

Girls and Boys

Back then, Jack was a boy. He was two years above me, and our sisters were pals. I knew him to say hi to and Jack said my mum took us all to see *Toy Story* 3¹ when we were about ten years old, but I don't remember him coming. If you asked me then I would have said he was a bit of a loser. [...] They lived in one of the smart houses on Bay View Road and that was probably the main reason why I didn't like him much in those days.

After Da² left we moved into the ugliest bungalow on Frairshill. It looked like something a kid who couldn't draw might come up with. If I close my eyes, I can see its two big windows staring at me disapprovingly. Ma³ and my sister still live there. Last summer they painted the front door pink and I told them it looks like a tongue in the photograph they sent.

I wasn't good at school and me and my mate Rory spent all of our time riding motorbikes up past the rugby club and then along the coast road to Clonmannon⁴. I got good at fixing them up and I think Ma spotted that and stopped giving me such a hard time about my studies. She thought I might become a mechanic, do stuff with my hands, but I wanted to race bikes or be in a band.

Friday nights Rory and I would be off into town. Ma would try and stop me, saying it was dangerous on the coast road, in the dark. But we were fearless and rode as fast as we could, side by side roaring through all the towns and villages like we didn't give a shit what anybody thought.

Rory was seventeen too but looked older and had no trouble getting us served in the pubs. I had bum fluff⁵ on my top lip and I used my sister's mascara to make it look like a proper moustache. We didn't have much money, but we got good at nicking other people's drinks when they weren't looking. We'd down a couple of pints and watch a band and then race back on the bikes before my Ma got too anxious or started ringing the hospital.

There would have been six weeks between the end of the exams and getting my results. It was obvious that I was going to fail them all. [...] That summer was like something out of a film. Long hot days and short nights with girls and drink and not a care in the world. I bleached my hair and I thought I looked like Ryan Gosling⁶ until I'd catch my reflection and the soft breath of disappointment at my image. [...]

It was that summer that we got really into The Photons⁷. They played Fridays at The Palace Bar and Rory knew the drummer's brother, so we got to hang out with them sometimes after a gig.

One weekend after The Palace there was a party in this old warehouse just over the river and by the time Rory and I got there we knew we weren't heading back to Wicklow⁸ that night. [...]

Inside the party was like a nightclub. Lights and lasers and Paul who played keyboards with the band was DJing. Rory's mate had told us to bring booze and we turned up with a plastic bag full of cans and a bottle of Bushmills⁹. [...]

We made our way slowly across to the bar and Rory kept saying "be cool, be cool" out of the side of his mouth, his teeth gritted. [...]

A steady flow of partygoers filled the place and I tried to look casual, like I couldn't really be

¹ *Toy Story 3*: American computer-animated film from 2010

² Irish English for dad

³ Irish English for mom

⁴ village in Ireland

⁵ *bum fluff*: first beard growth

⁶ *Ryan Gosling* (b. 1980): Canadian actor

⁷ a punk band

⁸ town in Ireland

⁹ Irish whisky

arsed¹⁰ with any of it. [...]

40 The warehouse party was like nothing I'd been to before. All these cool kids with great haircuts and fantastic boots. Art school, Rory reckoned, and later on I found myself sandwiched on a sofa between the Photons' drummer and a guy who had a snake tattoo that wrapped itself right around his neck. We passed the whisky back and forth and drank straight from the bottle and then this girl plonked herself on my lap without even asking.

"Kelly," she said, ruffling my hair and, although I knew I needed to be cool, I think I just stared at her.

45 She grabbed the bottle from the guy with the tattoo, took a gulp and then kissed me on the lips. Her mouth was hot and smoky, and I felt dizzy, unable to move.

"Hey..." I said, pretending I wasn't interested which was weird because I really was.

50 Kelly was American and had pink and black shoulder length hair and dark blue makeup on her eyelids so that when she blinked it looked like her eyes were still open. She was from California and even though I was pretty drunk I tried hard not to show too much interest. There were hundreds of people at the party and I couldn't see why she'd picked on me, some guy with a bad dye job¹¹ and bum fluff from Wicklow. [...]

55 Kelly asked if I wanted to go for a smoke and when Rory heard and looked at me with buggy eyes¹², I told him to "be cool, be cool" and sauntered off to the loading doors that opened out onto a yard.

60 I felt like I was watching me and Kelly from above, like we were being filmed. It was thrilling and I didn't know my lines, my next move, and I didn't care. I was torn – between wanting to tell her I was seventeen, that I'd never been to a party like this before, that my Ma would be worrying – and acting like this was just like every other Friday night. I had to hold on to the frame of the door but a part of me just wanted to let go, to fall.

"You ok, hon?" she asked, stubbing out her cigarette and taking my hand.

It was like she could read my mind and I smiled, weakly. I wanted Kelly to tell me what to do, how to be.

"C'mon. Let's get some air."

65 She led me out through the crowd, and it was like a spotlight followed us all the way. On the street it was still and quiet and the lights were orange like tiny suns. She swung my arm and skipped, and we made our way down the street and back to O'Connell Bridge. I felt like we were being watched but there was no one else around.

70 "Here," I said, pointing at the bikes, and she giggled and swung her leg over, grabbing the handlebars.

"You look good on there."

"Jump on!" she said, and I sat behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist.

She smelt of soap and smoke and I leaned my head against her back, and she made the noise of the motorbike, twisting the throttle, her arms bent.

75 I closed my eyes and held her tight and tried hard not to cry. It must have been the booze because I should have been happy. She was gorgeous and American, and it was just the two of us, a warm breeze and the lights sparkling off the river. But there was something in my throat and I wished my Da hadn't run away, and that this moment, just me and Kelly, would never end.

