

SHORT STORY

The Good of it

In memory of Dunally School

NIAMH McCABE

- *Fish Short Story Longlist 2014/15*
- *Fish Short Memoir Longlist 2014/15*
- *Bare Fiction Prize onglis 2015*
- *People's College Short Story*
- *2015 WINNER 2nd Prize Aesthetica Creative Writing*
- *Annual 2016 FINALIST, PUBLISHED*

They've stopped their stupid football in the playground since The American Boy came to our school. Now they all stand around, whispering to him about The Plan this, The Plan that, The Plan the other, real serious, like as if it was war. He was listening and nodding, but deciding for himself, standing all tall in the middle of them, his hair gelled back nice behind his ears, his arms folded and his legs apart like he couldn't care less what they were saying, like he already knew himself what he was going to do and they were all just bores he put up with in case they were useful for back-up.

The thing is, I didn't want him to catch me. I deffo did not want that boy to catch me, cross the heart and hope the die, stick the needle in me eye, Jesus Christ Almighty, I, did, not.

I'm the best runner in school. Well, the best if you don't count your wan Gillian. But she has those runners with stripes on them everywhere, except the soles, I don't think they're there, but I'm not sure because I never seen those soles, never got near enough to them, and not for the want of trying.

I didn't even realise that I might be the next. I never even thought of it, and all the time I had to think. But anyways.

I looked over, just in case, and he didn't look like he was looking at me. He was beyond on the boys' side of the playground, with all the lads in a circle around him, as if they owned him, which they don't, even though they think they do. They can think it all they like. SmartAlecs, the whole lot of them. Own him me eye.

The girls spotted me looking and they says 'What are you gawking at him for, are you thinking about kissing him, do you fancy him or something, do you like his hair is it, do you want to get married or what?' and I told them to feck off, there's no way I'd let him catch me, and of course I didn't fancy him, for Christ's sake, but didn't I have to watch out because wasn't I one of the girls not yet caught and mightn't he decide to catch me today, so he might.

And there was no way I was going to let that boy catch me, ever, so feck the feck off. That's more or less what I says to them.

They were all snorting and sniggering like I was telling a lie, and that made me mad after all my explaining about everything, so I decided I better say something shitey to Gráinne.

Gráinne is the one that says who is allowed be friends with who, the one who'll tell any of your secrets to anyone, but you still better have a few secrets to tell her or she'll think you're being an arse on purpose, so the best thing to do is tell her something she'll think is good secret stuff, and leave it at that. She's the one who'll laugh at your lunch if you don't have the Marietta biscuits with the shiny margarine squeezing out through the wee holes, you just have the stupid gooseberry jam sandwiches that your mother said 'don't come home with those good sandwiches still in your lunchbox' but you can't flush them down the jacks because the tinkers have blocked the drains up with throwing the buns they get from the teacher into them for the craic because they don't care about buns and they don't care about trouble.

So I turns to Gráinne, who was looking at me with her fists on her hips all ready to have a good laugh at me about looking over at Ricky, the new boy, from America, and all the girls behind her whispering that they definitely saw me gawking over at him and why should Gráinne put up with a sneaky liar? And I says to her loud and clear, right there in front of everyone, 'I didn't see you sprinting away top-speed yourself when he was after you yesterday, Gráinne, no, I didn't see you breaking your heart to get away from him with your big pink legs, now, did I, Gráinne?'

Oh Jesus she went pure wild at how I could say that to her, like as if I wasn't afraid, like as if I didn't realise I'd be hammered something wicked for saying stuff the like of that, and all the girls listening with their stupid mouths open and their bally eyes flittering back and forward between the two of us.

She made a grab for me, and with a big red raging head on her, she roared 'Wedding Bells for this wan! This wan wants to kiss him! This wan wants to marry yer man Ricky!' She dragged me by the hair to the big red fuchsia bush beside the field at the edge of the playground, with the swarm of girls running behind, screeching mad 'Wedding Bells! Wedding Bells!' over at Ricky and the other boys, and saying things like 'You didn't let that boy kiss you at all, Gráinne, you'd never let him, but that boy is so speedy Gráinne! Nobody'd blame you if you got caught by mistake!' talking like this as if they were the ones in trouble, as if they were the ones with a wad of their hair caught in her hot fist, and her dribbling crossways at having been caught out by the likes of me.

