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Opening Extract from...

Minding Frankie

Written by Maeve Binchy

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Minding
Frankie

Maeve Binchy



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Chapter One

Katie Finglas was coming to the end of a tiring day in the salon. Anything bad that could happen had happened. A woman had not told them about an allergy and had come out with lumps and a rash on her forehead. A bride's mother had thrown a tantrum and said that she looked like a laughing stock. A man who had wanted streaks of blond in his hair became apoplectic when halfway through the process he had enquired what they would cost. Katie's husband Garry had placed both his hands innocently on the shoulders of a sixty-year-old female client who had told him that she was going to sue him for sexual harassment and assault.

She looked at the man standing opposite her, a big priest with sandy hair mixed with grey.

'You're Katie Finglas and I gather you run this establishment,' the priest said, looking around the innocent salon nervously as if it were a high-class brothel.

'That's right, Father,' Katie said with a sigh. What could be happening now?

'It's just that I was talking to some of the girls who work here, down at the centre on the quays, you know, and they were telling me ...'

Katie felt very tired. She employed a couple of school-leavers; she paid them properly, trained them. *What* could they have been complaining about to a priest?

‘Yes, Father, what exactly is the problem?’ she asked.

‘Well, it *is* a bit of a problem. I thought I should come to you directly as it were.’ He seemed a little awkward.

‘Very right, Father,’ Katie said. ‘So tell me what it is.’

‘It’s this woman, Stella Dixon. She’s in hospital you see ...’

‘Hospital?’

Katie’s head reeled. What *could* this involve? Someone who had inhaled the peroxide?

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’ She tried for a level voice.

‘Yes, but she wants a hairdo.’

‘You mean she trusts us again?’

Sometimes life was extraordinary.

‘No, I don’t think she was ever here before ...’ He looked bewildered.

‘And your interest in all this, Father?’

‘I am Brian Flynn and I am acting chaplain at St Brigid’s Hospital at the moment while the real chaplain is in Rome on a pilgrimage. Apart from being asked to bring in cigarettes and drink for the patients, this is the only serious request I’ve had.’

‘You want me to go and do someone’s hair in hospital?’

‘She’s seriously ill. She’s dying. I thought she needed a senior person to talk to. Not, of course, that you look very senior. You’re only a girl yourself,’ the priest said.

‘God, weren’t you a sad loss to the women of Ireland when you went for the priesthood,’ Katie said. ‘Give me her details and I’ll bring my magic bag of tricks in to see her.’

‘Thank you so much, Ms Finglas. I have it all written out here.’

Father Flynn handed her a note.

A middle-aged woman approached the desk. She had glasses on the tip of her nose and an anxious expression.

‘I gather you teach people the tricks of hairdressing,’ she said.

‘Yes, or more the *art* of hairdressing, as we like to call it,’ Katie said.

‘I have a cousin coming home from America for a few weeks. She mentioned that in America there are places where you could get your hair done for near to nothing cost if you were letting people practise on you.’

‘Well, we do have a students’ night on Tuesdays; people bring in their own towels and we give them a style. They usually contribute five euros to a charity.’

‘Tonight is Tuesday!’ the woman cried triumphantly.

‘So it is,’ Katie said through gritted teeth.

‘So, could I book myself in? I’m Josie Lynch.’

‘Great, Mrs Lynch, see you after seven o’clock,’ Katie said, writing down the name.

Her eyes met the priest’s. There was sympathy and understanding there.

It wasn’t all champagne and glitter running your own hairdressing salon.

Josie and Charles Lynch had lived in 23 St Jarlath’s Crescent since they were married thirty-two years ago. They had seen many changes in the area. The corner shop had become a mini supermarket; the old laundry, where sheets had been ironed and folded, was now a laundromat, where people left big bags bulky with mixed clothes and asked for a service wash. There was now a proper medical practice with four doctors, where once there had been just old Dr Gillespie who had brought everyone into the world and seen them out of it.

During the height of the economic boom, houses in

St Jarlath's Crescent had been changing hands for amazing sums of money. Small houses with gardens near the city centre were much in demand. Not any more, of course – the recession had been a great equaliser, but it was still a much more substantial area than it had been three decades ago.

After all, just look at Molly and Paddy Carroll with their son Declan – a doctor – a real, qualified doctor! And just look at Muttie and Lizzie Scarlet's daughter Cathy. She ran a catering company that was hired for top events.

But a lot of things had changed for the worse. There was no community spirit any more. No church processions went up and down the Crescent on the feast of Corpus Christi as they used to three decades ago. Josie and Charles Lynch felt that they were alone in the world, and certainly in St Jarlath's Crescent, in that they kneeled down at night and said the Rosary.

That had always been the way.

