

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a small, light-colored object, possibly a seed or a small piece of food, over the head of a brown dog. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green field. The text 'Men and Women' is overlaid on the right side of the image in a white, cursive font with a black outline.

*Men
and
Women*

Children see more than their parents realize. They may not always understand what they see, but they have sharp eyes and long ears. They also know when things aren't right.

The daughter of this house is young enough to believe in Santa Claus at Christmas - but old enough to want to fight on her mother's side...

My father takes me with him to places. He has artificial hips, so he needs me to open gates. To reach our house, you have to drive up a long narrow road through a wood, open two lots of gates and close them behind you so the sheep won't escape to the road. I'm good at that sort of thing. I get out of the Volkswagen, open the gates, my father drives through, I close the gates behind him and jump back into the passenger seat. To save petrol, he lets the car roll downhill, then starts the engine and we're off to wherever my father is going on that particular day.

He's always looking for a bargain, so sometimes we go to a garage for a cheap spare part for the car. Sometimes we end up in a farmer's dirty field, pulling up young plants we've bought, to take home and grow on our land. On Saturdays, my father goes to the market and examines sheep for sale, feeling their bones, looking into their mouths. If he buys a few sheep, he puts them in the back of the car, and it's my job to keep them there. Da often stops for a meal on the way home. Usually he stops at Bridie Knox's, because Bridie kills her own animals and there's always meat there. The handbrake doesn't work, so when Da parks outside her house, I get out and put a stone behind the back wheel.

I am the girl of a thousand uses.

Bridie lives in a smoky little house, without a husband, but she has sons who drive tractors around the fields. They're small, ugly men whose rubber boots have been mended many times. Bridie wears red lipstick and face powder, but her hands are like a man's.

'Have you a bit of food for the child, missus? There's no food at home,' Da says, making me feel like a starving African child.

Ah now, says Bridie, smiling at his old joke. 'That girl looks well-fed to me. Sit down and I'll make some tea.'

To tell you the truth, missus, I wouldn't say no to a drop of something. I've come from the market, and the price of sheep is shocking, so it is.'

He talks about sheep and cattle and the weather and how this little country of ours is in a terrible state, while Bridie cuts big, thick slices off a large piece of meat. I sit by the window and keep an eye on the sheep in the car. Da eats everything in sight, while I build a little tower of biscuits, lick the chocolate off and give the rest to the sheepdog under the table.

When we get home, I clean out the back of the car where the sheep have been.

'Where did you go?' Mammy asks.

I tell her all about our travels while she and I carry heavy buckets of cattle feed across the yard.

Da milks the cow. My brother sits in the sitting room beside the fire and pretends he's studying for his exams next year. My brother is going to be somebody, so he doesn't open gates or clean up dirt or carry buckets. All he does is read and write and do mathematics. He is the intelligent one of the family. He stays in there until he is called to dinner.

'Go and tell Seamus his dinner's on the table,' Da says.

I have to take off my rubber boots before going in.

'Come and have your dinner, you lazy bollocks,' I say.

'I'll tell Da,' he says.

'You won't,' I say, and go to the kitchen, where I put small, sweet garden peas on his plate, because he won't eat boring winter vegetables like the rest of us.

In the evenings, I do my homework on the kitchen table, while Ma watches the television we hire for the winter. On Tuesdays she never misses the programme where a man teaches a woman how to drive a car. Except for a rough woman living behind the hill who drives tractors, no woman we know drives. During the advertising break, her eyes leave the screen and travel to the shelf above the fireplace, where she has hidden the spare key to the Volkswagen in an old broken teapot. I am not supposed to know this. I sigh, and continue drawing in the River Shannon on my map.

The night before Christmas, I put up signs. I write THIS WAY SANTA on large pieces of paper. I'm always afraid he will get lost or not bother coming because the gates are too much trouble. I attach the signs to a post at the end of the road, to both gates, and to the door of the sitting room. I put a glass of beer and a piece of cake on the table for him.

Daddy takes his good hat, with a feather in it, out of the cupboard, and puts it on. He looks at himself in the mirror and pulls it on further, to hide his baldness.

'And where are you going?' Mammy asks. 'It's Christmas Eve, a time to stay at home with the family.'

'Going to see a man about a dog,' he says and bangs the door.

I go to bed and have trouble sleeping. I am the only person in my class Santa Claus still visits. But every year I feel there's a greater chance that he won't come, and then I'll be like the others.

I wake early and Mammy is already lighting the fire, smiling. There's a terrible moment when I think maybe Santa didn't come because I said 'you lazy bollocks', but he does come. He leaves me the Tiny Tears doll I asked for, wrapped in the same wrapping paper we have. Santa doesn't come to Seamus any more. I suspect he knows what Seamus is really doing all those evenings in the sitting room, reading magazines and drinking the red lemonade out of the drinks cupboard, not using his intelligence at all.

