

MEN AND WOMEN

Claire Keegan

My father takes me places. He has artificial hips, so he needs me to open gates. To reach our house you must drive up a long lane through a wood, open two sets of gates and close them behind you so the sheep won't escape to the road. I'm handy. I get out, open the gates, my father free-wheels the Volkswagen through, I close the gates behind him and hop back into the passenger seat. To save petrol he starts the car on the run, gathering speed on the slope before the road, and then we're off to wherever my father is going on that particular day.

Sometimes it's the scrapyard, where he's looking for a spare part, or, scenting a bargain in some classified ad, we wind up in a farmer's mucky field, pulling cabbage plants or picking seed potatoes in a dusty shed. Sometimes we drive to the forge, where I stare into the water-barrel, whose surface reflects patches of the milky skies that drift past, sluggish, until the blacksmith plunges the red-hot metal down and scorches away the clouds. On Saturdays my father goes to the mart and examines sheep in the pens, feeling their backbones, looking into their mouths. If he buys just a few sheep, he doesn't bother going home for the trailer but puts them in the back of the car, and it is my job to sit between the front seats to keep them there. They shit small pebbles and say baaaah, the Suffolks' tongues dark as the raw liver we cook on Mondays. I keep them back until we get to whichever house Da stops at for a feed on the way home. Usually it's Bridie Knox's, because Bridie kills her own stock and there's always meat. The handbrake doesn't work, so when Da parks in her yard I get out and put the stone behind the wheel.

I am the girl of a thousand uses.

'Be the holy, missus, what way are ya?'

'Dan!' Bridie says, like she didn't hear the splutter of the car.

Bridie lives in a smoky little house without a husband, but she has sons who drive tractors around the fields. They're small, deeply unattractive men who patch their wellingtons. Bridie wears red lipstick and face powder, but her hands are like a man's hands. I think her head is wrong for her body, the way my dolls look when I swap their heads.

'Have you aer a bit for the child, missus? She's hungry at home,' Da says, looking at me like I'm one of those African children we give up sugar for during Lent.

'Ah now,' says Bridie, smiling for his old joke. 'That girl looks fed to me. Sit down there and I'll put the kettle on.'

'To tell you the truth, missus, I wouldn't fall out with a drop of something. I'm after being in at the mart and the price of sheep is a holy scandal.'

He talks about sheep and cattle and the weather and how this little country of ours is in a woeful state while Bridie sets the table, puts out the Chef sauce and the Colman's mustard and cuts big, thick slices off a fitch of boiled ham. I sit by the window and keep an eye on the sheep who stare, bewildered, from the car. Da eats everything in sight while I build a little tower of biscuits and lick the chocolate off and give the rest to the sheepdog under the table.

When we get home, I find the fire shovel and collect the sheep-droppings from the car and roll barley on the loft.

'Where did you go?' Mammy asks.

I tell her all about our travels while we carry buckets of calf-nuts and beet-pulp across the yard. Da sits in under the shorthorn cow and milks her into a bucket. My brother sits in the sitting room beside the fire and pretends he's studying. He will do the Inter-cert. next year. My brother is going to be somebody, so he doesn't open gates or clean up shite or carry buckets. All he does is read and write and draw triangles with special pencils Da buys him for mechanical drawing. He is the brains in the family. He stays in there until he is called to dinner.

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

I have to take off my wellingtons before I go down.

'Come up and get it, you lazy fucker,' I say.

'I'll tell,' he says.

'You won't,' I say, and go back up to the kitchen, where I spoon garden peas on to his plate because he won't eat turnip or cabbage like the rest of us.

Evenings, I get my school-bag and do homework on the kitchen table while Ma watches the television we hire for winter. On Tuesdays she makes a big pot of tea before eight o'clock and sits at the range and glues herself to the programme where a man teaches a woman how to drive a car. How to change gears, to let the clutch out and give her the juice. Except for a rough woman up behind the hill who drives a tractor and a Protestant woman in the town, no woman we know drives. During the break her eyes leave the screen and travel with longing to the top shelf of the dresser, where she has hidden the spare key to the Volkswagen in the old cracked teapot. I am not supposed to know this. I sigh and continue tracing the course of the River Shannon through a piece of greaseproof paper.

On Christmas Eve I put up signs. I cut up a cardboard box and in red marker I write THIS WAY SANTA and arrows, pointing the way. I am always afraid he will get lost or not bother coming because the gates are too much trouble. I staple them on to the paling at the end of the lane and on the timber gates and one inside the door leading down to the parlour where the tree is. I put a glass of stout and a piece of cake on the coffee table for him and conclude that Santa must be drunk by Christmas morning.

Daddy takes his good hat out of the press and looks at himself in the mirror. It's a fancy hat with a stiff feather stuck down in the brim. He tightens it well down on his head to hide his bald patch.

