

Rachel Trezise

# Jigsaws

It was 1977 and the sun was throbbing on the Rhondda. My mother pushed me around the market, the Gingham-cloth sun-umbrella on the push chair crashing into stall pegs and other prams. It was okay then to leave a baby alone for a minute. I could hear her laugh in the distance; a wicked, fun-loving cackle. But I was strapped into my seat staring fixed at the goods, a pair of red tartan trousers with a high waist and wide legs pinned to a tarpaulin, a huge, smooth pomegranate going yellow in the weather. Then she'd take me to my cousin in the cafe where the steam from the coffee machine made the glasses on the shelf behind it wobble. "Here's my other baby," Mrs Carpanini would say. "Ecco l'altro mio bambino , Heidi Anne." Her voice drew her big family from the back rooms into the shop where they'd smile and gurgle at me, all olive skin and jet black hair. "Svelta, svelta," she'd say. "Quick, quick," she'd clap her hands at Julie, my cousin. "Get a drink for Heidi." I remember the smell. Tobacco from the old men's strong cigarettes and cocoa butter from the lotion on my skin. The sour taste of lime or cherryade, it's gas at the back of my throat. I'd sit on a green leather bench next to the window, looking out through the multi colour vinyl blinds, my legs swinging beneath me, Paolo the Carpanini baby holding my hand, his orangey skin sweaty. Our mothers sat opposite us, talking about us, mine slipping neat forkfuls of steamed beef pie into her mouth between words, Mrs Carpanini playing with the skin under her chin. Always in the background there was the sound of clanking crockery, Julie replacing the cups and saucers they'd used that morning, an apron tied 'round her waist, a biro balancing behind her ear, nuzzling into her sandy colour curls.

"You mustn't tell Mammy about this," she'd say spooning hazelnut chocolate into

my mouth, the plastic spoon tapping on my milk teeth. My mother would have gone to work letting me sleep in the cool, shady back room of the cafe. But I'd cry for sweets, the room next door was full of them. Screw top jars of gelatine and sugar. "Give her the Nutella," Mrs Carpanini would say. "We can't sell the chocolate in this heat. She loves the Nutella." Paolo would sleep opposite me on a wooden frame settee, pillows all around him so he didn't roll onto the floor. When he woke he'd walk over to me and lightly press his hand on my head. He could talk better than me. "Io ti amo," he'd say looking down at me with enormous blue eyes. "Io ti amo." I didn't know what it meant but I started saying it myself, at nursery and at home.

"I think it's time you were in bed Heidi," my father would say.

"Io ti amo," I'd say.

"What's she saying?" He'd say to my mother. "She's talking Italian. Jesus, she can't speak Welsh yet!"

At the end of the afternoon Julie took me home. She took me across the road to see the Moscow State circus once. I've never forgotten it. There was a part where a man boxed with a kangaroo, and nobody believed me when I told them. I told Marc a year or so ago and he said my memory had failed me. Nobody would ever be allowed to fight with an animal - it must have been inflatable. But it was the Seventies. I remember the colour of its hair. It wasn't fluffy like a rabbit, it was wiry like a cat, and silver. I remember its red boxing gloves. I swear to this day it was a real kangaroo!

I grew up anyway, to be twelve or thirteen and kangaroo's didn't interest me any more. Very little did. The pop band Wham! Maybe, a strappy pair of shoes I couldn't walk in. A boy now and again. Paolo grew to be tall and thin with a big round head covered in chocolate colour hair. At comprehensive school he surpassed me academically. Got sent to A classes for science, maths and

languages. He was the same inside as he was when he ran around his cafe in a nappy, benevolent and peaceful. He sent me Christmas cards years after I stopped. His tie was always neat. I felt sorry for him I suppose. Thirteen year old boys were gruesome things with pockets full of stones, mouths full of swear words. It seemed wrong he should be so tender. It was a Friday morning when he touched me; rain pissing down on the annexe roof. I put my hand on the door handle to check if the classroom was locked, the teacher was five minutes late. Then he put his hand on mine, just for a second. But I noticed the variation in our skin colours. We played with a Blockbusters board game for the next hour under a supervision teacher and Paolo won. My skin felt strange all day, sort of tingly. I wondered if he made a mistake or if he meant to do that, calculated it so I'd think about him all weekend.

A week later I was getting ready to go to Mrs Carpanini's birthday party. She'd invited me through Paolo. "Il nostro bambino sta diventando grande, Dominic!" She'd say to her husband. "Our baby's getting big." I'd imagined it. Then my father called me down the stairs.

"You're not going," he said. "I don't want you going to that cafe. They're not like us sweetheart," he said. "They're Italian. They're Catholic. They're different to you."

