



A Few of the Girls: Stories

By Maeve Binchy



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From Maeve Binchy's earliest writings to the most recent, her work is filled with wisdom and common sense and also a sharp, often witty voice that is insightful and reaches out to her readers around the world and of all ages. Whether it is one of her best-selling novels or a short story, Maeve shows us that times may have changed, but people often remain the same: they fall in love, sometimes unsuitably; they have hopes and dreams; they have deep, long-standing friends whose secrets are shared; they go on holidays and celebrate new jobs . . .

A Few of the Girls is a glorious collection of the very best of her short story writing, stories that were written over the decades—some published in magazines, others for friends as gifts, many for charity benefits. The stories are all filled with the signature warmth and humor that have always been an essential part of Maeve's appeal.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A short story by Binchy is immediately recognizable for its blessed brevity, swift pace, poignant wit and unfailingly wise and gentle psychology. This posthumously published collection gathers 36 stories from various nook’s in Binchy’s writing life. . . Honestly, every one is marvelous. . . . *A Few of the Girls* is a string of gems, and, despite its title, it is not just fiction for women, any more than it is just a book for Irish and English readers.” —Pamela Miller, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Exploring the complex nature of relationships in the melodic prose that became her trademark, Binchy charts the dynamics of romance, the politics of family and the stipulations of friendship. When it comes to capturing the caprices of the human heart, she’s unbeatable. Readers will recognize themselves in her nuanced portrayals of women and men whose goals and regrets, dreams and disappointments never feel less than true-to-life. There’s no better antidote to a raw March evening than a dose of vintage Binchy.” —Julie Hale, *BookPage*

“The stories cover a broad range of human experiences for which Binchy had a unique talent for expressing . . . There are no flashy literary pyrotechnics, just solid, old-fashioned storytelling. Binchy displays a deep understanding of human nature that strikes a balance between idealists and realists, the cynical and the hopeful . . . At times whimsical, at times somber, Binchy had a keen sense for the nuances of relationships, and the inherent contradictions and quirks of human behavior. *A Few of the Girls* is a fitting tribute to a beloved and much-missed writer.” —Eleanora Buckbee, *Everday eBook*

“Binchy’s unique voice is reminiscent of a letter from an old friend.” —Vicki Briner, *Library Journal*

“In true Binchy fashion, these gentle stories revolve around universal themes of love, loyalty, friendship, compassion, and perseverance. The exploration of human relationships never ceases to fascinate and the author’s ability to empathetically depict the ups and downs of ordinary people living in authentic circumstances translates well to a briefer format. Tying all the stories together is, of course, their trademark comfy settings, and devoted fans will relish another armchair visit to Ireland.” —Margaret Flanagan, *Booklist*

“Short stories that thrill, entertain and delight readers like only Binchy can. . . . Without a doubt, Binchy is a masterful storyteller. In this work is a variety of stories that appeal to the heart and mind.” —Tmoura Gardener, *The Baton Rouge Advocate*

“The stories bring to life well-developed characters, often in the space of a few paragraphs, and brim with Maeve’s warmth and common sense. She writes particularly well on loneliness, and about the hopes and fears of young people on the cusp of adulthood.” —*Irish Independent*

“This new collection of Maeve’s beloved short stories will force you to put down your smartphone in favour of your favourite armchair and this hardback. Featuring some of her best works it is a fine tribute to a very fine author.” —*Image*

“These stories are full of warmth and humour . . . easy to read and an ideal present for any of her fans.”

—*Woman's Way*

“The wit, humanity and truths of dearly departed Maeve Binchy live on in her absorbing fictions as this collection of 41 stories proves.” —*RTE Guide*

About the Author

MAEVE BINCHY was born in County Dublin and educated at the Holy Child convent in Killiney and at University College, Dublin. After a spell as a teacher she joined *The Irish Times*. Her first novel, *Light a Penny Candle*, was published in 1982, and she went on to write more than twenty books, all of them best sellers. Several have been adapted for film and television, most notably *Circle of Friends* and *Tara Road*, which was an Oprah's Book Club selection. She was married to the writer and broadcaster Gordon Snell for thirty-five years, and died in 2012 at the age of seventy-two.

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The Bargain

When Cara met Jim at a party the rest of the world seemed to disappear; they stood looking at each other with delight and listening to each other in fascination, as if they were old friends.

When the evening was over, they knew they would meet again and everyone else knew as well.

So they met the following day for lunch, and that turned into a walk beside the canal, and they spent so long over a cup of coffee that the waitress had to ask them to order another one or leave.

They were both aged twenty-eight, they loved travel and jazz and cooking and dogs.

