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Quentins

Maeve Binchy



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*To my dear good Gordon.
Thank you for a lifetime of generosity,
understanding and love.*

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

When Ella Brady was six she went to Quentins. It was the first time anyone had called her Madam. A woman in a black dress with a lace collar had led them to the table. She had settled Ella's parents in and then held out a chair for the six-year-old.

'You might like to sit here, Madam, it will give you a full view of everything,' she said. Ella was delighted and well able to deal with the situation.

'Thank you, I'd like that,' she said graciously. 'You see, it's my very first time here.' This was in case anyone might mistake her for a regular diner.

Her mother and father probably were looking at her dotingly, as they always did. That's what all the childhood pictures showed, anyway . . . complete adoration. She remembered her mother telling her that she was the best girl in the world, and her father saying it was a great pity he had to go off to the office every day, otherwise he would stay at home with the best girl.

Once Ella asked why she didn't have sisters and brothers like everyone else seemed to. Her mother said that God had only sent one to this family, but weren't they lucky that it was such a wonderful one. Years later, Ella learned of the many miscarriages and false hopes. But at the time the explanation satisfied her completely, and it did mean that there was no one she had to share

her toys or her parents with and that had to be good. They took her to the zoo and introduced her to the animals, they brought her to the circus whenever it came to town, they even went for a weekend to London and took her picture outside Buckingham Palace. But somehow nothing was ever as important as that first visit to a grown-up restaurant, where she had been called Madam and given a seat with a good view.

The Bradys lived in Tara Road, in a house which they had bought years ago before prices started to rocket. It was a tall house with a big back garden where Ella could invite her friends from school. The house had been divided into apartments when the Bradys bought it. So there was a bathroom and kitchenette on every floor. They had restored most of it to make it a family home but Ella's friends were very envious that she had what was like a little world of her own. It was a peaceful, orderly life. Her father Tim had a twenty-two-minute walk to the office every day, and twenty-nine minutes back on the return journey, because he paused to have a half-pint of beer and read the evening paper.

Ella's mother, Barbara, only worked mornings. She was the one who opened up the solicitors' offices right in town near Merrion Square. They trusted her utterly, she always said proudly, to have everything ready when the partners arrived in at 9.30 a.m. All their mail would be on their desks sorted for them. Someone to answer early-morning phone calls and to imply that they were already at work. Then she would go through the huge collection in what was called Barbara's Basket, where they all left anything at all to do with money. Barbara thought of herself as a super-efficient book-keeper, and she controlled the four disorganised, crusty lawyers she worked for with iron rules. Where was this receipt for transport undertaken in the course of a case? Where was that

invoice for the new stationery that someone had ordered? Obediently, like small boys, they delivered their accounts to her and she kept them in great ledgers. Barbara dreaded the day when they would all become computerised. But it was still far away. These four would move very slowly. They would have liked the quill pen to work with had they been given a choice!

Barbara Brady left the office at lunchtime. At first she needed to do this in order to pick Ella up from school, but even when her daughter was old enough to return accompanied only by a crowd of laughing girls, Barbara continued the routine of working a half-day only. Barbara knew that she achieved more in her four-and-a-half-hour stint than most others did in a full day. And she knew that her employers realised this too. So she was always in the house when Ella returned. It all worked out very well. Ella had somebody at home to provide a glass of milk and shortbread and to listen to her colourful account of the events of the day, this drama and that adventure. Also, to help her with what homework needed to be done.

This system meant that Tim Brady had an orderly house and a good cooked meal to return to when he got back from the investment brokers where he worked with ever-increasing anxiety over the years. And when he came home every evening at the same time, Ella had a second audience for her marvellous people-filled stories. And the lines of care would fall gradually from his face as she followed her father around the garden, first as a toddler then as a leggy schoolgirl. She would ask questions about the office that her own mother would never dare to ask. Did they think well of Daddy at the office? Was he ever going to be in charge? And later, when it was clear to Ella how unhappy her father was, she asked him why he didn't go somewhere else to work.

Tim Brady might have left the office where he was so uneasy, and gone to another position, but the Bradys were not people to whom change came easily. They had taken a long time to commit to marriage, and an even longer time to produce Ella. They were nearly forty when she arrived, a different generation from the other parents of young children. But that only deepened their love for her. And their determination that she should have everything that life could possibly give her. They did their basement up as a self-contained flat, and let it to three bank girls in order to make a fund for Ella's education. They never did anything just for themselves. In the beginning a few heads were shaken about it all. Was there a possibility that they did too much for the child? some people wondered. That they would spoil her totally? But as it happened even those who had forebodings had to agree that all this love and attention did Ella no harm at all.