"Daddy!" I said, shocked. I wanted to say other things too but I couldn't find the words.

"What?" He said. "What do you want Heidi? Do you want to be a designer or do you want to work in a cafe having babies after Italian babies? Now forget it, you're not going."

In 1995 I married Marc, the son of my father's best friend. A big sinewy man who built houses for a living. Our father's insisted we chose 'Cwm Rhondda' as one of the hymns, that the reception be held in the rugby club and ceremony in

the non conformist chapel. They organised all of those things for us, and more. In the end it seemed as though Marc and me were only there to make up the numbers. A couple of eighteen year old kids still unsure of their own minds, guided carefully through the most important aspects of their lives by wise and virtuous parents. Marc didn't have an opinion about anything, that was his most attractive feature. So my father bought a plot of land in the next village, an uneven surface winding up into the mountain, and told Marc to build a house on it. A stout, white bungalow two miles away from the market, the cafe and my mother, who never learned to drive. I spent the first year of my marriage with a Media Guardian in my hand, picking out graphic designer appointments and circling them in red ink. Sometimes I got as far as folding an application letter into an envelope. I don't think I ever posted one. The post office was so far away. I painted every wall inside the house magnolia with a small brush I found on the road side. Marc never decided on a colour and the plaster began to bore me. I got up at five in the morning to fry bacon for sandwiches. By September I'd consummated the task, so the bacon was thick and pink in the middle, brown and crisp at the edge.

The sky was grey on my first wedding anniversary. The wind shook the daisies on the hill back and forth, their heads nodding at some warning sent from the atmosphere. Marc was in Pembroke building luxury flats for professional couples. I walked down town to see my mum, cold biting at my ankles, nature dragging blood and lining from my womb. Near Dominic's a pang hit me between my ribs. Maybe it was a hunger pain, a period pain, I didn't know. But I slowed down at the window and looked at the Turkish Delights in their jar, caster sugar gathered an inch thick at the base. It was Dominic's now, plain and informal. No, 'the cafe,' no connotations.

If I said, 'the cafe,'

Marc would say, 'which cafe?'

'The Italian cafe.'

'There's five bloody Italian cafe's down there.'

Julie wasn't there any more. She didn't marry but she had children and she took them to the city. Paolo was serving and it relaxed me. No, "Oh my bambino!" I was a woman now. I watched him measure out the midget gems, the mini eggs, reach for Nutella sachets at the bottom of a jar. And there it was, a mountain of colourful confectionery on the peeling counter before me. "My sweet tooth's playing up," I said suddenly, defending my gluttony. Paolo looked at me, his eyes still huge and cold, like an ocean in winter, but he laughed warmly. "Io ti amo," he said quietly, so the old men couldn't hear. "Io ti amo." I looked away quickly to the clumsy old till and watched the numbers appear as he rang in the sale. Outside it was cold again and I realised that for a long time I had missed the sound of saucers clink.

Weary, I decided to set up a business. Nothing big or fancy. Just an Apple Mac in the spare bedroom to print out wedding and christening invitations. My father laughed at me. "You're not a school child any more," he said. "You're a kept woman. Go dress shopping in Cardiff, or have a baby." It didn't work out anyway. On the day of my meeting at the bank I had black eyes. Turned out Marc did have opinions. He didn't like me lying in bed with a hot water bottle balancing on my midriff. He liked dinner on the table. For a successful man, he had quite a lot to prove.

The cafe was dark that year. When I passed it, it looked sad and heavy. An ice cream advert in the window fell down and crumpled on the sill. Nobody picked it up or blu-tacked it back to the glass. Paolo wasn't there. I thought perhaps he went to University, or travelling to Europe. At Easter Mrs Carpanini's new born baby girl died of cot death, or something else as unfathomable. She had the

biggest funeral the town had ever seen and the shop closed for three weeks. When I did go in to buy cigarettes nobody noticed me. The family were grieving for their real flesh. Then, my father died. A life time of business deals and whiskey drinking come to an end. He was young to die but I wasn't sorry. I'd come to dislike him for his manipulation and contradictions. I tolerated him because he was my father, but I'd realised how bitter and how selfish he was. Unhappy unless he had something to complain about, something to fight with, some issue to torment his family with. Even my mother said she was relieved. He'd killed himself with his own aggravations. At the grave side Marc and his father wept more than we did. A week later I filed for divorce. It was ugly but it was necessary. Like a smear test or a long flight. We both wasted two years of our young lives and now we felt old, used, depreciated. Marc didn't want a house that he'd built for his wife, so his solicitors gave it to me. The land was my mother's now anyway. I washed him away, painted the walls terracotta and sunshine yellow, lilac and ocean blue. I threw the frying pan in the bin. I left my wedding and engagement rings in the vase on my father's grave. Then I breathed, long and hard.

