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Amongst Women

Written by John McGahern

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JOHN McGAHERN

Amongst Women



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As he weakened, Moran became afraid of his daughters. This once powerful man was so implanted in their lives that they had never really left Great Meadow, in spite of jobs and marriages and children and houses of their own in Dublin and London. Now they could not let him slip away.

'You'll have to shape up, Daddy. You can't go on like this. You're giving us no help. We can't get you better on our own.'

'Who cares? Who cares anyhow?'

'We care. We all care very much.'

They all came at Christmas. After Christmas, Mona, the one girl who had not married, came every weekend from Dublin. Sometimes Sheila got away from her family to come with her and she drove down for a few hours as well as now and again in the middle of the week. The air fare from London was too expensive for Maggie to come regularly. Michael, their younger brother, had promised to come from London at Easter but Luke, the eldest, still would not come. All three girls planned to come to revive Monaghan Day. They had to explain to their stepmother Rose what Monaghan Day was. She had never heard of it in all her time in the house.

The end-of-February fair in Mohill was Monaghan Day. McQuaid came every year to the house on Monaghan Day. He and Moran had fought in the same flying column in the war. McQuaid always drank a bottle of whiskey in the house when he came.

'If we could revive Monaghan Day for Daddy it could help to start him back to himself. Monaghan Day meant the world to him once.'

'I'm sure Daddy was far from delighted to see a bottle of whiskey drank in the house,' Rose was doubtful about the whole idea.

'He never minded McQuaid drinking the whiskey. You wouldn't get McQuaid to the house without whiskey.'

They clung so tenaciously to the idea that Rose felt she couldn't stand in their way. Moran was not to be told. They wanted it to come as a sudden surprise – jolt. Against all reason they felt it could turn his slow decline around like a Lourdes' miracle. Forgotten was the fearful nail-biting exercise Monaghan Day had always been for the whole house; with distance it had become large, heroic, blood-mystical, something from which the impossible could be snatched.

Maggie flew over from London on the morning of the Day. Mona and Sheila met her at Dublin Airport and the three sisters drove to Great Meadow in Mona's car. They did not hurry. With the years they had drawn closer. Apart, they could be breathtakingly sharp on the others' shortcomings but together their individual selves gathered into something very close to a single presence.

On the tides of Dublin or London they were hardly more than specks of froth but together they were the aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow, a completed world, Moran's daughters. Each scrap of news any one of them had about themselves or their immediate family – child, husband, dog, cat, Bendix dishwasher, a new dress or pair of shoes, the price of every article they bought – was as fascinating to each other as if it were their very own; and any little thing out of Great Meadow was pure binding. Together they were the opposite of women who will nod and nod as they pretend to listen to another, waiting for the first pause of breath to muscle in with the growing pains and glories of their own house, the impatience showing on their faces as they wait. Mullingar was passed and they felt they had hardly said a word to one another. At the hotel in Longford they broke the journey to have tea and sandwiches, and just as the winter light began to fail

they were turning in the open gate under the poisonous yew tree.

In spite of their wish to make the visit a surprise, Rose had told Moran they were arriving.

'They must think I'm on the way out.'

'The opposite,' she reassured. 'But they think you should be getting far better.'

'How can they all manage to get away together like that?'

'It must have fallen that way. Isn't it worth getting dressed up for once?'

'Who cares now anyhow?' he said automatically but changed into his brown suit. His face was flushed with excitement when they came.

In their nervousness they offered at once the gifts they had brought: tea, fruit, duty-free whiskey – 'It'll be useful to have in the house even if nobody drinks it and we might need a glass' – a printed silk headscarf, thick fur gloves.

'What did you want to bring anything to me for?' He always disliked having to accept presents.

'You were complaining at Christmas that your hands were always cold, Daddy.'

As if to turn attention away from the continual coldness of his hands, he pulled on the gloves comically and pretended to grope about the room with them like a blind man.

'The gloves are only for when you go out. I'm afraid all this excitement is going to your head, Daddy.' Rose, laughing, took the gloves away as he pretended to need them to wear about the house.

