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Opening Extract from...

A Week in Winter

Written by Maeve Binchy

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A Week in Winter

Maeve Binchy



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For dear generous Gordon
who makes life great every single day.

Chicky

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

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

Stoneybridge was a West of Ireland paradise for children during the summer, but the summer was short and most of the time it was wet and wild and lonely on the Atlantic coast. Still, there were caves to explore, cliffs to climb, birds' nests to discover and wild sheep with great curly horns to investigate. And then there was Stone House. Chicky loved to play in the huge overgrown garden. Sometimes the Miss Sheedys, three

sisters who owned the house, and were ancient, let her play at dressing up in their old clothes.

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

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

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

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

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

Chicky remembered a sweater they had in stock which they

had used to be photographed. Perhaps Walter Starr might like to buy that one – it wasn't exactly new but it was nearly new.

He said it would be perfect.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Walter Starr said they would stay in New York with friends of his. He was going to drop out of law school, it wasn't really right for him. If we had several lives, well then, yes, maybe,

but since we only have one life it wasn't worth spending it studying law.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So Chicky left without it.

At Shannon airport there were crowds waving goodbye to their children setting out for a new life in the United States.

There was nobody to wave Chicky goodbye, but she and Walter didn't care. They had their whole life ahead of them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

mention that she had heard about Mary's romance with Sonny O'Hara having ended.

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

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

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

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

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

And in many ways it was.

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

She still heard news from home but it became more and more remote.

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

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

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

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

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

He was so restless these days; the smallest things upset him. He liked her to be always a cheerful, loving Chicky. So that's

what she was. Inside, she was tired and anxious Chicky, too, but not showing any of it.

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

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

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

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

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

It took ages for it to sink in.

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

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

Endlessly patient, he had assured her that it was nobody's fault. This is what happened – love bloomed, love died. It was

sad, of course, these things always were. But they would stay friends and look back on this time together as a fond memory.

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

But Chicky would never go back.

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

What Chicky also needed was a job.

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

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

Chicky could not sleep when Walter left.

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

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

She just smiled at him through her tears.

It took her four days to find a place to live and work. One

of the workmen on the building next to the diner had a fall and was brought in to the diner to recover.

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

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

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

He had been right. Mrs Cassidy took over.

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

Chicky looked at her with admiration.

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

Next day Chicky called to Cassidy's Select Accommodation.

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

'Why did you come to me?' Mrs Cassidy had asked.

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

'Too busy for that,' Mrs Cassidy had admitted.

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

'How old are you?' Mrs Cassidy asked.

'I'll be twenty-one tomorrow.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs Cassidy always dressed nicely when she served supper, and somehow the men had followed suit. They all washed and changed their shirts before sitting down at her table. If you expected good manners, you got good manners in return.

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

And in return, no questions were asked of Chicky.

It was a very restful relationship.

Mrs Cassidy had stressed the importance of getting Chicky her green card, and registering to vote in the city council to make sure that the necessary number of Irish officials got

returned to power. She explained how you got a post-office box number so that you could mail without anyone knowing where you lived, or anything about your business.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She wrote and told them in Stoneybridge that Walter had to go for a week to LA on business, and that he had suggested she use the time to come to Ireland. She would just love to

come back home for a short visit and she hoped that would be all right with everyone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When she was back in Stoneybridge she would walk for miles around and talk to the neighbours, filling them in on her mythical life on the other side of the Atlantic. Few people from these parts ever travelled as far as the States – she was safe in knowing that there would be no unexpected visitors. Her facade would never be brought crashing down by a surprise arrival from Stoneybridge at a non-existent apartment.

Soon she was part of the scenery.

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

'We always know it's July when we see Chicky back walking the beaches,' the three Sheedy sisters would say to her.

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

This pleased people.

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

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

But then it all changed.

The eldest of her nieces, Orla, was now a teenager. Next year she hoped to go to America with Brigid, one of the tribe of red-haired O'Haras. Could she stay for a little bit with Aunty Chicky and Uncle Walter, she wondered? They would be no trouble at all.

Chicky didn't miss a beat.

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

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

'Your uncle Walter will have you met at Kennedy, you'll come home and freshen up and straight away I'll take you on a

Circle Line Tour around Manhattan on a boat so that you'll get your bearings. Then another day we'll go to Ellis Island and to Chinatown. We'll have a *great* time.'

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

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

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

This made-up life had been her reward.

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

No satisfactory thoughts came to her when she was back in her New York life. It was a life nobody in Stoneybridge had dreamed of. Chicky could see no solution to the problem of Orla and her friend Brigid O'Hara. It was too aggravating.

Why couldn't the girl have chosen Australia, like so many other young Irish kids? Why did it have to be New York?

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

'I have a problem,' she said simply.

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

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

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

'What?'

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

'It wouldn't work.'

'It happens every day, Chicky.'

And as usual, Mrs Cassidy was right.

It worked.

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

Her mother cried down the phone.

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

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

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

'Believe me, he understood.'

'But can we write to his family?'

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

'Poor people. They must be heartbroken.'

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

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

She would have to move on.

This was very mysterious to those who read her letters home. Perhaps she had been unhinged by grief. After all, they had been so wrong about Walter Starr in life. Maybe they should respect him in death. Her friends now understood her need for solitude. She hoped that her family would do that also.

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

Not only would there be no welcoming Uncle Walter coming to meet them at the airport, but there would be no holiday at all. Now there was no possibility of Aunty Chicky to take them on this Circle Line Tour round the island of Manhattan. She was moving on, apparently.

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

They kept in touch and told her all the local news. The O'Haras had gone mad and were buying up property around Stoneybridge to develop holiday homes. Two of the old Miss

Sheedys had been carried away by pneumonia in the winter. The old person's friend, it was called; it ended life peacefully for those who couldn't catch their breath.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I understand, dear, everything turns out differently, doesn't it? I always hoped that you would come and live in this house. That was my dream.'

And then it began.

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

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

Mrs Cassidy had always said why not us just as much as anyone else?

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

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

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

'I have been too long away,' Chicky said.

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

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

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

'A hotel? Really? Run a hotel?'

'You'd make it special, a place for people like you.'

'There's no one like me, no one as odd and complicated.'

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

Chicky was wordless.

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

When Chicky got back to New York, Mrs Cassidy listened to the plans, nodding with approval.

'You really think I can do it?'

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

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

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

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

'I should go now while Queenie is alive, I suppose.'

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

'How will I explain it all . . . to everybody?'

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

'How can it be the truth?'