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MAEVE BINCHY

AUTHOR OF MINDING FRANKIE

A Week in Winter

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A Week in Winter



Maeve Binchy



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*For dear generous Gordon,
who makes life great every single day*

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Chicky



Everyone had their own job to do on the Ryans' farm in Stoneybridge. The boys helped the father in the fields, mending fences, bringing the cows back to be milked, digging drills of potatoes; Mary fed the calves, Kathleen baked the bread, and Geraldine did the hens.

Not that they ever called her Geraldine—she was “Chicky” as far back as anyone could remember. A serious little girl pouring out meal for the baby chickens or collecting the fresh eggs each day, always saying, “Chuck, chuck, chuck,” soothingly into the feathers as she worked. Chicky had names for all the hens, and no one could tell her when one had been taken to provide a Sunday lunch. They always pretended it was a shop chicken, but Chicky always knew.

Stoneybridge was a paradise for children during the summer, but summer in the west of Ireland was short, and most of the time it was wet and wild and lonely on the Atlantic coast. Still, there were caves to explore, cliffs to climb, birds' nests to discover, and wild sheep with great curly horns to investigate. And then there was Stone House. Chicky loved to play in its huge overgrown garden. Sometimes the Miss Sheedys, three sisters who owned the house and were ancient, let her play at dressing up in their old clothes.

Chicky watched as Kathleen went off to train to be a nurse in a big hospital in Wales, and then Mary got a job in an insurance office. Neither of those jobs appealed to Chicky at all, but she would have to do something. The land wouldn't support the whole Ryan family. Two of the boys had gone to serve their time in business in big towns in the West. Only Brian would work with his father.

Chicky's mother was always tired and her father always worried. They were relieved when Chicky got a job in the knitting factory. Not as a machinist or home knitter but in the office. She was in charge of sending out the finished garments to customers and keeping the books. It wasn't a *great* job but it did mean that she could stay at home, which was what she wanted. She had plenty of friends around the place, and each summer she fell in love with a different O'Hara boy but nothing ever came of it.

Then one day Walter Starr, a young American, wandered into the knitting factory wanting to buy an Aran sweater. Chicky was instructed to explain to him that the factory was not a retail outlet, they only made up sweaters for stores or mail order.

“Well, you're missing a trick then,” Walter Starr said. “People come to this wild place and they *need* an Aran sweater, and they need it now, not in a few weeks' time.”

He was very handsome. He reminded her of how Jack and Bobby Kennedy had looked when they were boys, same flashing smile and good teeth. He was suntanned and very different from the boys around Stoneybridge. She didn't want him to leave the knitting factory and he didn't seem to want to go either.

Chicky remembered a sweater they had in stock, which they had used to be photographed. Perhaps Walter Starr might like to buy that one—it wasn't exactly new but it was nearly new.

He said it would be perfect.

He invited her to go for a walk on the beach, and he told her this was one of the most beautiful places on earth.

Imagine! He had been to California *and* Italy and yet he thought Stoneybridge was beautiful.

And he thought Chicky was beautiful too. He said she was just so cute with her dark curly hair and her big blue eyes. They spent every possible moment together. He had intended to stay only a day or two, but now he found it hard to go on anywhere else. Unless she would come with him, of course.

Chicky laughed out loud at the idea that she should pack in her job at the knitting factory and tell her mother and father that she was going around Ireland hitchhiking with an American that she had just met! It would have been more acceptable to suggest flying to the moon.

Walter found her horror at the idea touching and almost endearing.

“We only have one life, Chicky. *They* can’t live it for us. We have to live it ourselves. Do you think *my* parents want me out here in the wilds of nowhere, having a good time? No, they want me in the country club playing tennis with the daughters of nice families, but, here, this is where I want to be. It’s as simple as that.”

Walter Starr lived in a world where everything was simple. They loved each other, so why was it more natural than to make love? They each knew the other was right, so why complicate their lives by fretting over what other people would say or think or do? A kindly God understood love. Father Johnson, who had taken a vow never to fall in love, didn’t. They didn’t need any stupid contracts or certificates, did they?

And after six glorious weeks, when Walter had to think of going back to the States, Chicky was ready to go with him. It involved an immense amount of rows and dramas and enormous upset in the Ryan household. But Walter was unaware of any of this.

Chicky’s father was more worried than ever now because everyone would say that he had brought up a tramp who was no better than she should be.

Chicky’s mother looked more tired and disappointed than ever, and said only God and her sainted mother knew what she had done wrong in bringing Chicky up to be such a scourge to them all.

Kathleen said that it was just as well she had an engagement ring on her finger because no man would have her if he knew the kind of family she came from.

Mary, who worked in the insurance office and was walking out with one of the O’Haras, said that the days of *her* romance were now numbered, thanks to Chicky. The O’Haras were a very respectable family in the town, and they wouldn’t think kindly about this behavior at all.

Her brother Brian kept his head down and said nothing at all. When Chicky asked him what he thought, Brian said he didn’t think. He didn’t have time to think.

Chicky’s friends—Peggy, who also worked in the knitting factory, and Nuala, who was a maid for the three Miss Sheedys—said it was the most exciting, reckless thing they had ever heard of, and wasn’t it great that she had a passport already from that school trip to Lourdes?

Walter Starr said they would stay in New York with friends of his. He was going to drop out of law school—it wasn’t really right for him. If we had several lives, well then, yes, maybe, but since we only have one life it wasn’t worth spending it studying law.

The night before she left, Chicky tried to make her parents understand her feelings. She was twenty, she had her whole life to live, she wanted to love her family and for them to love her in spite of their disappointment.

Her father's face was tight and hard. She would never be welcome in this house again, she had brought shame on them all.

Her mother was bitter. She said that Chicky was being very, very foolish. It wouldn't last, it couldn't last. It was not love, it was infatuation. If this Walter really loved her, then he would wait for her and provide her with a home and his name and a future instead of all this nonsense.

You could cut the atmosphere in the Ryan household with a knife.