'I haven't discovered yet what brought out all the troops,' he said when the laughing stopped.

'Don't you remember the day it is? Monaghan Day! The day when McQuaid always used to come from the fair in Mohill and we had to make the big tea.'

'What's that got to do with anything?' Just as he resented gifts he resented any dredging up of the past. He demanded that the continuing present he felt his life to be should not be shadowed or challenged.

'We thought it was as good an excuse as any and we were all able to get away at the same time. So here we are.'

'It was a poor excuse then. McQuaid was a drunken blackguard who was with me in the war. I felt sorry for him. If I didn't give him a square meal on Monaghan Day he'd drink himself stupid in Mohill.'

'They've come all this way to see you and is that all the welcome they get,' Rose chided gently. 'Who cares about poor McQuaid, God rest him, he's long gone.'

'Who cares about anything now anyhow?' he demanded.

'We care. We care very much. We love you.'

'God help your wits then. Pay no attention to me. I wrote to that older brother of yours, "My capabilities are of little matter now", but I suppose I might be as well off writing to myself for all the answer I'm likely to get.'

He went silent and dark and withdrew into himself, the two thumbs rotating about one another as he sat in the car chair by the fire. A quick glance between Rose and the girls was enough for them to know that it was better to make no mention of their elder brother. They began to busy themselves cheerfully with preparations for the meal, one or other of them constantly trying to engage Moran with this small thing or that, until he was drawn by their uncanny tact into the general cheerfulness. When they finally sat down to the meal it was Moran himself who brought McQuaid back into the day.

'McQuaid wasn't a bad sort but he was misfortunate with the drink. The interesting thing about him is that he was one of those people who always turn out to be lucky no matter what they do. When he started to buy he knew nothing about cattle. Yet he made a fortune. Those people always get on better in the world than decent men.'

'His great hour was when he dressed up as the newspaper boy and went to meet the train,' Sheila said tentatively. She had heard it every year on Monaghan Day for years but she was unsure if Moran would allow any talk of the war. He generally went stone-silent whenever it was mentioned.

'He was lucky in that too and he had no nerves.'

'He always said you were the whole brains of the column. That everything they ever went into was planned by you, down to the last detail,' Mona was emboldened to add.

'I'd gone to school longer than the others. To the Latin school in Moyne. I could read maps, calculate distances. You'd never think it but McQuaid, like many of the others, was more or less illiterate though he could add and subtract quick enough when it concerned his pocket. It was easy to get the name of brains in those days.'

As if he suddenly wanted to return the girls' favour on this Monaghan Day, he spoke to them openly about the war for the first time in their lives. 'The English didn't seem to know right what they were doing. I think they were just going through the motions of what had worked before. Look at the train business. Imagine having a brass band meet a colonel in the middle of the bogs with the whole countryside up in arms. A child wouldn't do it.

'Don't let anybody fool you. It was a bad business. We didn't shoot at women and children like the Tans but we were a bunch of killers. We got very good but there was hardly a week when some of us wasn't killed. Of the twenty-two men in the original column only seven were alive at the Truce. We were never sure we'd be alive from one day to the next. Don't let them pull wool over your eyes. The war was the cold, the wet, standing to your neck in a drain for a whole night with bloodhounds on your trail, not knowing how you could manage the next step toward the end of a long march. That was the war: not when the band played and a bloody politician stepped forward to put flowers on the ground.

'What did we get for it? A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half of my own family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod.'

'They say you should have gone to the very top in the army after the war but you were stopped. McQuaid always said they set out to stop you,' Sheila said with borrowed vehemence.

'I was stopped all right but it wasn't as simple as poor

McQuaid made out. In an army in peacetime you have to arse-lick and know the right people if you want to get on. I was never any good at getting on with people. You should all know that by now,' he said half humorously.

There were tears in the girls' eyes as they tried to smile back. Rose was quiet and watchful.

'For people like McQuaid and myself the war was the best part of our lives. Things were never so simple and clear again. I think we never rightly got the hang of it afterwards. It was better if it had never happened. Tired now. You were all great girls to travel such distances to see one sick old man.'