From the start she seemed able to laugh at herself. And everyone else. She grew into a tall, confident girl who was open and friendly and who seemed to love her parents as much as they loved her.

Ella kept a photograph album of all the happy events of childhood, and wrote captions under the pictures – 'Daddy and Mam and the Chimp at the zoo. Chimp is on left' – and would peal with laughter at it every time.

Even at the age of thirteen when other children might have wriggled away from scenes of family life, Ella's blonde head pored over the pictures.

'Was that the blue dress I wore to Quentins?' she asked.

'Imagine you remembering that!' Her father was delighted.

'Is it still there?' she asked.

‘Very much so, it’s got smarter, more expensive, but it’s certainly still there and doing well.’

‘Oh.’ She seemed disappointed to hear it had become expensive. Her parents looked at each other.

‘It’s a long time since she’s been there, Tim.’

‘Over half her lifetime,’ he agreed, and they decided to go to Quentins on Saturday night.

Ella looked at everything with her sharp young eyes. The place looked a lot more luxurious now than the last time. The thick linen napkins had an embroidered Q on them. The waiters and waitresses wore smart black trousers and white shirts, they knew all about every dish and explained clearly how they were cooked.

Brenda Brennan had noticed the girl looking around with interest. She was exactly the teenage daughter that Brenda would have loved to have had. Alert, friendly, laughing with her parents and grateful for being taken out to a smart place to eat. You didn’t always see them like that. Often they were bored and sulky and she would tell Patrick later on in the night that possibly they had been lucky to escape parenthood. But this one was every mother’s dream. And her parents didn’t look all that young, either. The man could be sixty, he was tired and slightly stooped, the mother in her fifties. Lucky people, the Bradys, to have had such a treasure late in their years.

‘What do most people like best to eat, are there any favourites?’ the girl asked Brenda when she brought them the menu.

‘A lot of our customers like the way we do fish . . . we keep it very simple, with a sauce on the side. And of course many more people are vegetarian nowadays, so Chef has to think up new recipes all the time.’

‘He must be very clever,’ Ella said. ‘And does he talk to you all normally and everything while he’s working? I mean, is he temperamental?’

'Oh, he talks all right, not always normally; then of course he's married to me, so he has to talk to me or I'd murder him.' They all laughed together and Ella felt so good to be treated as one of the grown-ups. Then Brenda moved on to another table.

Ella saw both her parents looking at her very intensely.

'What's wrong? Did I talk too much?' she asked, looking from one to the other. She knew she was inclined to prattle on.

'Nothing's wrong, sweetheart. I was just thinking what a pleasure it is to bring you anywhere, you get so much out of everything and everyone,' her mother said.

'And I was thinking almost the very same thing,' her father said, beaming at her.

And as Ella went on to high school she wondered if it was possible that they might care too much about her. All the other girls at school said that their parents were utterly monstrous. She gave a little shiver in case suddenly everything went sour. Maybe her parents wouldn't like her clothes, her career, her husband? It was going dangerously smoothly so far. And it continued to go well during what were meant to be the years from hell, when Ella was sixteen and seventeen. Every other girl at the school had been in open warfare with one or both parents. There had been scenes and tears and dramas. But never in the Brady household.

Barbara may have thought the party dresses Ella bought were far too skimpy. Tim may have thought the music coming from Ella's bedroom too loud. Ella might have wished that her father didn't turn up in his nice safe car and wait outside the disco to take her home at the end of an evening, as if she were a six-year-old. But if anyone thought these things they were never said. Ella did complain that her father fussed over her too much and that her mother worried about her, but she did it

lovingly. By the time Ella was eighteen and ready to go to university, it was still one of the most cheerful, peaceful households in the Western Hemisphere.

Ella's friend Deirdre was full of envy. 'It's not fair, really it isn't. They haven't even got annoyed with you for doing science. Most parents refuse point-blank to let you do what you want.'

'I know,' Ella said, worried. 'It's a bit abnormal, isn't it?'

'They don't have rows, either,' Deirdre grumbled. 'Mine are always on at each other about money and drink . . . everything, in fact.'

Ella shrugged. 'No, they don't drink, and of course we rent out the flat so they have plenty of money . . . and I'm not a drug addict or anything, so I suppose they don't have any worries.'

