

# **Men**

**Tessa Hadley**

*The Midland Commission, Tessa Hadley, 2017*

Tessa Hadley was appointed Writer in Residence at The Midland hotel in Spring 2017, and was commissioned by The Midland and Manchester Literature Festival to write a short story inspired by her stay. The resulting piece, *Men*, was performed at a special Afternoon Tea event in The Midland's Lancaster Suite on Thursday 19th October 2017, as part of MLF's 2017 Festival.

Manchester Literature Festival  
The Department Store  
5 Oak Street  
Manchester  
M4 5JD  
[www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk](http://www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk)

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At about seven o'clock a crowd came in. They were booked for an overnight, and dinner in the Jazz Bar - the men were loud, middle-aged, they had money and stood at ease in the foyer in their business suits, as if they owned the place. Strong, confident accents from across the Pennines, Leeds or Sheffield. The women varied: some of them were obviously first wives, hanging on in there from another less prosperous era, solid and plain and mouthy, mothers of grown children, packed pugnaciously into expensive tight dresses and lethal heels, defying the showy hotel. Other men had shed their first wives and acquired a newer model, younger and slimmer, promising a dream of sex; these new girls were full of themselves, or diffidently shy. The ringleader among the men was a clever talker, short, with a paunch and a shock of reddish hair, bald patch like a monk's; his ugliness was attractive, with his blue eyes shifting quickly from face to face, entertaining his companions, making sure they were all on board with his jokes, his know-how. He charmed them all, touching everyone with his quick hands, bringing them inside his magic circle, even the dumpiest of the old wives. And his girl stood out, she was different: very tall and serene, and pale - not like the others with their Lanzarote tans. She wore a long tasteful pastel dress, not split up to her thigh or cut right down to show off her breasts - though you noticed the shape of her breasts, loose under the loose fabric. Her hair was old-gold colour, silky, good boyish cut, feathered onto her white shoulders. She smiled around her as if she wasn't afraid of anything, and her smile didn't change when the red-head man trailed fingers down her back, between the shoulder blades; she was still free. While he was talking away to the others, telling some old story about his great-grandfather who'd fought and won against a rival in this city once, at Moran's Boxing Booth, famous in those days.

Michelle Brennan came through from the staff area into the space behind the reception desk, bumping the swing door open with her behind, preoccupied, holding her bookings chart in both hands and frowning down at it. There was some minor glitch with this block booking which she was worrying over. Then she thought that she was aware of her sister's presence instantly, vividly, even before she looked up, like an animal picking up a scent, a smear of something rank; yet she hadn't seen her for fifteen years, not since Jan was seventeen. And as soon as she'd snatched an image of her, in one swooping, rapacious gaze - the serenity and the thinness and

the beauty and the dress and the man – she looked away again, back to her paper, and pretended she hadn't seen. No one else would have noticed anything. There wasn't any resemblance between the two sisters. Michelle wasn't beautiful, she was sensible, she looked like their mother, small and dark with a little pasty face as soft as putty. Their father had been the tall fair one, good-looking, a fine waste of space.

As far as Michelle knew, staring down at her chart, unable to see anything for a few moments, Jan never cast a glance over in the direction of the reception desk. Though it must have occurred to her, surely, however serene she was, that Michelle might well still be working here, where their mother had worked before her: unless it was really that easy to forget everything. Michelle soon saw how to resolve her booking problem – upgrade one of the party to a suite on the second floor, no one ever objected to that. They'd had a cancellation earlier. She helped one of the receptionists put this change into the system, went back through the swing door to her office. Later she asked Paul, the sales manager who knew everyone, about the crowd in the Jazz Bar. -Somebody's fiftieth, he said. -The little fella.

-And who's he when he's at home?

-Architectural Salvage. Smart guy. Started out in waste management.

Somebody's got to do it.

When she googled him it turned out that Martin Donoghue was in property development now, and urban landscaping: on his website there were photographs of old red-brick mills like the ones where her uncles and her grandparents and great-grandparents had once slaved their lives away, turned now into expensive flats, among the canals which didn't run with poisonous dyes any longer, and were planted with wild flowers. So that was how Jan lived.

