

One Sunday In May

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

“WHEN is Daddy coming home?” she asked again, my previous answer apparently not satisfying her. “Well...” I took a deep breath, leaving the obvious futile filler, as my mother would call it, lingering for far too long, as if it were a statement in itself. “When?” she probed again, this time more impatiently. “Well, sweetie,” I answered, determined this time to give her an answer that would quench her thirst for the knowledge she so longed for, and deserved to hear.

“Do you know the way Daddy sometimes goes on long trips?”

“With work you mean?” she replied, understanding dawning in her eager little face.

“Well, yes, with work, yes, something like that.” I interceded, glad she had thrown me this bone. “It’s just like one of his work trips actually, sweetie, except this time he will be gone for much longer.”

“Ah,” she said, and I could see that she too needed some time to digest this rather sizeable bite. Then another question was sent my way: “Like when he went to a Merica?”

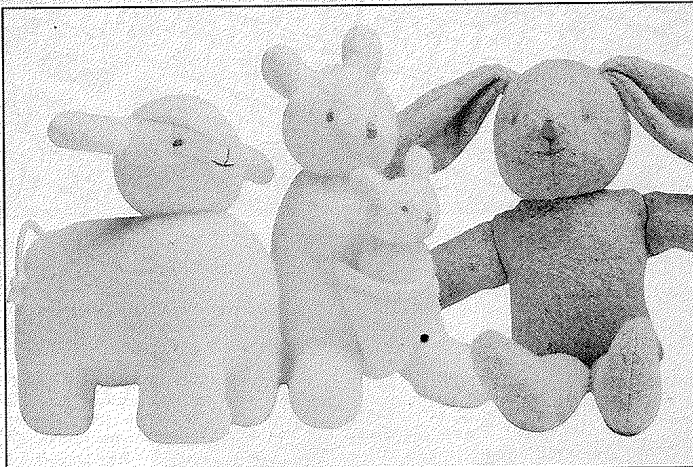
“Exactly, sweetie, it’s exactly like when he had to go to America,” I said with a faint smile.

“Ah!” she said again, burying her head back in the upside-down book she had been studying.

I stood there, watching her so immersed in her reading once more, bringing the upside-down people to life in her own little world. How few worries the innocent had. I did not want to be the one who tarnished that. And anyway, how could I tell her the truth, when I hardly knew what had happened myself?

How could I tell her that her Daddy was never coming home?

“Mummy? Where is Fluffy?” I hadn’t noticed her until she was standing right in front of me, in the desperate search for something to do I had been dusting our family photographs and must have stopped mid-swish as I looked at the picture of Ger and me in O’Donovan’s, our arms around each other, Ger smiling his roguish smile with his full pint precariously suspended above my shoulder. I remember that evening so well, it had been our first night out after Rosie had been born, we had waited a long time before we decided to trust the mother-in-law, herself a mother of six, with the challenge of minding a sleeping child. We hadn’t left the house until she was asleep, but when we got there we had felt like newlyweds, thoroughly enjoying having just each other for company for a change. Of course it wasn’t too long before the conversation had strayed to our little princess, though we had both agreed before we went out that we would try to talk about ourselves and each other, and not let Rosie take over as happened so often these days. “You know,” he had mused, the dimples that I loved so much deepening around his mouth as it broke into a broad grin. “I think she is old enough to look after a puppy now! She told me so herself!” I had laughed, knowing full well that it was Ger who had been looking for the perfect excuse to finally get the dog he had always wanted, and it had suddenly occurred to him, helped along by a few pints of the black stuff, that our daughter’s second birthday was the perfect opportunity! And anyway, our little Rosie had only just begun putting two-word sentences together, so the eloquent plea he had acted out for me with his puppy-dog eyes — along the lines of “Daddy, please can I have a doggy, please please, please, I promise I’ll look after him every day, I’ll feed him and brush him and take him for walks! — somehow hadn’t been a likely scenario. But I had given in, despite the additional work the wretched creature would cause me — me, of course, because Ger, the official caretaker of our little dog, would spend more hours at work than at home, leaving me with the