'But why are they all on red alert about everything in *my* house?' Deirdre wailed.

Ella shrugged. She couldn't explain it . . . it just didn't seem to be a problem.

'Wait until we want to stay out all night and go to bed with fellows, then it will be a problem,' Deirdre said with her voice full of menace.

But oddly when that happened it wasn't a problem at all.

In their first year at university, Ella and Deirdre had made a new friend, Nuala, who was from the country and had her own flat. Right in the centre of the city. So whenever anything was going to be too late or too hard to get home from, the fiction of Nuala's flat was used. Ella wondered if her parents were truly convinced, or did they suspect that she might be up to some adventure? Perhaps they didn't want to know about any adventures, so they didn't ask questions to which the answers, if truthful, might be unacceptable. They just trusted her to

get along with everything as they always had. Occasionally she felt a bit guilty, but there weren't all that many occasions.

Ella never fell in love during her four years at university, which made her unusual. She did have sex, though. Not a great deal of it. Ella's first lover was Nick, a fellow student. Nick Hayes was first and foremost a friend, but one night he told Ella that he had fancied her from the moment she had come into the first lecture. She had been so cool and calm while he had always been over-eager and loud and saying the wrong thing.

'I never saw you like that,' Ella said truthfully.

'It's got to do with having freckles, green eyes, and having to shout for attention as a member of a large family,' he explained.

'Well, I think it's nice,' she said.

'Does that mean you fancy me a bit too?' he asked hopefully.

'I'm not sure,' she said.

He was so disappointed that she couldn't bear to see his face. 'Couldn't we just talk a lot instead of desiring each other?' she asked. 'I'd love to know about you and why you think science is a good way into film-making, and, well . . . lots of things,' she ended lamely.

'Does that mean that you find me loathsome, repulsive?' he asked.

Ella looked at him. He was trying to joke, but his face looked very vulnerable. 'I find you very attractive, Nick,' she said.

And so they became lovers.

It was less than successful. Oddly they weren't either upset or embarrassed. They were just surprised.

After a few attempts they agreed that it wasn't all they had expected it to be. Nick said that it was his first time

too, and that perhaps they should both go off and get experience with people who knew all about it.

'Maybe it's like driving a car,' he said seriously. 'You should learn from someone who knows how to do it.'

Then she was fancied by a sporting hero, who was astonished when she said she didn't want to have sex with him.

'Are you frigid, or what?' he had asked, searching for an explanation.

'I don't think so, no,' Ella had said.

'Oh, I think you must be,' said the sporting hero in an aggrieved manner. So then Ella thought it might be no harm to try it with him, since he was known to have had a lot of ladies. It wasn't any better than with Nick, and there was nothing to talk about, so it was probably worse. She had the small compliment of being told by the sporting hero that she most definitely wasn't frigid.

There were only two other brief experiences, which, compared to Deirdre and Nuala's adventures, were very poor. But Ella wasn't put out. She was twenty-two and a science graduate; she would find love sooner or later. Like everyone.

Nuala found love first. Frank, dark and brooding. Nuala adored him. When he said that he wanted to join his two brothers in their construction business in London, she was heartbroken.

This called for an emergency dinner at Quentins. 'I really and truly thought he cared, how could I have been so taken in, so humiliated?' she wept to Deirdre and Ella when they settled at their table.

It was meant to be an Early Bird dinner, where people came in at six-thirty and left by eight. It was intended for pre-theatre goers, and the restaurant hoped to be able to have a second sitting for the table. But Deirdre, Ella and Nuala showed no signs of leaving. Mon, the lively little

blonde waitress, cleared her throat a couple of times but it was no use.

Finally Ella approached Mrs Brennan. 'I'm very sorry. I know we are meant to be Early Bird and the cheaper menu, but one of the birds at our table has a terrible crisis and we are trying to pat down her feathers.'

Brenda laughed despite herself and despite the people waiting in the bar for the next sitting.

'Go on then, pat her down,' she said good-naturedly.

'Send them a bottle of house red, with a note saying: "To help the crisis",' she told Mon.

'I thought we were meant to be dislodging the Early Birds,' Mon grumbled.

'Yes, you're right, Mon, but we have to be flexible too in this trade,' Brenda said.

'A whole bottle, Mrs Brennan?' Mon was still confused.

'Yes, a very poor wine, one of Patrick's few mistakes, sooner it's drunk the better,' Brenda said.