When they married, they planned a life based on the maxim that the family that prays together stays together. They had assumed they would have eight or nine children, because God never put a mouth into this world that He didn't feed. But that wasn't to happen. After Noel, Josie had been told there would be no more children. It was hard to accept. They both came from big families; their brothers and sisters had produced big families. But then, perhaps, it was all meant to be this way.

They had always hoped Noel would be a priest. The fund to educate him for the priesthood was started before he was three. Money was put aside from Josie's wages at the biscuit factory. Every week a little more was added to the Post Office savings account and when Charles got his envelope on a Friday from the hotel where he was a porter, a sum was also put into the Post Office. Noel would get the best of priestly educations when the time came.

So it was with great surprise and a lot of disappointment

that Josie and Charles learned that their quiet son had no interest whatsoever in a religious life. The Brothers said that he showed no sign of a vocation and when the matter had been presented to Noel as a possibility at the age of fourteen, he had said if it was the last job on earth he wouldn't go for it.

That had been very definite indeed.

Not so definite, however, was what he actually *would* like to do. Noel was vague about this, except to say he might like to run an office. Not work in an office, but run one. He showed no interest in studying office management or bookkeeping or accounting or in any areas where the careers department tried to direct him. He liked art, he said, but he didn't want to paint. If pushed he would say that he liked looking at paintings and thinking about them. He was good at drawing; he always had a notebook and a pencil with him and he was often to be found curled up in a corner, sketching a face or an animal. This did not, of course, lead to any career path, but Noel had never expected it to. He did his homework at the kitchen table, sighing now and then, but rarely ever excited or enthusiastic. At the parent-teacher meetings Josie and Charles had enquired about this. They wondered, did anything at school fire him up? Anything at all?

The teachers were at a loss. Most boys were unfathomable around fourteen or fifteen but they had usually settled down to do something. Or often to do nothing. Noel Lynch, they said, had just become even more quiet and withdrawn than he already was.

Josie and Charles wondered, could this be right?

Noel was quiet, certainly, and it had been a great relief to them that he hadn't filled the house up with loud young lads thumping each other. But they had thought this was part of his spiritual life, a preparation for a future as a priest. Now it appeared that this was certainly not the case.

Perhaps, Josie suggested, it was only the Brothers' brand of religious life that Noel objected to. In fact, might he have a different kind of vocation and want to become a Jesuit or a missionary?

Apparently not.

And when he was fifteen he said that he didn't really want to join in the family Rosary any more, it was only a ritual of meaningless prayers chanted in repetition. He didn't mind doing good for people, trying to make less fortunate people have a better life, but surely no God could want this fifteen minutes of drone drone drone.

By the time he was sixteen they realised that he didn't go to Sunday Mass any more. Someone had seen him up by the canal when he was meant to have been to the early Mass up in the church on the corner. He told them that there was no point in his staying on at school as there was nothing more he needed to learn from them. They were hiring office staff up at Hall's and they would train him in office routine. He might as well go to work straight away rather than hang about.

The Brothers and the teachers at his school said it was always a pity to see a boy study and leave without a qualification, but still, they shrugged, it was very hard trying to interest the lad in anything at all. He seemed to be sitting and waiting for his schooldays to end. Could even be for the best if he left school now. Get him into Hall's, the big builders' merchants; give him a wage every week and then they might see where, if anywhere, his interest lay.

Josie and Charles thought sadly of the fund that had been growing in the Post Office for years. Money that would never be spent making Noel Lynch into a reverend. A kindly Brother suggested that maybe they should spend it on a holiday for themselves, but Charles and Josie were shocked. This money

had been saved for God's work; it would be spent on God's work.

Noel got his place in Hall's. He met his work colleagues but without any great enthusiasm. They would not be his friends and companions any more than his fellow students at the Brothers had become mates. He didn't *want* to be alone all the time but it was often easier.

Over the years Noel had arranged with his mother that he would not join them at meals. He would have his lunch in the middle of the day and he would make a snack for himself in the evening. This way he missed the Rosary, the socialising with pious neighbours and the interrogation about what he had done with his day, which was the natural accompaniment to mealtimes in the Lynch household.

He took to coming home later and later. He also took to visiting Casey's pub on the journey home – a big barn of a place – both comforting and anonymous at the same time. It was familiar because everyone knew his name.

'I'll drop it down to you, Noel,' the loutish son of the house would say.

Old Man Casey, who said little but noticed everything, would look over his spectacles as he polished the beer glasses with a clean linen cloth.

