



# A Backward Glance

Today's short fictional story is by Niamh O'Sullivan, of Mallow



**FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL:** "I nod wordlessly and she takes my outstretched hand."

**S**HE does not glance back. Though I want her to, and yet I know she must not. I suddenly sense that my hand still lies suspended in mid-air, an apparent urge to touch, to hold once more has faltered and died as I watch her walk away.

And then the tears set in. I have been fighting them, they should not come, not in so public a place. And yet, here they are. I take off my glasses which bear spattered specks of abandoned tear drops and wipe my eyes.

And through the haze of my now shortsighted eyes I can see the blurred navy and white silhouette of my five-year-old daughter disappear around the corner, without hesitation.

She is gone.

I quietly blow my nose and replace my spectacles upon my red nose. I follow her progress through the corridor of classroom windows. She comes to a halt outside the last door, her first door. And then she hesitates. And turns around. Just as I thought, hoped, that she would. My heart melts. She must feel as fragile as I do on this Special Day.

"Mummy!"

I have followed Emma around the corner and take some steps forward, impatiently, arms outstretched, as she starts running back to me.

Her little legs pound the concrete yard, skipping past painted hop-scotch squares and whizzing over permanent multi-coloured shapes on the ground. She has almost reached me and with another out-cry of my name her tears, too, have found her.

"Mummy! Don't go!"

Just that morning she had been up at 6.30am. It still gets bright early these early autumn mornings, and the so-called black-out blinds let in such a definite stream of light they cannot keep an excited and apprehensive child in the realms of sleep for very long.

"Mummy! Daddy! It's today. My first day of school! It's today!" Emma is jumping up and down on the landing.

Sophie, the older sister, strolls out of her room, rubbing her eyes. I smile as I watch our first-born play cool, her mind, too, must be all in a jumble on this first day back after so many weeks away. I would bet a small fortune that her last stretch was more exaggerated and drawn-out than her previous two.

"School's boring," she shrugs matter-of-factly, passing her baby sister and making her way to the bathroom. The little one is now running from room to room and her aimless bursts of running remind me a little of the erratic flying patterns of a house fly. Ears, Emma's faded pink teddy, is being thrown up onto every ceiling she passes.

"I'm a school girl, a big, big school girl..." she chants over and over as Ears hits the ceiling light on the landing with his left foot, and I can see he looks rather displeased with this new game.

As I help Emma into her school uniform, carefully laid out the night before, and hastily labelled a few short minutes ago, I shoot my eldest a grateful look. She is already half-way through dressing and has just picked up her dirty laundry and flung it into the wash basket. Today of all days I did not want to nag, and I am glad I do not have to.

"Thanks, love. You're my great big girl."

"I'm a big girl too, Mummy. A big school girl, Mummy, remember!" Emma chimes in as she tries to pull up her right sock with her sore finger. Ears lies abandoned by her new shoes.

"Let me help you with that," I say, reliving the tense moments in the garden the day before when two tired but excited little climbers insisted on taking it in turns to swing from the rope on the climbing frame — and the youngest is in such a rush to impress she reaches for the rope and misses, loses her balance and tumbles to the ground.

"Owww!" she says again, licking her sore finger, as if she, too, is reliving that moment. I pull up her other sock and then all that's left is her tie.

"Done!" shouts Sophie and rushes into Daddy for a kiss.

"Ehemmm. Your pyjamas," I remind her and she runs back to fold the clothes she has so carelessly discarded, then flings them onto her bed from the door, folding askew. I think better of saying something and grab the hair brushes and clips.

My girls are already half-way down the stairs and I decide to move faster, eager to catch up so I can catch a glimpse of their faces when they reach the kitchen.

A small gift lies wrapped on their placemats. 'Dizzy Dino goes to school' under little Emma's plate, and 'The Tiny Black Foal' under my avid reader's breakfast bowl. "Presents!" they shout and they laugh and giggle and exchange notes on what they found on the table. I smile as I watch them, cheeks rosy, faces animated and full of joy. Only a matter of minutes and I will return here alone, dirty dishes on the table, half-finished glasses of juice abandoned, the core of an apple, skinned and disregarded, chairs strewn with crumbs, and empty. The sound of the girls arguing over who has the largest apple quarter reins me back in again.

"Come on, now, girls, everyone has the same amount..." I counter half-heartedly. I pour some juice and moments later the apple lies forgotten on their plates. They barely eat their breakfasts and have started chattering again. How Sophie will miss her best friend, Ciara, who is still on holidays. Will anyone have the same lunch box with the cute puppies on it? What will the new teacher be like? Will they see each other at brektime?



