

Cirque des Enfants

(Circus of the Children: Disenfranchised and Disoriented)

by Troy Carlyle

Jean was an exceptional man with an exceptional mind and had an exceptional work ethic. Yet employment was difficult and rare and each employer was more harsh and paid less than the previous. Needing work, Jean followed his cousin to work this day, at a large factory owned by a company that bought companies and sat in a huge field just beyond the perimeter of town. He didn't even remember driving there, but now, as he walked in close tow, behind the cousin who had given certain assurances of employment, he marveled at the enormity of the place.

They proceeded through great doors into a stadium-sized open area, flanked on both sides by smaller rooms – some containing brightly colored and odd-shaped parts – other rooms were clearly assemblage areas. The air was filled with the sound of hammering and arc welding, and, under these factory noises, the small, sad and ironic carnival music played slowly on a pipe organ.

As they grew nearer, and the shops grew nearer in Jean's view, he noticed a particular room where workers snapped bright blue plastic hats on bright red plastic clown heads.

"You work here," his cousin said sternly, after which he disappeared around the corner to places unknown.

Jean, noticing the unmanned stool, sat down and went to work. This shop was quieter than most, making the music seem louder. The pipe organ drove on, providing a rhythm with which to proceed.

Hours had passed when, quite unexpectedly, the smell of food crept into Jean's awareness – the familiar odor of hot dogs and cotton candy. "Is it time for lunch?" he asked himself. But, looking around and seeing only vacant work stools, he realized that everyone had left. "It must be time for lunch," he said, confidently, to himself.

While Jean could clearly see other people rushing to and fro in more distant areas, there seemed to be no one close at hand whom he could ask directions to the eating area, though this fact was not upsetting to him in the least. Jean didn't feel much like talking to people right now... he felt like taking a look around.

Rounding a corner, he came across one particular large room, which had on display the most unusual furniture. Sofas with the most beautiful upholstery decorated with prints of antiquarian European maps, and marble-topped mahogany occasional tables with fine and elegantly carved pediments. Jean viewed the collection in wonderment, but quickly realized these rare items were intended for customers far more affluent than he. Embarrassed, he hastily exited back into the factory's grand hall.

More and more, as he walked, the factory looked less like a factory. The rooms along the sides were less frequently filled with parts and more often looked like shops of the retail variety. But Jean only had a few dollars in his pocket for lunch... and besides, he was here to earn money and could scarce afford to spend it.

He would have liked to run across his cousin. He would have liked to have run across the room where he could finish his day snapping hats on clown heads... but he was admittedly lost now in the vast complex.

Eventually, he found himself in a shop where a man was cutting another man's hair. The shop was brightly painted with red and white stripes, and both gentlemen were dressed in brown herringbone suits and sported handlebar mustaches. "Can you tell me how to get back to the factory part?" Jean asked timidly.

"Do you have an appointment?" the man answered curtly, knowing full well that a person such as Jean, dressed in greasy factory overalls could never afford an appointment in such a place as this.

"No. I'm most terribly sorry," he answered – his words seemingly amplified by the silence at the end of the pipe organ's tune. But the silence was momentary – the organ at once took up the same sad, ironic carnival tune.

Jean hurriedly exited through doors on the opposite wall, and found himself in another hair-cutting room. Feeling quite awkward, he picked up the pace a bit – only to discover room after room, each containing two men that were either cutting or having their hair cut. Finally, he arrived at the end of the corridor and was forced to turn around. Looking upwards, he noticed for the first time a clear signpost, on which the words had been painted in bright red on a field of white, "Avenue of Barbers."

It was an odd sensation to feel so suddenly closed in at the enormity of the place, so Jean was relieved to see ahead an exit through an arched portico. As he approached the doorway, he walked by a railing that exposed several floors beneath and a vast shopping area, teeming with wealthy purveyors and patrons set about the task of consuming the luxurious wares.

Outside at last, his relief was short-lived. Yes, the air was fresh, but the concrete walkway, formed in the shape of a sylvan path, replete with gray concrete twigs and gray pebbles and even a gray concrete stream bed, was in fact three stories up in the air, and dead-ended at a picnic area containing concrete tables and concrete chairs, and provided no discernable way to avoid re-entering the facility.

Arriving at a restaurant back inside the complex, Jean asked a young couple where he might find an exit. They were seated at a bistro table right next to the railing, with a splendid view of the many shops below. Obviously irritated at the interruption, the young man pointed, nonchalantly, to a set of doors a full two stories beneath their current location. "Well," he said, "I think there's an elevator somewhere down there."

"You don't have to be such an ass," Jean responded... at which the young man rose from his seat, as if to punch him.

Jean had always held in his breast a gentle spirit, which is not to say he was a coward. He was, in fact, the embodiment of courage, and would be the first to stand for a worthy cause. Yet he was loathe to fight when the cause was poor or, in this case, altogether absent.

"Come here!" the young man shouted, as Jean retreated into the crowd.

He began at a pace quick enough, but increased his speed momentarily to a trot to put some distance between them. A brief glance over his shoulder revealed the young man, however, to be in pursuit – his angry glare betraying an obvious intention to do harm.

Arriving at the balcony, with nowhere to turn, Jean suddenly recalled his most unusual and infrequently utilized aptitude for *floating*. If he remembered correctly, all he had to do was lean backwards and flutter his hands, and the air would become thick as water, allowing him to rise upwards, his feet rising in front of him as though he was

floating on his back. And he did... the astonished expression of his pursuer providing for him the first and most satisfying moment of the entire day.

With the smallest expenditure of energy, Jean floated about five feet into the air, and over the edge of the balcony, safely out of reach of his would-be attacker, as the young man reached the balcony in awe and wonder and the pipe organ slowly played its ironic carnival tune....

Jean Babtiste Simmons was found in an ordinary shopping mall, in an ordinary town on an ordinary day. An unimportant figure, few bothered to speculate how or why he fell... whether by intention or accident no one cared to guess. Chief on the minds of most involved was the inconvenience to passers by and the brief reduction in sales caused by the spectacle.

On a slower news day, some small-town newspaper reporter might have included a brief paragraph on the incident on page four, but today was not a slow news day. Today marked the town's grand opening of their brand new record-setting shopping center – an auspicious event that promised to bring bright, shiny new jobs and bright, shiny new wares to both the affluent and everyday, ordinary people like you and me.