'Evening, Noel,' he would say, managing to combine the courtesy of being the landlord with the sense of disapproval he had of Noel. He was, after all, an acquaintance of Noel's father. It was as if he was glad that Casey's was getting the price of the pint – or several pints – as the night went on, but he also seemed disappointed that Noel was not spending his wages more wisely. Yet Noel liked the place. It wasn't a trendy pub with fancy prices. It wasn't full of girls giggling and interrupting a man's drinking. People left him alone here.

That was worth a lot.

When he got home, Noel noticed that his mother looked different. He couldn't work out why. She was wearing the red knitted suit that she wore only on special occasions. At the biscuit factory where she worked they wore a uniform, which she said was wonderful because it meant you didn't wear out your good garments. Noel's mother didn't wear make-up so it couldn't be that.

Eventually he realised that it was her hair. His mother had been to a beauty salon.

'You got a new hairdo, Mam!' he said.

Josie Lynch patted her head, pleased. 'They did a good job, didn't they?' She spoke like someone who frequented hairdressing salons regularly.

'Very nice, Mam,' he said.

'I'll be putting a kettle on if you'd like a cup of tea,' she offered.

'No, Mam, you're all right.'

He was anxious to be out of there, safe in his room. And then Noel remembered that his cousin Emily was coming from America the next day. His mother must be getting ready for her arrival. This Emily was going to stay for a few weeks apparently. It hadn't been decided exactly how many weeks . . .

Noel hadn't involved himself greatly in the visit, doing only what he had to, like helping his father to paint her room and clearing out the downstairs box room where they had tiled the walls and put in a new shower. He didn't know much about her; she was an older person, in her fifties maybe, the only daughter of his father's eldest brother Martin. She had been an art teacher but her job had ended unexpectedly and she was using her savings to see the world. She would start with a visit to Dublin from where her father had left many years ago to seek his fortune in America.

It had not been a great fortune, Charles reported. The eldest brother of the family had worked in a bar where he was his own best customer. He had never stayed in touch. Any Christmas cards had been sent by this Emily, who had also written to tell first of her father's death and then her mother's. She sounded remarkably businesslike, and said that when she arrived in Dublin she would expect to pay a contribution to the family expenses, and that since she was letting her own small apartment in New York during her absence, it was only fair. Josie and Charles were also reassured that she seemed sensible and had promised not to be in their way or looking for entertainment. She said she would find plenty to occupy her.

Noel sighed.

It would be one more trivial happening elevated to high drama by his mother and father. The woman wouldn't be in the door before she heard all about his great future at Hall's, about his mother's job at the biscuit factory and his father's role as a senior porter in a very grand hotel. She would be told about the moral decline in Ireland, the lack of attendance at Sunday Mass and that binge drinking kept the emergency departments of hospitals full to overflowing. Emily would be invited to join the family Rosary.

Noel's mother had already spent considerable time debating whether they should put a picture of the Sacred Heart or of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour in the newly painted room. Noel had managed to avoid too much further discussion of this agonising choice by suggesting that they wait until she arrived.

'She taught art in a school, Mam, she might have brought her own pictures,' he had said and amazingly his mother had agreed immediately.

'You're quite right, Noel. I have a tendency to make all the decisions in the world. It will be nice having another woman to share all that with.'

Noel mildly hoped that she was right and that this woman would not disrupt their ways. This was going to be a time of change in their household anyway. His father was going to be retired as porter in a year or two. His mother still had a few more years in the biscuit factory but she thought she might retire also and keep Charles company with the two of them doing some good works. He hoped that Emily would make their lives less complicated rather than more complicated.

But mainly he gave the matter very little thought.

Noel got along by not thinking too deeply on anything: not about his dead-end job in Hall's; not about the hours and money he spent in Old Man Casey's pub; not about the religious mania of his parents who thought that the Rosary was the answer to most of the world's problems. Noel would not think about the lack of a steady girlfriend in his life. He just hadn't met anyone, that's all it was. Nor indeed did he worry about the lack of any kind of mates. Some places were easy to find friends. Hall's wasn't one of them. Noel had decided that the very best way to cope with things not being so great was not to think about them at all. It had worked well so far.

Why fix things if they weren't broken?

Charles Lynch had been very silent. He hadn't noticed his wife's new hairdo. He hadn't guessed that his son had drunk four pints on the way home from work. He found it hard to raise any interest in the arrival next morning of his brother Martin's daughter, Emily. Martin had made it clear that he had no interest in the family back home.

Emily had certainly been a courteous correspondent over the years – even to the point of offering to pay her bed and board. That might come in very useful indeed these days. Charles Lynch had been told that morning that his services as hotel porter would no longer be needed. He and another

'older' porter would leave at the end of the month. Charles had been trying to find the words to tell Josie since he got home, but the words weren't there.