He took his beads from the small purse. They hung loose from his hand. 'Anyhow it no longer matters to you or to me, but whoever has the last laugh in the whole business is going to have to spend a hell of a length of time laughing. *We* have to try to work as best we can and *pray*.'

He looked so strained and tired that they offered to say the Rosary in his room but he brushed the offer aside. He knelt as erect as ever at the table.

'Thou, O Lord, wilt open my lips,' he called. When he came to the Dedication he paused as if searching. Then, in a sudden flash that he was sometimes capable of, he acknowledged his daughters' continuing goodwill and love, love that usually he seemed inherently unable to return. 'Tonight we offer up this Holy Rosary for the repose of the soul of James McQuaid.'

When the prayers were ended the three girls kissed him goodnight in turn, and Rose went with him to their room. The girls started to wash up and tidy; very soon the litter of the evening was cleared away, the room made ready for breakfast.

When Rose saw the table already set for morning, she said, 'If you were around for too long I'd be spoiled rotten. I don't know what anybody else is having but I'm going to be bad tonight and have a cigarette and hot whiskey. You all took Daddy out of himself tonight. That all of you managed to come meant the world to Daddy.'

The next morning they were idling in the luxury of a long breakfast, enjoying the chatting in the warmth of the room, the

tussocks in the white field outside the window stiff with frost, the only green grass the huge dark circles under the cypress trees, when a single shotgun blast came from the front room. They looked at one another in fear, moving quickly as one person to the room. He was standing at the open window in his pyjamas, the shotgun in his hand, staring out at the front field where the black splash of a jackdaw lay on the white ground beneath the ash tree.

'Are you all right, Daddy?' they called out.

When it was clear that he was, Rose cried, 'You frightened the life out of us, Daddy.'

'That bloody bird has been annoying me for days.'

'You'll get your death of cold standing there at the open window,' Maggie complained and Rose brought the window down.

'You didn't miss anyhow.' Rose was intent on laughing away the incongruity of the situation.

'I don't think Daddy ever missed,' Mona said.

'The closest I ever got to any man was when I had him in the sights of the rifle and I never missed.' The voice was so absent and tired that it took some of the chill from the words.

He allowed Rose to take the gun away but not before he had removed the empty shell. He dressed and had breakfast with them at the table. The gun was returned to its usual place in the corner of the room and no more mention was made of the dead jackdaw.

'Tired again,' he said simply after an hour and went back to his room.

Maggie was taking a plane to London that night and Sheila and Mona were driving her to the airport. The two girls would not be back till the following weekend. Moran stood with Rose in the doorway watching the car drive away. He waved weakly after the car but he did not speak as Rose shut the door and they turned back into the house.

Monaghan Day had revived nothing but a weak fanciful ghost of what had been. After Easter and many other alarms, when none of the girls was able to be in Great Meadow, Rose had

her sister buy a brown Franciscan habit in the town. In spite of the hush and emptiness of the house, the two women smuggled the habit in like thieves and later that evening Rose hid it among her most intimate articles of clothing in a part of the wardrobe that Moran never opened.

The attempt to revive Monaghan Day was a gesture as weak as a couple who marry in order to try to retrieve a lost relationship, the mind having changed the hard actual fact into what was comfortable to feel.

On the last Monaghan Day that McQuaid came to the house Moran was on edge as he waited for him as he had been on edge every Monaghan Day, the only day in the year that McQuaid came to Great Meadow. Since morning he had been in and out of the kitchen where Maggie and Mona were cleaning and tidying and preparing for the big meal. Though Maggie was eighteen, tall and attractive, she was still as much in awe of Moran as when she had been a child. Mona, two years younger, was the more likely to clash with him, but this day she agreed to be ruled by Maggie's acquiescence. Sheila, a year younger still, was too self-centred and bright ever to challenge authority on poor ground and she pretended to be sick in order to escape the tension of the day. Alone, the two girls were playful as they went about their tasks, mischievous at times, even carefully boisterous; but as soon as their father came in they would sink into a beseeching drabness, cower as close to being invisible as they could.