In the Jazz Bar they were a noisy crowd, but there wasn't any trouble. You never knew, all that testosterone kicking around and the men showing off their girls, the senior wives on edge and combative, the drink running freely. You didn't get to make a fortune starting off in waste management, and be a pussy cat. But Jack who was head of security took one look at the party and wasn't worried. Jack was a big man, an ex-wrestler like the security guy before him, he was a rock, he knew all the people

Paul said he was glad he didn't have to know. Red-headed Martin Donoghue was all right, he was a sophisticated operator, it wasn't just a veneer. He was paying for everything on his card, there was no flashing wads of cash around. And he took care of everyone round the table, calling them by name as if he were coaxing them and herding them in the direction he wanted, remembering the names and ages of all their children and even their grandchildren, keeping up the flow of his jokes and cajoling the whole time. –Don't be shy, ladies! Go for a bit of what you fancy, a nice T-bone. Any requests, send to the piano-player, but keep it clean. Boys, did you see the game on Saturday? Tidy player, but no finishing skills. A man's got to know how to finish what he started, isn't that right?

Courteously he asked the waitress what she was studying at college, encouraged her to apply herself to her subject and not lose heart. He made sure that some of the older folk - the ones his own age or more, who were maybe a bit rougher round the edges - weren't made to feel foolish when it came to ordering from the menu. Subtly he helped them choose, without their noticing. –You like a nice piece of salmon, don't you John? Why don't you try it with a sauce?

Ordering the wine - champagne for anyone who wanted it, he'd rather drink a decent red himself - he seemed to know what he was talking about. He made them all feel that they belonged there in the hotel, they had rights to it.

–My mum used to work in here, Jan said suddenly, as if she were amazed at it herself. –When I was a little girl. I don't mean in this bar. She just cleaned the rooms.

Martin didn't seem to think this shamed them, he was delighted. –You're kidding me. Why didn't you tell me?

–I'd forgotten which hotel it was, until just now.

It was a surprise to some of them that she had an ordinary past at all, let alone here in this city, and cleaning; they'd imagined for some reason, feeling hostility because of her looks and dreamy detachment, that she must come from the alien South. Though now she'd told them it was obvious, you could hear it in her voice. –She used to bring us in sometimes, Jan said, –me and my sister, when she couldn't find anyone to mind us. The housekeeper let her put us in a room if one was empty, we had to watch telly and not touch anything. I loved it. I used to pretend I lived here and it was my palace.

–And now it is your palace, my darling, Martin said.

Some of the women knew Martin's wife, who'd been in and put of psychiatric hospital for years, from long before Jan was on the scene. He wouldn't divorce Kay, because for one thing he was sentimentally attached to his religion - although who knew when Martin Donoghue last stepped inside a church? At any rate, he wore his St Christopher on a gold chain round his neck: with his top button undone, you saw it nestling in the fuzz of grey hair on his chest. As for Jan, she wasn't quick with her repartee, wasn't funny like some of the other women or like Kay was, on her good days - and she didn't have kids, so they weren't sure how to talk to her. She could discuss make-up and clothes, but her elegance made them uneasy; she'd done some modelling, she said. I'll bet you have, the women thought. But they also thought that Martin deserved his fun, if she was his idea of fun.

He'd insisted on breaking up the couples around the table in the fashionable way, and been careful to seat himself between Kath and Gerry, his oldest friends from his Harehills past, where he could make sure they didn't feel lost, or pick fights with each other or with anyone. Gerry looked twenty years older than him, though they'd been in the same class at school – not that they'd attended very often; he was missing half his teeth because he was too stubborn or too much afraid to go to the dentist, though Martin had offered a hundred times to pay. And Kath had been a good-looking woman once; she was as skinny as ever and good in a dress, but the drink was a blank in her face even when she was scrubbed up like tonight, with her hair tied back neatly in a ribbon. Kath and Gerry both had a weakness for drink, they couldn't handle it.

From time to time across the table Martin exchanged a look with Jan, or said something to attract her attention. You could see how he enjoyed having her there, balancing his heat and his energy with her calm. It didn't worry him that she didn't talk much. There was an affinity between them, only not in words. Jan wasn't highly intelligent, Martin thought, but she had something else which was just as good, or better: she floated out of reach of all the taking offence and nursing grudges and feuding which had been the atmosphere of his childhood and youth. Jan had told him that she'd taken a lot of drugs at one point, and been pretty crazy at the time. But there wasn't a sign of any damage, to look at her. She was always as cool as if

she'd dropped into his life from another world. Or from another planet, a planet where all the women were six foot tall and the light was different, clear and green.