He could repeat what the young man in the suit had said to him earlier in the day: a string of sentences about it being no reflection on Charles or his loyalty to the hotel. He had been there, man and boy, resplendent in his uniform and very much part of the old image. But that's exactly what it was – an old image. The new owners were insisting on a new image and who could stand in the way of the march of progress?

Charles had thought he would grow old in that job. That one day there would be a dinner for him where Josie would go and wear a long frock. He would be presented with a gold-plated clock. Now, none of this was going to happen.

He was going to be without a job in two and a half weeks' time.

There were few work opportunities for a man in his sixties who had been let go from the one hotel where he had worked since he was sixteen. Charles Lynch would have liked to have talked to his son about it all, but he and Noel didn't seem to have had a conversation for years now. If ever. The boy was always anxious to get to his room and resisted any questions or discussions. It wouldn't be fair to lay all this on him now.

Charles wouldn't find a sympathetic ear or any font of advice. Just tell Josie and get it over with, he told himself. But she was up to high doh about this woman coming from America. Maybe he should leave it for a couple of days. Charles sighed about the bad timing of it all.

To: Emily

From: Betsy

I wish that you hadn't decided to go to Ireland, I will miss you greatly.

I wish you had let me come and see you off . . . but then you were always one for the quick, impulsive decision. Why should I expect you to change now?

I know that I should say that I hope you will find all your heart's desire in Dublin, but in a way I don't want you to. I want you to say it was wonderful for six weeks and then for you to come back home again.

It's not going to be the same without you here. There's an exhibit opening and it's just a block away and I can't bring myself to go to it on my own. I won't go to nearly as many theater matinées as I did with you.

I'll collect your rent every Friday from the student who's renting your apartment. I'll keep an eye open in case she is growing any attitude-changing substances in your window boxes.

You must write and tell me all about the place you are staying – don't leave anything out. I am so glad you will have your laptop with you. There will be no excuse for you not to stay in touch. I'll keep telling you small bits of news about Eric in the suitcase store. He really is interested in you, Emily, whether you believe it or not!

Hope you get your laptop up and running soon and I'll hear all about your arrival in the land of the Shamrock.

*Love from your lonely friend,
Betsy*

*To: Betsy
From: Emily*

What makes you think that I would have to wait to get to Ireland to hear from you? I'm at J.F.K. and the machine works.

Nonsense! You won't miss me – you and your fevered imagination! You will have a thousand fantasies. Eric does not fancy me, not even remotely. He is a man of very few words and none of them are small talk. He speaks about me to you because

he is too shy to speak to you. Surely you know that?

I'll miss you too, Bets, but this is something I have to do.

I swear that I will keep in touch. You'll probably get twenty-page letters from me every day and wish you hadn't encouraged me!

Love,

Emily

'I wonder, should we have gone out to the airport to meet her?' Josie Lynch said for the fifth time next morning.

'She said she would prefer to make her own way here,' Charles said, as he had said on the previous four occasions.

Noel just drank his mug of tea and said nothing.

'She wrote and said the plane could be in early if they got a good wind behind them.' Josie spoke as if she were a frequent flyer herself.

'So she could be here any time ...' Charles said with a heavy heart.

He hated having to go in to the hotel this morning, knowing that his days there were numbered. There would be time enough to tell Josie once this woman had settled in. Martin's daughter! He hoped that she hadn't inherited her father's great thirst.

There was a ring at the doorbell. Josie's face was all alarm. She snatched Noel's mug of tea from him and swept up the empty eggcup and plate from in front of Charles. Patting her new hairdo again, she spoke in a high, false voice.

'Answer the door, please, Noel, and welcome your cousin Emily in.'

Noel opened the door to a small woman, forty-something, with frizzy hair and a cream-coloured raincoat. She had two neat, red suitcases on wheels. She looked entirely in charge of

the situation. Her first time in the country and she had found St Jarlath's Crescent with no difficulty.

'You must be Noel. I hope I'm not too early for the household.'

'No, we were all up. We're about to go to work, you see, and you are very welcome, by the way.'

'Thank you. Well, shall I come in and say hello and good-bye to them?'

Noel realised that he might have left her for ever on the doorstep, but then he was only half awake. It took him until about eleven, when he had his first vodka and Coke, to be fully in control of the day. Noel was absolutely certain that nobody at Hall's knew of his morning injection of alcohol and his mid-afternoon booster. He covered himself very carefully and always allowed a bottle of genuine diet Coke to peek out of his duffel bag. The vodka was added from a separate source when he was alone.

He brought the small American woman into the kitchen where his mother and father kissed her on the cheek and said this was a great day that Martin Lynch's daughter had come back to the land of her ancestors.

'See you this evening then, Noel,' she called.

'Yes, of course. I might be a bit late. Lots of things to catch up on. But settle in well ...'

'I will and thank you for agreeing to share your home with me.'

