

Run Away

It was a warm summer's morning and John Doonan was on his way down the winding country road to Papple Farm. John was the youngest in his family with 10 siblings. He never knew his father as he had died after John was conceived. His siblings grew up and left to find work as they had to send money back to their mother. Then when he reached 18, he also left his home towards Scotland to find work as a farm hand. John wiped his brow with his hanker chief and walked through the gates toward the farm house, where he met his friend Michael.

"It's such a beautiful morning, don't you think?" he asked Michael.

"It sure is!" Michael replied, "a good day to get the turnips in."

With that they both put some shovels in a wheel barrow and went to the field they would be working in along with a few other workers. Most of these workers had come from Ireland to get work, and with Scottish soil being good to grow potatoes and turnips, it was the best place for the migrants to earn a living.

John grabbed a few shovels out of the wheel barrow and took them down to one end of the turnip field where a couple workers were gathering. He handed out the rest of the shovels to the workers; among them were three new workers. They were a small family consisting of two men, Joseph (who was the father), Tallachan (eldest brother) and Elizabeth (the eldest sister). As John handed Elizabeth her shovel, their hands touched. Her fingertips felt so soft like flower petals. Elizabeth blushed then went to start digging her row of turnips while John cleared his throat. He never liked many girls before but had always had a few running after him, and being tall, tanned, blonde and blue eyed, he could have any girl he wanted. All the boys were envious of him having so much attention but none of the girls caught his eye, with the exception of Elizabeth. He worked in the row across from her and couldn't help but take a few chance glances at her. She was a really pretty girl: brunette, wavy hair and a slender figure. As her hair blew in the wind, he felt butterflies in his stomach. When she looked up and caught him looking, he quickly glanced back down at the ground and never dared to look at her again. John had never had any experience with girls as he spent too much time running away from them. He never knew what to say to Elizabeth and he wasn't sure how to behave around her.

A couple of hours had passed and a bell rang in the distance letting the workers know they could take a break. John had finished his second row of turnips, while Elizabeth had just about finished her first row. John slowly walked up to her,

“Do you need a hand with the rest miss?”

She looked up at him and smiled. John noticed her green eyes and felt his heart skip a beat.

“No thank you, I can manage,” she replied with another smile then hastened on with her work.

John carried his turnips to the horse drawn cart then threw them on. Michael ran up to him.

“I see you and Miss Elizabeth there are getting to know each other,” Michael said with a wink.

John laughed, “She’s quite a little thing.”

Michael then replied, “Just watch yourself mate, rumour has it her father is trying to get her married to some gentleman so they can pay off their debt.”

John’s eyes widened with fear. He never believed in being forced to marry. “How can he do that to his own daughter? What if she doesn’t want to marry the man?”

“She’s got to or they will be paying off the debt for the rest of their lives,” Michael said.

John had a worried look on his face. Then the bell rang again and John had to finish his work.

John was saddened by her story and couldn’t stop thinking about it. He had only known her a few hours and already she seemed like a strong woman to him.

“I’ve heard about your father going to marry you off. When is the wedding?” he asked.

“In two week’s time,” Elizabeth replied.

“Well, it will be the best two weeks you’ll have. I’ll show you around, if you’d like to?” said John. He felt it was only right that she enjoyed herself before she was forced into being married off.

“Yeah, that would be great,” replied Elizabeth with a smile.

John grinned back at her then carried on with his work till the day was over.

While walking home that night, John couldn’t stop thinking about Elizabeth, he was crazy about her! When she smiled at him he felt so giddy. John thought she was the most beautiful girl in the whole world. She was the one, he thought smiling up at the starry night. Suddenly an idea struck him. John would try to change her father’s mind about marrying her off to some stranger. He wasn’t sure it would work but it was worth a try. He wanted to be with her for the rest of his life.

The next morning when John went into the farm house, Elizabeth was there waiting on her brother.

“Morning John,” she said with a smile.

“Good morning Elizabeth,” replied John, “Do you fancy going for a walk later on tonight?”

He was hopeful that she would say yes.

“Of course, I’d love to,” said Elizabeth; she had the biggest smile on her face.

With that John left and started his work. He was in high spirits all day but was so nervous about later on that night. Thoughts were running through his head. What would they talk about? How will he act around her? What if he gets nervous and stutters?

While working away, John couldn’t help passing a few grins at Elizabeth across the field. She always seemed to be looking at him too. When she saw him, she blushed then carried on with her work. John got a feeling in the pit of his stomach that she felt the same as he felt when their eyes met. He always got a shiver down his spine and felt giddy. He couldn’t wait to see her later so he could spend some time getting to know her properly. Later on that night just as they had finished work, he waited for her at the gate. He waited and waited for hours and still she didn’t show up. John

walked home in the moonlight feeling empty and sad. He never wanted to see her again.

The next day at work, John noticed Elizabeth wasn't there and neither was the rest of her family. He never bothered to think if she was ok because he felt heartbroken that she didn't turn up the night before.

Michael ran up to him and said, "You can go home. Me and two other boys will do the last rows of turnips. The farmer hasn't got enough to pay any others."

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow to dig up the potatoes," replied John.

And with that he was on his way back home. When he was walking past the hay barn, he saw Elizabeth waiting outside. She smiled at him, but when she saw that John was ignoring her, she ran up to him.

"Please listen to me," she said, "It's important. Come in here."

She pulled John by the arm toward the hay barn and shut the door.

"What do you want?" asked John firmly.

"My father found out I was meeting you last night and ordered me home at once. He wasn't happy with me going to meet another man while I was to be wed next week, and because he found out, he asked to move the wedding to tomorrow," said Elizabeth with a tear running down her face.

Instantly John had a feeling of protectiveness over her. He had to do something otherwise he would lose the one girl he really loved. Immediately without much thought he decided what the best thing he had to do.

John held out his hand to Elizabeth and said to her, "Run away with me?"

This short story was inspired by Nicky Bird's "Archaeology of the Ordinary" exhibition at the Peter Potter Gallery in East Lothian. In the gallery there was a wooden panel with writing from Irish migrant workers who were currently working at the Papple Farm Cottages.