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Maeve Binchy

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Maeve Binchy is the author of *Maeve's Times: In Her Own Words* and many bestselling novels, including *A Week in Winter*, *Minding Frankie*, *Heart and Soul*, *Whitethorn Woods*, *Circle of Friends*, and *Tara Road*, which was an Oprah's Book Club selection. Married to Gordon Snell, she lived in Dalkey, Ireland, until her death in 2012.

www.maevebinchy.com

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ALSO BY MAEVE BINCHY

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Minding Frankie
Heart and Soul
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Nights of Rain and Stars
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The Return Journey
Evening Class
This Year It Will Be Different
The Glass Lake
The Copper Beech
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The places Maeve created in her novels and stories—Knockglen, Castlebay, Mountfern, and so many others—became just as real for her readers as those of the real Ireland. In fact the Irish Tourist Board often had to explain to visitors that they couldn't actually get on a bus or train to go and see them.

Chestnut Street, too, is fictional, but the Dublin portrayed there is very real: a city changing over the years in ways that come vividly to life in these stories of its residents and their families.

Maeve wrote the stories over several decades, reflecting the city and people of the moment—always with the idea of one day making them into a collection with Chestnut Street as its center. I am very pleased with the way her editors have now gathered them together as she intended, to make this delightful new Maeve Binchy book *Chestnut Street.*



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DOLLY'S MOTHER



It was all the harder because her mother had been so beautiful. If only Dolly's mother had been a round, bunlike woman, or a small wrinkled person, it might have been easier for Dolly, this business of growing up. But no, there were no consolations on that score. Mother was tall and willowy and had a smile that made other people smile too and a laugh that caused strangers to look up with pleasure. Mother always knew what to say and said it; Mother wore long lilac silk scarves so elegantly they seemed to flow with her when she walked. If Dolly tried to wear a scarf, either it looked like a bandage or else she got mistaken for a football fan. If you were square and solid and without color or grace, it was sometimes easy to hate Mother.

But only for a moment, and not real hate. Nobody could hate Mother, and certainly not the dumpy daughter that Mother treated like a princess. She always spoke of Dolly's fine points. Her lovely deep-green eyes. People will get lost in those eyes, Mother had said. Dolly doubted it—there was precious little sign of anyone looking into them for long enough to realize that they were green, let alone run the risk of sinking hopelessly into their depths. Mother always called on Father to admire Dolly's won-

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derful texture of hair. "Look," Mother would say excitedly. "Look at how thick it is and how healthy it is; we may well see the shampoo companies begging Doll to do advertisements for them." Father would look obediently and with some mild surprise as if he had been called to see a kingfisher that had just disappeared. He would nod eagerly to please his wife and daughter. Oh, yes, he would agree. A fine shock of hair, all right, no molting there.

Dolly would examine her dull brown hair without pleasure. The only thing to be said in its favor was that there was a lot of it. And that was what Mother had unerringly been able to identify and fasten on in her extravagant compliments.

All the girls at school loved Dolly's mother—she was so friendly they said, so interested in them. She remembered all their names. They loved coming round to the house on Chestnut Street on Saturday afternoons. Dolly's mother used to let them play with her old makeup. Ends of lipsticks, little, nearly empty pots of eye shadow, compacts almost worn away by dabbing. There was a big mirror with a good light where they could practice; all Dolly's mother insisted was that every trace of it be removed with cold cream and tissues before they went home. She managed to make them believe that this was what kept the skin healthy and fresh, and Dolly's friends enjoyed the cleansing almost as much as they had liked the painting of their young faces.

Dolly's friends. Were they really friends, she often wondered, or did they just like her because of Mother? At school they didn't make much of her. After class Dolly often sat alone while others went off arm in arm. She was never the center of any laughing crowd in the playground, nobody chose her to go shopping after school, she was usually one of the last to be picked for any team. Even poor Olive, who was fat and had thick, whirly round spectacles, often got picked before Dolly. If it hadn't been for Mother she might have sunk without trace in that school. She should be very, very grateful that, unlike almost everyone else around her, she had a parent who was universally approved and liked. She

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should be grateful, and she usually was. She was happiest playing with her cat.

Mother always baked a funny cake for the sale of work, not a big showy one that would embarrass you or a little mean one that would make you feel ashamed, but like the one covered in Smarties, or the one with nasturtium flowers on it and a cutting from a newspaper saying that they were safe to eat. Mother had lent marvelous things for the school play and hadn't complained when they got torn. Mother had asked Miss Power for the knitting pattern of her cardigan, and then had actually gone and knitted the thing, telling Miss Power that she had chosen a different color in case they looked like identical twins. Poor Miss Power, plain as a pikestaff and not willowy and lovely like Mother, had pinked with pleasure and had become nearer to human than any of them had ever seen her.

For Dolly's sixteenth birthday, Mother was making a marvelous production. And every step of the way she consulted her daughter.

"Now, you must tell me what you'd like and what the other girls do. There's nothing so silly as a mother getting it all wrong, and taking you to the pictures and McDonald's when that's far too young for you."

"You'd never get it wrong, Mother," Dolly said in a dead sort of voice.

"But of course I would, darling Doll. I'm a hundred years older than you and all your friends. I have ideas from the last century. That's why I'm relying on you to say what you want."