He left them to it. As he pulled the door to behind him he could hear the pride in his mother's voice as she showed off the newly decorated downstairs bedroom. And he could hear his cousin Emily cry out that it was just perfect.

Noel thought his father was very quiet today and last night. But then he was probably just imagining it. His father didn't have a care in the world, just as long as they made a fuss of him

in that hotel and while he was sure there would be the Rosary every evening, an annual visit to Lourdes to see the shrine and talk of going further afield one day, like maybe Rome or the Holy Land. Charles Lynch was lucky enough to be a man who was content with things the way they were. He didn't need to numb himself against the dead weight of days and nights by spending long hours drinking in Old Man Casey's.

Noel walked to the end of the road where he would catch his bus. He walked as he did every morning, nodding to people but seeing nothing, noting no details about his surroundings. He wondered mildly what that busy-looking American woman would make of it all here.

Probably she might stick it for about a week before she gave up in despair.

At the biscuit factory Josie told them all about the arrival of Emily who had found her own way to St Jarlath's Crescent as if she had been born and reared there. Josie said she was an extremely nice person who had offered to make the supper for everyone that night. They were just to tell her what they liked and didn't like and point her to the market. She didn't need to go to bed and rest, apparently, because she had slept overnight on the plane coming over. She had admired everything in the house and said that gardening was her hobby, so she would look out for a few plants when she went shopping. If they didn't mind, of course.

The other women said that Josie should consider herself very lucky. This American could have easily turned out to be very difficult indeed.

At the hotel, Charles was his normal, pleasant self to everyone he met. He carried suitcases in from taxis, he directed tourists out towards the sights of Dublin, he looked up the times of theatre performances, he looked down at the sad face

of a little fat King Charles spaniel that had been tied to the hotel railing. Charles knew this little dog: Caesar. It was often attached to Mrs Monty – an eccentric old lady who wore a huge hat and three strands of pearls, a fur coat and nothing else. If anyone angered her, she opened her coat, rendering them speechless.

The fact she had left the dog there meant that she must have been taken into the psychiatric hospital. If the past was anything to go by, she would discharge herself from the hospital after about three days and come to collect Caesar and take him back to his unpredictable life with her.

Charles sighed.

Last time, he had been able to conceal the dog in the hotel until Mrs Monty came back to get him, but things were different now. He would take the dog home at lunchtime. Josie wouldn't like it. Not at all. But St Francis had written the book as far as animals were concerned. If it came to a big, dramatic row Josie wouldn't go against St Francis. He hoped that his brother's daughter didn't have any allergies or attitudes towards dogs. She looked far too sensible.

Emily had spent a busy morning shopping. She was surrounded by food when Charles came in. Immediately, she made him a mug of tea and a cheese sandwich.

Charles was grateful for this. He had thought that he was about to miss lunch altogether. He introduced Emily to Caesar and told her some of the story behind his arrival in St Jarlath's Crescent.

Emily Lynch seemed to think it was the most natural thing in the world.

'I wish I had known he was coming. I could have got him a bone,' she said. 'Still, I met that nice Mr Carroll, your neighbour. He's a butcher. He might get me one.'

She hadn't been here five minutes and she had got to know the neighbours!

Charles looked at her with admiration. 'Well, aren't you a real bundle of energy,' he said. 'You took your retirement very early for someone as fit as you are.'

'Oh no, I didn't choose retirement,' Emily said, as she trimmed the pastry crust around a pie. 'No, indeed, I loved my job. They let me go. Well, they said I *must* go, actually.'

'Why? Why did they do that?' Charles was shocked.

'Because they thought that I was old and cautious and always very much the same. It was a question of my being the old style. The old guard. I would take children to visit galleries and exhibits. They would have a sheet of paper with twenty questions on it and they would spend a morning there trying to find answers. It would give them a great grounding in how to look at a picture or a sculpture. Well, I thought so anyway. Then came this new principal, a child himself with the notion that teaching art was all about free expression. He really wanted recent graduates who knew how to do all this. I didn't, so I had to go.'

'They can't sack you for being mature, surely?'

Charles was sympathetic. His own case was different. He was the public face of the hotel, they had told him, and these times meant the hotel's face must be a young face. That was logical in a cruel sort of way. But this Emily wasn't old. She wasn't fifty yet. They must have laws against that kind of discrimination.

'No, they didn't actually say I was dismissed. They just kept me in the background doing filing, away from the children, out of the art studio. It was unbearable, so I left. But they had forced me to go.'

'Were you upset?' Charles was very sympathetic.

'Oh yes, at the start. I was very upset indeed. It kind of

made nothing of all the work I had done for years. I had got accustomed to meeting people at art galleries who often said, “Miss Lynch, you started off my whole interest in art,” and so I thought it was all written off when they let me go. Like saying I had contributed nothing.’