His mother had died three years ago. Her father had died at the same time.

Jim knew the fellow who was giving the party because he had been on the same hurling team as him, way back when they were kids.

Cara knew him because he was a driving instructor and he had helped her to get her test.

Cara was a short story writer. She had gone to the party to celebrate having finished her latest collection of stories.

Jim sold agricultural machinery. He had come to Dublin to celebrate a big sale and his father making him a partner in the business.

Finally, they hit one problem.

Cara lived in Dublin. Jim lived two hundred miles away in the country.

He was going back home the following morning. So they talked nearly all night about what they would do and finally, exhausted, they agreed that Cara would make the journey to Jim's part of the world the next weekend.

They made a bargain.

If Cara hated it she was to say so. If she thought that she could manage to write her stories there, and that she wouldn't miss her Dublin life too much, then she would say that and they would get married as soon as possible.

That's how sure they were in less than forty-eight hours.

So they both waited nervously for Cara's visit.

It involved a train journey, followed by a bus trip. Jim was standing there waiting at the bus stop. Cara's heart leaped when she saw him look anxiously at the bus in case she might not be on board. She saw the smile light up his face. He was so generous and warm.

Please may this not be a desperate place, she prayed silently.

Jim couldn't leave his father and the business they had both built up. She knew that. And she would be the one who should move. She lived at home with her mother and a big family of brothers and sisters. Her

younger sister would get Cara's bedroom. Life would go on without her. But Jim could not possibly leave home. His father and his four sisters depended on him to keep the business going. Surely it couldn't be too bad a place? It had produced Jim, after all. But the countryside looked very wild and woolly as the bus had hurtled along. Frightening-looking goats, or sheep maybe, but probably goats. They had terrifying curvy horns. Small, rough fields divided by stone walls . . . It was very far from anywhere, anywhere normal. But she nailed a smile on her face and he held her in his arms for a long time. "I was afraid you might not come," he said.

They drove together down one of the four streets in the town and out into the countryside. The house where Jim lived had old roses in the garden and sweet peas, and the grass had been freshly cut. "I did that this morning," Jim said. "I was too excited to do anything else. They wouldn't let me near work in case I gave the machinery away."

His father was stooped over a stick, standing at the door to welcome them.

"He told me that you were a lovely girl, Cara, and he didn't exaggerate," he said with a big, broad smile just like his son's.

Jim's sisters were in the kitchen, trying not to look too eager to examine her. The eldest one was Rose. The bossy one, Jim had said. She was married to a rich man about twenty miles away. A miserly man, Jim had said, who didn't like Rose wasting his earnings on things like hairdos and clothes. She was very forthright, he said, sometimes too forthright. Rose looked Cara up and down.

"We don't often have visitors," she said, "but we've prepared a room for you. It will be separate rooms, I'm afraid. This is my father's house and we have standards."

"I'm glad to hear it," Cara replied with spirit. "It would have been extremely embarrassing if it had been otherwise. Jim and I don't know each other very well yet, and certainly not well enough to share a room."

The other girls giggled. And even Rose looked at her with some respect.

Cara had won that round.

Jim had said that he would build a house nearer to the town. He had the land already and she would help him choose what kind of house. They would have a big studio where Cara would write, a small office where Jim would do his accounts, and plenty of rooms for when the children came along.

Together they would plant herbs and vegetables and flowers.

She looked around the table as they sat down for a late lunch; a lunch in her honor, with a full turnout to inspect and welcome her. Would these be her closest friends and contacts from now on if she were to make this giant leap and live here?

Could she bear trying to keep Rose in her place and to encourage the awkward, shyer younger ones, who seemed hesitant of themselves and doubting that they had anything to say unless it was drawn out of them?

Would she become involved in the machinery that Jim and his father were buying and selling?

Would she find anything to write about in this empty landscape and the small town with the four streets, one church, seventeen shops, and five public houses?

It would be ridiculous to make a decision on the basis of one weekend.

And anyway, Jim would have to come and meet *her* family and get to know them too. They didn't need to rush things, did they?

Then she looked across the table at him, his face beaming with pride that she was there, and she knew that there was no point in hanging about. This really *was* the kind of man she had dreamed of and never met.

What did it matter where they lived, really?

They would not let Cara help with the washing up. Cara noticed that Rose filled a container with leftover food. "Waste not, want not," she said when she saw she was being observed.

"Oh, you're so right. Very sensible," Cara said hastily.

The younger girls took her on a tour to show her everything: the hens and geese, the old donkey, the orchard and the cow in the far field.

They loved this place where they had grown up.

They also loved their big brother.