'And where are you going on Christmas Eve?' Mammy asks.

'Going off to see a man about a pup,' 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. I know this because the master asked, 'Who does Santa Claus still come to?' and mine was the only hand raised. I'm different, but every year I feel there is a greater chance that he will not come, that I will become like the others.

I wake at dawn and Mammy is already lighting the fire, kneeling on the hearth, ripping up newspaper, smiling. There is a terrible moment when I think maybe Santa didn't come because I said 'Come and get it, you lazy fucker,' but he does come. He leaves me the Tiny Tears doll I asked for, wrapped in the same wrapping paper we have, and I think how the postal system is like magic, how I can send a letter two days before Christmas and it reaches the North Pole overnight, even though it takes a week for a letter to come from England. Santa does not come to Seamus any more. I suspect he knows what Seamus is really doing all those evenings in the sitting room, reading *Hit 'n Run* magazines and drinking the red lemonade out of the sideboard, not using his brains at all.

Nobody's up except Mammy and me. We are the early birds. We make tea, eat toast and chocolate fingers for breakfast. Then she puts on her best apron, the one with all the strawberries, and turns on the radio, chops onions and parsley while I grate a plain loaf into crumbs.

Seamus and Da come down and investigate the parcels under the tree. Seamus gets a dartboard for Christmas. He hangs it on the back door and himself and Da throw darts and chalk up scores while Mammy and me put on our anoraks and feed the pigs and cattle and sheep and let the hens out.

'How come they do nothing?' I ask her. I am reaching into warm straw, feeling for eggs. The hens lay less in winter.

'They're men,' she says, as if this explains everything.

Because it is Christmas morning, I say nothing. I come inside and duck when a dart flies past my head.

'Ha! Ha!' says Seamus.

'Bullseye,' says Da.

On New Year's Eve it snows. Snowflakes land and melt on the window ledges. It is the end of another year. I eat a bowl of sherry trifle for breakfast and fall asleep watching Lassie on TV. I play with my dolls after dinner but get fed up filling Tiny Tears with water and squeezing it out through the hole in her backside, so I take her head off, but her neck is too thick to fit into my other dolls' bodies. I start playing darts with Seamus. He chalks two marks on the lino, one for him and another, closer to the board, for me. When I get a treble nineteen, Seamus says, 'Fluke.'

'Eighty-seven,' I say, totting up my score.

'Fluke,' he says.

'You don't know what fluke is,' I say. 'Fluke and worms. Look it up in the dictionary.'

'Exactly,' he says.

I am fed up being treated like a child. I wish I was big. I wish I could sit beside the fire and be called up to dinner and draw triangles, lick the nibs of special pencils, sit behind the wheel of a car and have someone open gates that I could drive through. Vrum! Vrum! I'd give her the holly, make a bumper-sticker that would read: CAUTION, SHEEP ON BOARD.

That night we get dressed up. Mammy wears a dark red dress, the colour of the shorthorn cow. Her skin is freckled like somebody dipped a toothbrush in paint and splattered her. She asks me to fasten the catch on her string of pearls. I used to stand on the bed doing this, but now I'm tall, the tallest girl in my class; the master measured us. Mammy is tall and thin, but the skin on her hands is hard. I wonder if someday she will look like Bridie Knox, become part man, part woman.

Da does not do himself up. I have never known him to take a bath or wash his hair, he just changes his hat and shoes. Now he clamps his good hat down on his head and puts his shoes on. They are the big black shoes he bought when he sold the Suffolk ram. He has trouble with the laces, as he finds it hard to stoop. Seamus wears a green jumper with elbow-patches, black trousers with legs like tubes and cowboy boots to make him taller.

'Don't trip up in your high heels,' I say.

We get into the Volkswagen, me and Seamus in the back and Mammy and Da up front. Even though I washed the car out, I can smell sheep-shite, a faint, pungent odour that always drags us back to where we come from. Da turns on the windscreen wiper; there's only one, and it screeches as it wipes the snow away. Crows rise from the trees, releasing shrill, hungry sounds. Because there are no doors in the back, it is Mammy who gets out to open the gates. I think she is beautiful with her pearls around her throat and her red skirt flaring out when she swings round. I wish my father would get out, that the snow would be falling on him, not on my mother in her good clothes. I've seen other fathers holding their wives' coats, holding doors open, asking if they'd like anything at the shop, bringing home bars of chocolate and ripe pears even when they say no.