Michelle didn't want to take even one peek into the Jazz Bar. She was on late but she kept out of the way, found things to do in the office instead of taking a turn on reception. She spent half of her life in that scruffy old office which smelled of the food compressor; Paul said that it would have suited her in the old days when the staff lived in, sharing rooms on the top floor. Michelle was divorced, she didn't have much to go home for now that her daughter was away at university. And then as fate would have it, just at the very moment when she happened to push through the swing door to the front of house, the Donoghue party came out of the Bar to go up to bed. Last ones out, naturally: suits jackets off now and shirt sleeves rolled up, Rolex watches flashing on hairy arms, back-slapping, shouted farewells on their way upstairs as if it weren't past midnight already, mock-fights getting into the lift, those women shrieking with laughter and cursing at the top of their voices. Her sister was draped around Martin Donoghue who was glad-handing everyone, the whole evening his demonstration of what money could buy. Usually Michelle enjoyed coming out from the workaday reality behind the scenes, into the foyer with its seventeen different types of marble, its chandeliers and pink Peterhead granite floor. But tonight all the good tone of the place was spoiled.

Jan seemed to lift her head to look back from where she leant against Martin, the two of them the last ones waiting by the lifts; she was scanning vaguely around the foyer as though in search of someone, but without much expectation of seeing them. And then perhaps she did actually catch sight of Michelle: who had her head bent down, peering assiduously into the computer screen. Didn't Jan seem to straighten up in excitement? Puzzling as if she couldn't be certain, but might break off at any moment and hurry over towards her sister, calling out to her. Michelle only turned away, as if she hadn't noticed anything. Pushing back through the swing door she returned to work, and no one came following after her.

For a long while everything was quiet in the sleeping hotel. But Michelle was so keyed up she couldn't get on with anything properly, couldn't see what was in

front of her on her screen; she was fumbling, folding invoices into their envelopes. She ought to call her taxi and go home, but felt as if she were waiting for something to happen, a storm to break. Then just after one o'clock came the call from security she must have been dreading - or half-desiring, because at least it would show up how things really were. Someone had reported noises of a domestic in the suite on the second floor. Following Jack upstairs, in the well-rehearsed quick bustle of their emergency response – it was policy to have female staff present for support - Michelle hugged her vindication to her chest, like a baby which was also devouring her. Wasn't she anticipating Janet weeping and penitent and holding a towel to her face, bright red with blood? Or carried out from the suite on a stretcher? Or underneath a sheet? Her imagination was like her own violence breaking out at last, accusing and triumphant. Hurrying after Jack in the airless corridor, faint with expectation, she thought she would fall to her knees on the thick carpet.

But after all that, it was only a false alarm. Martin Donoghue hadn't taken the suite for himself, he'd put a couple of his friends in there, the roughest old types of drinker: Michelle had taken good note of them downstairs. And in fact Donoghue was already on the scene by the time they got there, calming things down and reproaching his friends and apologising for them, closing the door on their bleary disgrace: it looked as though the old chap had got the worst of it. -They're an awful old pair, he said to Jack and Michelle ruefully, *sotto voce* in the corridor, tucking his twenty-pound note discreetly into Jack's top pocket. -But you know, they're old friends, what can you do? I couldn't cut them out, on a special occasion. But I'm very sorry for the disturbance. They'll be meek as lambs from now on, I promise you.

He was in his white towelling gown, as if he'd come from the shower, or nude from his bed - one of those stocky men who seem to give off heat like an engine, with their thrumming chest voices, so sure of their power to always smooth the way ahead of them. Michelle was close enough to smell the drink on him, and the cologne; he gripped Jack's huge hand confidently when he shook it, and she knew that if she'd given him her hand he was the kind to put it to his lips and kiss it, or try to get round her in some other way with his charm. So she kept both hands behind her back, unsmiling, standing apart from the whole exchange between him and Jack there in the corridor as if she were dull as a plain pudding, with nothing to say for



herself. She'd have liked to tell Martin Donoghue what she thought of his whole party and their behaviour, but knew she mustn't. She was there as a representative of the ethos of the hotel.

As a special favour, on days when their mother had to bring Michelle and Jan to the hotel, the housekeeper would let her know which rooms were finished with. Then the girls were shut in with daytime telly and a bottle of Coke each, and a bag of sweets; Michelle was in charge because she was the oldest, seven years older. They were supposed to sit still where they were and not touch anything, but of course they did touch. They loved the silky perfect spacious rooms where nothing was spoiled or dirty or belonged to anyone. Michelle was good at inventing games, and they had favourite ones they only ever played on hotel days. Princess Time was like a TV show, they lounged around languidly combing each other's hair and painting their mouths with red sweets, taking it in turn to be the servant. Or there was Holy Book, involving the Gideon Bible from the drawer in the bedside table. Michelle opened it at random, reading out from it or pretending to - Jan wouldn't have known the difference, she always had problems with her reading. Whatever the Book told them, they had to do: even if it was sitting with a bare bum on the toilet while the other one flushed, or putting shampoo on their tongues out of the little bottles.