Ger had come home that evening with Fluffy, who would become Rosie’s new favourite cuddly toy. “Take this. It will keep him safe,” he had said and had handed her a little red collar. “That way he will know that he’s ours, and that we’ll always look after him.”

feeding, walking, washing, cleaning, playing and all the other chores our new arrival would demand. So we had gone to the dog shelter that weekend and had picked a tiny border collie cross, smaller than the others, and she had sat apart from all the rest and had stared straight at us, willing us to take her home. She had melted our hearts, and so had her rather sickly condition; it so happened that the poor little thing, who had been promised walks on the beach and games of football in the garden, had an incurable disease and spent most of her days lying in front of the hearth, too feeble to move very far. For Daisy had been the runt of the litter, and deprived of much-needed nourishment at the very start of her little life.

She lasted a year and four months but despite our best care, regular shots administered by the vet and a carefully controlled vitamin-rich diet she passed on peacefully one Sunday morning, leaving behind her three distraught people. Rosie cried for days and days and Ger wasn’t much better, he disappeared the evening he buried our little four-legged friend in the back garden and didn’t arrive back until the early hours of the morning, sand in his hair and missing his jacket. He told me later that he had walked the beach for hours on end and had almost gotten caught out by the tide; it was only for a lone passer-by who had spotted him beyond the rocks and called him to safety that

he may not have returned to me that day.

I remember trying to explain to Rosie, and in a strange way, to Ger, too, that Daisy was in a better place now where she could run and jump, play football and eat forbidden snacks in doggy heaven, things she had never been able to do while she was with us. I missed her too but I had to be strong, rarely had I seen Ger so affected by the passing of another being.

“No, we’re not getting another one!” had been his response to my question, thinking it might help him, and indeed, Rosie, to get over Daisy. “No, she could never be replaced!” he had said emphatically when I persevered, and had shaken his head determinedly when I insisted that maybe he would feel differently in the future. I had dropped the subject and Ger had come home that evening with Fluffy, who would become Rosie’s new favourite cuddly toy.

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As I watched Rosie who was now taking Fluffy for a drive around the living room in her sofa car, I could feel the tears welling up again in my eyes. She was lying on the rug in front of the cold ashes of the living room fire, which were silently pleading with me to fetch the ashbin and put them out of their misery every time I walked in the room. But I hadn’t touched the

fire since the night it had happened.

She was oblivious to all this of course and made engine noises as Fluffy obediently sat in his child seat on the way to the supermarket. She was so sweet, so beautiful, so small. It was not fair to put her through this. I decided that I would shield her from this as much as I could. She didn’t need to know, not yet.

I started peeling the carrots, automatically lining up the usual amount, then double-checking and placing three back in their bag. We would not need that many today. Not by a long way. I hadn’t had an appetite in days and ate just to put on a brave face in front of Rosie, just to keep up the semblance of some sort of reality for her, just to be doing something. I had absent-mindedly bought a chicken which I now knew would be far too big for us, and as I checked how close to being fully cooked it was I decided I would freeze some of the extra meat for another day. Maybe I would make a stock and freeze that, too. There were days when Rosie would be playing on the chair next to me, and I would be sitting at the kitchen table with my head in my hands, a half-finished cup of tea long since gone cold. And suddenly it would be lunch time and I had cooked nothing, cleaned nothing. It was for days like this that we would need meals in the freezer, and these days were becoming more frequent as the weeks went on.

