his right hand to the key. Predictably, it sticks, the mechanism worn out through years of turning. Jonas wills the engine to start as his lungs run out of air. Reluctantly he sucks in another breath, and instantly gags.

Despite long summer drives with windows open, scent dispensers, and perfumed furniture polish, Jonas can still smell Papa's cologne and Grandpapa's cigar smoke seeping insidiously out of the red leather upholstery, waging a constant olfactory battle that renders the Rolls Royce unbearable to drive.

But drive it he must.

"The engine must be regularly warmed," Papa insisted as he handed Jonas the keys. As the fancy crowd sang Happy Birthday and Jonas struggled to blow out fifty candles, the Rolls Royce sat, twinkling, in the middle of the party, festooned with helium balloons, a sash of ribbon around its bulbous waist, and its motor purring like a fat cat, causing carbon monoxide delirium amongst the very old and very young.

Jonas held his breath as he drove the car away that evening. Papa lingered in the driveway behind them, waving stiffly, framed by the rear view mirror.

Jonas holds his breath again now, as he eases the cursed machine back into the garage. Like a bird of prey, Pride sits heavily on Jonas' back, its feathers ruffling,

as Jonas snaps off the light, closes the door, and walks into the adjoining cloakroom, down a long corridor, through the ballroom, past the servants' quarters, through three living rooms, and into the kitchen.

Sunlight stretches out on the marble counter tops, and the old clock is ticking loudly. Jonas watches the big silver arms jerking through the seconds, a steely eyed cuckoo clock poised on coiled springs within its little house, waiting for the midday charge. "Papa," Jonas reminds himself, and Pride is kneading tiny talons into his shoulder blades as he walks to the kitchen window.

There she is.

On her hands and knees, shaded by snowpeas and passionfruit, butterflies alighting on her long red hair. His gaze brushes her cheek, and Monique looks up. She sees a faded oil painting of a man framed by the window, fine cracks around his eyes and mouth as he smiles and waves. She gets up and dusts off her hands, dark earth falling from her fingers.

Monique leaves a trail of dirty footprints on the white tiles as she joins him at the kitchen table. Jonas looks up from his cup of tea and says "Papa is due at twelve." "Why?" she asks, her eyes soft. "He wants to go over the books," he says, his voice intentionally brusque.

"It's a sinking ship," Monique murmurs. Jonas winces as Pride tightens its grip. Monique notes the familiar expression. "You know I'm right," she says gently.

Jonas looks beyond her. Through the window he can see the water rising and white horses galloping towards them over the hills, spray pluming from their manes. "You're wrong," he says. Monique sighs. "I *can* save the business," Jonas continues. "I *must* save the business."

Monique shakes her head, and stands up. "Swallow your Pride," she says, standing beside him for a moment, her hand on his shoulder. Pride pecks violently at her fingers, but she does not heed it. "It's not about Pride," Jonas stammers, "I just can't...I can't...I won't lose this house."

Monique's hand falls away. She walks to the door. Puts on high gumboots. Steps outside. "Ok darling," she says. "If you need me, you know where I am."

The flood waters part before her, and close behind her, as she heads back to her little vegetable garden. Elevated on higher ground, surrounded by a deep moat carved by the passing of years and deepened with every argument about the business, the garden is an island for Monique, a place to hide on shipwrecked days. He will soon need a small boat and oars to reach her if the storm doesn't subside.

"Come on Papa," Jonas whispers.

Papa will carve a path through troubled seas and save this sinking ship, thinks Jonas. With cannons blazing Papa will come alongside their mansion, leap down onto the deck with slip-proof boots, and stride in with Rage in his eyes and a bulletproof vest of Empirical Righteousness strapped around his chest.

Jonas feels his pulse quicken. He needs a drink. He almost falls over his feet as he rushes to the fourteenth century cabinet inherited from nobility and grabs a sixteenth century crystal glass crafted for royalty and opens a bottle of forty year old whisky given to him twenty five years ago when Papa officially bestowed the family business upon Jonas.