"Mummy, don't go!" She is still crying and I force back the tears as her little arms close around my neck. Can you walk me in?" I nod wordlessly and she takes my outstretched hand.

I offer up second and third choices to try and get some food into them but these are all rejected and finally we agree on crackers and cheese. Not ideal but better than the fairy buns with the pink icing Sophie was suggesting in all seriousness. "There's real strawberry in that icing, Mummy. That's like eating a portion of fruit!" Her little face has lit up so convincingly I have to suppress a smile.

In the car on the way in Emma says what she has been saying all morning: "Mummy, can you leave me at the gate, I want to walk in by myself!"

I am reluctant to give in, I want to walk her right to her chair these first couple of days, help her choose her table. Yet I cannot shake the feeling that her independence, admired so much in her big sister, and freshly acquired by herself that very day, should only be encouraged. So I give in, silently vowing to follow her, to put my mind at ease that all is well.

Sophie had caught up with two friends and had left us at the gate. Though she is three years older she is not yet old enough to believe that farewells are for fools and hugs are for home. She kisses Emma on the cheek and says: "You'll have fun, you know. You will do a lot of playing, you even get toys on your tables the first day. And then you'll have your lunch and then Mummy will be back to get you." Emma takes in her words with wide eyes and nods, then waves as Sophie greets her friends and the three of them skip away, almost in time.

"Now, Mummy, remember, you promised. You're going to leave me here at the gate."

Her face is so earnest I nod, and I swallow hard to fight back the tears. "Bye, pet. Have a good first day! Big school girl!" My throat suddenly feels dry and I blink.

Mary O'Connor passes me with a smile. Her

little boy, Shane, will be in the same class as Emma. He is walking along next to his Mum, looking as though he'd rather be somewhere else dismembering green aliens.

"Bye, Mummy!" She grabs me around the neck and gives me one of her bear hugs that I love so much. I lean my head on hers for a moment and just have enough time to plant a kiss on her cheek before she runs off.

"No running..." my voice trails off as I realise that most of the other children are running, or walking with great speed, too.

"What a great girl. On her first day. And not a bother on her." Old Mrs Corrigan nods appreciatively as she passes with Noel, her grandson, and I smile weakly. I'd rather my Emma had waited being brave until next week, had taken a leaf out of Shane O'Connor's book and was walking into the classroom right now, gripping my hand tightly and hoping that Ms Kelleher does not enter the room on a spaceship. Her little grip would give me such a sense of purpose, an opportunity to busy myself, be distracted on this eventful day when one era ends and another begins, leaving behind a distraught mother who has to cope with the fact that, unbeknown to them, her two children have reached another milestone in their little lives.

"Mummy, don't go!" She is still crying and I force back the tears as her little arms close around my neck.

"Can you walk me in?"

I nod wordlessly and she takes my outstretched hand. I pick up her school bag and we enter the spaceship together, mother and daughter, the way it should be.

"Hello, Emma." Ms Kelleher smiles and Emma responds shyly, her voice sounds little and quieter than I've seen her in a long time.

I smile and nod at a few other parents I recognise from the school runs the previous years.

I should really leave, now that she is settled and looks content enough. She is searching through the basket of toys in front of her and finally pulls out a puzzle. I'm sure there were no toys on the table when I started.

I pull up my left sock that keeps slipping down and try and stand up my school bag again. Josephine, the girl next to me, keeps chewing her pig tails. The ends are all wet and I watch her, amazed. I stare back at Ms Murphy who is handing out crayons. I am looking forward to drawing a picture. I smooth down my wine-coloured uniform and gaze at the faces all around me. Then I look back at Ms Murphy. How tall she is. And how beautiful her dress. How loud and strict her voice. I feel a little in awe, a little afraid. When the door closes I know I am all alone, with twenty-five other children who are all alone, too. I glance at the door...

"Deirdre...? ... Deirdre!"

I am roused from my reveries and notice that umpteen pairs of little eyes are staring at me, including little Emma's. All the other parents have left and there is just me and the little ones. And Ms Kelleher.

"She is fine. You can go now. See you at 12.30."

I smile and nod and push down the handle of the door.

"I'll be back in a while," I whisper to Emma and she gives a little wave.

The door closes behind me and now she is really gone. And as I reach the car I feel the tears flowing once more. And I let them this time.