The following Christmas I moved my boyfriend Kelis into the house. He was a student of architecture, four years younger than me. A boy with milk white skin, a washboard torso and half a dozen moles making the shape of a triangle across his belly. An indifferent face with cruel black eyes. Hair that stuck in place if you ran your fingers through it. Ninety-eight pence in the bank; enthusiasm by the bucket load. It was enchanting at first, like most new things. We don't stop playing with toys just because we grow up. The toys get bigger too. The house was full of wine, marijuana and the scents of expensive perfume. I ordered food from delicatessen's, stone baked pizza's with parma ham and rocket salads, and stopped washing dishes. I left clothing and possessions where they first got strewn so the sight of a diamante encrusted high heel shoe balancing on a stair, or a

pair of joke shop handcuffs hanging from the bed frame excited me on uneventful Monday mornings.

Sex was everything. It was the reason we were together, the reason he was there.

It was what everything else lead to - a final act every day. I dressed for sex in lace hold-ups hidden neatly under my uniform. I got a job as a librarian. And I thought about sex. It looked as though I was hard at work in the reference section cataloguing the local census. But I was draped across the machines in my utility room, my legs assuming an impossible position in the air. We drank for sex.

Ridiculous percentages of alcohol printed in italics on the foot of bottle labels, all to loosen our restrains. To help us utter filthy words into one another's ear canals.

We went out to rock clubs to watch men play guitars, to shake off our day jobs, to smell sweat in the air, and go home to have sex, to fuck. Skin never tasted so good. I wondered if Marc discovered it too, the animal instinct that comes with wanting someone, not for life but just for a night, or a week or a month. Just until your energy has run out. Probably, he didn't. He wanted to own everything. Of course, after the sex there wasn't much left. Company on a cold night and a record collection full of aggressive, adrenaline-pumping guitar chords. I'd graze myself on the great big art folder Kelis carried around and on arrival left next to the front door. Before, I'd look at it fondly and think it was cute; naive but powerful in it's naivety. Now I swore at it or kicked it or hid it away in the louvre door cupboard. I let him stay even though there was nothing left in him for me; no bond, just a few more cupfuls of semen. But I took keep when I could for his food and water, pretended to be five years younger when his mother phoned and we carried on as a quasi-couple. Sleeping in one bed together, kissing now and again, and all the while holding out for something better.

It was raining again on the day I realised very little changes in a lifetime. Sheets of dirty water shooting to the floor, cold droplets like bullets hitting and stinging

pink skins. Wind blowing umbrella's inside and out again. Kelis came to the library for me, his folder held with white knuckles, his little black eyes darting in panic for himself, disregard for me. He was going to see his friend's band he said, in Pontypridd, and he was late. I knew he had a date and I wasn't jealous. We used to walk to the bungalow, laughing. In the summer he'd take his sweatshirt off and tie it around his small waist. In the autumn we'd kick through the leaves. But we waited for a bus that day, standing in the freeze outside Dominic's, Kelis watching the square anxiously for the green bustler to roll in and me turned to the window looking at how the colours of the blinds had faded in sun to a beige, the red and green barely visible. I could see the gas fire on inside but that's not what made the shop front glow, I'm not sure what did. The wood had rotted to a dull white. Twenty five years of weather changed a few colours. One hundred unpredictable or out of sync Welsh seasons to make the place look old, the wall paper dated. But I'm sure it looked the same when I was three. Maybe it was the light. The florescent strip light yellow against the indigo night. "Let's go in," I said.

"What?"

"Let's go in," I said and I opened the door, pushing the brass rail handle away from me.

"Heidi," Kelis said, "the bus'll be here any minute."

"The bus is always late." I said, and he didn't push it any further. He didn't want to protest too much. It was there, stirring my cappuccino and relishing the sound of the spoon against the china that I realised it's always the same, all over the world; boy meets girl, boy meets another girl, girl meets boy, girl meets another boy. It's a jigsaw and sometimes the pieces don't fit. What do you do? You try a different piece. You keep trying until it's complete or your jigsaw starts to look shitty. The cups were the same as before, white with a burgundy band around the

rim. And when I looked at the glasses on the shelves closely they still wobbled behind the steam from the percolator.

“Drink your coffee,” Kelis said, but I was trying not to hear him. Paolo had walked through from the back room and he was standing behind the counter staring at me, the ribbons hanging from the door still draped over his shoulders. Sometimes the jigsaw piece was right first time, it was other things that needed to fall into their place.

“Drink your coffee,” Kelis said, “the bus is here.”

“Go then,” I said. “Go to the bus.”

Twenty six years old, and I was still a kid in a sweet shop.