I tried to remember what had started it all. I recalled one day about three weeks ago going shopping, the three of us, that was part of our weekend routine. We were low on groceries; I had let them run down during the week, trying to use as many things as I could from the freezer, until we went shopping again. We weren’t in dire straits, but prudence was called for in these testing times. It wasn’t easy getting by on the one salary, but we managed, not least owing to the fact that I carefully planned our meals for the week and made sure I didn’t stray to the supermarket more than twice, once for the main shopping, and once for the top-up towards the end of the week. He would laugh at my lists but left me at it, knowing deep down that it was my careful planning that kept us above water. So many of our friends had started doing the same, though not admitting to it, running two big cars they thought they needed, making sure they went on that big summer holiday, and another city break in autumn, overdrawing money they didn’t have. At least we had Aunt Carmel’s holiday cottage only half an hour away that we could use whenever we wanted, and that did us just fine twice a year.

I didn’t miss my job but I missed the extra income, we couldn’t afford most of the little luxuries any more. We’d splash out on a take-away of a Friday evening, or take Rosie to the cinema once a month but that would be the extent of our extravagances. Things were tight enough, but we managed and I just couldn’t see how it was the finances that had driven him to do what he did. But it is a wise woman who can truly see inside her man, and maybe I hadn’t seen the signs, hadn’t registered his cries for help. Had I known him at all?

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No. 342: Shandon Boggoon

EVIDENTLY, we're not from Cork at all originally, the Crowleys, but are descendants from mercenary soldiers and pig farmers from Roscommon, who gave of our efforts in support of the Earls at the Battle of Kinsale and after that ignominious defeat, settled on the Northern bank of the Bandon River.

Thus the Cruadhlaach or 'hard warrior' axiom anglicised as Crowley.

But 'tis bacon I want to discourse about today, in particular this fascinating song, *Seandrum Boggoon*, collected by Crofton Croker and annotated and discussed in his wonderful work, *Popular Songs In Ireland, 1886*.

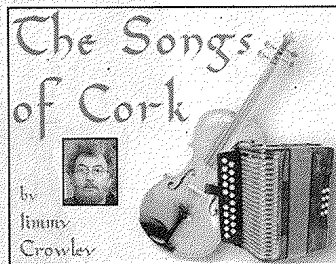
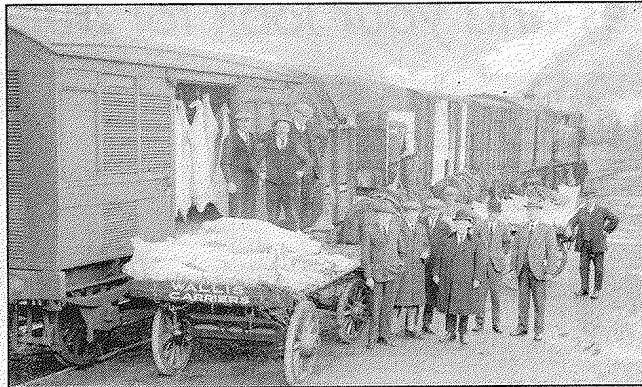
I performed at the South Roscommon Singers' Club last year and will do so again ere I'm much older and I announced to my 'neighbours' there that I felt perfectly at home. I was treated to the most sumptuous dish of green collar bacon, complimented by cabbage and spuds, that I have ever tasted. Those flowery potatoes, out of the rocky mane of Roscommon, were laughing up at me in their jackets and I won't forget them. Evidently, my history and the porcine husbandry of my antecedents was common knowledge and thus the treat was planned. For they are smart and sensible people in Roscommon.

Of all the viands going, the mate of pigs, as both Shakespeare and Cork people pronounce it, has been constantly benign and benevolent to my digestive system, a true sign of my native Irish provenance. Blue steaks and horse steaks in France have left me peevish on occasion; tough mutton chops, which seem to be a thing of the past, have tested my molars and my paunch, while the classic Kansas t-bone has always knocked me into the arms of Morpheus, not exactly a boon for a bard of the roads. In New Orleans one time I chanced an alligator breakfast and was snapping at the people for days. I think an alligator is best confined to purses and guitar cases.