The hand-over was conducted in a lavish ceremony in the town hall, with dozens of witnesses from the highest caste of society, each one of them a solid rock of resistance against any protest that might leak from Jonas on that fateful, inescapable day. His mother was quiet and his siblings were awkwardly congratulatory, relief sparkling in their eyes like tiny chandeliers, all of them secretly thankful to have been spared Papa's grand plan.

"It is with High Expectation that I relinquish the family name and business to your care," his father said, at the conclusion of his speech. "You are the rightful successor of a noble tradition, five generations strong. I know you will not let me down." Papa stopped, and stared at Jonas. His voice echoed in the town hall, and in the brief silence that followed Jonas heard a flapping of wings and looked up to see a sparrow flying backwards and forwards through the rafters, desperately seeking an exit.

"Take Pride in your work," Papa concluded, "and you cannot fail."

That's when Pride swooped down and perched on Jonas' back, and clutched on for the ride. It pecked the eyes out of his other career plans, and never slept, always on the lookout for another opportunity to fluff up Jonas' ego and keep him committed to the task.

As instructed by Papa, Jonas learnt to take Pride in his work.

And that strong grip of Pride's claws propelled Jonas, and guided him through the most ghastly of hours. In no time at all it banished Doubt, and made Jonas the most sought after Undertaker in the district. Papa taught him Perfectionism, which enabled Jonas to carry out his contract with death in a way that made Pride flourish. Car accident victims, drowned men, broken children and gassed housewives were washed and cleaned and sewn together with such care that often – during open casket viewings – relatives had to lay a head on a chest to ensure that life had not returned.

And Papa was always there at the critical moment, checking a corpse, suggesting a different face paint, and collecting his commission. Death was a lucrative business that would pay Papa's bills for the rest of his life. "I'm proud of you son," was all he offered as thanks, but that was enough for Jonas.

The only thing that Pride couldn't monitor was Jonas' dreams, unchanged since childhood. The visions were lively, colourful, full of lovely creatures with roots for feet and stars for eyes, sunkissed skins and fistfuls of fruit.

Jonas tried to make sense of these bountiful dreams in private leafy places, and that's how he met Monique. She was feeding swans at the edge of the pond in the Botanical Gardens, and something about the way she broke bread and caused those long white necks to entangle and disentangle gave him the courage to go to her, and speak about random things. They talked about life. They met every week. By the time Jonas admitted his work with death, she was in love with him. When he invited her to move into his big mansion full of ghosts and golden trinkets, she agreed, on one condition.

She must have her own garden.

Bordered by recycled timber, quenched by pure rainwater, and fed by rich fertilizer of goat, cow and horse manure, the little garden prospered. Happiness flowered even in the heart of winter, Compassion unfurled thick creepers across the neighbours' fences, and pollen collected from the garden was so heavy with Peacefulness that the bees often fell from the air in a daze, their sense of direction addled and their memories erased.

Whilst Papa's Ambition and Jonas' Pride renovated the mansion, extended the wings and added new rooms, Monique insisted that her garden remain unchanged. "It's big enough to feed the two of us," she insisted, "and small enough for me to handle."

Jonas throws back his whisky, and stares out the kitchen window again. The water is lapping half way up the outside wall now, and his sinking ship of a house is groaning.

"It's not my fault, goddammit," he says through gritted teeth, his eyes flicking upwards to the cuckoo. Less than two hours remain before Papa is due, and Pride is wrapped around Jonas' neck like a python, making it hard to breath.

Strangled, Jonas thinks back. The problem with the business, he realizes with sudden clarity, started with the cigarette warnings. Yes. That was when more people started smoking less, and the death rate fell. The Undertaking industry faltered further with the introduction of airbags in cars. Stricter speed limits. Key hole surgery. A crackdown on designer drugs.

And how we adapted to those challenges, thinks Jonas, is what caused Pride to become a burden. It's when Pride started to squawk with Shame.

