

Chestnut Street

Maeve Binchy



First published in Great Britain in 2014
by Orion Books
an imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This collection copyright © Gordon Snell 2014

Selected stories first appeared in the following: 'Star Sullivan' as the first chapter of *Star Sullivan*, copyright Maeve Binchy 1996 (Orion, 1996); 'By the Time We Get to Clifden' in *The Return Journey*, copyright Maeve Binchy 1999 (Orion, 1999); 'The Builders' as the first three chapters of *The Builders*, copyright Maeve Binchy 2002 (Open Door, 2002)

The moral right of Maeve Binchy to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (hardback) 978 1 4091 5178 4

ISBN (export trade paperback) 978 1 4091 5179 1

Typeset at The Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd,
St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

www.orionbooks.co.uk

Dolly's Mother

It was all the harder because her mother had been so beautiful. If only Dolly's mother had been a round, bun-like 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 colour 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 realise that they were green, let alone run the risk of sinking hopelessly into their depths. Mother always called on Father

to admire Dolly's wonderful 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 moulting there.

Dolly would examine her dull brown hair without pleasure. The only thing to be said in its favour 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 make-up. 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 practise; 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 centre 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 of and liked. She 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 marvellous 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 colour 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 marvellous 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 I 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.

‘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, 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.

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 colourful 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 marvellous 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.

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 was a symbol, a landmark, a milestone. It had to be marked. What would they do to make the day marvellous for Dolly?

Dolly saw Father's face become tender. Father too must know of other households where the mothers were not as Mother was here. Where there was strife about children having any kind of party. How blessed he was to have the single exception, to have married the only woman in the world who positively relished a celebration for teenage girls.

'Well, now.' He beamed. 'You're a lucky girl and there's no doubt about that, Dolly. Well, well, a sixteenth party, no less.'

'I don't mind if we can't afford it,' Dolly began.

'Of course we can afford it. What else do we work for, your mother and I, except to be able to afford the odd little treat like this?'

Again, Dolly found herself guiltily wondering, could this possibly be true? Did Father go out on that long journey to the faceless office and come back tired every evening so that he could afford birthday parties? Surely not. And Mother, who went to work mornings in a big florist's shop, was it all for a

nest egg so that they could have these kind of treats? Dolly had always thought Mother liked being among the beautiful flowers, and having lunch with her friends there and getting tired flowers to take home, where they often came to life again. She thought that Father went to work because it was what men did. They stayed in the office and dealt with files. She realised she must be very stupid about a lot of things. No wonder she couldn't have these great conversations with people, like Mother did. Only the other day she had heard Mother talking to the postman about happiness. Imagine talking about something as huge as happiness to a man who came to deliver the letters. And he had seemed very interested and said that not enough people ever took those kind of things into consideration.

'Mother, I'm bad at knowing what people like and what they want. You are very good at it. What do you think my friends would like?'

Dolly felt about as low as she had ever felt. And who in the world would have an ounce of sympathy for her? A spoiled brat, is what they would say she was. A girl who was being offered everything and could accept nothing. Mother didn't know any of these thoughts. She was too busy being helpful.

'What about a lunch?' she said suddenly. 'A Saturday lunch at The Grand Hotel – you could all dress up and you could have one bottle of wine between all of you, if you have lots and lots of mineral water. You could order from the menu, choose ... whatever you like. How about that?'

It had definite possibilities. It was so utterly different.

'Would you come with us?' Dolly asked.

'Nonsense, darling, your friends wouldn't want an old fogey like me ...'

'Please, Mother,' Dolly begged.

Mother said that since she would be working on Saturday,

well she could wear a silly hat and just drop in and join them for a drink ... or whatever.

Dolly's friends thought it was a great idea. Jenny said she would wear her new outfit and it would make Nick sick as a parrot to know she had been lunching at The Grand. Mary said she'd go and grab a look at the menu so they'd know what to order. Judy said there might be film scouts there or men who ran model agencies. They said Dolly's mother was a genius to have thought of it.

'How is it that your mother is so fabulous?' Jenny asked with interest.

'Meaning that I'm not,' Dolly said.

'Oh don't be so boring, Dolly,' Jenny and Mary said together, walking away from her, and Dolly sat in the classroom wishing the world would end. Suddenly and in a big splash of sunset. There seemed to be no point in living in a place where it seemed like a good idea for your parents to pay huge money to take people out to lunch, people who accused you to your face of being boring. Miss Power came in and found her sitting there.