Michelle had a job keeping everything intact, in case the housekeeper or their mother looked in to check on them. Jan wasn't dreamy or serene as a little girl. She was funny-looking, with a wide gap-toothed grin and sticking-out ears, and she was a wild thing - though Michelle knew it was partly her own fault, working her up to such excitement in the games. She had to run round after her sister, sweeping crisp crumbs from the carpet or smoothing out the bedcover if Jan had leaped on it, mopping up in the bathroom when Jan turned on the shower, rearranging the towels perfectly afterwards with the wet inside, praying no one would notice. When their mother had finished work she checked all round to see if they'd left traces, but never found them, except that she refolded the ends of the toilet paper. -Good girls, she admired them, in her dispirited, worn-out way. -What good girls I've got.

And then on their way down in the service lift Jan would nudge Michelle behind their mother's back, opening her hand with its sticky pink fat fingers and quickly clamping it shut again, showing exultantly on her palm whatever it was she'd stolen this time: a mending kit or glossy strands torn from the tassel on the curtain tie-back, nuts from the mini-bar or a miniature soap in its waxed wrapping. Once - most awfully - it was a page torn out from the Holy Book, folded into a hot tight square. Michelle scolded her bitterly when they were alone. Didn't she know, she could get them into such trouble? Their mother would lose her job. But Jan wouldn't give up whatever her latest treasure was. With her secretive sly look she twisted out of Michelle's way, doubling over in the back yard where they played and hunching her shoulders to protect herself, holding out stubbornly against her sister's prising, punishing fingers and her blows. And Jan didn't even want to keep those stolen things! She would give them away happily to just anyone: the worst girls in the playground at school, who only ever laughed at her old rubbish - or kids she met playing on the street and never saw again.

Michelle wasn't on until one the next day. She'd thought that the Donoghue crowd would all be long gone by the time she arrived, but apparently he'd had a late checkout and she'd only just missed them. Sunita on reception informed her that Mrs. Donoghue had asked for her by name. -By name indeed! And who's Mrs. Donoghue, I wonder?

Sunita had told Mrs. D. that she could leave a note but she'd said not to worry, and Michelle could just imagine why: Jan's writing wasn't up to much, she couldn't spell and she muddled up the capitals and small letters, made her numbers backwards. At school she'd had special classes but they didn't help. Michelle knew all about this because after their mother died, when Michelle's own daughter was still a baby, she'd taken Jan in and tried to be a second mother to her. Until Jan ran away when she was seventeen.

She went upstairs to talk to the housekeeper: there were a few late checkouts to cover, some earlies coming in. On her way down, on an impulse, she let herself in with her master key to the room where Jan had stayed with Martin

Donohue. She knocked first and her heart beat as if she half-expected to find them still inside, caught out in something, half undressed, or leering up at her from the bed. And the state of the room was shocking. You learned a lot about people from the way they left a hotel room. Sheets stained with wine were dragged off the bed halfway across the carpet, muddled up with a mess of eggs and greasy leftovers on their breakfast tray. Broken pieces of a wine glass were dark with dregs, there were used teabags posted at intervals like someone's joke along the windowsill, sodden towels smeared with foundation and mascara were dropped all over the floor in the bedroom and bathroom, everything stank of scent and sweat. The runaway in the shower was clogged, an empty shampoo bottle floated in scummy water. Some things don't change then, Michelle grimly thought.

With half an hour to spare, she might as well sort out this lot before anyone else saw, in case they ever knew it was her sister. She turned on the air conditioning; borrowing a trolley, she brought clean linen from the store and with quick accustomed hands began putting everything back in order, stripping the bed, wearing rubber gloves to scabble the longer fair hairs and soapy twist of short grey hairs from the plug hole in the shower, spraying around with cleanser, restoring the rooms to pristine nothingness. There was usually something satisfying in such work; only today she was tense with expectation, as if she were looking for something under all this mess. There must be some clue in here, some message left for her. She even found herself searching through the waste bins, among the used dirty cotton buds and dental floss - unwrapping screwed-up scraps of paper and reading through them. Nothing of interest: receipts from a motorway café and a taxi, a request from a charity, a list of scribbled figures, not in Jan's hand. Like a madwoman, she thought. That was what Jan had said to her years ago, when she found Michelle going through the things in her bedroom once, looking for traces. -You're mad, Jan furiously said. -I don't even know what it is you're looking for. Traces of what?

There was nothing in this hotel room anyway to show that Jan wasn't perfectly happy. Whatever Michelle was looking for, her sister had taken it away with her.