Chicky's sisters were no support. But she was adamant. They hadn't known real love. She was not going to change her plans. She had her passport. She was going to go to America.

"Wish me well," she had begged them the night before she left, but they had turned their faces away.

"Don't let me go away with the memory of you being so cold." Chicky had tears running down her face.

Her mother sighed a great sigh. "It would be cold if we just said, 'Go ahead, enjoy yourself.' We are trying to do our best for you. To help you make the best of your life. This is not love, it's only some sort of infatuation. There's no use pretending. You can't have our blessing. It's just not there for you."

So Chicky left without it.

At Shannon Airport there were crowds waving good-bye to their children setting out for a new life in the United States. There was nobody to wave Chicky good-bye, but she and Walter didn't care. They had their whole life ahead of them.

No rules, no doing the right thing to please the neighbors and relations.

They would be free—free to work where they wanted and at what they wanted.

No trying to fulfill other people's hopes—to marry a rich farmer, in Chicky's case, or to become a top lawyer, which was what Walter's family had in mind for him.

Walter's friends were welcoming in the big apartment in Brooklyn. Young people, friendly and easygoing. Some worked in bookshops, some in bars. Others were musicians. They came and went easily. Nobody made any fuss. It was so very different from home. A couple came in from the Coast, and a girl from Chicago who wrote poetry. There was a Mexican boy who played the guitar in Latino bars.

Everyone was so relaxed. Chicky found it amazing. Nobody made any demands. They would make a big chili for supper with everyone helping. There was no pressure.

They sighed a bit about their families not understanding anything, but it didn't weigh heavily on anyone. Soon Chicky felt Stoneybridge fade away a little. However, she wrote a letter home every week. She had decided from the outset that *she* would not be the one to keep a feud going.

If one side behaved normally, then sooner or later the other side would have to respond and behave normally as well.

She did hear from some of her friends, and had the odd bit of news from them. Peggy and Nuala wrote and told her about life back home; it didn't seem to have changed much in any way at all. So she was able to write to say she was delighted about the plans for Kathleen.

wedding to Mikey, and did not mention that she had heard about Mary's romance with Sonny O'Hara having ended.

Her mother wrote brisk little cards, asking whether she had fixed a date for her wedding yet and wondering about whether there were Irish priests in the parish.

She told them nothing about the communal life she lived in the big crowded apartment with all the coming and going and guitar playing. They would never have been able to begin to understand.

Instead, she wrote about going to art-exhibit openings and theater first nights. She read about these in the papers, and sometimes indeed she and Walter went to matinees or got cheap seats at previews through friends of friends who wanted to fill a house.

Walter had a job helping to catalog a library for some old friends of his parents. His family had hoped to woo him back this way to some form of academic life, he said, and it wasn't a bad job. They left him alone and didn't give him any hassle. That's all anyone wanted in life.

Chicky learned that this was definitely all Walter wanted in life. So she didn't nag him about when she would meet his parents, or when they would find a place of their own, or indeed what they would do down the line. They were together in New York. That was enough, wasn't it?

And in many ways it was.

Chicky got herself a job in a diner. The hours suited her. She could get up very early, leave the apartment before anyone else was awake. She helped open up the diner, did her shift and served breakfasts. She was back at the apartment before the others had struggled into the day, bringing them cold milk and bagels left over from the diner's breakfast stock. They got used to her bringing them their supplies. She still heard news from home but it became more and more remote.

Kathleen's wedding to Mikey, and the news that she was pregnant; Mary walking out with JP, a farmer Chicky and her sisters used to laugh at not long ago as a mad old man. Now there was a serious romance. Brian getting involved with one of the O'Haras, which Chicky's family thought was great but which the O'Haras were a lot less excited about. How Father Johnson had preached a sermon saying that Our Lady wept every time the Irish divorce referendum was mentioned, and some of the parishioners had protested and said he had gone too far.

Stoneybridge was, after a few short months, becoming a totally unreal world.

As was the life they lived in the apartment, with more people arriving and leaving, and tales of friends who had gone to live in Greece or Italy, and others who played music a night in cellars in Chicago. Reality was, for Chicky, this whole fantasy world that she had invented of a busy, bustling, successful Manhattan lifestyle.

Nobody from Stoneybridge ever came to New York—there was no danger of anyone looking her up or exposing the lies and the pathetic deception. She just couldn't tell them the truth: that Walter had given up the cataloging of the library. It was so boring because the couple kept saying he should go home for a weekend and see his parents.

Chicky couldn't see much wrong with that as a plan, but it seemed to spell aggravation for Walter so she nodded sympathetically as he left the job and she took extra hours in the diner to cover their costs in the apartment.

He was so restless these days; the smallest things upset him. He liked her to be always cheerful, loving Chicky. So that's what she was. Inside, she was tired and anxious Chicky to

but not showing any of it.

She wrote home week after week and believed in the fairy tale more and more. She started to fill a spiral notebook with details of the life she was meant to be living. She didn't want to slip up on anything.

To console herself, she wrote to them about the wedding. She and Walter had been married in a quiet civil ceremony, she explained. They had a blessing from a Franciscan priest. It had been a wonderful occasion for them, and they knew that both families were delighted that they had made this commitment. Chicky said that Walter's parents had been abroad at the time and not able to attend the ceremony but that everyone was very happy about it.

In many ways, she managed to believe this was true. It was easier than believing that Walter was becoming restless and was going to move on.

When the end came for Walter and Chicky, it came swiftly, and it seemed to everyone else inevitable. Walter told her gently that it had been great but it was over.

There was another opportunity, yet another friend with a bar where Walter might work. A new scene. A new beginning. A new city. He would be off at the end of the week.

It took ages for it to sink in.

At first she thought it was a joke. Or a test of some sort. There was a hollow, unreal feeling in her chest like a big cavity that was getting even bigger.

It could *not* be over. Not what they had. She begged and pleaded; whatever she was doing wrong she would change it.