'How do the lamb chops look?' he demanded again. 'Are these the best lamb chops you could get? Haven't I told you time in and time out never – never – to get lamb chops anywhere but from Kavanagh's? Has everything to be drummed in a hundred times? God, why is nothing ever made clear in this house? Everything has to be dragged out of everybody.'

'Kavanagh said the steak wasn't great but that the lamb was good,' Maggie added but Moran was already on his way out again, muttering that not even simple things were made clear

in this house and if simple things couldn't be made clear how was a person ever to get from one day to the next in this world.

The two girls were quiet for a long time after the door closed; then suddenly, unaccountably, they started to push one another, boisterously mimicking Moran: 'God, O God, what did I do to deserve such a crowd? Gawd, O Gawd, not even the simple things are made clear,' falling into chairs laughing.

A loud imperious knocking came on the tongued boards of the ceiling in the middle of the rowdy relief. They stopped to listen and as they did the knocking stopped.

'She's no more sick than my big toe. Whenever there's a whiff of trouble she takes to her bed with the asthma. She has books and sweets hidden up there,' Mona said. They waited in silence until the knocking resumed, insistent and angry.

'Boohoo!' they responded. 'Boohoo! Boohoo! Boohoo!' The knocking made the boards of the ceiling tremble. She was using a boot or shoe. 'Boohoo!' they echoed. 'Boohoo! Boohoo! . . .'

The stairs creaked. In a moment Sheila stood angrily framed in the doorway. 'I've been knocking for ages and all ye do is laugh up at me.'

'We never heard. We'd laugh up at nobody.'

'Ye heard only too well. I'm going to tell Daddy on the pair of ye.'

'Boohoo!' they repeated.

'You think I'm joking. You'll pay for this before it's over.'

'What do you want?'

'I'm sick and you won't even bring up a drink.'

They gave her a jug of barley water and a clean glass.

'You know what day it is and McQuaid is coming from the mart. He's in and out like a devil. You can't expect us to dance attendance up the stairs as well. If he comes in and sees you like that in the door he'll have something to say,' Maggie said but Sheila slipped back upstairs before she finished.

They draped the starched white tablecloth over the big deal table. The room was wonderfully warm, the hotplate of the stove glowing a faint orange. They began to set the table, growing relaxed and easy, enjoying the formality of the room, when

Moran came in again from the fields. This time he stood in the centre of the room, plainly unsure as to what had brought him in, his eye searching around for something to fasten on, like someone in mid-speech forgetting what they had to say.

'Is everything all right?'

'Everything is all right, Daddy.'

'Be sure the chops are well done,' he said and went out again. No sooner had the door closed than Mona, released from the tension of his presence, let slip a plate from her hands. They stood watching dumbly in horrible fascination after it shattered. Quickly they swept up the pieces and hid them away, wondering how they would replace the plate without being found out.

'Don't worry,' Maggie comforted Mona who was still pale with shock. 'We'll find some way round it.' They were too sick at heart to mimic or mock this mood away. Anything broken had to be hidden until it could be replaced or forgotten.

Outside it was cold but there was no rain. It was always cold on Monaghan Day, the traditional day poor farmers sold their winter stock and the rich farmers bought them for fattening. Moran was neither rich nor poor but his hatred and fear of poverty was as fierce as his fear of illness which meant that he would never be poor but that he and all around him would live as if they were paupers. Moran had no work in the fields but still he stayed outside in the cold, looking at hedges, examining walls, counting cattle. He was too excited to be able to stay indoors. As the light began to fail he retreated into the shelter of the fir plantation to watch the road for McQuaid's car. If McQuaid had a big order to fill he mightn't come till after dark.

The light was almost gone when the white Mercedes came slowly along the road and turned into the open gate under the yew tree. Moran did not move even after the car stopped. In fact, he instinctively stepped backwards into the plantation as the car door was thrown open. Without moving he watched McQuaid struggle from the car and then stand leaning on the open door as if waiting for someone to appear. He could have called out from where he stood but he did not. McQuaid slammed the car door and walked towards the house. Not until

he was several minutes within the house did Moran leave the plantation. He came slowly and deliberately across the fields to the back door. Though he had lived for weeks for this hour he now felt a wild surge of resentment towards McQuaid as he came into his own house.

