

## Farmer Wants a Wife

*Looking for a male, 20-40, for friendship on dark lonely nights. Please call.*

It looks better written down, more professional. I try and dissect it then, seeing if the letters can be rearranged to read boring and desperate, or handsome and popular. Staring at it for this long it starts to read more on the desperate side and I close the pages quickly. The noise of the pump starting up outside tells me Dad is out there fixing things.

The paper has been left open on the kitchen table to show this big VOTE NO TO LISBON ad. Dad's done it for my benefit, as if I haven't seen the posters on every lamppost in the village. He's out there now checking I shut the cows in properly before he has this big meeting, here in the house. His own big NO campaign. "Who's going to turn up on a Thursday evening?" I said to him this morning. "They'll all be watching Top Gear." He shook his head at that, like I was foreigner asking him for money. "It'll take you thirty seconds to all agree to vote No tomorrow and then you'll spend the rest of the time talking about the price of milk."

"You think you're so clever, don't you, John?" he said, narrowing his eyes in a confusion of bad eyesight and anger. "There's been nothing as important as this in Ireland for a long time and I don't know if I can even count on you."

I take the washing-up bowl out of the sink and fill the kettle. Crumbs from the bread we had at noon mix with some spilt milk to form a mush that pools around our dirty plates; I lick my finger to smudge away the dusty scratches worn into the Formica worktop and skirt a carton of curdling orange juice by the fridge. Grabbing

the handle of the broom from behind the door, I make a half-hearted attempt to gather dust and grit from under the kitchen table.

It's nearly black outside, but I can just make out my father's silhouette by the gate, curly grey hair sticking out from the bottom of his woolly hat, his hands undoing and redoing what I did about half an hour ago. A pinkish red light fills the sky behind him. The sun is setting here in the west of Ireland, but rising just over that stretch of water, its bonfire-like glow washed out by the ocean to a light morning yellow.

My hands burn red under the tap, big hands like my father's covered in calluses and dirt squashed under finger nails. Scratching my chin, I realise I haven't shaved in over two days.

There's half a packet of biscuits in the press so I eat one and put them on the table.

Footsteps sing on the metal grate outside the back door, and I hear my father cough as he takes his boots off. The kettle boils as I try to find a level spot for the sugar bowl on the table where the wood hasn't warped, stopping to pick lumps from its yellowing crystals.

"Biscuits?" my father growls, surveying the table. He puts his hands on his hips, filling the kitchen with a smell of silage. "You can put them away. Go and get some more chairs whilst I make some tea."

"I've done it," I reply over my shoulder, just as the front door opens and my brother Mikey strides in.

"Get some more chairs, John," he snaps as he passes me into the kitchen followed by I'm not sure how many more men as I lose count. Their low voices all

begin talking at once, getting ready for battle, my father gathering them around the war table. The front door has been left slightly ajar and I catch a glimpse of two tracksuited women out power walking.

“John?” my brother fills the doorway. “Any biscuits?” His breath is a mix of whiskey and cigarettes.

“In the press,” I reply, placing a chair in his hands.

“You are voting tomorrow?” he asks, holding the chair between us.

He is older than me, his black hair showing a few flecks of grey where mine is an even brown, but we have the same deep-set eyes and furrowed brow, which make him look stern and me worried.

“Yup,” I tell him.

“No?” he says firmly.

“Yes, I am voting.” I smile.

“Yes, but you’re voting No.”

He’s not smiling. In those eyes I see something burning bright and fierce that makes my balls contract and I have to swallow. A phone rings.

“I know you’ll do the right thing, John. People died for your freedom, don’t forget that. Don’t throw it away in some misguided idealism about a united Europe that only takes us back to being an imperialist state. You do want this farm to be yours? We’ve been given two chances to get it right, don’t forget that, and don’t even think about mentioning otherwise in there.” He shoves a thumb towards the kitchen.

“It’s Kerry,” I pipe up finally, showing him my phone. He nods and retreats to the kitchen, light filling where I stood in his shadow.

“I got it!” Kerry shouts down the phone at me. “Chicago here I come!”

I’m speechless. How did my little brother fix that? The big move, away from home. Away from Ireland. I should congratulate him. “There’s a meeting here, remember?” I say instead. “About the referendum tomorrow. You are voting aren’t you? It’s important.”

“Oh that. Yeah, sure. Get Dad off my back.”

Then he gabbles on about Chicago as I pick at the wallpaper around the light switch.

Dad is waving *The Farmers Journal* above his head when I walk back into the kitchen, shouting apocalyptically about the collapse of CAP subsidies, the perils of free trade, Ireland’s diminishing clout in Europe and the death of Irish farming in general.

My heart thumps in my chest thinking about my ad. “*Looking for a male, 20-40, for friendship on dark lonely nights.*” Does that sound corny? Mikey? Kerry? Dad? Does that sound corny?