Endlessly patient, he had assured her that it was nobody's fault. This is what happened—love bloomed, love died. It was sad, of course; these things always were. But they would stay friends and look back on this time together as a fond memory.

There was nothing she could do except go home, back to Stoneybridge, to walk along the wild shores where they had walked together and where they had fallen in love.

But Chicky would never go back.

That was the one thing she knew, the one solid fact in a quicksand world that was changing all around her. She could not stay on in the apartment even though the others were hoping that she would. Outside this life, she had made very few friends. She was too closed; she had no stories, no views to bring to a friendship. What she needed was the company of people who asked no questions and made no assumptions.

What Chicky also needed was a job.

She couldn't stay on at the diner. They would have been happy to keep her, but once Walter was gone she didn't want to be around the neighborhood anymore.

It didn't matter what she did. She didn't really care. She just had to earn a living, something to keep her until she got her head straight.

Chicky could not sleep when Walter left.

She tried, but sleep would not come. So she sat upright in a chair in the room she had shared with Walter Starr for those five glorious months—and those three restless months.

He said it was the longest time he had ever stayed anywhere. He said he hadn't wanted to hurt her. He had begged her to go back to Ireland, where he had found her.

She just smiled at him through her tears.

It took her four days to find a place to live and work. One of the workmen on the building next to the diner had a fall and was brought into the diner to recover.

"I'm not bad enough to go to hospital," he pleaded. "Can you call Mrs. Cassidy, she'll know what to do."

"Who is Mrs. Cassidy?" Chicky had asked the man with the Irish accent and the fear of losing a day's work.

"She runs Select Accommodation," he said. "She's a good person, she keeps herself to herself, she's the one to contact."

He had been right. Mrs. Cassidy took over.

She was a small, busy person with sharp eyes and her hair drawn into a severe knot behind her head. She was someone who wasted no time.

Chicky looked at her with admiration.

Mrs. Cassidy arranged for the injured man to be driven back to her guesthouse. She said she had a next-door neighbor who was a nurse, and if his condition worsened she would go with him to hospital.

Next day, Chicky called to Mrs. Cassidy's Select Accommodation in Queens.

First she inquired about the workman who had been injured and brought to the diner. Then she asked for a job.

"Why did you come to me?" Mrs. Cassidy asked.

"They say you keep yourself to yourself, you don't go blabbing around."

"Too busy for that," Mrs. Cassidy admitted.

"I could clean. I'm strong and I don't get tired."

"How old are you?" Mrs. Cassidy asked.

"I'll be twenty-one tomorrow."

Years of watching people and saying little had made Mrs. Cassidy very decisive.

"Happy Birthday," she said. "Get your things and move in today."

It didn't take long for Chicky to collect her things, just a small bag to pick up from the big sprawling apartment where she had lived as Walter Starr's girl with a group of restless young people for those happy months before the circus left town without her.

And so began Chicky's new life. A small, almost monastic bedroom at the top of the boardinghouse; up in the morning to clean the brasses, scrub the steps, and get the breakfast going.

Mrs. Cassidy had eight lodgers, all of them Irish. These were not people who had cereals and fruit to start the day. They were men who worked in construction or on the subway, men who needed a good bacon-and-egg to see them through until the lunchtime ham sandwich that Chicky made and wrapped in waxed paper and handed over before they left for work.

Then there were beds to make, windows to polish, the sitting room to clean, and Chicky went shopping with Mrs. Cassidy. She learned how to make cheap cuts of meat taste good by marinating them; she knew how to make the simplest of meals look festive. There was always a vase of flowers or a potted plant on the table.

Mrs. Cassidy was dressed nicely when she served supper, and somehow the men had

followed suit. They all washed and changed their shirts before sitting down at her table. you expected good manners, you got good manners in return.

Chicky always called her “Mrs. Cassidy.” She didn’t know her first name, her life story whatever had happened to Mr. Cassidy, even if there had ever *been* a Mr. Cassidy.

And in return, no questions were asked of Chicky about her life.

Theirs was a very restful relationship.

Mrs. Cassidy had stressed the importance of getting Chicky her green card, and registering to vote in the city council to make sure that the necessary number of Irish officials got returned to power. She explained how you got a post-office box number so that you could mail without anyone knowing where you lived, or anything about your business.

She had given up trying to persuade the girl to get a social life. She was a young woman in the most exciting city in the world. There were huge opportunities. But Chicky was very definite. She wanted none of it. No pub scene, no Irish clubs, no tales of what a good husband this lodger or that lodger might make. Mrs. Cassidy got the message.

She did, however, point Chicky toward adult-education classes and training courses. Chicky learned to be a spectacular patisserie chef. She showed no interest in leaving Mrs. Cassidy’s Select Accommodation, even though a local bakery had offered her full-time work.

Chicky’s expenses were few; her savings increased. When she wasn’t working with Mrs. Cassidy, there were so many other jobs. Chicky cooked for christenings, First Communion, bar mitzvahs, and retirement parties.

Each night, she and Mrs. Cassidy presided over their table of Select lodgers.

She still knew nothing about Mrs. Cassidy’s life history, and had never been asked any details about her own. So it was surprising when Mrs. Cassidy said that she thought Chicky should go back to Stoneybridge for a visit.

“Go now, otherwise you’ll leave it too late. Then going back would be a big deal. If you go this year just for a flying visit, then it makes it much easier.”

And, in fact, it was so much easier than she had thought.

She wrote and told them in Stoneybridge that Walter had to go to L.A. on business for a week, and that he had suggested she use the time to come to Ireland. She would just love to come back home for a short visit and she hoped that would be all right with everyone.

It had been five years since the day her father had said she would never come back into her house again. Everything had changed.

Her father was now a different man. Several heart scares had made him realize that he did not rule the world, or even his own part in it.

Her mother was not as fearful of what people thought as she once had been.

Her sister Kathleen, now the wife of Mikey and the mother of Orla and Rory, had forgotten her harsh words about disgracing the family.

Mary, now married to JP, the mad old farmer on the hill, had mellowed.

