

Brian Friel

**SELECTED
STORIES**

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A Man's World

I had five maiden aunts and they doted on me. I was their only nephew, the child of their youngest sister, Christina, who alone of the whole family of twelve left home while she was still in her teens to work in the nearest town of Strabane and married a town man. The others stayed together, grew into men and women, buried Grandfather and Grandmother (whom I never knew) and the six brothers (whom I never knew either) who must have died long before their time. When I first became aware of them they were settled women whose ages ranged from about forty-five to fifty, each with her role in the running of their doll's house. Aunt Kate and Aunt Maggie were the breadwinners, teachers in the village school; Aunt Agnes was the housekeeper; Aunt Sarah looked after the cow and the chickens and the precise garden; and Aunt Rose — well, as the others used to say with gentle tolerance, 'Rose will always be Rose'. That was good enough for me.

Every year on August 1st we went to Donegal to visit them. The journey itself was an adventure in a mad scarlet rail-bus which plunged along a narrow-gauge track pulling a dancing wagon of luggage behind it and emitted a throaty *toot-toot* now and again just for the sheer joy of it. It was a two-and-a-half hour trip through hills and between mountains, past lakes and streams, between high banks glowing with sun-yellow whins and flat boglands of purple and brown and russet. Inside the bus country women, anonymous in black head shawls, and great, unshaven country men chatted volubly to one another, and the atmosphere took body with the pungent smoke of their pipes. Then at the end of the line, run to earth at the foot of grey mountains, the village of Ardara itself, a hamlet of about four hundred people. The line stopped abruptly half a mile short of

the village, although why, after battling across impossible terrain for the previous sixty miles, it could not tackle the last soggy stretch used to puzzle me. But that was its unpredictable way and we had no reason to complain because Mother's home was only a stone's throw away from the terminus.

For days before we would leave home Father would be quiet and moody and I never remember a holiday that was not overshadowed by his cold withdrawal from our enthusiastic preparations. But once we were on our way he thawed slowly, partly because of the whiskey flask he carried in his hip pocket and partly because of Mother's watchful attentions to him. So that by the time the rail-bus stuttered to a halt he had arrived at a state of garrulous good humour. And there on the platform would be the five aunts, smiling, happy, nervous, welcoming, one or two of them very often in slippers and aprons if the rail-bus caught them unawares, bobbing up and down in the golden heat of an August afternoon.

Of course I got their first attention. Invariably I had got bigger and fatter and healthier and more manly and cleverer — that on a second's observation — and before we had left the station, but not before I had been handled by each aunt in turn, it was unanimous that I was 'more a caution than ever'. Mother came next. Less said now but five pairs of eyes quickly noted the shoulders gathering flesh and the new line at the edge of the mouth and there were tentative, casual-sounding questions about how she was eating and sleeping. Lastly, Father. They did love him, I believe now, because he was Christina's husband and the father of her child. But he was a man — more, a town man — and since they had no experience of men they had nothing spontaneous to say to him and had to improvise with formalities. To tide the situation over Father usually busied himself by passing me from one to the other.

The first few days of the holiday were never enjoyable: I had to go over every song and recitation and mime and imitation that I had done in previous summers (every detail had to be perfect, too) and then bring them up to date with the latest additions to my repertoire, not once but half a dozen times until Aunt Sarah or Aunt Agnes would insist that the others

were tiring me and Aunt Kate and Aunt Maggie would finally agree to release me. If I were singing Mother would accompany me on the yellow-keyed piano, half of whose notes were mute, and her eyes would rove restlessly round the five naked faces, smiling brightly if a sister's eyes met hers or just moving from one to the other as if she were somehow playing them and not the piano. At last I would be set free, out to the fields and the Atlantic wind and to Aunt Rose.

It was always a relief to get away from them and yet when I would run round to the back of the house and stand looking across the valley towards the hazel wood where the witch with the red eyes lived I was neither surprised nor disappointed to find Aunt Rose there before me, waiting for me. I know now, after almost thirty years, that she was a plain-looking woman. Her face was too white, her cheeks too flat, her mouth permanently open, her head shot forward. But at five or six years of age I saw only a mild woman who always smiled and seldom spoke and knew exactly what would delight a boy of my age. There would be a black rabbit in the warren or a pigeon's nest in the wood or a hedgehog along the path beside the burn or a rose tree, sudden and inexplicable, in the lower meadow. Or she had spotted an early crop of nuts and had guarded it for me by her silence. Or she had a sick hen in the byre with a ludicrous bandage of cotton wool tied round its head or a trunkful of mysteries sent home from Kenya by some granduncle who had a wandering foot. And all these things she would reveal to me, not exultantly but almost coyly, like a fresh girl wooing her first youth. Unless we were far out of earshot of the house, away beyond the hazel wood, for example, where the boglands stretched out before us and we had to raise our voices to be heard above the wind or in the sweet-smelling secrecy of the byre where a whisper would do: in those places she talked, wildly, carelessly, senselessly it seemed to me a lot of the time, telling me about Grandfather and Grandmother and about her schooldays and about a necklace she once bought with egg money and about a fortune teller who promised great things for her. Sometimes, too, she would talk about her dead brothers. I was too young to invest their unexplained passing with mystery