Mikey’s phone rings. He has to go, the babysitter’s not turned up and Charmaine’s still at the hairdressers. He puts a hand on my shoulder as he leaves. “This is a big deal, John, don’t waste it. Any other vote but No is the wrong vote. You’d be letting the side down, you do understand?”

His grip tightens and I nod.

The next day my father is up early. He has the radio on so loud it wakes me up.

“John!” he shouts up the stairs. “Get up. We’re going in five minutes.”

Thin, low cloud hangs across the fields outside my bedroom window like a pall of snow, hiding the mountains and trees, making the ground look flat and endless. Pinhead droplets of rain dot the glass, the wind blowing them into fatter, noisier strips that dampen the sound of the newscaster broadcasting live from the Dáil, forecasting change. I put on my clothes from yesterday, run a hand across my chin and jog down the stairs. Dad hands me a cup of tea telling me to drink it quickly as I put my coat on.

“Big day today Jonno,” he says, and I can tell he’s holding back, itching to get to the polling station and meet up with his pals.

They nod to us as we arrive at an empty school, its pupils running around a beach somewhere, delighted with this unexpected day off. Mrs O’Mahony has our names ticked off before we even walk through the door. “I figured you’d be here early, Joe,” she says laughing with my father.

He stops to talk to a neighbouring farmer, and I am left with the man’s son who tells me his herd has mastitis and his wife’s in Tenerife. I tell him Kerry is going to Chicago.

Dad nods to me he’s ready and we take our voting slips. A small seat at a low table behind a high board is my voting booth, reminding me of when I used to sit in this classroom, crouching behind a book to make faces at the teacher. My phone beeps a message and I try to hurry my father.

“Farming’s gone,” he says as we drive home. “All I ever worked for all my life could be taken from me by do-gooders in Dublin. Farming’s gone, John. Don’t end up like Mikey with a wife who spends all her time at the hairdressers.”

I think of Charmaine and her courage in choosing glamour over mud.

“Don’t worry, there’s no chance of that, Dad,” I say, wondering what would happen if I went further. “Farming’s what I know. I’m happy here. Besides who’d look after you?”

“Charmaine can do that.”

“And the farm?”

“Mikey can do that.”

Fear and isolation swell in my chest. I try to say something but my father coughs and winds down the window.

When we get home he moves the TV onto the kitchen table and fiddles with the aerial to get a better reception. *“Voter turnout for Ireland’s second Lisbon Treaty referendum has been described as ‘low and slow’ so far in rural areas. This compares to Dublin where voting is substantially up on last year. Polling stations opened at 7am and will remain open until ten tonight. Over three million people are entitled to vote, and the importance of the result for Ireland’s future prosperity and place in Europe has been a focus of both sides in the campaign.”*

I check my phone to see if there has been any response to my ad. A tiny yellow envelope tells me I have a message. I move into the hallway to listen, sweat prickling under my arms. It’s a nice voice: slow, slightly nervous. I warm to it quickly; he sounds young, younger than me, this side of thirty. He has a farm not far from here, further up the coast, and I allow myself just for a second to imagine us sitting at the

kitchen table, talking, waiting to eat dinner. He's finished outside and made up a fire, telling me about when he .....

The front door bangs and Mikey is behind me, breathing stale whiskey, a cigarette between his fingers. "Heard anything, John?" he barks at me.

I fumble with my phone, feeling myself blush. "It's too early," I stammer. "They won't start the count 'til tomorrow morning."

"There are such things as exit polls, John," he snaps. "What are they saying there Dad?"

He goes and stands next to our father, the passion and struggle of so many years, of so many other battles coming together in this very moment they need their voices to be heard, to continue to be heard, from this battle to the next. They look virtually identical, thick necks bent, big hands on hips, heads slightly forward, frowning, lips parted, deep lines etched on their faces like two Ogham stones.

His name is Ciarán and I send him a text telling him I want to meet him, trying to imagine from his voice what he will look like and what it will be like to kiss him.

The television news bats incomprehensibly at my distracted ears. I walk up behind Dad to rest a cheek on his arm but he drops it down to his side. "Did you lock that gate? Go and check, it looks open to me."

I grind my teeth as I brush passed Mikey to the back door, stamping on the metal grate so that it rings out over the yard, scattering the birds who get lost in the cloud still hanging over the mountains. I can sense that people have voted for change, that Ireland has said Yes. I want this to have a positive effect on Mikey and my father, that they will understand when I tell them about Ciarán.

The newsreader's voice is faint now, obscured by the sound of the pump and the cattle nudging the fence. I reach out and run a finger nail down between the eyes of one of the animals, over bone and coarse hair to a wet nose that pushes my hand away, repeating the action so that it becomes a game between us. The steel gate is cold under my grip, but the ache feels good and the wind is fresh on my face as I tilt my chin up to meet the sun.

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