Brian, bruised by the rejection from the O’Hara family, had thrown himself into work and barely noticed that his sister had returned.

So the visit was surprisingly painless, and thereafter every summer Chicky returned to a warm welcome from her family.

When she was back in Stoneybridge she would walk for miles around and talk to the neighbors, filling them in on her mythical life on the other side of the Atlantic. Few people

from these parts ever traveled as far as the States—she was safe in knowing that there would be no unexpected visitors. Her façade would never be brought crashing down by a surprise arrival from Stoneybridge at a nonexistent apartment.

She would meet her friend Peggy, who told her of all the dramas in the knitting factory. Nuala had long ago left to live in Dublin and they never heard from her anymore.

“We always know it’s July when we see Chicky back walking the beaches,” one of the three Sheedy sisters would say to her.

And Chicky’s face would open up into a big smile, embracing all the sisters in its warmth and telling them and anyone else who would listen that there was nowhere on earth as special as Stoneybridge, no matter how many wonderful things she saw in foreign parts.

This pleased people.

It was good to be praised for having the wisdom to stay where you were in Stoneybridge for having made the right choice.

The family asked about Walter, and seemed pleased to hear of his success and popularity. They felt ashamed that they had wronged him so much, they never said it in so many words.

But then it changed.

The eldest of Chicky’s nieces, Orla, was now seventeen. Next year, she hoped to go to America with Brigid, one of the tribe of the redheaded O’Haras. Could she stay for a little bit with Auntie Chicky and Uncle Walter? she wondered. They would be no trouble at all.

Chicky didn’t miss a beat.

Of course Orla and Brigid could come to visit; she was enthusiastic about it. Eager for them to come. There would be no problem, she assured them. Inside she was churning, but no one would have known. She must be calm now. She would work it out later. Now was the time to welcome and anticipate the visit and get excited about it.

Orla wondered what would they do when they got to New York.

“Your uncle Walter will have you met at Kennedy; you’ll come home and freshen up and straightaway I’ll take you on a Circle Line boat tour around Manhattan so that you’ll get your bearings. Then another day we’ll go to Ellis Island and to Chinatown. We’ll have a *great* time.”

And as Chicky clapped her hands and enthused about it all, she could actually imagine the visit happening. And she could see the kind, avuncular figure of Walter laughing ruefully and regretfully over the daughters that they’d never had as he spoiled Orla and Brigid rotten. The same Walter who had left her after their short months in New York and headed west across the huge continent of America.

The shock had long gone now, and the real memory of her life with him was becoming vague. Chicky very rarely went back there in her mind anyway. Yet the false life, the fantasy existence, was crystal sharp and clear.

It had been what had let her survive. The knowledge that everyone in Stoneybridge had been proved wrong and she, Chicky, at the age of twenty, had known better than any of them. That she had a happy marriage and a busy, successful life in New York. It would be meaningless if they knew he had left her and that she had scrubbed floors, cleaned bathrooms, and served meals for Mrs. Cassidy; that she had scrimped and saved and taken no holiday except for the week back in Ireland every year.

The life she'd made up had been her reward.

How was she to re-create it for Orla and her friend Brigid? Would it all be unmasked after years of careful construction? But she would not worry about it now, and let it disturb her holiday. She would think about it later.

No satisfactory thoughts came to her when she was back in her New York life. It was a life nobody in Stoneybridge had dreamed of. Chicky could see no solution to the problem of Orla and Brigid's visiting them. It was too aggravating. Why couldn't the girls have chosen Australia, like so many other young Irish kids? Why did it have to be New York?

Back at Mrs. Cassidy's Select Accommodation, Chicky broke the code that had existed between them for so long.

"I have a problem," she said simply.

"We will talk problems after supper," Mrs. Cassidy said.

Mrs. Cassidy poured them a glass of what she called port wine, and Chicky told the story she had never told before. She told it from the very beginning. Whole layers and onion skins of deception were peeled back as she explained that now the game was up: her family believed in Uncle Walter, and now his niece wanted to come and visit them with her friend.

"I think Walter was killed," Mrs. Cassidy said slowly.

"What?"

"I think he was killed on the Long Island highway, in a multiple-car wreck, bodies barely identified."

"It wouldn't work."

"It happens every day, Chicky."

And as usual, Mrs. Cassidy was right.

It worked.

A terrible tragedy, motorway madness, a life snuffed out. They were so upset for her, back in Stoneybridge. They wanted to come to New York for the funeral but she told them it would be very private. That's the way Walter would have wanted it.

Her mother cried on the phone.

"Chicky, we were so harsh about him. May God forgive us."

"I'm sure he has, long ago." Chicky was calm.

"We tried to do what was best," her father said. "We thought we were a good judge of character, and now it's too late to tell him we were wrong."

"Believe me, he understood."

"But can we write to his family?"

"I've already sent your sympathies, Dad."

"Poor people. They must be heartbroken."

"They are very positive. He had a good life, that's what they say."

They wanted to know should they put a notice in the paper. But no. She said her way of coping with grief was to close down her life here as she had known it. The kindest thing they could do for her was to remember Walter with affection and to leave her alone until the wounds healed. She would come home next summer as usual.

She would have to move on.

This was very mysterious to those who read her letters home. Perhaps she had been

unhinged by grief. After all, they had been so wrong about Walter Starr in life. Maybe they should respect him in death. Her friends now understood her need for solitude. She hoped that her family would do that also.

Orla and Brigid, who had been planning to come and visit the apartment in Manhattan, were distraught.

Not only would there be no welcoming Uncle Walter coming to meet them at the airport, but there would be no holiday at all. Now there was no possibility of Aunty Chicky's taking them on the Circle Line tour around the island of Manhattan. She was moving on, apparently.

And anyway, their chances of being allowed to go to New York had disappeared. Could anything have been more unfortunately timed? they wondered with the callousness of youth.