"Your future depends on it", Papa insisted. But it didn't feel right. Jonas begged not to go to the endless clandestine meetings, but Papa gave him no choice. So Jonas sat, head down, as the politicians and pharmaceutical executives played their card games and made their bets, with Papa banging his fist on the table. "Life-saving and death-making has been a complex negotiation since the

beginning time, since the very start of our industry," Papa explained. "Believe me, we have a right to be heard. And for our preferences to be heeded."

After heavy negotiations - during which time Jonas' Pride hung limply on his back like an old fur coat - business resumed. More than that, it boomed. As agreed, the cure for cancer was suppressed, carcinogens were secretly increased in foods and in the air, poisons were sprayed on school ovals, chemicals were intensified in public pools...and Jonas was busy again.

But the dead were not the same.

Try as Jonas might, the death masks of the faces remained strained, frozen, full of fear. He buried and burned them as well as he knew how, but the victims of foul play didn't leave quietly. As Monique slept soundly, Jonas lay awake night after night, listening to skeletons rattling bones in his cupboard and angry ghosts sharpening their nails on his bedroom door.

With dark shadows under his eyes, Jonas watches Monique in her garden. Rain starts to fall. The drops are large and pearly, hitting the walls of the mansion with the wet thudding sound of frogs landing. But Monique isn't running for cover. Her t-shirt is dry, and her back is still bathed in sunshine. Jonas can see the rain dancing around her, its skirt tossing up leaves.

I'm going to drown, Jonas says to himself, and runs out of the house.

Knee high in water, struggling to keep his footing, he wades to the edge of the garden. "Help me," he yells out to Monique, and she moves swiftly towards him, her strong hands guiding him onto higher ground. Jonas bends at the waist, panting. A thick aroma of honeysuckle and Hope fills his senses. Monique watches him, and waits.

Jonas straightens. "Help me darling," he splutters, "to swallow my Pride."
"Have you tried on your own?" Monique asks calmly, one foot casually resting on her spade.

"Yes, I did once, I promise."

"What happened?"

"It was too big. It got caught in my throat. It refused to go down."

Monique looks at the mansion, waves now licking the window sills.

"Ok, Jonas," she says, taking his hand, "are you willing to try something else?"

"Yes."

"We must hurry."

"Yes."

Without warning, Monique leaps upon Jonas, knocking him off his feet. Excruciating pain grips Jonas' shoulders as Monique wrestles with Pride, and tears it from his back. Tipping to one side, Monique is on the ground, pinning Pride down with her hands and knees, as the great beast writhes and screams. "Dig Jonas, DIG!" Monique orders, and Jonas grabs Monique's spade and digs as fast and as deeply as he can, throwing up truffles and sods and worms.

Together they shove Pride to the bottom of the hole, and race to bury it, stamping on the grave until the earth is compacted like concrete. But Pride has such a tough bulb in its heart that it bursts back through the surface of the earth without much effort, exploding forth in a shower of seeds, casting its evil genetic material far and wide.

Jonas seizes Pride, and he and Monique run – slipping and sliding in their muddy ruin - to the crematorium at the front of their property. After much shoving they manage to force Pride into the oven, slamming the door and turning up the heat. They wait, pale and shaken, watching the gauges, until they are certain that Pride must be burned to ashes. But Pride is molten, welded at the limbs, and when they open the oven door Pride rises as a Phoenix, filling the crematorium with screeching black crows.

Catching Pride, Monique runs to the moat around her garden, and tries to drown it. But Pride just holds its breath and sinks to the bottom, lungs becoming gills, skin metamorphosing into scales, until it sits in the mud as a large grey fish, eyes bulging and unblinking. A sea eagle swoops down and collects Pride in its talons, but Pride wriggles so violently that the bird relinquishes its prey, and Pride drops down, landing heavily at Jonas' feet.

"It's impossible," he says. "No, it's not," Monique replies, quickly scooping Pride into her arms. "Come on," she says, now wading towards the garage.

The key turns easily in the polished Rolls Royce, and Jonas reverses under the roller door and into the storm. Raindrops glide off the bonnet like drops off an oily penguin's chest as Pride – trussed and tied with chains and ropes – bangs loudly in protest against the roof of the boot.