Spellman Hall stands in the middle of a car park, an arch of bare, multi-coloured bulbs surrounding a crooked 'Merry Christmas' sign above the door. Inside is big as a warehouse with a slippery wooden floor and benches at the walls. Strange lights make every white garment dazzle. It's amazing. I can see the newsagent's bra through her blouse, fluff like snow on the auctioneer's trousers. The accountant has a black eye and a jumper made of grey and white wool diamonds. Overhead a globe of shattered mirror shimmers and spins slowly. At the top of the ballroom a Formica-topped table is stacked with bottles of lemonade and orange, custard-cream biscuits and cheese-and-onion Tayto. The butcher's wife stands behind, handing out the straws and taking in the money. Several of the women I know from my trips around the country are there: Bridie with her haw-red lipstick; Sarah Combs, who only last week urged my father to have a glass of sherry and gave me stale cake while she took him into the sitting room to show him her new suite of furniture; Miss Emma Jenkins, who always makes a fry and drinks coffee instead of tea and never has a sweet thing in the house because of her gastric juices.

On the stage men in red blazers and candy-striped bow-ties play drums, guitars, blow horns, and The Nerves Moran is out front, singing 'My Lovely Leitrim'. Mammy and I are first out on the floor for the cuckoo waltz, and when the music stops, she dances with Seamus. My father dances with the women from the roads. I wonder how he can dance like that and not open gates. Seamus jives with teenage girls he knows from the vocational school, hand up, arse out, and the girls spinning like blazes. Old men in their thirties ask me out.

'Will ya chance a quickstep?' they say. Or: 'How's about a half-set?'

They tell me I'm light on my feet.

'Christ, you're like a feather,' they say, and put me through my paces.

In the Paul Jones the music stops and I get stuck with a farmer who smells sour like the whiskey we make sick lambs drink in springtime, but the young fella who hushes the cattle around the ring in the mart butts in and rescues me.

'Don't mind him,' he says. 'He thinks he's the bee's knees.'

He smells of ropes, new galvanise, Jeyes Fluid.

After the half-set I get thirsty and Mammy gives me a fifty-pence piece for lemonade and raffle tickets. A slow waltz begins and Da walks across to Sarah Combs, who rises from the bench and takes her jacket off. Her shoulders are bare; I can see the tops of her breasts. Mammy is sitting with her handbag on her lap, watching. There is something sad about Mammy tonight; it is all around her like when a cow dies and the truck comes to take it away. Something I don't fully understand is happening, as if a black cloud has drifted in and could burst and cause havoc. I go over and offer her my lemonade, but she just takes a little, dainty sip and thanks me. I give her half my raffle tickets, but she doesn't care. My father has his arms around Sarah Combs, dancing slow like slowness is what he wants. Seamus is leaning against the far wall with his hands in his pockets, smiling down at the blonde who hogs the mirror in the Ladies.

'Cut in on Da.'

'What?' he says.

'Cut in on Da.'

'What would I do that for?' he says.

'And you're supposed to be the one with all the brains,' I say. 'Gobshite.'

I walk across the floor and tap Sarah Combs on the back. I tap a rib. She turns, her wide patent belt gleaming in the light that is spilling from the globe above our heads.

'Excuse me,' I say, like I'm going to ask her the time.

'Tee-hee,' she says, looking down at me. Her eyeballs are cracked like the teapot on our dresser.

'I want to dance with Daddy.'

At the word 'Daddy' her face changes and she loosens her grip on my father. I take over. The man on the stage is blowing his trumpet now. My father holds my hand tight, like a punishment. I can see my mother on the bench, reaching into her bag for a hanky. Then she goes to the Ladies. 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 butt in and take over, rescue and be rescued.

There's a general hullabaloo towards midnight. Everybody's out on the floor, knees buckling, handbags swinging. The Nerves Moran counts down the seconds to the New Year and then there's kissing and hugging. Strange men squeeze me, kiss me like they're thirsty and I'm water.

My parents do not 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,' I said. 'And this is Daddy's room.'

'Your parents don't sleep in the same bed?' she said in a voice of pure amazement.

The band picks up the pace. 'Oh hokey, hokey, pokey!'

'Work off them turkey dinners, shake off them plum puddings!' shouts The Nerves Moran and even the ballroom show-offs give up on their figures of eight and do the twist and jive around, and I shimmy

around and knock my backside against the mart fella's backside and wind up swinging with a stranger.

Everybody stands for the national anthem. Da is wiping his forehead with a handkerchief and Seamus is panting because he's not used to the exercise. The lights come up and nothing is the same. People are red-faced and sweaty; everything's back to normal. The auctioneer takes over the microphone and thanks a whole lot of different people, and then they auction off a Charolais calf and a goat and batches of tea and sugar and buns and jam, plum puddings and mince pies. There's pebbles where the goat stood and I wonder who'll clean it up. Not until the very last does the raffle take place. The auctioneer holds out the cardboard box of stubs to the blonde.

'Dig deep,' he says. 'No peeping. First prize a bottle of whiskey.'

She takes her time, lapping up the attention.

'Come on,' he says, 'good girl, it's not the sweepstakes.'

She hands him the ticket.