Chicky's family kept in touch and told her all the local news. The O'Haras had gone mad and were buying up property around Stoneybridge to develop holiday homes. Two of the old Miss Sheedys had been carried away by pneumonia in the winter. The old person's friend, it was called; it ended life peacefully for those who couldn't catch their breath.

Miss Queenie Sheedy was still around—strange, of course, and living in her own little world. Stone House was practically falling down around her. It was said that she seemed to have barely the money to pay her bills. Everyone had thought she would have to sell the big house on the cliff.

Chicky read all this as if it were news from another planet. Still, the following summer she booked her flight to Ireland. She brought more somber clothes this time. Not official mourning, as her family might have liked, but less jaunty yellows and reds in her skirts and tops—more grays and dark blues. And the same sensible walking shoes.

She must have walked twenty kilometers a day along the beaches and the cliffs around Stoneybridge, into the woods and past the building sites where the O'Haras were busy with plans for Hispanic-style housing, complete with black wrought iron and open sun terraces, much more suitable for a warmer, milder climate than for the wild, windswept Atlantic coast around Stoneybridge.

During one of her walks Chicky met Miss Queenie Sheedy, frail and lonely without her two sisters. They sympathized with each other on their loss.

"Will you come back here, now that your life is ended over there, and your poor dear mother has gone to Holy God?" Miss Queenie asked.

"I don't think so, Miss Queenie. I wouldn't fit in here anymore. I'm too old to live with my parents."

"I understand, dear, everything turns out differently, doesn't it?"

And then it began.

The whole insane idea of her buying the big house on the cliff. Stone House, where she had played when she was a child in the wild gardens, what she had looked up at from the sea when she went swimming, where her friend Nuala had worked for the lovely Sheedy sisters.

It could happen. Walter always said it was up to us what happened.

Mrs. Cassidy had always said, "Why not us just as much as anyone else?"

Miss Queenie said it was the best idea since fried bread.

"I wouldn't be able to pay you the money that others might give you for the place," Chicky said.

“What do I need money for at this stage?” Miss Queenie had asked.

“I have been too long away,” Chicky said.

“But you will come back, you love walking all around here, it gives you strength, and there’s so much light, and the sky looks different every hour here. And you’ll be very lonely back in New York without that man who was so good to you for all those years—you don’t want to stay there with everything reminding you of him. Come home now, if you like, and I’ll move into the downstairs breakfast room. I’m not too good on the old stairs anyway.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Miss Queenie. It’s your house. I can’t take any of this in. And what would I do with a big house like this all on my own?”

“You’d turn it into a hotel, wouldn’t you?” To Miss Queenie, it was obvious. “Those O’Haras have been wanting to buy the place from me for years. They’d pull it down. I don’t want that. I’ll help you turn it into a hotel.”

“A hotel? Really? Run a hotel?”

“You’d make it special, a place for people like you.”

“There’s no one like me, no one as odd and complicated.”

“You’d be surprised, Chicky. There are lots of them. And I won’t be around here for long anyway; I’m going to join my sisters in the churchyard soon, I’d say. So you really have to decide to do it now, and then we can plan what we are going to do to make Stone House lovely again.”

Chicky was wordless.

“You see,” Queenie said, “it would be very nice for me if you *did* come here before I go. I just love to be part of the planning.” And they sat down at the kitchen table in Stone House and talked about it seriously.

The night Chicky returned to New York, Mrs. Cassidy listened to the plans, nodding with approval.

“You really think I can do it?”

“I’ll miss you, but you know it’s going to be the making of you.”

“Will you come to see me? Come to stay in my hotel?”

“Yes, I’ll come for a week one winter. I like the Irish countryside in winter, not when it’s full of noise and show and people doing leprechaun duty.”

Mrs. Cassidy had never taken a holiday. This was ground-breaking.

“I should go now while Queenie is alive, I suppose.”

“You should have it up and running as soon as possible.” Mrs. Cassidy hated to let the grass grow beneath her feet.

“How will I explain it all ... to everybody?”

“You know, people don’t have to explain things nearly as much as you think they do. Just say that you bought it with the money Walter left you. It’s only the truth, after all.”

“How can it be the truth?”

“It’s because of Walter you came here to New York. And because he left you, you went and earned that money and saved it. In a way, he *did* leave it to you. I don’t see any lie there. And Mrs. Cassidy put on the face that meant they would never speak of it again.

In the following weeks, Chicky transferred her savings to an Irish bank. There were endless negotiations with banks and lawyers. There were planning applications to be sorted, ear-

movers to be contacted, hotel regulations to be consulted, tax considerations to be decided. She would never have believed how many aspects of it all there were to put in place before the announcement about Stone House was made. She and Miss Queenie told nobody about their arrangement.

Eventually it all seemed ready.

"I can't put it off much longer," Chicky said to Mrs. Cassidy as they cleared the table after supper.

"It breaks my heart, but you should go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Miss Queenie can't wait much longer, and you have to tell your family sometime. Do it before it's leaked out to them. It will be better this way."

"But to get ready to go in one day? I mean, I have to pack and say my good-byes ..."

"You could pack in twenty minutes. You have hardly any possessions. The men in the house aren't great on big flowery good-bye speeches, any more than I am myself."

"I'm half cracked to do this, Mrs. Cassidy."

"No, Chicky, you'd be half cracked if you didn't do it. You were always great at taking an opportunity."

"Maybe I'd have been better if I hadn't seized the opportunity of following Walter Starr. Chicky was rueful.

"Oh, yes? You'd have been promoted in the knitting factory. Married a farmer, have six children that you'd be trying to find jobs for. No, I think you make great judgments. You made a decision, contacted me for a job, and *that* turned out all right for twenty years, didn't it? You did fine by coming here to New York, and now you're going back home to own the biggest house in the neighborhood. I don't see much wrong with that career path."

"I love you, Mrs. Cassidy," Chicky said.

"It's just as well you're going back to the Celtic mists and twilight if you're going to start talking like that," Mrs. Cassidy said, but her face was much softer than usual.

The Ryan family sat open-mouthed as she told them her plans.