"You aren't a hundred years older than us." Dolly's tone was level. "You were twenty-three when I was born; you're not forty yet."

"Oh, but soon will be." Mother sighed and looked at her perfect face in the mirror. "Soon a wizened, stooped, eccentric old forty-year-old." She pealed with laughter and Dolly laughed too. The notion was so ridiculous.

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"What did you do when you were sixteen?" Dolly asked, trying to put off the moment when she would have to say she didn't know how to stage the celebration, and was dreading it in any form.

"Oh, love, that was so long ago. And it was a Friday, so we all did what everyone did then—we watched *Ready, Steady, Go!* on the television, and we had sausages and a birthday cake and we played all the Beatles on my record player. And then we went to a coffee bar and drank cups of frothy coffee and giggled and everyone went home on the bus."

"It sounds lovely," Dolly said wistfully.

"Well, it was the Dark Ages," Mother admitted ruefully. "Nowadays things are much more advanced. I suppose you'll all want to go to a disco? What did the others do? Jenny's sixteen, Mary must be sixteen, Judy?" Mother looked at her brightly, listing the names of Dolly's friends, alert and interested. Caring that her daughter should not be left out of whatever was the scene.

"I think Jenny just went out to the pictures," Dolly said.

"Of course she had Nick—that's right." Dolly's mother nodded sagely. She was the confidante of all the girls.

"I don't know what Judy did." Dolly was mulish.

"But you must, darling. She's your friend."

"I still don't know."

Mother's face softened visibly. Dolly could see a change of approach. The note was soothing now. "Of course, of course, and let's not forget she may have done nothing at all. Or just had a family gathering. No, there's no reason why you should know."

Dolly felt worse than ever now. She was revealed to Mother as a person whose friends had celebrations without her, but as someone so pathetic that she had to give some kind of cringe-making party herself so as to buy their friendship. Dolly's heart was heavy. She knew her face looked heavy and sad as well. She wished she could smile for this bright and lovely mother who was trying to help her, who had always been there supporting and suggesting and admiring. But the smile wouldn't come to her face.

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Mother would have every reason to play the martyr, to feel that her daughter was monstrously ungrateful. But Mother never behaved like that. Judy's mother was constantly saying that daughters were a scourge to the flesh and a torment to the soul. Jenny's mother was like a Special Branch officer, so suspicious was she of even the most innocent activities. Mary's mother looked like a medieval painting of a mourning Madonna; she seemed stooped under the weight of her responsibility for a teenage girl. Only Dolly's mother was full of hope and plans and enthusiasm. Wasn't it bad luck that when the cards were being given out she had been dealt dull old Dolly instead of someone more colorful and lively who could respond.

"Why are you so nice to me, Mother?" Dolly asked seriously. She really and truly wanted to know.

Mother's face showed hardly any surprise at the question. She answered it as cheerfully and with the same kind of smile that greeted almost everything.

"I'm not being nice, darling, I'm being ordinary . . . but it's your sixteenth birthday and that should be a happy day, something you'll remember . . . even if it's silly, like mine was. At least I remember it, and all our idiotic clothes and hairstyles. That's what I want you to have, a happy day."

Dolly thought for a moment. Every single one of the girls who had been to their house had praised Mother. They had all said she was like a marvelous big sister—you could tell her anything, she always understood.

"Mother, don't bother. Honestly. It won't *be* a happy day. There aren't any happy days. Honestly. Days just aren't happy like they were for you, like they are for you. I'm not complaining. It's just the way it is."

She willed her eyes not to fill with tears, she prayed for some understanding to come on her mother's face. What came was a look of great concern, but Dolly knew that it wasn't real understanding. It was just more of the same. Like it had always been.

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Mother's words washed over her, reassurance, everyone feeling down when they were fifteen, being neither old nor young, more reassurances, soon everything would look rosy again, Dolly's beautiful green eyes would shine again, her lovely thick, shiny hair would fly about her as she raced off, full of excitement about life and all the adventures it held. . . . Dolly sat there glumly as her mother stroked her hand.

She looked down at Mother's long, thin white fingers with their perfect, long shell-pink nails, she saw Mother's rings, not very huge in themselves but making Mother's little hand seem still frailer by having to bear them. The hand stroked Dolly's square hands, with their bitten nails, their ink stains and the scratches from the blackberry bush.

Dolly knew that the fault was hers, Mother was so good; it was Dolly who was rotten. Rotten and ungiving to her core. Right to the base of her hard, square, unattractive heart.

Father often looked melancholy, Dolly thought, a little stooped and tired as he walked up the hill from the railway station carrying his briefcase, but as soon as he saw Mother he cheered up. She might wave to him from an upstairs window and then run lightly down the stairs to embrace him when he came in the door. She didn't peck at him; she threw both her arms around him and encircled him, briefcase, overcoat, evening paper and all. Or else she might be in the kitchen, where she would drop everything and run to him. Dolly saw how pleased and even slightly surprised he was each time. He was not given to such spontaneous gestures himself, but he responded like a flower opening to the sun. The worried look of the commuter tired after a day's work disappeared. Mother never laid any problems on him the moment he arrived. If there had been a burst pipe he heard about it later. Much later.

And so, as Dolly knew would happen, the subject of the sixteenth birthday was raised as an excitement, not a problem. Mother's eyes shone with the excitement of it. A girl turning sixteen—it

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