Jonas tries to stop panting. But his heart is pounding and his breath can't be calmed. The thick air inside the closed car charges into his extended nostrils, and he prepares himself for the normal reflex, the nausea.

"But wait," he says suddenly, glancing at Monique, "I can't smell Papa...nor Grandpapa." Monique smiles. Jonas inhales deeply.

Yes.

All he can smell is Monique's sweat and her patchouli perfume. And it's causing roses to open up in his soul.

Jonas takes the car right to the edge of the cliff. Monique stands back as Jonas reaches in and releases the handbrake. Within seconds the Rolls Royce is airborne, falling heavily, turning end over end, crashing into the sea.

Thick bubbles rise to the surface, and then the car bobs into view, buoyant. Jonas feels faint as the car is caught by a wave, and pushed towards shore. "Have faith," whispers Monique. But the next wave pushes the car even further, and the next,

and next, until the shining Rolls Royce is up on the beach, tyres sinking in the sand, looking as if it's ready to drive Pride right back home again.

But Jonas knows the keys won't turn without him.

And with delight he sees the car start to sink deeper in the sand, digging its own grave like a big beached whale. Jonas can hear Pride banging inside the boot, but the rain has chased away the tourists. There's no one there to hear the noise, or admire the car, or release the captive emotion protesting from within its confines.

And the ridiculousness of it all makes Jonas laugh. And then Monique laughs too. And they stand on top of the cliff, clutching their sides, laughing together.

As Mother Nature swallows Pride whole.

When the car is completely consumed, Jonas feels a huge burden lift off his shoulders. He's so light his feet leave the ground. "Monique!" he squeals as he drifts upwards, and Monique seizes his hand. With a grip like steel, Monique walks slowly home, Jonas floating above her like a parasol, protecting her from the rain.

When Papa sails in that afternoon, guns blazing, Jonas is alone in the kitchen. He hasn't cleaned up after his battle with Pride. His feet are dirty and his hair is ruffled and his shirt is torn. Papa barely notices.

"Ok son," he barks as he enters the kitchen, "let's review the paperwork."
"Sure Papa," replies Jonas, smiling. "The ledger's in the office."
Papa hesitates, and rests his knuckles on the marble bench. His eyes narrow.
"Go get them," he orders. "We've got a business to save."
"No Papa."
"What?"
"You heard me Papa."

For a moment Papa can't muster speech. His moustache is twitching like a dying mouse and blood is boiling below the surface of his face and sparks of hate are bursting out of his eyes like tiny airborne arrows.

Finally his lips unfurl, and in a low growl he says, "Have you no Pride?"

Before Jonas can answer the windows of the kitchen implode. A torrential rush of water stampedes inwards, bucking and kicking. Jonas grabs the taps of the kitchen sink, and they resist the surge, and Jonas holds on as the water continues to rush in. The sinking ship of a house is now listing horribly to the right, nails popping out from timber, wallpaper stripping away like skin.

Jonas looks towards Papa. The old man has been forced against the far wall by the water pressure, his arms splayed and pinned against the brickwork. Gold and

silver trinkets are flying towards him, and Jonas thinks Papa looks like a prisoner facing a firing squad, hit by a relentless barrage of household bullets.

Jonas knows he has to swim now. Or drown with Papa.

As the old man's face disappears under the injurious mess of white water and inherited antiques, Jonas moves with the flow along the kitchen bench, all the way to the door.

Outside he finds himself in a calm eddy. He takes in a deep breath, and starts to breaststroke. There's only one dry bit of land for miles around. He can see it, right in front of him.

As he swims towards Monique's garden, she throws him her heart. He clutches the life-ring and holds on tight, resisting the violent sucking pull as the house is washed away.

Hand over hand, Monique drags Jonas to safety. Finally he feels earth under his feet, and crawls towards her. Huddled together, they watch the house vanish from sight, without even one ripple of Regret.

An eerie silence follows. The flood recedes as rapidly as it came. Jonas waits to see the foundations of the house emerge, but there is only bare ground.

"Now what?" he says quietly, turning towards Monique.

"Here, take this," she replies, handing him a garden fork. "It's almost spring."