Chicky coming home for good? *Buying* the Sheedy place? Setting up a hotel to be open in summer and winter? The main reaction was total disbelief.

The only one to show pure delight in the idea was her brother Brian.

"That will soften the O'Haras' cough," he said with a broad smile. "They've been sniffing after that place for years. They want to knock it down and build six top-of-the-market homes up there."

"That was exactly what Miss Queenie didn't want!" Chicky agreed.

"I'd love to be there when they find out," Brian said. He had never got over the fact that the O'Haras hadn't thought him worthy of their daughter. She had married a man who had managed to lose a great deal of O'Hara money on the horses, Brian often noted with satisfaction.

Her mother couldn't believe that Chicky was going to move in with Miss Queenie the very next day.

“Well, I’ll need to be on the premises,” Chicky explained. “And anyway, it’s no harm to have someone there to hand Miss Queenie a cup of tea every now and then.”

“And a bowl of porridge or packet of biscuits wouldn’t go amiss either,” Kathleen said. “Mikey saw her picking blackberries a while ago. She said they were free.”

“Are you *sure* you own the place, Chicky?” Her father was worried, as always. “You’re not just going in there as a maid, like Nuala was, but with a promise that she will leave it to you?”

Chicky patted them down, assured them it was hers.

Little by little they began to realize that it was actually going to happen. Every objection they brought up she had already thought of. They were worried about the economy and no one would be taking holidays. Her years in New York had made her into a businesswoman. She knew if she kept it simple, Stone House would be just what people would want to go away for a rest. Her family had learned from the past not to underestimate Chicky. They would not make the same mistake a second time.

Her parents had arranged for yet another Mass to be said for Walter, as Chicky hadn’t been at home for the first one they’d said. Chicky sat in the little church in Stoneybridge and wondered if there really was a God up there watching and listening.

It didn’t seem very likely.

But then everyone here appeared to think it was the case. The whole community joined in prayers for the repose of Walter Starr’s soul. Would he have laughed if he could have known this was happening? Would he have been shocked by the superstition of these people in an Irish seaside town where he had once had a holiday romance?

Now she was back here, Chicky knew that she would have to be part of the church again. It would be easier; Mrs. Cassidy had gone to Mass every Sunday morning in New York. It was just yet one more thing that they had never discussed.

She looked around the church where she was baptized, made her First Communion and her Confirmation, the church where her sisters had been married and where people were praying for the repose of the soul of a man who had never died. It was all very odd.

Still she hoped that the prayers would do someone somewhere some good.

There were a series of minefields that had to be walked very carefully. Chicky must make sure not to annoy those who already ran bed-and-breakfast accommodation around the place or who rented out summer cottages. She began a ceaseless diplomatic offensive, explaining that what she was doing was creating something totally new for the area, not a premises that would take business away from them.

She visited the many public houses dotted around the countryside and told them of her plans. Her guests would want to tour the cliffs and hills around Stoneybridge. She would recommend that they see the real Ireland, take their lunch in all the traditional bars, pubs and inns around. So if they were to serve soup and simple food, she would love to know about it and she would send customers in their direction.

She chose builders from another part of the country, as she wanted to avoid giving preference to the O’Haras or their main rivals in the construction business. It was so much easier than choosing one over the other. It was the same about buying supplies. Offense could easily be taken if she was seen to favor just one place. Chicky made sure that everyone

would get something from the project.

The main thing was to get the architects in and out and the workmen on-site.

She would need a manager, but not yet. She would want someone to live in and help her with the cooking, but again, that could wait.

Chicky had her eye on her niece Orla to come and help her. The girl was quick and bright. She loved Stoneybridge and the life it offered. She was energetic and sporty, into windsurfing and rock climbing. She had done a computer course in Dublin and had got a diploma in marketing. Chicky could teach her to cook. She was lively and good with people. She would be a natural for Stone House. Irritatingly, the girl seemed to want to stay in London, where she had a job. No explanations, she just went. Things were so much easier for the young these days than in her time, Chicky thought. Orla didn't have to ask for permission or family approval. It was assumed that she was an adult and they had no say in her life.

The plans went on and on. There would be eight bedrooms for guests and one big kitchen and dining area where all the guests would eat dinner together. Chicky found a huge old-fashioned table that would have to be scrubbed every day, but it was authentic. This was no place for fancy mahogany and place mats or thick Irish-linen tablecloths. It must be the real thing.

She got one local craftsman to make her fourteen chairs, and another to restore an old dresser to display the china. With Miss Queenie she drove to auctions and sales around the countryside and found the right glasses, plates, and bowls.

They met people who would be able to restore some of the old rugs in the Sheedy home and who could replace frayed leather on little antique tables.

This was the part that Miss Queenie loved most. She would say over and over what a miracle it was to have all these lovely treasures restored. Her sisters would be so pleased when they saw what was happening. Miss Queenie believed that they knew every detail of what was going on in Stone House, and watched it all approvingly. It was touching that she saw them settled in some happy place waiting for the hotel to open and checking the coming and goings in Stoneybridge.

It was rather more unsettling when Miss Queenie also assumed that Walter Starr would be there in heaven with the two Miss Sheedys, cheering on every development that was being made by his brave, courageous widow.

Chicky made sure to tell her family about her plans each week so that they could be well briefed and ahead of the game. It gave them great status to know in advance that the planning applications had been approved for a walled garden to grow their own vegetables and oil-fired heating for the whole house.

She would probably need a professional designer as well. Even though she and Miss Queenie thought they knew what the place should look like, they *were* pitching for discerning people; they would charge real money and must make the place right. What Chicky thought of as elegant might well be considered tacky.

Even though she had looked at all the hotels and country houses in magazines, she had little practical experience in getting the right look. Mrs. Cassidy's Select Accommodations hadn't been a real training ground for style.

There would be a lot of work ahead: she would have to have a Web site and take bookings online, still a very foreign world to her. This is where young Orla would be her right hand

she were to come back from London. She had telephoned her twice but the girl had been distracted and noncommittal. Chicky's sister Kathleen said that Orla was like a bag of cats and that there was no talking to her on any subject.

