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The Return Journey

Written by Maeve Binchy

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THE RETURN JOURNEY

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The Return Journey





Mother Darling,
It's as beautiful as you said. Having a really wonderful time. Will write soon. Keep well and happy.

Gina

Freda,
The card I sent the other day was for the neighbours. Or rather for you and your paranoia about the neighbours. Anyway, its purpose was that it could be left around and looked at, spied on and inspected by them. The truth is that the place is a shambles, it's cold and it's raining so hard I can't see whether it's green or yellow. The truth is that I still feel hurt and unhappy and not at all like writing letters. The truth is that I must care about you a great deal, otherwise why am I letting that call from the airport get to me so badly? I

believed you when you said you'd watch for a letter or an email. I will write but just now there's nothing to say.

Try not to worry about what people think and say. Honestly, they aren't thinking and saying much about us at all. They have their own problems.

Gina

Darling Gina,
You called me Freda instead of Mom. I wondered about that for a long while. I suppose it means you're growing up, growing away. I told myself it meant you liked me more, thought of me as an equal, a friend. Then I told myself that it meant you liked me less, that you were distancing yourself.

For someone who claims there is nothing to say, you sure have a lot to say. You say I am paranoid about the neighbours. Well, let me tell you that Mrs Franks came in to say she couldn't help reading your nice postcard and wasn't it wonderful that Gina was having such a good time. So! Do they look or do they not? You say that you are upset by the call from the airport. It was you who called me, Gina. I just said write to me often. You are the one who was crying, I was the one who says what

any normal mother says to a daughter travelling abroad wherever they're going. I said, I'd like it if you wrote to me, is that so emotionally draining? Does it deserve the lecture, the sermon . . . the order not to live my life by other people's dictates? But I only say all this so that you'll know I'm still me, still the same prickly jumpy thin-skinned mother I always was. I like you to call me Freda. Don't stop now because you think I've taken it and run with it, that I've read into it more than there is. And don't stop writing to me, Gina. You know I didn't want you to go to Ireland this winter. But I did say . . . I always said it was an unreasonable feeling on my part. There are so many things I want to hear about Ireland, and so many I don't.

I think I want you to tell me that it's beautiful and sad and that I did the only possible thing by leaving it. And leaving it so finally. I think that's what I want you to say in your letters. And when you come home. I love you Gina, if that's not too draining.

Freda

I'm calling you nothing in this letter in case we get another long analysis. I had an odd day today. I left the B&B which is fine, small

room, small house, nice woman, kept telling me about her son in Boston who's an Illegal. I thought she meant the IRA but she meant working in a bar without a proper visa or a green card. Anyway I was walking down the street, small houses, hundreds of kids roaming round when school's out, the country is like a big school playground in many ways. And I saw a bus. It said 'Dunglass'. It was half full. I put out my hand. And it stopped. I asked the driver 'Where is Dunglass?' and he told me . . . But I said isn't Dunglass not a house, a big house. He said no it was a town. Mom, why didn't you tell me it was a town? What else did you not tell me? I got off the bus. I told him I had changed my mind. Back at the B&B the woman was happy. She had heard from her son the Illegal. It was cold in Boston, lots of ice and snow – is it snowing at home? I asked her about Dunglass. She said it was a village. She said it was a nice kind of a place, quiet, peaceful but not a place to go in the middle of winter. It would scald your heart she said. Why didn't you say it was a village that would scald your heart? Why did you let me think for years that it was a big old house with Dunglass on the gate? You even told me what it meant. Dun, a fort and Glass, meaning

green. That much is true, I checked. But what else is?

Gina

Gina my love,
I wish you'd call. It's five days since you wrote. It might well be another five days before you get this, ten days could have changed everything. You may have been there by now for all I know.

I never told you it was a house. Never. Our house didn't have a name that's all, it was a big house, it did have gates, it was the biggest house in Dunglass which wasn't saying anything great. I just didn't talk about any of it. There are things in your life we don't go over and over. Go see Dunglass, go on a day when there is light and even watery winter sunshine. Go on a day when you might be able to walk down by the lake. Go see the house. Your grandmother is dead and in the churchyard on the hill. There is no one who will know you. But tell people if you want to. Tell them your mother came from Dunglass and left it. I don't think you will tell them. You are always saying that most people are not remotely interested in the lives and doings of others.

The snow has been falling for days now and I wish you were here with me. It never snows in Ireland the way it does here. It's one of the things I had to get used to. I love you and I will tell you anything you want to know.

Your mother Freda, in case you have forgotten my name

Freda,
Stop playing silly games. And let us stop having an argument by mail. Yes I will go to Dunglass. When I'm ready.

And don't talk to me about my grandmother. She was never allowed to be a grandmother to me. Her name was not spoken to me, I got no letters, no presents . . . there were no pictures of me in a Granny's Brag Book on this side of the Atlantic. The woman who lies in the churchyard on the hill is your mother. That's the relationship. You might as well face it. Her name was Mrs Hayes. That's all I know. You were Freda Hayes, so my Granny was Mrs Hayes. Don't lecture me, Freda, about forgetting your name, you never even told me hers.