Charles felt tears in his eyes. She was describing exactly his own years as porter in the hotel. Written off. That’s what he felt.

Emily had cheered up. She put twirly bits of pastry on top of the pie and cleared the kitchen table swiftly.

‘But my friend Betsy told me that I was mad to sit sulking in my corner. I should resign at once and set about doing what I had really wanted to. Begin the rest of my life, she called it.’

‘And did you?’ Charles asked.

Wasn’t America a wonderful place! *He* wouldn’t be able to do that here – not in a million years.

‘Yes, I did. I sat down and made a list of what I wanted to do. Betsy was right. If I had gotten a post in some other school maybe the same thing would have happened. I had a small savings account so I could afford to be without paid work for a while. Trouble was, I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do, so I did several things.

‘First I did a cookery course. Tra-la-la. That’s why I can make a chicken pie so quickly. And then I went on an intensive course and learned to use computers and the internet properly so I could get a job in any office if I wanted to. Then I went to this garden centre where they had window-box and planter classes. So now that I am full of skills, I decided to go and see the world.’

‘And Betsy? Did she do that too?’

‘No. She already understood the internet and she doesn’t want to cook because she’s always on a diet, but she did share the window-box addiction with me.’

‘And suppose they asked you back to your old job? Would you go?’

‘No. I can’t now, even if they *did* ask. No, these days I’m much too busy,’ Emily said.

‘I see,’ Charles nodded. He seemed about to say something else but stopped himself. He fussed about, getting more milk for the tea.

Emily knew he wanted to say something; she knew how to listen. He would say it eventually.

‘The thing is,’ he said slowly and with great pain, ‘the real thing is that these new brooms that are meant to be sweeping clean, they sweep away a lot of what was valuable and important as well as sweeping out cobwebs or whatever ...’

Emily saw it then. This would have to be handled carefully. She looked at him sympathetically.

‘Have another mug of tea, Uncle Charles.’

‘No, I have to get back,’ he said.

‘Do you? I mean, think about it for a moment, Uncle Charles. Do you have to? What more can they do to you? I mean, that they haven’t done already ...’

He gave her a long, level look.

She understood.

This woman he had never met until this morning realised, without having to be told, exactly what had happened to Charles Lynch. Something that his own wife and son hadn’t seen at all.

The chicken pie that evening was a great success. Emily had made a salad as well. They talked easily, all three of them, and Emily introduced the subject of her own retirement.

‘It’s just amazing, the very thing you most dread can turn out to be a huge blessing in disguise! I never realised until it was over that I spent so much of my life on trains and

cross-town buses. No wonder there were no hours left to learn the internet and small-scale gardening.’

Charles watched in admiration. Without ever appearing to have done so, she was making his path very smooth. He would tell Josie tomorrow, but maybe he might tell her now, this very minute.

It was much easier than he would ever have believed possible. He explained slowly that he had been thinking for a long time about leaving the hotel. The matter had come up recently in conversation and, amazingly, it turned out that it would suit the hotel too and so the departure would be by mutual agreement. All he had to do now was make sure that he was going to get some kind of reasonable compensation.

He said that for the whole afternoon his head had been bursting with ideas for what he would like to do.

Josie was taken aback. She looked at Charles anxiously in case this was just a front. Perhaps he was only blustering when inside he was very upset. But in as much as she could see, he seemed to be speaking from the heart.

‘I suppose it’s what Our Lord wants for you,’ she said piously. ‘Yes and I’m grabbing it with both hands.’

Charles Lynch was indeed telling the truth. He had not felt so liberated for a long time. Since talking to Emily today at lunchtime, he had begun to feel that there was a whole world out there.

Emily moved in and out clearing dishes, bringing in some dessert, and from time to time she entered the conversation easily. When her uncle said he had to walk Mrs Monty’s dog until she was released from wherever she was, Emily suggested that Charles could mind other people’s dogs as well.

‘That nice man, Paddy Carroll, the butcher, had a huge dog called Dimples that needs to lose at least ten pounds’ weight,’ she said enthusiastically.

‘I couldn’t ask Paddy for money,’ Charles protested.

Josie agreed with him. ‘You see Emily, Paddy and Molly Carroll are neighbours. It would be odd to ask them to pay Charles to walk that big, foolish dog. It would sound very grasping.’

‘I see that, of course, and you wouldn’t want to be grasping, but then again he might see a way to giving you some lamb chops or best ground beef from time to time.’

Emily was a great believer in barter and Charles seemed to think that this was completely possible.

‘But would there be a real job, Emily, you know, a *profession*, a life like Charles had in the hotel? Where he was a person who mattered?’