They were overjoyed at the table.

'As soon as we get some money, we'll eat here properly,' Ella promised.

And they settled down to the plan of war. Should they just murder Frank now, or go to his house and threaten him? Should Nuala find another lover in the next two hours and taunt Frank about it? Should she write him a hurt, sad letter that would break his heart and unsteady his hand for the rest of his working life? None of these things proved to be necessary, because Frank came into the restaurant looking for Nuala. He was greeted with a great deal of hostility by the three girls. He seemed very bewildered. Yet they were ranged against him and there was no way of talking to Nuala alone.

'All right, then,' he said, with his face red and almost

tearful. 'All right, it wasn't what I had planned, but here we go.' He knelt down and produced a diamond ring.

'I love you, Nuala, and I was waiting for you to give me an indication of whether you would mind coming to England with me. When you were so silent, I thought you wouldn't come with me. Please, do please, marry me.'

Nuala stared at him with delight. 'I thought you didn't love me, that you were leaving me,' she began.

'Will you marry me?' he said, almost purple now.

'Frank, you see, I thought you wanted a career more than ...'

A vein was moving dangerously in Frank's forehead.

'I was so upset I had even been looking up jobs in London ...'

Ella could bear it no longer. 'NUALA, WILL YOU MARRY HIM ... YES OR NO?' she shouted, and the whole restaurant watched as Nuala said that of course she would, then everyone cheered.

Deirdre and Ella were to be the bridesmaids three months later.

'Maybe I might meet my own true love at Nuala's wedding,' Ella said to her mother. 'I'll certainly be hard to miss in this awful tangerine-coloured outfit she has insisted we wear.'

'You look well in anything,' Barbara said.

'Come on, Mam, please. We look like two things dressed up to sell petrol in a garage or to give away sweets for a charity.'

'Nonsense, you're much too hard on yourself ...'

'Deirdre was saying that again only the other day, she says you both give me everything I want and praise as well, that I'm a spoiled princess.'

'Nothing could be further from the truth.'

'But Mam, you don't even nag me about not going to Mass.'

'Well, I will if you like, but what good would it do? Anyway Father Kenny says we should look after our own souls and not everyone else's.'

'It's late that Father Kenny and the Church have decided that, what about the Crusades and the Missions?'

'I don't suppose you're going to tell me that you think poor Father Kenny was personally involved in the Crusades and the Missions,' Barbara said with a smile.

'No, of course not, and I will be polite and respectful all during the wedding ceremony, though I think Nuala's crazy to go for the whole church thing.'

'So when the time comes for you, we won't have to alert Father Kenny?'

'No, Mam, but by the time the time comes for me, it could be the planet Mars that might be the in place to get married.'

Ella didn't meet her true love at Nuala's wedding, but Deirdre did meet and greatly fancied one of Frank's married brothers, who had come over from London for the wedding.

'Oh, Deirdre, please don't. I beg you, put him down,' Ella had said.

'What on earth do you mean?' Deirdre's eyes were wide open with innocence.

'I'm worn out covering for you and that fool of the first order, delaying photographs and everything until the bridesmaid comes back dishevelled with one of the ushers, what *are* you thinking of?'

'It's okay, it's a bit of a laugh. Nuala would laugh too - will laugh, in fact.'

'No, Deirdre, you've got it so wrong, that's her brother-in-law now. Someone she'll be seeing with his

wife twice a week in London. Nuala won't laugh, and what's more, she won't know.'

'Oh, God, you're so disapproving! That's what people *do* at weddings, that's what weddings are *for*.'

'Adjust your dress, Deirdre, more piccies to be taken.' Ella had a voice like steel.

'What do you mean, adjust my dress?'

'Well, pull it down at the back, it's all caught up in your knickers.' Ella had the satisfaction of watching Deirdre's worried face as she beat around hopelessly at the back of her dress, which was, as it happened, not caught up at all.

At the wedding, Ella met Nuala's cousin, a woman she had not met for years. She was just about to leave her job as a science teacher; did Ella know anyone looking for a job?

Ella said she'd love the job herself.

'I didn't know you were going to teach,' the woman said, surprised.

'Neither did I, until this minute,' said Ella.

Her parents were very surprised at the news also. 'You know you can go on at university and take more degrees, the money is there for you,' her father said, nodding towards the downstairs flat, where the three women bankers were happy to pay for the privilege of living in a good address like Tara Road.