80 She stopped making the noise of the bike and leaned back and I held her, my nose buried in her hair, her neck. She didn't say anything, and I think she knew that I was fine and I didn't want it to end, the ride. She rocked gently in my arms, and we stayed like this for ages.

I imagined riding down a road lined with palm trees all the way to the ocean. She was so confident with everything, like she knew exactly what she was doing. Her voice all growly like it was full of smoke. For a while she hummed gently and, without looking, I knew she had her eyes shut. It

¹⁰ bothered

¹¹ *dye job*: (here) hair color

¹² *buggy eyes*: (here) surprised eyes

85 was lovely, just the two of us, and I held her like a gift. I felt if I let go, she might take it away for ever.

I thought about my Da and wondered where he was right now. I remembered how he'd take me to the chipper¹³ on Friday nights on the back of his moped and we'd eat them down on the front staring out across the sea. He told me once about a girlfriend he'd had in Bristol¹⁴, and I wondered if

90 that's where he'd gone and whether he thought about me now.

My Ma would be. Sitting at home, watching some bollocks on the TV, starting to worry. [...]

We stayed like this until her legs went numb and it felt like we'd ridden all the way to California.

"Hey," she said, and we turned together to sit side-saddle and face out along the river.

I felt for her hand, and she squeezed my fingers. "I think I love you Kelly," I said, and I think I was

95 more surprised than she was to hear those words out in the world.

"You're very sweet. And much too young to be falling in love with someone like me. Your friend'll be trying to figure what happened to the two of us. C'mon."

She grabbed my hand and we were back at the party before I'd had a chance to think, to be properly heartbroken. I didn't think I knew about love between a boy and a girl until that night. And

100 then there it was, something hot and heavy in my chest, like a baked potato, and I didn't know if it was Kelly or thinking about my Da or Wicklow or just the Bushmills.

She disappeared into the crowd, and I grabbed a beer and tried to pull myself together. My heart was beating fast, my fingers shaking, [...] and then Rory was there with a girl I thought I recognised.

"Where ya been? Youse¹⁵ ok?"

105 I slugged the can, crushing it with one hand to show that everything was fine.

"You remember Jack? From school? Her mum and dad are up there on Bay View Road."

"Hey," I said, struggling to remember, confused by Kelly, my feelings.

"My Annie knows your Katie," said Jack.

Rory was raising his eyebrows, signalling to me.

110 "You wanna drink?" I asked.

I already knew that tonight was the night when everything changed.

I'd fallen in love, grown up, become a man, drunk too much, felt happy and sad all at once, thought about my stupid Da.

"Rory?" I asked but he was shaking his head and so I took Jack to the bar and made her a vodka

115 and orange and got myself another can.

We sat on the top step that led down to the basement and I gave Jack a cheers, my can bumping against her plastic cup.

"I don't think I knows you," I said, and I could hear I was slurring even with the music so loud.

"Yes ya fuckin' do. Annie Walsh's sister. Brother, I guess, if that helps. You ok?"

120 "Jack. Yeah, I remember. I'm ok. I'm just a bit all over the place. The music. The booze. I met a girl that I liked and now she's gone. I'm sorry."

Jack put her arm around me and I rested my head on her shoulder.

"You'll be right," she said. "Big night, huh?"

She sounded calm, assured. Kelly had this fierce energy, a wild spirit that had worked its way

125 inside me. But Jack was different. A girl who'd grown up a boy, but from my town, someone who knew all about the detail of things and what they mean.

I wanted to tell her everything. That I felt like I was on the cusp of something. That I'd fucked up my exams and that I didn't want to be a mechanic or a butcher. That sometimes at night I'd ride out along the coast road and shut my eyes for as long as I dared. That I was happy, most of the time,

130 that I really didn't want to die. That I wished my Da hadn't gone, even though I could barely remember him at all. That I wanted to drink tonight until I passed out. [...] That I had this sense that tonight had changed me forever. That there was no going back. That I'd outgrown my small town.

¹³ (here) fish 'n' chip shop

¹⁴ city in England

¹⁵ (here) you

That I wanted to be a motorbike racer or a rock star or just someone, somewhere. Someone who was loved and loved someone back. Someone kind and calm and cool.

135 I wanted to tell Jack all of this, but I slumped forward, my head in her lap and she ran her fingers through my hair. I felt the baked potato in my windpipe again, hot and strange. I took her free hand in mine and squeezed her fingers and it was like she was talking to me. Telling me that she could see me, that she understood. It was like a whisper that only I could hear. "You're a good person. You'll be ok. Life is short and you've to go with your gut and be true to yourself, who you really are". It
140 seemed like forever, my head in her lap, and it was like all the sadness I'd felt earlier just melted away.

It's a cliché, I know. The one night that changes your life. Like one of them dumb movies my Ma loves to watch. Young love and all that bollocks. But you know what? It's true. Me and Kelly and then me and Jack and fast forward three years and we're married and we live in New York and I
145 realise how those hours at that party were like my version of that film. Ryan Gosling with some girl on a motorbike. And then later with my true love, someone different, but someone like me.

I'm still a kid, really. Jack too. But I'm old enough to know I ain't gonna be a rock star or a motorbike racer and that's just fine. My Ma told me that life with Jack would be difficult. That I was taking on something, someone, who's going through a huge change. But Jack's cool and the truth is
150 so much more ordinary than my Ma might have ever expected. We go to work, we do our laundry, we watch films on TV. We've even got a cat. And I can honestly say that from that night on, the night of the party, the night I fell in love, twice, perhaps, that I've been happy, happy, happy.

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