"She's more headstrong than you ever were," Kathleen said ruefully, "and that's real saying something."

"Look at how well and sane I turned out in the end," said Chicky, laughing.

"The place isn't up and running yet." Kathleen's voice was full of doom. "We'll see how well and sane you are when you're open for business."

Only Mrs. Cassidy, over in New York, and Miss Queenie believed it would happen and be a big success. Everyone else was humoring her and hoping it would take off, but in the same way that they hoped for a long hot summer and for the Irish soccer team to do well in the World Cup.

Sometimes Chicky would go and walk the cliffs at night and look out over the Atlantic Ocean. Always it gave her strength.

People had enough courage to get into small, shaky boats and set sail over those choppy waters, not knowing what lay ahead. Surely it couldn't be too hard to set up a guesthouse. Then she would go back indoors, where Miss Queenie would make them a mug of hot chocolate and say that she hadn't been so happy since she was a girl, since the days when she and her sisters would go to a hunt ball and hope they might find dashing young men to marry. That had never happened, but this time she knew it would work. Stone House was going to happen.

And Chicky would pat her on the hand and say that they would be the talk of the country. And as she said it, she believed it. All her worries would go. Whether it was because of the walk in the wild winds or the comforting hot chocolate or Miss Queenie's hopeful face or a combination of all three, it meant she slept a long, untroubled sleep every night.

She would wake ready for anything, which was just as well, because in the months ahead there was quite a lot she had to be ready for.

Rigger



Rigger never knew his father—he had never been spoken of. His mother, Nuala, was hard to know properly. She worked so hard for one thing, and she said little of her life in the west of Ireland, in a small place called Stoneybridge. Rigger knew she had worked as a maid in a big house for three old ladies called the Miss Sheedys, but she never wanted to talk about it or her family back home.

He shrugged. It was impossible to understand grown-ups anyway.

Nuala had never owned anything of her own. She was the youngest of the family, so all the clothes she got had been well tried out on the others first. There was no money for luxuries, not even a First Communion dress; and when she was fifteen they had found her a job working for the Miss Sheedys in Stone House. Very nice women they were; ladies, all three of them.

It was hard work: stone floors and wooden tables to scrub, old furniture to polish. She had a very small room with a little iron bed. But it was her own, more than she'd ever had at home. The Miss Sheedys hadn't a penny really between them, so there was a lot of fighting back the damp and the leaks, and there was never the money to give the house any proper heating or a good coat of paint—both needed badly. They ate very little but Nuala was used to that. They were like little sparrows at the table.

She looked at them with wonder, as they had to have their table napkins each in its own ring and they sounded a little gong to announce the meal. It was like taking part in a play.

Sometimes Miss Queenie would ask about Nuala's boyfriends, but the other sisters would *tut-tut* as if this weren't a suitable topic to discuss with the maid.

Not that there was that much to discuss. There were very few boyfriends around Stoneybridge. Any lads her brothers knew had all gone to England or America to find work. And Nuala wouldn't be considered good enough for the O'Haras or some of the big families in the place. She hoped that, just like Chicky had, she would meet one of the summer visitors who would fall in love with her and not care that she was in domestic service.

And she *did* meet a summer visitor, called Drew. It was short for "Andrew." He was a friend of the O'Haras, and they had all been kicking a ball around the beach. Nuala was watching the girls in their smart swimsuits. How wonderful it must be to be able to go into town and buy things like that, and lovely colored baskets and colored towels.

Drew came over and asked her to join the game. After a week she was in love with him. After two weeks they were lovers. It was all so natural and normal, she couldn't understand why she and the other girls had giggled so much about it at school. Drew said he adored her and that he would write to her every day when he went back to Dublin.

He wrote once and said it had been a magical summer and that he would never forget her. He gave no address. Nuala wouldn't ask the O'Haras where to find him. Not even when she realized that her period was late and she was most probably pregnant.

When this became more certain to be true, she was at a complete loss about what to do.

would break her mother's heart. Nuala had never felt so alone in her life.

She decided to tell the Miss Sheedys.

She waited until she had cleared and washed up their minimal supper before she began the story. Nuala looked at the stone floor of the kitchen so that she did not have to meet the eyes as she explained what had happened.

The Sheedy sisters were shocked. They had hardly any words to express their horror that this should have happened while Nuala was under their roof.

"What on earth are you going to do?" Miss Queenie asked with tears in her eyes.

Miss Jessica and Miss Beatrice were less sympathetic but equally unable to think of a solution.

What had Nuala hoped they would do? That they might ask her to bring up the baby there? That they would say a child around the house would make them all feel young again?

No, she hadn't hoped for that much, but she wanted some reassurance, some pinprick of hope that the world was not going to end for her as a result of all this.

They said they would make inquiries. They had heard of a place where she might be able to stay until the baby was born and could be given up for adoption.

"Oh, I'm not going to give the baby away," Nuala said.

"But you can't *keep* the baby, Nuala," Miss Queenie explained.

"I never had anything of my own before, apart from the room you gave me and my bed here."

The sisters looked at each other. The girl didn't begin to understand what she was taking on. The responsibility, the fuss, the disgrace.

"It's the nineteen nineties," Nuala said. "It's not the Dark Ages."

"Yes, but Father Johnson is still Father Johnson," Miss Queenie said.

"Would the young man in question perhaps ...?" began Miss Jessica tentatively.

"And if he's a friend of the O'Haras, he would be an honorable person and do his duty ..."
Miss Beatrice agreed.

"No, he wouldn't. He wrote to say good-bye; 'it was a magical summer.'"

"And I'm sure it was, my dear," Miss Queenie clucked kindly, not noticing the disapproval from the others.

"I can't tell my parents," Nuala said.

"So, we'll get you to Dublin as quickly as possible. They'll know what to do up there." Miss Jessica wanted Nuala's baby problem off her doorstep soonest.

