

The eighth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2020

‘If It’s Good Enough For Swift
It’s Good Enough For Me’

by Fergal Greene

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2020...
Stephen Fry & Prue Leith



‘If It’s Good Enough For Swift
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There are mornings, most unusual of course, when one wakes up and a great truth reveals itself. When everything falls into place like somebody flinging a jigsaw puzzle in the air which upon landing on the floor miraculously comes together to form Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. My jigsaw puzzle moment came as I was lying in bed one morning...I was adopted.

My three sisters all had jet black hair and blue eyes. My parents were raven headed and blue eyed too. I had red hair, freckles and green eyes. My hair was curly, theirs all straight. I was the only one who had a gap in my front teeth as wide as a mountain pass. I was a citóg, they were all right-handers. I hated potatoes and was convinced they were the devil's fruit. I could eat a few chips as long as they weren't drenched in oil. Everybody else at home adored them—boiled, roasted, sautéed, fried, or mashed—as they 'oohed' and 'aahed' over a mound of potatoes I would lift my eyes to heaven looking for someone to blame. I stared at these strangers devouring their potatoes their

heads moving from side to side like a pack of dogs who hadn't eaten in days, raising their eyes for a second to smile at me, as if to say 'you don't know what you're missing.' Colcannon, champ and coddle—my trinity of tormentors—common denominator? Potatoes...

When I was younger, maybe five or six my older sisters loved to take me for walks. After dinner they would ask my mother permission to walk me up the terrace. Nobody asked for my permission. I felt like a dog. They would dress me up in a green overcoat, with buttons the size of saucers, that reached down to my ankles—irrespective of the weather. It felt like a huge straitjacket and resembled one of those World War One trench coats.

I was then paraded up the terrace like a prize poodle, my three sisters behind me always eager to show me off to the neighbours. All I was missing was a rosette.

'Isn't he the head of his father?' Mrs O'Shea would say. She was an old lady who lived on her own and was deaf. She would stroke my cheeks and rub my hair. She always smelt of burnt toast and as she couldn't hear her conversations were really just soliloquies interspersed with her shouting 'what?' every so often.

'He's gone so big, now,' Mr Smith would say cleaning his car. His was the only car on our terrace. He spent entire weekends and some evenings too cleaning and polishing it. I only ever saw one half of his face the other half was always too busy scrutinising his car for specks of dirt like a jeweller with his loupe. He must have had the shiniest car in the world.

I could see my distorted reflection in his car. I looked like a green version of the Michelin Man from TV.

'Smith and his fucking car,' my father used to say as he looked out our window. The expletive hurt my sensitive ears like somebody prodding barbed-wire tipped cotton buds into my eardrums and provided another clue as to my different origins. I liked to use fancy words if I could. Nobody else at home cared much for either words or fanciness. Under my bed I kept the only book in our home—a three-volume illustrated dictionary—bought many moons ago from a travelling salesman.

'He's the head of your mother, isn't he?'

The fumes from the car polish must have affected his vision for I no more resembled my mother than he did.

'Your car is luminous, Mr Smith, so it is, luminous,' I said. I liked to chat with my neighbours even at such a young age, or as Mr Darby at school put it I was 'a precocious young scut.' He told the class once that coddle was Jonathan Swift's favourite dish and that he loved to have a great feed of coddle at night and then write another chapter of *Gulliver's Travels* by candlelight.

One Saturday afternoon I was at home with my mother. My sisters were in town and my father was out working. Our TV was on the blink. My best friend was in Mount Melleray with the scouts.

'I'm bored.'

'Only boring people get bored.'

'That's a low blow.' I said looking out the window as

Mr Smith knelt in front of his headlights like somebody genuflecting to receive communion at mass.

‘Read a book.’ This was meant as a serious piece of advice in a house bereft of books.

‘No,’ I said shaking my head.

‘Homework?’

‘It’s the summer holidays. I’m bored.’

‘Poor little Jims,’ my mother said with her arms opened wide looking for a hug. I dodged them with a feint and dashed up the stairs.