‘I wouldn’t survive just with dog walking alone, but maybe I could get a job in a kennels, I’d really love that,’ Charles said.

‘And if there was anything else that you had both *really* wanted to do?’ Emily was gentle. ‘You know, I so enjoyed looking up all my roots and making a family tree. Not that I’m suggesting that to you, of course.’

‘Well, do you know what we always wanted to do . . .?’ Josie began tentatively.

‘No. What was that?’ Emily was interested in everything so she was easy to talk to.

Josie continued, ‘We always thought that it was a pity that St Jarlath was never properly celebrated in this neighbourhood. I mean, our street is called after him, but nobody you’d meet knows a thing about him. Charles and I were thinking we might raise money to erect a statue to his memory.’

‘A statue to St Jarlath! Imagine!’ Emily was surprised. Perhaps she had been wrong to have encouraged them to be free thinkers. ‘Wasn’t he rather a long time ago?’ She was careful not to throw any cold water on Josie’s plan, especially when she saw Charles light up with enthusiasm.

Josie waved this objection away. ‘Oh, that’s no problem. If he’s a saint does it matter if he died only a few years back or in the sixth century?’ Josie said.

‘The *sixth* century?’ This was even worse than Emily had feared.

‘Yes, he died around AD 520 and his Feast Day is 6 June.’

‘And that would be a very suitable time of the year for a little procession to his shrine.’ Charles was busy planning it all already.

‘And was he from around these parts?’ Emily asked.

Apparently not. Jarlath was from the other side of the country, the Atlantic coast. He had set up the first Archdiocese of Tuam. He had taught other great holy men, even other saints: St Brendan of Clonfert and St Colman of Coyne. Places that were miles away.

‘But there was always a devotion to him here,’ Charles explained.

‘Why would they have named the street after him otherwise?’ Josie wanted to know.

Emily wondered what would have happened if her father Martin Lynch had stayed here. Would he have been a simple, easily pleased person like Charles and Josie, instead of the discontented drunk that he had turned into in New York? But all this business about the saint who had died miles away, hundreds of years ago, was a fantasy, surely?

‘Of course, the problem would be raising the money for this campaign about the statue *and* actually earning a living at the same time,’ Emily said.

That was apparently no problem at all. They had saved money for years, hoping to put it towards the education of Noel as a priest. To give a son to God. But it hadn’t taken. They always intended that those savings be given to God in some way, and now this was the perfect opportunity.

Emily Lynch told herself that she must not try to change the world. No time now to consider all the good causes that that money could have gone towards – many of them even run by the Catholic Church. Emily would have preferred to see it all going to look after Josie and Charles, and give them a little comfort after a life of working long, hard hours for little reward. They had to endure what to them must have been a tragedy – their son’s vocation ‘hadn’t taken’, to use their own words. But there were some irresistible forces that could never be fought with logic and practicality. Emily Lynch knew this for certain.

Noel had been through a long, bad day. Mr Hall had asked him twice if he was all right. There was something behind the question, something menacing. When he asked for the third time, Noel enquired politely why he was asking.

‘There was an empty bottle, which appears to have contained gin before it was empty,’ Mr Hall had said.

‘And what has that to do with me and whether I’m all right or not?’ Noel had asked. He was confident now, emboldened even.

Mr Hall looked at him long and sternly under his bushy eyebrows.

‘That’s as may be, Noel. There’s many a fellow taking the plane to some faraway part of the world who would be happy to do the job you are meant to be doing.’

He had moved on and Noel had seen other workers look away.

Noel had never known Mr Hall like this, usually there was a kindly remark, some kind of encouragement about continuing in this work of matching docketts to sales slips, of looking through ledgers and invoices, and doing the most lowly clerk duties imaginable.

Mr Hall seemed to think that Noel could do better and had made many positive suggestions in earlier days. Times when there was some hope. But not now. This was more than a reprimand, it was a warning. It had shaken him and on the way home he found his feet taking him into Casey's big, comforting pub. He vaguely recalled having had one too many the last time he'd been there but he hesitated only for a moment before going in.

Mossy, the son of Old Man Casey, looked nervous. 'Ah, Noel, it's yourself.'

'Could I have a pint, please, Mossy?'

'Ah now, that's not such a good idea, Noel. You know you're barred. My father said—'

'Your father says a lot of things in the heat of the moment. That barring order is long over now.'

'No, it's not, Noel. I'm sorry, but there it is.'

Noel felt a tic in his forehead. He must be careful now.

'Well, that's his decision and yours. As it happens, I have given up drink and what I was actually asking for was a pint of lemonade.'

Mossy looked at him open-mouthed. Noel Lynch off the liquor? Wait till his father heard this!