'Stop slouching, Dolly. Go out and get some fresh air, get some colour in your cheeks, and for heaven's sake, don't come to school with a torn tunic and a ripped jumper. You can be sure your mother was never like that when she was your age.'

'No, I'd say she was perfect then too.' Dolly's voice was sour and hurt. The teacher looked after her and shook her head in disappointment.

Mother had arranged a hairdo at Lilian's and a manicure for the Saturday morning of the birthday lunch. Dolly hadn't wanted it, any more than she had wanted the voucher for the new outfit.

'It will be a disappointment, Mother,' she had said. 'Everything is.'

Had Mother's eyes grown a little steely or did she imagine it?

'Shall I choose something for you to wear, then?' Mother had said. And of course she had found a lovely green exactly the colour of Dolly's eyes, she had said, and it did fit, and the other girls loved it; they were being polite to her today of course, because she was getting them taken to The Grand Hotel, Dolly realised. But still, they did seem to think that she looked well. And her hair was shiny and her nails, though short, were pink and neat, and the girl had given her a thing to paint on that meant you couldn't bite them any more.

The hotel manager had welcomed them warmly; the booking had been made in Dolly's name.

'And your lovely mother will be joining you later,' he had said.

'Yes, she's working, you see,' Dolly explained.

'Working?'

'In the flower shop,' Dolly explained.

For some reason he found this amusing. He smiled and then quickly reassured her. 'Of course she is. Wonderful woman, your mother. We see her from time to time here. Not often enough.'

When Mother came in, it did appear as if everyone were admiring her. She seemed so excited by the group of girls that she was joining, you would have thought it was the most glittering gathering in the land, not four ill-at-ease teenagers lost in a world of too much splendour. Suddenly the lunch looked up; a very, very little wine was allowed to toast the newly sixteen-year-old. The girls felt grown up, and they felt as if they belonged. Dolly saw them looking around more confidently now. The day would be one they would all remember. Would she remember it? she wondered to herself. Would she be able to recall it years and years later, like Mother had about records and television programmes and coffee bars?

Mother had said that they should all take a little stroll down town after lunch, see the musicians and dancers by the fountain. She had a few things to do later – she'd leave them to their own devices. Feeling adult and in charge of their own destinies, the girls got their coats from the Cloakroom.

Dolly had no coat, her soft green jacket and skirt was complete in itself. She waited while the others had gone to titivate still further, and idly pushed open the door to the manager's office, where Mother had gone to pay the bill personally. She wanted to thank Mother, and thank her with warmth and say that it had been great, and that she did like the green outfit. Mother and the manager were standing very close. He had one arm around Mother and with the other hand he was stroking Mother's face. She was smiling at him very warmly.

Dolly managed to get back, but the door still stood open. She sat down on one of the brocaded sofas in the hall.

In seconds they must have noticed the open door and they came out, Mother looking flushed, as did the hotel manager. Their fear of discovery took on a new horror when they saw the girl sitting solidly on the sofa. At the same time the chattering schoolmates arrived, so it was goodbyes and thank-yous and off with Mother down town for the action. Jenny, Judy and Mary went ahead. Dolly walked thoughtfully with her mother.

'Why am I called Dolly?' she asked.

'Well in order to please your father we called you Dorothy after his mother, but I never liked the name, and you were like a little doll.' She had answered, as she would every question, simply and without guilt.

'Do you do everything to please other people, to make them happy?'

Her mother looked at her for a moment.

'Yes, I think I do. I learned that early on; it makes the journey through life much simpler if you please other people.'

‘But it’s not being honest to how you feel, is it?’

‘Not always. No.’

Dolly knew if she asked her about the hotel manager she would get an answer. But what would she ask? Do you love him? Are you going to leave Father and live with him? Do other men take you in their arms? Is that what you are going back to, what you meant when you said you had a few things to do?

And suddenly Dolly knew she would ask no questions. No questions at all. She knew that she would have to think about whether her mother’s way was in fact the right way – life was short, why not smile, why not please people ... people like her old mother-in-law, Dorothy, now long dead; like Miss Power at school by knitting a cardigan; like Father by running to the gate to meet him; like her lumpen, surly daughter by giving her a birthday party.

And, as she linked Mother’s arm to walk towards the fountain, Dolly knew with a shock that she would never forget her sixteenth birthday. It would always be there, frozen for ever as the day she grew up. The day she realised that there were many ways to go, and Mother’s was only one way. Not necessarily the right way, and not at all the wrong way. Just one of the many ways ahead.