Only Mammy and I are up. We're the early birds. We make tea, then I help her with the cooking.

Sometimes we dance round the kitchen. Seamus comes down to investigate the parcels under the Christmas tree. He gets a dartboard as a present. He and Da throw darts, while Mammy and I put on our coats and feed the cattle and sheep and look for any newly laid eggs.

'Why don't they do anything to help?' I ask her.

'They're men, that's why,' she says simply.

Because it's Christmas morning, I say nothing. I come inside and a dart flies past my head.

'Ha! Ha!' says Seamus.

'Bulls-eye,' says Da.

The day before New Year, it snows. It is the end of another year.

I eat some leftover Christmas food for breakfast and fall asleep watching a film on the television. I get bored playing with my Tiny Tears doll, so I start playing darts with Seamus. When I get a good score, he calls it lucky.

I've had enough of being a child. I wish I was big. I wish I could sit beside the fire and wait to be called to dinner. I wish I could sit behind the wheel of a car and get someone to open the gates for me. Vroom! Vroom! I'd drive away fast.

That night, we get ready for the village dance. Mammy puts on a dark-red dress. She asks me to fasten her pearl necklace for her. She's tall and thin, but the skin on her hands is hard. I wonder if some day she'll look like Bridie Knox, part man, part woman.

Da doesn't make any effort. I have never known him take a bath or wash his hair. He just changes his hat and shoes. Seamus wears a pair of tight black trousers and boots with big heels to make him taller.

'You'll fall over in your high heels,' I say.

We get into the Volkswagen, Seamus and me in the back. Although I washed the inside of the car, I can still smell sheep-dirt. I hate this smell that drags us back to where we come from. Because there are no doors in the back of the car, it's Mammy who gets out to open the gates. I think she's beautiful, with her pearls around her neck and her red skirt flying out as she turns around. I wish Da would get out. I wish the snow would fall on him, not on Mammy in her good clothes. I've seen other fathers holding their wives' coats, holding doors open for them. But Da's not like that.

The village hall stands in the middle of a car park. Inside there's a slippery wooden floor and benches around the walls, and strange lights that make white clothes seem very bright.

Everyone we know is there, including Bridie with her red lipstick, and Sarah Combs, who only last week gave my father a glass of wine and took him into the sitting room to show him her new furniture.

There's a band playing dance music, and Mammy and I are first on the floor. When the music stops and restarts, she dances with Seamus. My father dances with the women he knows from his trips. I wonder how he can dance like that, and not be able to open gates. Old men in their thirties ask me to dance.

They tell me I'm light on my feet. 'Christ, you're like a feather,' they say.

After a while, I get thirsty and Mammy gives me money for a lemonade and some raffle tickets. A slow dance begins, and Da walks across to Sarah Combs, who rises from her bench and takes her jacket off. Her shoulders are bare; she looks half-naked to me. Mammy is sitting with her handbag on her knees, watching. There is something sad about Mammy tonight; it's all around her, like when a cow dies and the men come to take it away. Something I don't fully understand is happening; a black cloud seems to hang in the air. I offer her my lemonade, but she just drinks a little and thanks me. I give her half my raffle tickets, but she doesn't care. Da has his arms round Sarah Combs, dancing close and slow. I go to find Seamus, who's smiling at a blonde I don't know.

'Go and dance with Sarah Combs instead of Da,' I say.

'Why would I do that?' he asks.

'And you're supposed to be intelligent,' I say. 'Bollocks.'

I walk across the floor and tap Sarah Combs on the back. She turns, her wide belt shining in the light.

'Excuse me,' I say, like when you ask someone the time.

She just giggles, looking down at me.

'I want to dance with Daddy,' I say.

At the word 'Daddy' her face changes and she loosens her hold on my father. I take over and dance with him. He holds my hand tight, like a punishment. I can see my mother on the bench, reaching into her bag for a handkerchief. Then she goes to the Ladies' toilets. There's a feeling like hatred all around Da. I get the feeling he's helpless, but I don't care. For the first time in my life, I have some power. I can take over, rescue, and be rescued.

There's a lot of excitement just before midnight. Everybody's dancing, knees bending, handbags waving. The bandleader counts down the seconds to New Year and then there's kissing all round.

My parents don't kiss. In all my life, back as far as I remember, I have never seen them touch. Once I took a friend upstairs to show her the house.

'This is Mammy's room, and this is Daddy's,' I said.

'Your parents don't sleep in the same bed?' she said in amazement. That was when I suspected our family wasn't normal.