Boggoon, or properly spelt bagun, is of course the Irish for bacon. Stanihurst quotes the fragment of a song that was popular in Ireland around the time that my ancestors were getting their butts kicked at Kinsale, according to which:

*"He is not a king that wearath saien
But he is a king that eateth bacon."*

The author of this song, Edward Quinn, is the brother of Simon Quinn, whose *The Town Of Passage* appeared in this column



some months back. Both brothers, to quote Corkman Crofton Croker, "have long abandoned their coquetry with the Irish muse for the more substantial employment of English coach-building which Mr Edward Quinn successfully carries on in London".

The devil, who was seen regularly around Cork, was a regular fancy of ballad printers like Haly of the Marsh in the 19th century and his ferocious appearance was liberally depicted in terrifying woodcuts to accompany the ballads.

Shandrum (the old hill) was the seat of William Allen, Esq., near Charleville, a gentleman, to quote Croker, "no less remarkable for his hospitality than Shandrum is for the excellence of the bacon produced there".

Doubt and anger, doubt and anger, playing havoc in my head, I was trying to comprehend but could not. Why? Why did he do it? Was it him? Was it me? The only thing I knew for sure was that it was not Rosie, she had always been the apple of his eye, his precious little princess. Rosie had once given him Fluffy's little red collar to take to work with him, it was just after Daisy died and when she had handed it to him on his way out the door I could see how touched he had been. Several times later I had found it in his pockets when I had emptied them out before doing a wash, and had always placed it back in the jar on the window sill where all our little trinkets could be found, and he would put it back in his pocket every time without fail. Rosie would have been upset if she had found out he hadn't actually taken it to work but instead carried it with him, preferring to keep a little piece of Rosie, and Daisy, with him every day.

But then, if he loved her so much, how could he do this to her, to me? Doubt and anger, doubt and anger, I was on a merry-go-round of guilt and could not get off.

Or maybe it had been me, us, all relationships go stale after a few years, and it now had been seven years since we had started going out, maybe it was the dreaded seven-year itch, if it existed, that had pushed him to leave me. Yes, we had our rows, but usually they were over petty things, the phone bill, his clothes on the floor, the broken Hoover he had promised to fix, how

completely. "Don't worry!" I had tried to encourage him, "it will come right in the end. You'll get something, you'll see. You've got your good name to go on, that's worth a lot!" But he had been low, very low, until one night he had banged his fist on the table and had shouted: "No! It won't be alright! How can it be alright when there is no work out there? How can I support my family when no-one will give me a job?" And he had stormed out and driven away, stayed away for hours, had only returned well after midnight. When he had shut the door on the elements which were raging outside he had kissed me on the forehead and had muttered "Sorry". After that things had been alright, and a few days later he had had work again, not a lot, but a few days here and there, it had kept us going. We had gotten by, or so I had thought.

Then, three weeks ago, he never came home. When night fell and he still hadn't returned I had been alarmed, but then he did that sometimes, when something was troubling him. I had tried his mobile again and again but couldn't get through. But when morning had broken

69 *Then, three weeks ago, he never came home. When night fell and he still hadn't returned I had been alarmed, but then he did that sometimes, when something was troubling him. I had tried his mobile again and again but couldn't get through.*

TASTY TRADE: Bacon is exported from Lower Glanmire Road (Kent) Station, Cork, in October, 1927. Today's song is about the popular meat, called boggoon in Irish. Ref: 92A

The Goddesses, Graces, the Lakes of Killarney,
To 'Bobety Dawly', to Passage, to Blarney,
Some folks have attempted their lays to attune;
But the subject on which these few lines are compose'
Was never yet chanted in verse or in prose.
The reason is plain — no praise did it need;
If you ever should taste it, you'd swear it indeed:
What I mean now, an' please you, is Shandrum boggoon