McQuaid was seated in the armchair by the fire. His powerful trunk and huge belly filled the chair and the yellow cattleman's boots were laced halfway up the stout legs. He did not rise from the chair or acknowledge Moran's entrance in any way except to direct the flirting banter he was having with the girls to Moran.

'These girls are blooming. You better have your orchards well fenced or you'll be out of apples by October.'

The words were said with such good humour and aggressive sureness that it would have been impossible to take offence. Moran hardly heard; all resentment left him as quickly as it had come: McQuaid was here and it was Monaghan Day.

'Michael.' McQuaid reached out of the chair and took Moran's hand in a firm grip.

'Jimmy.' Moran responded with the same simplicity. 'Have you been here long?'

'Not long. I had a fine talk with these girls. They are great girls.'

Moran walked across to the curtained press where he kept medicines and took out a glass and a full bottle of Redbreast. He poured out a large measure of the whiskey and brought it to McQuaid. Maggie placed a jug of spring water on the table. 'Say when,' Moran poured the water into the glass. McQuaid held out the glass until it was three-quarters full.

'You'll need it after the mart,' Moran said.

'I don't need it but I'll do much better than that. I'll enjoy it. Good luck everybody.'

'How did it go?' Moran asked with a heartiness that didn't suit him.

'The same as every other Monaghan Day,' McQuaid said.

'Was it good or bad?' Moran continued.

'It was neither good nor bad. It was money. All the farmers

think their cattle are special but all I ever see is money. If a beast is around or below a certain sum of money I buy. If it goes over that I'm out.'

'I've often watched you in the past and wondered how you know exactly the right time to enter the bidding, the right time to leave,' Moran praised. His fascination with McQuaid's mastery of his own world was boyish. He had never been able to deal with the outside. All his dealings had been with himself and that larger self of family which had been thrown together by marriage or accident: he had never been able to go out from his shell of self.

'I don't know how I know that,' McQuaid said. 'All I know is that it cost me a lot of money to learn.'

The girls had the freshly cut bread, butter and milk on the table. The lamb chops sizzled as they were dropped into the big pan. The sausages, black pudding, bacon, halves of tomatoes were added soon after to the sides of the pan. The eggs were fried in a smaller pan. Mona scalded the large teapot and set it to brew. The two girls were silent as they cooked and when they had to speak to one another spoke in quick, urgent whispers.

'This looks like a meal fit for a king. It makes me want to roll up my sleeves,' McQuaid said in praise and plain enjoyment at the prospect of it as the plates were put on the table. He finished his glass of whiskey with a flourish before rising from the chair.

The two men ate in silence, with relish, waited on by the two girls. As soon as McQuaid pushed his empty plate contentedly aside he said, 'These are great girls but where are the missing soldiers?'

'Sheila is upstairs with a cold,' Maggie pointed to the ceiling. 'And Michael is gone to our aunt in the mountains for a week.'

'Where's Luke then?'

The girls looked from McQuaid to Moran and back to McQuaid again but they did not speak.

'We don't know where he is,' Moran said reluctantly. He particularly disliked parting with information about the house.

'You couldn't open your mouth in this house before he left but he'd be down your throat.'

'If I know you I'd warrant he was given his money's worth,' McQuaid laughed gently and when Moran didn't answer he added, 'The young will have their way, Michael. Anyhow I always liked Luke. He is very straight and manly.'

'I respect all my children equally,' Moran said. 'How are your lads?'

'You know they're all married now. I don't see much of them unless they want something and they don't see much of me. They're good lads though. They work long hours.'

'And the good lady?'

'Oh, the old dosey's all right. She needs plenty of shouting at or she'd go to sleep on her feet.'