"I'll make those inquiries," said Miss Beatrice. She was the sister with contacts.

Nuala's eldest brother, Nasey, was already living in Dublin. He was the odd one in the family, very quiet, kept himself to himself, they would always say with a sigh. He had a job in a butcher's shop and seemed settled enough.

He was a bachelor with a home of his own, but he wouldn't be anyone she could rely on. He had been gone too long from home to know her and care about her. She did have his address for an emergency, of course, but she wouldn't contact him.

The Sheedys had found a place for Nuala to stay. It was a hostel where several of the other girls were pregnant also.

A lot of them had jobs working in supermarkets or cleaning houses. Nuala was used to having

work, and found it very easy compared to all the pulling and dragging at Stone House. She got jobs by word of mouth. People said to each other that she was very pleasant and that nothing was too much trouble for her. She saved enough to rent a room for herself and the baby when it was born.

She wrote home to her family, telling them about Dublin and the people she worked for but saying nothing of the visits to the maternity hospital. She wrote to the Sheedy ladies telling them the truth, and eventually giving them the news that Richard Anthony had been born weighing six and a half pounds and was a perfect baby in every way. They sent her a five-pound note to help out, and Miss Queenie sent a christening robe.

Richard Anthony wore it at his baptism, which was in a church down by the river Liffey at a christening of sixteen infants.

“What a pity you don’t have any family there with you at this time,” Miss Queenie wrote. “Perhaps your brother would be pleased to see you and meet his new nephew.”

Nuala doubted it. Nasey had always been withdrawn and distant, from what she remembered.

“I’ll wait until Richard Anthony is a little person before I introduce them,” she’d said.

Nuala now had to get jobs that would allow her to take the baby with her. Not easy at first but when they saw the long hours she put in and how little trouble the child was, she found plenty of work.

She saw a great deal of life through the households where she worked. There were women who fussed about their homes as if they thought life were a permanent examination where they would be found wanting. There were families where husband and wife were barely civil to each other. There were places where the children were spoiled with every possession possible and still were not content.

But also she met good, kind people who were warm to her and her little son and grateful when she went the extra distance and cooked them potato cakes or made old dull brass shine like new.

When Richard was three, it was getting harder to take him to people’s houses. He wanted to explore and run around. One of Nuala’s favorite ladies was someone they all called Signora, who taught Italian classes. She was a most unusual woman: completely unworldly, wore extraordinary flowing clothes, and had long hair with gray and red and dark brown in all tied back with a ribbon.

She didn’t have a cleaner for herself, but paid Nuala to clean two afternoons a week for her mother. Her mother was a difficult, hard-to-please person who hadn’t a good word to say for Signora except that she had always been foolish and headstrong and no good would come of it all.

But Signora, if she knew this, took no notice. She told Nuala about a marvelous little playgroup. It was run by a friend of hers.

“Oh, that would be much too expensive for me,” Nuala said sadly.

“I think they’d be very happy to have Richard there if you could do a few hours’ cleaning in exchange.”

“But the other parents mightn’t like that. The cleaner’s child in with theirs.”

“They won’t think like that, and anyway, they won’t know.” Signora was very definite.

“You’d like playgroup, wouldn’t you, Richard?” Signora had a great habit of talking to children as if they were grown-ups. She never put on a baby voice.

“I’m Rigger,” he said. And that’s what he was called from then on.

Rigger loved the playgroup, and nobody ever knew that he arrived there two hours before the other children while his mother cleaned and polished and got the place ready for the day.

Through Signora, Nuala got several other jobs nearby. She cleaned in a hairdressing salon where they made her feel very much part of it all and even gave her very expensive highlights for nothing. She did a few hours a week in a restaurant on the quays, called Ennio’s, where again she was involved in the place and they always asked her to try out a bowl of pasta for her lunch. Then she would pick up Rigger and take him with her while she minded other children and took them for walks on St. Stephen’s Green to feed the ducks.

Nuala’s family were entirely unaware of Rigger’s existence. It just seemed easier that way. And Rigger learned at a very young age not to ask about his father. Every time he did, his mother started to cry and would get very cross with him.

As happens in many big families, the children who leave become dissociated with their old home. Sometimes, at Christmas, Nuala missed Stoneybridge and the days when she would decorate the tree for the Miss Sheedys and they would tell her the stories of each ornament. She thought of her mother and father and the goose they would have for Christmas and the prayers they would say for all emigrants—particularly her two sisters in America, her brother in Birmingham, and she and Nasey in Dublin. But it was not a lonely life. Who could be lonely with Rigger? They were devoted to each other.

She couldn’t think what made her get in touch with her brother Nasey. Possibly it was another letter from Miss Queenie, who always saw things in a very optimistic way. Miss Queenie said that it was probably a lonely life for Nasey in Dublin, and that he might enjoy having company from home.

She could barely remember him. He was the eldest and she the youngest of a big family. He wasn’t going to be shocked and appalled that she had a son who was about to go to boarding school any day.

It was worth a try.

She called to the butcher’s shop where Nasey worked, holding Rigger by the hand. She recognized him at once in a white coat and cutting lamb chops expertly with a cleaver.

“I’m Nuala, your sister,” she said simply, “and this is Rigger.”

Rigger looked up at him fearfully and Nuala looked long and hard at her brother’s face. Then Nasey lit up with a great smile. He was indeed delighted to see her. What a waste of five years it had been because she was afraid he might not want to recognize her.

“I’m going to be on my break in ten minutes. I can meet you in the café across the road.” Her brother turned to speak to his boss. “Mr. Malone, this is my sister and her little boy Rigger.”

“Go on now, Nasey. You’ll have lots to talk about.” Mr. Malone was kindly. And it turned out that they did have lots to talk about.

Nasey was oddly easygoing. He asked nothing about Rigger’s father, nor why Nuala had taken so long to contact him. He was interested in the places she worked, and he said that the Malones were looking for someone to help in the house and that they were a really decent family. She could do much worse than go there. He was in touch with another nephew

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