She didn't listen to any of their soft talk. With a hard face on her, she pushed me onto the wet ground in front of the fuchsia bush and grabbed its old droopy branches, swinging them over me. I stayed dead still, head well down, the cold coming up on me, thinking to meself 'She's bulling so don't get up, wait 'til she's gone, it doesn't matter, he can't see you here, in the muck, looking the sorry fool.' All the girls were copying her, pulling at the poor owl bush, roaring 'Wedding Bells, Wedding

Bells'. Its branches lashed down wee red flowers like confetti over me, the eejit bride on the ground. I play-acted like I was sorry so that she'd quit and leave me lying there, drenched with the broken bits of flowers, as if birds had shat red berries all over me. I looked through the pack of girls to where he had been standing.

Oh Christ, wasn't he staring right back, eyes tight as feck, getting ready to run at me! And all the boys lined up behind him, ready for The Plan!

I leapt to me feet because I knew what was coming next, what was happening at last, and I didn't give a damn about Big Gráinne, nor the dirty muck on me, nor the banjaxed flowers glued to me like stickers, nor all the roaring girls. I shoved through the lot of them, and they all laughing because they thought I was scared of them and their Wedding Bells.

I ran like the clappers, to show him how much I didn't want him to catch me, to show him what a good runner I was, to show him only a really fast boy could maybe do it, not like the snot-lads running behind him, pushing and pulling at each other like pups.

I ran, and him fast after, catching up.

I ran, looking back to make sure he was still there.

I ran towards the field beside the playground, because if he was going to catch me, that would be the best place to be caught. That was the plan I had made, ready if this ever happened, ready for a long time now.

He was close. I scarpared forward through the air like I was flying, like I had special powers. Me hair was wet, whipping like mad tails behind me, the daft flowers still stuck on me as if I didn't care what kind of a gobshite I looked like. He grabbed me by the hair-tails. I fell face forward, he fell right on top.

Christ Almighty, Ricky, The American Boy, right on top of me. I lay there, not sure what the hell to do, the heart nearly bouncing out of me poor chest, his breath on me neck, his grip on me hair, everything quiet like it didn't exist. The two of us. Meself and Ricky. We lay

together like that for a while, enough time to get the feel for it. He loosened his hold and said me name. I couldn't believe he said me name, just like that. I turned around to face him, the other boys still snorting miles behind, the girls all squeaking like babies under the fuchsia, craning their silly necks to see what would happen so they could tell each other after.

He put his hands on me arms. I wriggled to show him that he had caught me fair and square, that he had me if that was The Plan, and I thought; better try throwing him off me or he'll think I want him to kiss me and the runty boys

are nearly here and they'll tell the girls I let him kiss me and that'll be the end of me forever. I looked at his face and his mouth and the truth of it is he was so lovely and I smiled at the good of it and then he kissed me on the lips as if we were married. I heard the others coming up the field roaring that Ricky had got me and so I gave an almighty shove and threw him off, shouting at the top of me voice 'Ricky! Let me go! Please, Ricky! Would you ever just let me go, Ricky!' his name flashing around me, me eyes dancing and me heart racing like I could die right there and then, and I wouldn't give a damn.

No Snow, but a White Christmas for the Killavoggy Whites MARY KELLY-WHITE



Above — Back: Benny, Joey, Chris, Jim & Al

*Front: Mick, Ann & John White
Right: White brothers with Partners: Chris, Bernadette & Al, Mary & Jim, Mick & Mary, Maura & Joey, Benny, John — the only White sister — Ann and her husband Chic Keller Fox*



In 2017 the White family of Killavoggy came together for Christmas Day for the first time in 64 years. Four of the family had emigrated to USA, (Benny, Chris, Ann and John) and while two or three of them returned on vacation to their native home in Leitrim every few years and the four at home (Mick, Al, Joey and Jim) visited America several times, they had not been together on Christmas Day for 64 years. The oldest, my husband Mick is 83, John, Benny, Chris, Ann (the only sister), Al, Joey and the youngest, Jim, is 70, all are married, and all are hail and hearty, as the pictures show.