They had married young and their three sons married young as well. They lived alone now in the big cattle dealer's house with the white railing in the middle of fields. He was seldom in the house except to eat or sleep and when he was all he ever did was yell, 'Get the tea. Polish the boots. Kick out that bloody cat. Get me a stud. Where's the fucking collar?' 'In a minute, Jimmy. Coming. On the way. It's here in my very hand,' his wife would race and flurry and call. Then he would be gone for days. She would spoil her cats, read library books and tend her garden and the riotous rockery of flowers along the south wall of the house that he encouraged the cattle to eat. After days of peace the door would crash open: 'There's six men here with lorries. Put on the kettle. Set the table. Get hopping. Put wheels under yourself. We're fucking starving!' There was never a hint of a blow. So persistent was the language that it had become no more remarkable than just another wayward manner of speaking and their sons paid so little attention to it that it might well have been one of the many private languages of love.

The dishes had been washed and put away. Mona went to join Sheila upstairs. Maggie was going visiting. Another night Moran would have questioned her but not tonight.

Years ago Moran loaned McQuaid money when he had

started in the cattle business but now McQuaid was the richer and more powerful man and they saw little of one another. They came together once a year to slip back into what McQuaid said were the days of their glory. Moran was too complicated to let anybody know what he thought of anything. Moran had commanded a column in the war. McQuaid had been his lieutenant. From year to year they used the same handrails to go down into the past: lifting the cartwheel at the crossroads, the drilling sessions by the river, the first ambush, marching at night between the safe houses, the different characters in the houses, the food, the girls . . . The interrogation of William Taylor the spy and his execution by the light of a paraffin lantern among his own cattle in the byre. The Tans had swarmed over the countryside looking for them after the execution. They had lived for a while in holes cut in the turf banks. The place was watched night and day. Once the British soldiers came on Mary Duignan when she was bringing them tea and sandwiches. The Duignans were so naturally pale-faced that Mary showed no sign that anything was other than normal and she continued to bring tea and sandwiches to men working on a further turf bank. Seeing the British soldiers, the startled men sat and ate though they had just risen from a complete meal.

'Mary was a topper,' McQuaid said with emotion. 'Only for Mary that day our goose was cooked. She was a bloody genius to think of giving the food to the men on the bank. She's married to a carpenter in Dublin now. She has several children.'

Moran poured more whiskey into the empty glass.

'Are you sure you won't chance a drop?' McQuaid raised his glass. 'It's no fun drinking on your own.'

'I couldn't handle it,' Moran said. 'You know that. I had to give it up. Now I couldn't look at it.'

'I shouldn't have asked you then.'

'I don't mind. I don't mind at all.'

The reminiscing continued – the deaths of friends, one man marching alone through the night, the terrible hard labour it was for some men to die, night marches from one safe house

to another, the rain, the wet, the damp, the cold of waiting for an ambush in one place for hours.

'We had them on the run by then. They were afraid to venture out except in convoys.'

'People who would have spat in our faces three years before were now clapping our backs. They were falling over one another to get on the winning side.'

'Many of them who had pensions and medals and jobs later couldn't tell one end of a gun from the other. Many of the men who had actually fought got nothing. An early grave or the emigrant ship. Sometimes I get sick when I see what I fought for,' Moran said.

'It makes no sense your not taking the IRA pension. You earned it. You could still have it in the morning,' McQuaid said.

'I'd throw it in their teeth,' Moran clenched and unclenched his hands as he spoke.

'I never question the colour of any man's money. If I'm offered it I take it,' but Moran was too consumed to respond and McQuaid went on. 'Then it began to get easier. We hadn't to hide any longer. One hot day I remember leaving guns and clothes along the river bank and swimming without a stitch on. Another Sunday we went trolling, dragging an otter behind the boat. Then they tried to bring in the general.'

'He wasn't a general. He was a trumped-up colonel.'

'Whatever he was we settled his hash,' McQuaid gloated. 'You had a great head on you the way you thought the plan through from beginning to end. You've been wasted ever since.'

'Without you it would never have worked. You were as cool as if you were out for a stroll,' Moran said.

'You could plan. You worked it out from beginning to end. None of the rest of us had that kind of head.'

'We had spies. We had men in the town for weeks. They were bringing the big fellow in on the three o'clock train. They were going to put on the big show. They had a band and a guard of honour outside the station, their backs to a row of railwaymen's cottages. They never checked the cottages.'

'They wouldn't have found us anyhow.'