and too incurious to ask questions about them. I knew only the details Aunt Kate or Aunt Maggie had volunteered — that the family had stopped keeping bees when Uncle John died or that the good bedroom could not be used for displaying Mother's wedding gifts because Uncle Joe was lying there in his last illness — so that I had accepted these men as shadowy backgrounds to memorable events in the family. But Aunt Rose talked about them, giving them girth and height and colouring, made me laugh at Uncle Peter's attempt to train a sheep dog or Uncle Pat's efforts at changing the course of the burn. And once, I remember, after she had led me through Uncle Jim's career as a fighting patriot and I, hoping for a dramatic conclusion to the tale, had asked her how did he die, the question genuinely puzzled her. She thought for a moment and said, 'I don't know — I just suppose he died.' The problem interested her as much as it interested me, no more, no less.

When she and I would get back to the house again we would find Mother and the other four basking in the sun at the gable. Aunt Kate would say, 'And where has Rose been hiding our young man? Eh? Keeping him to herself, I'll bet. Aye, Rose is a deep one.' And there would be a sympathetic laugh.

Father spent most of his day in the village. After a late breakfast he would say, 'I think I'll go out and stretch my legs and leave you women to your gossiping.' We would not see him again until lunchtime when he would sit at the head of the table and make laborious jokes about men in the village who, he said, had asked him to 'put in a good word with the girls'. Mother would tell him sharply to shut up. But he would persist. With the best of good humour he would point out the many advantages of a match between Aunt Maggie, for example, and Jimmy the Post who owned one of the best-cared-for farms in the locality. 'It's a proposition,' he would say, slapping the table with his fingertips. 'Turn it over. Give it a thought.' Occasionally when he continued his schemes after lunch Mother would accuse him of being drunk. He would then go sullenly to bed for the remainder of the afternoon and a silence would fall on the house. Only Aunt Rose seemed to be unaware of the undercurrents which even I was beginning to understand.

On the eve of my eighth birthday Father was sacked from his job in the civil service. His Christmas binge had extended too far into January and his superiors had no patience left. However, as a return for twenty years' service, they promised him the first offer of any substitute work which might arise during the year through illness. When our meagre savings were exhausted three weeks after Father's dismissal there was nothing for us but appeal to the aunts. Mother wrote to them and by return post came an enthusiastic invitation to us to come and stay as long as we wished. The following afternoon we set off.

Never before had I travelled to Ardara in the winter and the journey was a series of disappointments. Darkness caught up with us before we were half way and snow began to fall. The red rail-bus was cold and feebly lit and the other passengers hugged themselves in silence in scattered seats. A cattle dealer behind me smoked a dirty clay pipe whose fumes sickened me. Mother sat upright beside me, her hands up her sleeves, hissing a rosary to herself, and Father slept heavily somewhere at the rear. Only the happiness that I knew lay ahead kept me from whining.

The five aunts were on the platform to meet us and everything was suddenly right again. They were friendlier than ever and even more talkative. Although it was only five months since they had last seen me they agreed that I had got bigger and firmer and, when they hugged me in turn, each of them held on to me protectively for a second longer than usual. Indeed they scarcely looked at Mother at all, so concentrated were they on me. But to Father they were as welcoming and as polite as ever. They told him he was looking very well and said that January was a good time for a rest. All bundled together, all talking at the same time, the eight of us walked the short distance to the house.

That night and for the next three days snow kept falling. Gradually paths, roadways, hedges became one. The village school was closed and Aunt Kate and Aunt Maggie were at home all day. Only Father ventured out, beating an unsteady path for himself to the town. In the house talk became thin. There would be hours of quiet and then from upstairs would

come the sharp voices raised in anger of two of the aunts. Sometimes they snapped at one another when we were all together and on those occasions Mother would tell me to go to the sitting room and 'keep up with your lessons'. I noticed that she had begun doing most of the heavy housework; never before had she been allowed to lift a finger.