'It's a - What colour is that would ya say, Jimmy? It's a salmon-coloured ticket, number seven hundred and twenty-five. Seven two five. Serial number 3X429H. I'll give ye that again.'

It's not mine, but I'm close. I don't want the whiskey anyhow; it'd be kept for the pet lambs. I'd rather the box of Afternoon Tea biscuits that's coming up next. There's a general shuffle, a search in handbags, arse pockets. The auctioneer calls out the numbers a few times and it looks like he'll have to draw again 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 aside to let her pass. Her new high-heeled shoes say clippety-clippety on the slippery floor and her red skirt is flaring. 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 ya like a drop of the booze, do ya, missus?' the Nerves Moran asks, reading her ticket. 'Sure wouldn't it keep ya warm on a night like tonight. No woman needs a man if she has a drop of Power's. Isn't that right? Seven twenty-five, that's the one.'

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

'Let's check the serial numbers now,' he says, drawing it out. 'I'm sorry, missus, wrong serial number. The hubby may keep you warm again tonight. Back to the old reliable.'

My mother turns and walks clippety-clippety back down the slippery floor, with everybody knowing she thought she'd won when she didn't win. And suddenly she is no longer walking, but running, running down in the bright white light, past the cloakroom, towards the door, her hair flailing out like a horse's tail behind her.

Out in the car park snow has accumulated on the trampled grass, the evergreen shelter beds, but the tarmac is wet and shiny in the headlights of cars leaving. Thick, unwavering moonlight shines steadily down on the earth. Ma, Seamus and me sit into the car, shivering, waiting for Da. We can't turn on the engine to heat the car because Da has the keys. My feet are cold as stones. A cloud of greasy steam rises from the open hatch of the chip van, a fat brown sausage painted on the chrome. All around us people are leaving, waving, calling out 'Goodnight!' and 'Happy New Year!' They're collecting their chips and driving off.

The chip van has closed its hatch and the car park is empty when Da comes out. He gets into the driver's seat, the ignition catches, a splutter, and then we're off, climbing the hill outside the village, winding around the narrow roads towards home.

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

Mammy says nothing.

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

Still Mammy says nothing.

My father begins to sing 'Far Away in Australia.' He always sings when he's angry, lets on he's in a good humour when he's raging. The lights of the town are behind us now. These roads are dark. We pass houses with lighted candles in the windows, bulbs blinking on

Christmas trees, sheets of newspaper held down on the windscreens of parked cars. Da stops singing before the end of the song.

'Did you see aer a nice little thing in the hall, Seamus?'

'Nothing I'd be mad about.'

'That blonde was a nice bit of stuff.'

I think about the mart, all the men at the rails bidding for heifers and ewes. I think about Sarah Combs and how she always smells of grassy perfume when we go to her house.

The chestnut tree's boughs at the end of our lane are caked with snow. Da stops the car and we roll back a bit until he puts his foot on the brake. 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.

'Is that door stuck or what?' he says.

'Open it yourself.'

He reaches across her and opens her door, but she slams it shut.

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

Something tells me I should not move.

'Seamus!' he shouts. 'Seamus!'

There's not a budge out of any of us.

'By Jeesus!' he says.

I am afraid. Outside, one corner of my THIS WAY SANTA sign has come loose, the soggy cardboard flapping in the wind. Da turns to my mother, his voice filled with venom.

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

He gets out and there's rage in his walk, as if he's walking on hot coals. He sings: 'Far Away in Australia!' He is reaching up, taking the wire off the gate, when a gust of wind blows his hat off. The gates swing open. He stoops to retrieve his hat, but the wind nudges it further from his reach. He takes another few steps and stoops again to retrieve it, but again it is blown just out of his reach. 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. It feels as if the trees are moving, the chestnut tree whose green hands shelter us in summer is backing away.

Then I realise it's the car. We are rolling, sliding backwards. No handbrake and I am not out there putting the stone behind the wheel. And that is when Mammy gets behind the wheel. She slides over into my father's seat, the driver's seat, and puts her foot on the brake. We stop going backwards. She revs up the engine and puts the car in gear. The gear-box grinds - she hasn't the clutch in far enough - but then there's a splutter and we're moving. Mammy is taking us forward, past the Santa sign, past my father, who has stopped singing, through the open gates. She drives us through the snow-covered woods. I can smell the pines. When I look back, my father is standing there watching our tail-lights. The snow is falling on him, on his bare head, and all he can do is stand there, clutching his hat.

Claire Keegan (b. 1968)

Claire Keegan was born in Wexford in 1968. She has written two collections of stories: *Antarctica* (1999) and *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007). *Antarctica* was a *Los Angeles Times* Book of the Year and won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. These stories have earned Keegan the William Trevor Prize (judged by Trevor), the Edge Hill Prize and the Macaulay Fellowship. Her story *Foster* won the Davy Byrnes Award,