‘I hate this place. I’m running away,’ I announced.

‘That’s a great idea!’ my mother said. This stopped me dead in my tracks. I turned around and came back down. She was getting the dinner ready and I could smell sausages and bacon being fried and on the chopping board I saw onions, parsley and of course a mountain of potatoes—coddle.

‘Sorry?’ I asked my nose tingling as I held back my tears.

‘Running away is a brilliant idea. I’ll give you a hand.’

Well, I had her now. I mean what sort of mother thinks that running away is a good idea for her youngest child? Not only that but she was prepared to help me too. They adopt me and then they actively encourage me to leave home...at ten!

‘Give me a hand?’

‘Yes, you’ll need food, won’t you? And something to drink?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said my left hand squeezing the banister.

‘One less mouth to feed too and you’ll be as free as a bird.’

Why adopt an extra child if it meant another mouth to

feed? Kieran Connolly said that the more children you had the more children’s allowance you got. I knew it, I was just a pawn in my parents’ financial scheming. I had read Tom Sawyer at school and now I was about to emulate him, due to ‘lack of sympathy at home’ too. The river Suir would be my Mississippi and I was bound to meet a Huck Finn along the way.

I heard the chimes of an ice-cream van in the distance as my mother rushed around the kitchen opening and closing cupboards.

‘Ham sandwiches, an apple and a banana,’ she said cutting the bread. I went to look for a bag and washed the apple. I took one of my father’s old flasks and poured some tea into it. I packed my dreaded green trench coat too—it would keep me warm at night while the coyotes howled and prowled along the banks of Ole Man River.

‘That’s a great idea, a nice mug of tea as you travel around the world. Will we get you a stick too? You can wrap your bag round it like a real adventurer.’

‘Too ostentatious, Mary.’ I had decided to stop calling her ‘mam’ until I was certain she was my mother. She didn’t mind. My father, or my alleged father, told her that it was all part of my using big words and trying to be all intellectual. I told her that ‘Mary’ only had four letters and could hardly be described as a big word even by such an Einstein as my soi-disant father. Calling her ‘Mary’ was just part of my low-level campaign of civil disobedience against my impostor parents.

Mary gave me a hug and wished me all the best, then I left

home.

‘When will I see you again?’ I asked sheepishly, the audacity of my departure finally dawning on me.

‘Oh, who knows? Go wherever the wind takes you but make sure you come back with some good stories...if you ever come back that is,’ she said waving to me.

‘I’ll be able to expectorate to my heart’s content in the wilds,’ I said smiling at her.

‘Expectorate away,’ she said and then slammed the door shut as if she had just got rid of a pesky vote-seeking politician.

I looked up to the sky. Dark clouds hovered overhead like vultures waiting to swoop on the innocent below. I shuffled away from my house looking behind a few times to see if my mother had lingered. She hadn’t.

I soon reached the train station. I entered the building, the floor, with its chessboard coloured tiles had just been washed, and sparkled. The smell reminded me of the local swimming pool.

Mrs Kennedy, a friend of my mother’s was sitting next to a boarded-up fireplace. I sat down beside her.

‘Getting a train, Jim?’ she asked wiping some fluff off her cardigan.

‘No, just running away from home,’ I said.

‘Oh, I see and where are you going?’ she asked.

‘Maybe up to the Suir...Mrs Kennedy, how do you know if you’re adopted?’

‘Well, if the people rearing you tell you I suppose.’

‘And if they don’t tell you?’

‘Well, the thing is to ask them, I’d imagine.’ A whistling sound like a kettle determined to be heard interrupted us. A train puffed into the station.

‘Got to go, getting the train to Waterford,’ Mrs Kennedy said rubbing down her cardigan and flicking back her hair, ‘ask, just ask, just because something is never talked about doesn’t mean it hasn’t happened - too many secrets in this country,’ she said.

‘You’re a real conundrum, Mrs Kennedy.’