Ardara was turning sour for me. I could not go outside because of the snow drifts and inside I was either forgotten about or the object of everybody's attention. Perhaps for a whole morning I would moon about, unseen, and then suddenly a couple of the women would decide that my education was being neglected. Aunt Kate and Mother would lead me to the sitting room, set me between them and begin teaching me. These lessons frequently ended in tears. Aunt Kate would call me stubborn and obstinate and spoiled and Mother would defend me; or Aunt Kate would stump off in disgust and Mother would suddenly slap my cheeks with her open hand, something she used never to do. To get away from them all I would creep into Father's bed and lie beside him, warm and snoring. When he would awaken and dress himself fumblingly for the village I would move into the part of the bed warmed by his body and wait until he came back again. Sometimes in his sleep he would throw his hand across my chest and I would lie motionless beneath it, admiring its roughness.

By the end of two weeks I knew I hated my five aunts, Rose especially because she had disappointed me the most. I had expected her to provide some entertainment, to have something of interest tucked away. But she had nothing; the snow had covered all her resources. Yet she kept haunting me. Wherever I went in the small house she followed me, watching me with her diluted blue eyes, her head shot forward, her mouth never closed, silent. When I would look back arrogantly at her the flat cheeks would rise in a smile and her head would bob up and down in greeting but she had nothing to say. Even when I thought she was out in the byre or bringing in turf for the fire I would discover her pale face pressed against the window, peering in at me. I began to ignore her; but that made no difference. At last, in desperation one day, I called her 'cow face',

the most hurtful nickname I would concoct, and that rid me of her. From then on she stopped following me, but whenever we were together in the kitchen or the sitting room I could feel her eyes on me.

It was one of the railway men who found Father lying unconscious in a drift of snow at the side of the signal box. He carried him on his shoulders to the house and then went for the doctor. I was in Father's bed waiting for him to come back when the dark bulk of the two men passed the window. The house became suddenly quick with talk again. Mother was purposeful and competent and organized the aunts who were racing around in near-hysteria. They laid him in his bed and loaded him with blankets. His lips were blue, I remember, and one eye open and one shut in a grotesque wink. If he dies, I thought, I want to die too; I don't want to be the only man left in this house. But Mother did not let him die. Until the doctor came, hours later, she sat beside him, pouring drops of brandy into his mouth, rubbing his feet and legs and cheeks with her strong hands, talking to him with quiet intensity, calling him back to life. When the doctor arrived and I was chased out of the way I went out to the byre to lie down and die too.

Aunt Rose interrupted me. I should have locked the door from the inside. 'Is it you?' she said, peering into the dark corner where I lay on damp straw.

'Why?'

'I just thought it was you.' She came over to me and squatted down beside me. 'What are you doing here?'

'Nothing.'

'It's the snow,' she said, half to herself. 'The snow.'

The cold was seeping through my clothes. My lips must be darkening by now.

'I'll take you over to the brook and show you McHugh's new lambs.'

'No.'

'We'll go to the village — no one will miss us now — and buy a poke of sweets.'

'Go away.'

'You never saw Uncle John's sun helmet. It's up in the loft.'

Come on up and we'll look at it.'

'Go away. Go away.' I closed one eye and waited for death to take me.

'I'll show you something,' she said softly, 'if you promise not to tell no one.'

'I don't want to see anything.'

'No one knows about this. No one in the whole world except me.'

I sat up, interested. I could die later. 'Tell me what it is first.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

She rose to her feet. Her face, now robbed of its perpetual smile, seemed strange, almost intelligent. She went over to the door and bolted it. Then her fingers groped along the lintel above the window, found a loose stone and removed it. From the hole she brought out a scrap of paper. I got up and stood behind her.

'There,' she said. 'Read that.' It was a letter. Her hands were trembling.

The byre was dark and the handwriting spidery but I made it out. The letter was headed by an address in Boston and dated 1906. 'Dear Rose,' it said, 'I have now made enough money for your passage. If you will come out and marry me I will send it to you. Please make up your mind and reply by return. In haste, Bill Sweeney.'

'Is that the whole surprise?' I asked, disappointed.

She took the letter from me, folded it and put it back in its hiding place. 'Bald Billy they called him,' she said. 'Because even then he hadn't a stab of hair on his head.' She drew back the bolt on the door and stood looking across the stunted hedge into the snow-covered meadow. The smile was creeping back into her face as she went out into the crisp air.

Father was out of his bed of pneumonia within a fortnight and well enough to accept a temporary post in early March. The fright did him good. We left Ardara when spring was imminent and as I sat waiting impatiently for the rail-bus to pull out of the station the five faces of the aunts smiled and nodded in at us as if nothing had happened. But I knew then

that this was a man's world and I was determined to go camping with the boys next August. There was nothing to bring me back there anymore, nothing to interest me, not even Aunt Rose.