Gina

Dear Gina,

I have begun this twelve times, this is the thirteenth attempt and I will send it no matter what. Her name was Annabel. She was tall and straight. She walked as if she owned Dunglass. And in a way she did. It was her family who had the big house. My father married in as they say. I never knew why they sent me away to boarding school, why they made me leave such a lovely home. Peggy, who looked after me, used to whisper about rows, and ornaments being broken, but I couldn't believe that my dad could be like Peggy said he was, two men, one man sober and another man drunk. Everyone admired my mother, because she ran the place. Even after my father went away she never asked for sympathy. She was cold, Gina, she made herself cold and hard as ice. She used to say to me that we didn't need their sympathy, their pity. We needed only their admiration. Perhaps some of that has rubbed off on me, perhaps I care too much about people thinking well of me, rather than being natural. She had only one daughter, as I have. We could have been more alike than I ever realised. I can't write any more. I love you. I wish you were here. Or I were there.

No, I don't wish I were there, I can never go to Dunglass. But I want you to go and to get some peace and some of your history from it.

Freda

Dear Freda,
Thanks for yours. I think I'll cool it a bit on all the emotion. Don't forget I have Italian blood as well. The mix is too heady. I could explode. The days are getting brighter, I've been to Wicklow a lot, it's so beautiful . . . and I went further south, Wexford . . . the river bank is like something from a movie . . . and Waterford. The Illegal is home from Boston, his name is Shay. He is very funny about Boston, but I think he wasn't happy there, he says his dream is to have a little cottage in Wicklow, and write songs. It's not a bad dream.
I have no dreams really.

I'm doing an extra-mural course in the University about Irish history. It was full of dreams.

I'll give you my Irish number in case you're lonely and sad. But don't call just for talking. It's very artificial. Shay says that when he and his mother used to talk, they both put the phone down feeling like hell. We don't want

that Freda. Now that we're rubbing along OK. Yes of course I love you.

Gina

Gina,
It was so different then. You can't imagine. I remember the year I met your father. All right. All right. The year I met Gianni . . . the man I married. Does that satisfy you? When I met Gianni I tried to explain all about Ireland to him. We sat in a café, it was a cold wet day. He was an Italian American. He talked to me about America. It seems like a hundred years ago. And Gianni wanted to know where I was from, so I took him home to Dunglass. And Mother laughed at him because he told her how poor his parents had been when they got the boat from Italy.

And I didn't want to sleep with him, Gina, I was twenty-three like you are now, but in those days we were so different. Not just me . . . everyone, I promise you. But I hated Mother so much for scorning him. And I despised her for saying that she hadn't gone through so much just for me to throw myself away on the son of a chambermaid and a hall porter. Gianni had told with pride how his parents, your grandparents, had got these jobs.

And Mother said it in front of Peggy. Just letting Peggy know how little she thought of Peggy's role in life.

I was glad Gina, I was glad when I was pregnant even though I was frightened at the thought of living with Gianni for ever. I felt it wouldn't last, that we didn't know each other, and that when we did we might be sorry. But we were never sorry, we had you. And you will admit, that difficult as I have been, and stubborn, I have never said anything bad about your father. He thought he could live in Dunglass and marry in like my father had. But my mother hunted him, and she hunted me too because I wouldn't stay one minute to listen to her harsh words.

I left my room as it was, my books and letters and papers. I don't know what happened to them. Ever. I closed that door and never opened it.

When Gianni left me I didn't feel as sad as people thought. I knew it would happen. I had my home in America, my daughter, my job in the bookshop, my friends. I may marry again.

I won't of course, but I say to myself cheerfully like Peggy used to say, it may be a sunny day after all, little Freda. My heart is heavy when I think of Peggy. I didn't write to

her because I didn't write to the big house, it would have been twisting a knife too harshly into Mother.

Her name was Peggy O'Brien, Gina, they lived in a cottage by the lake. I tried to write after Mother died. But there weren't any words. You were always good with words Gina.

Love Freda

This is a postcard of Dunglass village. I bought it in a Dublin shop. Has it changed much, Mother? I'm going there tomorrow. I'll write and tell you everything. I miss you.

Gina

The time gap is too long. I called you at the B&B but Shay's mother told me you were still away. You didn't say you were taking Shay with you. It's nearly a quarter of a century since I took Gianni there. Are we going to repeat history all over again? Dunglass hasn't changed very much. I had forgotten it was so small.

I wait to hear anything you may write.

Freda

Dearest Freda,

Your letter was cold, there were no dears or darlings or loves anywhere. Are you afraid that like my mother and my grandmother, I will marry hastily the wrong man who will leave me as happened to you and to Annabel? I went to her grave and I laid a big bunch of spring flowers on it. The countryside is glorious. There were little ducklings on the lake, and moorhens and two big swans. You never told me any of that. You never told me that you had a pony and that you fell off and broke your arm. You never told me about Peggy's big soft bosom where I cried like you cried. She bought a lot of your things at the auction. She said she didn't want strangers picking up your books and your treasures. She called them treasures, Freda, and she has them in a room. Waiting for you to come home and collect them.

She was left nothing in the will. It all went to charity. She bought them from her wages because she knew one day you'd come back.

I told her it would probably be in June. When the sun shines long hours over the lake and the roses are all out on her cottage. Not far from the one that Shay and I are looking at with our hearts full of hope.

Send me an open postcard to Shay's house so that his mother will know how much you and I love each other. See I am like you after all. I want them to think well of us. In many ways I'm glad you kept it from me, it came as such a rainbow of happiness. But don't keep it from yourself any more. There are no ghosts in Dunglass. Only hedges and flowers and your great friends Peggy, Shay and

Gina