The hall's main lights are switched on, and nothing is the same. People are red-faced and sweaty; everything's back the way it is in everyday life. The bandleader calls for quiet, and says the raffle is about to take place. He holds out the box of tickets to the blonde that Seamus was smiling at. 'Dig deep,' he says. 'First prize is a bottle of whiskey.'

She takes her time, enjoying the attention.

'Come on,' he says. 'Christ, girl, it's not a million pounds we're offering!'

She hands him the ticket.

'It's a - what colour would ye say that is? It's a pink ticket, number seven two five and 3X429H. I'll give ye that again.'

It's not mine, but it's close. I don't want the whiskey anyway; I'd rather have the box of Afternoon Tea biscuits that's the next prize. There's a general searching in pockets and handbags. He calls out the numbers a few times and is just going to get the blonde to pick another ticket, when Mammy rises from her seat. Head held high, she walks in a straight line across the floor. A space opens in the crowd; people step to one side to let her pass. I have never seen her do this. Usually she's too shy, gives me the tickets and I run up and collect the prize.

'Do ye like a drop of whiskey, do ye, missus?' the bandleader asks, reading her ticket. 'Sure, it'd keep you warm on a night like tonight. No woman needs a man, if she has a drop of whiskey. Isn't that right? Seven two five, that's the one.'

My mother is standing there in her beautiful clothes and it's all wrong. She doesn't belong up there.

'Let's see,' he says. 'Sorry, missus, the rest of the number's wrong. The husband may keep you warm again tonight.'

My mother turns and walks proudly back, with everybody knowing she thought she'd won. And suddenly she is no longer walking, but running, running in the bright white light towards the door, her hair flowing out like a horse's tail behind her.

Out in the car park it's been snowing, but the ground is wet and shiny in the headlights of the cars that are leaving. Moonlight shines down on the earth. Ma, Seamus, and I sit in the car, shaking with cold, waiting for Da. We can't turn on the engine to heat the car because Da has the keys. My feet are as cold as stones. A cloud of steam rises from the window of the chip van. All around us, people are leaving, waving, calling out 'Goodnight!' and 'Happy New Year!' They're buying their chips and driving off.

The chip van has closed down and the car park is empty when Da comes out. He gets into the driver's seat, starts the engine and we're off.

'That wasn't a bad band,' he says.

Mammy says nothing.

'I said, there was a bit of life in that band.' Louder this time.

Still Mammy says nothing.

Da begins to sing 'Far Away in Australia'. He always sings when he's angry. The lights of the village are behind us now. These roads are dark. Da stops singing before the end of the song.

'Did you see any nice girls in the hall, Seamus?'

'Nothing I'd be mad about.'

'That blonde was a nice little thing.'

I think about the market, with all the men looking at the sheep and cattle. I think about Sarah Combs and how she always smells of grassy perfume when we go to her house.

We have driven up the road through the wood. Da stops the car. He is waiting for Mammy to get out and open the gates.

Mammy doesn't move.

'Have you got a pain?' he says to her.

She looks straight ahead.

'Can't you open your door or what?' he asks.

'Open it yourself.'

He reaches over her and opens her door, but she bangs it shut.

'Get out there and open that gate!' he shouts at me.

Something tells me I shouldn't move.

'Seamus!' he shouts. 'Seamus!'

None of us moves.

'Christ!' he says.

I am afraid. Outside, one corner of my THIS WAY SANTA sign has come loose; the sign is hanging from the gate.

Da turns to my mother, his voice filled with hate.

And you walking up there in your best clothes in front of all the neighbours, thinking you won first prize in the raffle.' He laughs unpleasantly and opens his door. 'Running like a fool out of the hall.'

He gets out and there's anger in his walk. He sings, 'Far Away in Australia!' He is reaching up to open the gate, when the wind blows off his hat. The gate opens. He bends to pick up his hat, but the wind blows it further away. He takes another few steps, but again it is blown just a little too far for him to catch it. I think of Santa Claus using the same wrapping paper as us, and suddenly I understand. There is only one obvious explanation.

My father is getting smaller. The car is rolling, slipping backwards. No handbrake, and I'm not out there, putting the stone in position. And that's when Mammy gets behind the wheel. She moves into my father's seat, the driver's seat, and puts her foot on the brake. We stop going backwards.

And then Mammy starts to drive. There's a funny noise in the engine for a moment, then she gets it right, and we're moving. Mammy is taking us forward, past the Santa sign, past my father, who has stopped singing, through the open gate. She drives us through the snow-covered woods. When I look back, my father is standing there watching our taillights. The snow is falling on him, on his bare head, on the hat that he is holding in his hands.

- THE END -

Hope you have enjoyed the reading!

Come back to <http://english-e-reader.net/> to find more fascinating and exciting stories!