'But if I'm not welcome in Casey's, then I'll have to take my custom elsewhere. Give my best to your father.'

Noel made as if to leave.

'When did you give up the gargle?' Mossy asked.

'Oh, Mossy, that's not any of your concern these days. You must go ahead serving alcohol to folks here. Am I interfering with your right to do this? I am most definitely not.'

'Wait a minute, Noel,' Mossy called out to him.

Noel said he was sorry but he had to go now. And he walked, head high, out of the place where he had spent so much of his leisure time.

There was a cold wind blowing down the street as Noel leaned against the wall and thought over what he had just said. He had only spoken in order to annoy Mossy, a foolish, mumbling mouthpiece for his father's decisions. Now he had to live with his words. He could never drink in Casey's again.

He would have to go to that place where Declan Carroll's father went with his huge bear of a dog. The place where nobody had 'friends' or 'mates' or 'people' they met there. They called them 'Associates'. Muttie Scarlet was always about to confer with his Associates over the likely outcome of a big race or a soccer match. Not a place that Noel had enjoyed up to now.

Wouldn't it be much easier if he really *had* given up drink? Then Mr Hall could find whatever bottles he liked. Mr Casey would be regretful and apologetic, which would be a pleasure to see. Noel himself would have all the time in the world to go back to doing the things he really wanted. He might go back and get a business certificate so as to qualify for a promotion. Maybe even move out of St Jarlath's Crescent.

Noel went for a long, thoughtful walk around Dublin, up the canal, down through the Georgian squares. He looked into restaurants where people of his own age were sitting across tables from girls. Noel wasn't a social outcast, he was just in a world of his own making where that kind of woman was never available. And why was this? Because Noel was too busy with his snout in the trough.

It would not be like this any more. He was going to give himself the twin gifts of sobriety and time: much more time. He checked his watch before letting himself into number 23 St Jarlath's Crescent. They would all be safely in bed by now. This was such an earth-shaking decision, he didn't want to muddy it all up with conversation.

He was wrong. They were all up, awake and alert at the

kitchen table. Apparently his father was going to leave the hotel where he had worked all his life. They appeared to have adopted a tiny King Charles spaniel called Caesar, with enormous eyes and a soulful expression. His mother was planning to work fewer hours at the biscuit factory. His cousin Emily had met most of the people in the neighbourhood and become firm friends with them all. And, most alarming of all, they were about to start a campaign to build a statue to some saint who, if he had ever existed, had died fifteen hundred years ago.

They had all been normal when he left the house this morning. What could have happened?

He wasn't able to manage his usual manoeuvre of sliding into his room and retrieving a bottle from the box labelled 'Art Supplies', which contained mainly unused paintbrushes and unopened bottles of gin or wine.

Not, of course, that he was ever going to drink them again.

He had forgotten this. A sudden heavy gloom settled over him as he sat there, trying to comprehend the bizarre changes that were about to take place in his home. There would be no comforting oblivion afterwards, instead a night of trying to avoid the art supplies box or maybe even pouring the contents down the handbasin in his room.

He struggled to make out what his father was talking about: walking dogs, minding pets, raising money, restoring St Jarlath to his rightful place. In all his years of drinking, Noel had not come across anything as surreal and unexpected as this scene. And all this on a night when he was totally sober.

Noel shifted in his seat slightly and tried to catch the glance of his cousin Emily.

She must be responsible for all this sudden change of heart: the idea that today was the first day of everybody's life. Mad, dangerous stuff in a household that had known no change for decades.

In the middle of the night Noel woke up and decided that giving up drink was something that should not be taken lightly or casually. He would do it next week when the world had settled down. But when he reached for the bottle in the box he felt, with a clarity that he had not often known, that somehow next week would never come. So he poured the contents of two bottles of gin down his sink, followed by two bottles of red wine.

He went back to bed and tossed and turned until he heard his alarm clock next morning.

In her bedroom, Emily opened her laptop and sent a message to Betsy:

I feel that I have lived here for several years and yet I have not spent one night in the country!

I have arrived at a time of amazing change. Everyone in this household has begun some kind of journey. My father's brother was fired from his job as a hotel porter and is now going to go into a dog-walking business, his wife is hoping to reduce her hours at her place of employment and set up a petition to get a statue erected to a saint who has been dead for – wait for it – fifteen hundred years!

The son of the house, who is some kind of recluse, has chosen this, of all days, to give up his love affair with alcohol. I can hear him flushing bottles of the stuff down the drain in his bedroom.

Why did I think it would be peaceful and quiet here, Betsy? Have I discovered anything about life or am I condemned to wander the earth learning little and understanding nothing?

Don't answer this question. It's not really a question, more a speculation. I miss you.

*Love,
Emily*