

## A FAMILY CHRISTMAS: JULIE DAWSON

It's Christmas and we sisters (well only me, actually) have decided it's time to get together to celebrate. My sister's cottage is not the festive scene I expect. A dismal fire struggles with damp turf sending billows of smoke into the air. My grubby nephews bounce with news of a new baby donkey, the goat who ate their underpants, and of course Santa! Although I can't see any preparations for Santa or anyone else for that matter. Go take the bags to my room, while I have a chat with your mam' I say. 'You're sharing with me.' says Dodo briskly pointing, my face crunches in dismay.

Half an hour later, I'm scouring the small village supermarket for food, coal, bedsheets, decorations, a bottle or two of wine and even a frozen turkey. We stuff them all into the car and bounce back along the muddy country lanes, the boys showing their enthusiasm by competing in a noisy farting competition.

As we unpack, they are electric with excitement. 'Ya should have seen Mrs Murphy face, Ma. She couldn't believe her luck. Six bags of stuff, we got!'

I put out milk and cake for Santa and with last minute inspiration put a huge sooty footprint on the grubby mat before shuffling the boys to bed. Exhausted, we lie atop Dodo's straw mattress. Too exhausted to talk I reach out to Dodo but she shoves my hand away. I can't sleep worrying if the turkey will defrost in time. Will the oven even work and of course what will I do about Dodo and the kids?

I'm awoken by shrieks and cries - but not of joy! There's chaos. The donkey, Christmas lights trailing from its mouth is being shooed out of the door. The turkey lying in a pool of bloody ice is being mauled by the dog. The goat has eaten the presents. Food cascades from the open fridge door. Dodo is berating me about the dirty footprint on her clean rug! I shudder, shrug my shoulders and start the clean up.

Luckily, none of the animals seem to eat coal and so we recover with a roaring fire, omelettes, jokes and a glass of wine or two along with a determination that tomorrow, next month, next year will be a better time - for all of us.