Of old greedy Midas a strange story is told.
That, whatever he touch, it would turn into gold.
Were that attribute mine, I would barter it soon
For the gift that whatever I'd touch, I'd at ease
Convert to the substance or form that I please:
Oh! I'd touch Blackrock Castle, the Baths and New Wall,
Mount Prospect racecourse, the racers and all
And I'd turn them at once into Shandrum boggoon

If you credit report, about this time last year
His terrific highness the Devil did appear,
And dined with one Martin who lives in Johnstown,
'Tis said in that place he has chosen to dwell,
Perhaps somewhere near us, Lord save us! 'tis well
That they've got no boggoon; by my soul, 'twould require
A host of the clergy to banish the squire,
If he'd e'er set his eyes on Shandrum boggoon

Since the praise of boggoon I've the honour to start,
Indulge me, for once, in a wish of my heart —
And this wish shall be mine till I'm laid in the tomb:
May the inmates of Shandrum, encircling that board,
Enjoy every comfort this world can afford —
Have always a plenty, and should we go there,
A heart to divide it, and never worse fare
Than a ham, filch or gammon of Shandrum boggoon.

See Jimmy perform in Cork city

JIMMY Crowley, Cork's own troubadour, has created a new piece of musical theatre for summer at the Firkin Crane, Shandon, where he will present *Songs From The Beautiful City* every Wednesday and Thursday from July 15.

Old street names like Cat Lane, Phair's Cross and Connor's Glen are almost gone from living memory. Shawlies and Black and Tans, The Shakespeare of the Northside, Christy Ring with his modern incarnation Sean Og, the Dagenham Yanks and the Celtic Cubs: Jimmy gives them life in our imagination, weaving stories about the colourful characters, maritime exploits and daily life in between the ballads and ditties.

This is a vibrant dramatisation of his lifelong musical expedition as song collector and creator, particularly among the people and places of Cork City, where the musical richness mirrors the city's cultural diversity.

Jimmy is a living legend in Irish music, a central figure in the worldwide folk scene since his debut album *The Boys Of Fairhill*. He established himself not just as a singer of old songs, but also as a stylish songwriter. His song about the sailing ship *Asgard, My Love is a Tall Ship*, was adopted as an anthem for sailors everywhere. A bossanova style skit, *Mrs President*, about Mary Robinson, showed that this musician could not be pigeon-holed.

No-one sounds like Jimmy, and few can match him for sheer joy, humour and the storytelling craft which he brings to his repertoire of songs. He draws on many traditions to fashion his unique performance style and repertoire, with funny, touching and raucous tales, presenting them as essential affirmations of Cork Culture.

See him at The Firkin Crane, Shandon, Cork, every Wednesday and Thursday from July 15. Bookings on 021 4507487 or check www.firkincrane.ie

without a trace of him I had known something was wrong. I had phoned his friends, then his work colleagues, but no-one had been in contact with him. Eventually I thought to call Aunt Carmel, who hadn't heard from him either, but then recalled how he had phoned her a few days earlier to ask if the house would be free at the weekend. We had a key, and it was missing from its hook in the hallway.

When they had come to the door, neatly attired in their blue uniforms, their buttons glinting in the bright sunlight, their hats firmly pulled down, their sole purpose, it seemed, to keep rogue hair at bay, I had understood. "Mrs Walsh?" I had nodded, tongue-tied, waiting to hear what I knew would come next. The Ban Garda had lowered her head for a moment, then, with a sharp intake of breath, presumably remembering her training to deal with these sort of situations, had continued: "I'm so sorry... We found your husband, Mrs Walsh. He was pulled out of the sea an hour ago." And as I had clasped my hands to my mouth, she had handed me a little red band: "He had this in his hand."

I pull the red collar from the trinket jar and call Rosie. "Sweetheart? Come here for a second, will you? I have something for you?" She runs into the kitchen, an expectant look on her face. "Here," I say and place the collar into her little hand. "Daddy wants Fluffy to have his collar back. It'll keep him safe."