‘Well, I’ll be an angry conundrum if I miss my train...’ And she was gone. I picked up my bag and felt a waft of chlorine enter my nostrils, which made my nose tingle. On the other side of the railway bridge was a traveller camp. I hid behind a small mound overlooking the camp. Brother O’Leary at school told us that the travellers were true Irish people who had been kicked off the land during the Great Hunger and had been roaming ever since.

I took a few bites of a sandwich and washed it down with some tea. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Greyhounds, whippets and children were running around the camp as if playing some frenzied game of tig. A brindled greyhound turned and ran as if floating on the ground and even took some time out to dip his nose into a bowl of water and take a sup. I counted three curly redheads out of seven children. Smoke billowed up, from a fire I couldn’t see, shivering at first, splitting apart and then vanishing up into the sky. An old man had a piebald’s hoof between his legs and was

hammering with his left hand. A citóg too. It would have been easy for my parents to get a child here, they were everywhere. Nobody would notice a child or two going missing.

‘Mister, we have a lovely little fella here, fine head of hair on him and already has three teeth.’

‘£30 boss, not a bother, sleeps like an angel, all through the night.’

‘£20? Doesn’t look so steady on those legs.’

‘£25, look he’s already talking a little and loves to clap his hands and have a bit of craic’.

‘Deal’ and then my father carried me off under his arm.

‘You drive a hard bargain, mister, a hard bargain.’

I wasn’t sure how I could locate my real parents here but I convinced myself I was simply on a recognisance mission to identify my birth parents, meeting them would come later. I got up and waved at the camp saying ‘farewell, my nomadic friends,’ and continued on my trek.

I walked to the hospital which was on the other side of town thinking ‘babies are born there’. A mist veiled the Comeragh mountains which were opposite the hospital. I arrived at reception and went over to the counter.

‘Ah, young Burke,’ the man behind the counter said, winking at me.

‘I hope you can help me.’ I said.

‘So do I young Burke, are you visiting somebody?’

‘No, I’d like to know if I’m adopted.’

‘Sure, you’re Pa Burke’s youngest, aren’t you?’

‘I’m here to see my file.’

‘File? What do you mean file?’

‘My adoption file.’

‘We don’t have adoption files here and if we did we wouldn’t just give them out like confetti at a wedding.’

I felt our conversation was going nowhere. He knew my family and was adamant that I was a Burke.

‘Confidentiality and all that.’

‘One man’s confidentiality is another man’s secret,’ I said turning away. He handed me a sweet while telling me to watch out for the rain. I left the hospital, up a sweet but none the wiser about my adoption. A breeze came down from the hills which made my eyes squint. I started to think that running away wasn’t one of my better ideas. A darkness fell over town and I wondered where I would sleep that night. I didn’t want to be all alone in a storm and I had lost any desire to find myself a Huck Finn. I ate an apple down by the river and then decided to swallow my pride along with the last bit of the apple, and go home.

I knocked on the door. Mary answered.

‘Back already Jims? Come in and rest your weary bones,’ she said smiling and bending down to put her arms around me. I loved her hugs and knew that even Tom Sawyer wouldn’t have run away if he had known how good a ‘Mary hug’ felt. A feeling that everything was just right and that nothing could happen to me in her arms.

‘It wasn’t meant to be Mary,’ I said, the kitchen smelling of onions and parsley as the coddle bubbled away on the stove.

‘It’s great to have you back.’

‘Am I adopted?’ I blurted out and then proceeded to list off my reasons. My mother let me speak and when I was done she gave me another hug.

She disappeared upstairs and came back with a bundle of papers held together by a piece of orange twine. She pulled at it and yanked out a photo. It was a photo of my mother much younger and pregnant.

‘Turn it around.’

I flicked it over, I saw the following written in faded and slightly smudged blue ink; ‘Pregnant with James, October, 1975’.

‘My red hair?’

‘Jims, there’s red hair in my family and your father’s going back a bit, that’s all. Will you be staying for dinner tonight?’ This was more than enough for me, I felt like floating around the kitchen. My work as a junior sleuth was over. I was a Burke.

‘Coddle, is it? Well, if it’s good enough for Swift, it’s good enough for me.’