“He never brought anyone home before,” said one.

“So we knew you were special,” said another.

“He talked about you all week,” said the third.

Then Jim came and drove her into town. They walked around and he saluted almost everyone he met.

“We’ll have a drink,” he said.

“Which is your local?” Cara asked.

“In a place like this, with a job like mine, they’re *all* my local,” Jim said and he brought her into Ryan’s.

He had obviously told everyone in the place about her. Cara realized that they were all expecting to meet her.

She shook hands with a dozen people who all said to Jim that he had done well for himself up in Dublin.

Amazing in the fumes of traffic and all the noise that he had managed to find such a lovely girl.

Then they went to Walsh’s pub and the other three.

In every place they had heard she was coming and Cara began to get edgy, as if she was some kind of traveling exhibition instead of a girl down from Dublin for the weekend.

Jim had a lemonade in each place and so did Cara. She felt full of fizz and bubbles. Only the café and the garage to call on and then they could go home.

“They all think you’re wonderful,” Jim said, “and so do I.”

She felt trapped and imprisoned by this marvelous man. She felt that it was all happening too quickly.

In a moment he would introduce her to the priest and they would set a day and then she would spend the rest of her life in this small, faraway place.

“It’s too soon, Jim,” she said, almost in tears. “You’re lovely. It’s *all* lovely. But it’s gathering too much speed, like something rolling downhill.”

“We had a bargain,” he said sadly. “If you didn’t like it you were to say so.”

“I can’t say yes or no in twenty minutes,” Cara begged.

“So it’s no then . . .” His face was lined with disappointment.

They drove back to Jim’s home in silence. His father and the girls were waiting inside eagerly. Rose had gone home to her mean husband, taking a plastic box of supper. Cara realized she hadn’t known any of these people a week ago and now she was expected to come and make her life with them.

It wasn’t fair. She *had* to have time to get used to it.

The supper wasn’t as jolly as the lunch had been. Jim said nothing at all and one by one the others let their chatter die down.

“I’m sure you must be tired, Cara,” Jim’s father said. “You’ll be needing an early night.”

She looked at him gratefully.

“It has been a long day. Wonderful. But it had a lot of people in it,” she said, and there was a chorus of good nights.

Jim looked like a child who had lost his lollipop.

In her bedroom Cara sat wretched on the side of her bed. It had been such a mistake to have rushed across the country after so short a time, giving rise to expectations that couldn’t be realized. Just as she was about to climb the stairs, Jim’s father had given her a big folder.

“You might like to read this, my dear,” he said. “It’s my late wife’s diary. She wrote it every day.”

“But I can’t. It’s too private. Too personal,” Cara began.

“No, she would have liked you to read it,” he said.

So she began at the start, when Maria had first come to this place. She had marveled that anyone could live so far from the bustling city where she had been born and grew up. She could not believe that it was possible

to be so far from the theater and art galleries. How could anyone look out at those stony fields and go along the narrow roads without losing part of their soul?

But as the pages went on, Maria began to love the place, to know the seasons, to go hunting for mushrooms, to finding sheep that had rolled over on their backs and couldn't get up again. Maria wrote on how she started a mobile library. She had learned to drive and took books and art books to faraway farms and villages. She got to know everyone who lived within miles around. She wondered what she had been doing in a city of strangers, walking past people whose faces and life histories she did not know. And all through the story was a thread: even up to the very last weeks was her love for Mikey, Jim's father.

How she had been nervous of his certainty in the very start, how he was so sure she was the one for him and she feared it was a decision too quickly made.

She wrote on and on about Jim's birth and how proud she was of him and her hope that he might be like his father before him and find the right one before she died.

Cara didn't know what time it was. She looked out the window. The moon seemed high in the dark sky. The orchard looked beautiful with the old trees casting curled shadows.

The old donkey was asleep, standing up with his head on the gate. Cara had read how Maria had rescued him from people who had been ill-treating him when he was just a foal or whatever you call a young donkey. He had never done any work, just given the children rides on his back for years.

Down in the farmyard the hens and geese were clucking contentedly behind the mesh doors that kept the beautiful red fox away from them.

Cara could not understand now why she had feared this place. It was very like home already . . .

She blessed her future father-in-law for giving her the diary. She wished she had met Jim earlier and she would have known her soon-to-be mother-in-law.

Yes, of course she would marry Jim.

She remembered counting the hours after she had said good-bye to him in Dublin last week.

Now she was counting the hours until morning when she could tell him that they should see the priest while they were at it. She was going to live here—she might as well get married here.

After all, that's what Maria had done all those years ago, and she had never known a day's regret.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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