'No, Dad, really, I've been to the school, they're nice. They don't mind I've no experience. They seem to think I'll be able to manage the kids; well, I'm tall physically . . . that's a help, if it comes to arm wrestling,' Ella said with a smile.

'You got a good degree as well,' her mother reminded her.

'Yeah, well, that helped, I suppose – anyway I just have to do this teaching diploma, which means lectures in the

evenings . . . and since the school is over that way near the university, I was thinking . . .' She wondered how to put this to them. That it was time to leave home. They took it very calmly.

'We had wondered if you'd like to live in the basement flat eventually?' Her father was tentative.

'You'd be free to come and go like the bank girls there are,' her mother said. 'Nobody to bother you or anything.'

'It's just the distance, Mam, it's not about people bothering me. You never have.'

'You know, days could go by without your having to see us, just like the tenants. And there are big, strong walls . . .'

She knew this was their last plea, then they would give in. 'No, I'm not worried about your hearing my wild parties, Dad. Honestly, it's only to make it all quicker and easier. And I'll be at home often, even staying for whole weekends if you want me.'

The deal was done.

'I don't believe you, your own place *and* a room at home, that's pure greed. Why should you get it all, Ella Brady?' Deirdre said.

'Because I'm reliable, that's why,' Ella replied. 'I'm no trouble. I never have been. That's why I have such an easy life.'

And it all did go easily. Ella liked the school, the other young teachers warned her of the pitfalls, the staffroom bores, the danger of getting sucked into campaigns, how to cope with parent-teacher meetings, how to lobby for better equipment for the lab. She liked the children and their enthusiasm. It seemed only the other day that she was in a classroom on the other side of the desk. The lectures were easy too, and she found herself a flat in a leafy road only five minutes from the school.

'I feel free here somehow, independent,' Ella explained to Deirdre.

'I don't know why you bothered, you got your meals served to you back in your parents' place, and it's not as if you ever brought a bloke in here, by the looks of things.'

'How do you know?' Ella laughed.

'Well, have you?'

'No, as it happens, but I might.'

'See?' Deirdre was triumphant. 'I don't know why you feel so free and independent, I really don't.'

And in a way, neither did Ella know. She thought it had something to do with not having to think about her parents' marriage. They were old now, in their sixties, and they still clung to work rather than retire like other people of their age did. They could sell that big house in Tara Road for a fortune and buy a much smaller place. Then Mam would not have to go in anxiously to the law firm where she suspected that she was being kept on from kindness. Dad would not have to go to what he saw as a changing world of money men.

They got on well together. Surely they did? As she had so often told Deirdre, they never had rows. Suppose they were to turn the house back into apartments, then the rent that would bring in would mean they could retire. She would say nothing yet, just let the idea develop.

She went back home to see them for supper at least once a week and every Sunday as well, but she never stayed over. She said she studied better in the flat. Some months later, she made the suggestion that they should let her room.

Never had anything fallen on such unresponsive ground. They were astounded that she should even think of it. They didn't want to retire. What would they do with their days?

Suddenly Ella's legendary laughter left her. She saw a

very bleak future ahead. Imagine what desperate lives people must lead if these two, who were meant to be Happily Married, couldn't even bear the thought of being side by side at home instead of going to jobs which they found tiring and anxiety-creating.

'I'd prefer to be a nun than have a dead marriage,' Ella told Deirdre very earnestly.

Deirdre worked in a busy laboratory where she knew a great many men.

'You might as well *be* a nun, the way you live,' Deirdre said. 'In fact, I think you are one in plain clothes.'

And as time went by Nuala still kept in touch from London. She had decided not to get a job after all, but instead to work in the company as a receptionist. Frank said it was better to keep all the family secrets within the family, she wrote.

'What family secrets does she mean?' Deirdre wondered.

'Probably that her brothers-in-law are screwing everything that moves in there,' Ella suggested.

'Very droll.' Deirdre still wondered what they could be hiding.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Dee. Remember them at the wedding in their sharp suits and their eyes never still, moving around the room? Those fellows have never known what it is like to keep proper books or pay proper tax in their lives.'

'You think all builders are unreliable, that's your prejudice.' Deirdre was spirited.

'No, I don't, look at Tom Feather! His family are above-board. Lots of them are. It's just Frank's lot make me shudder.'

'If you're right, do you suppose they have our pal Nuala drawn into it all?' Deirdre wondered.

'Poor Nuala. I'd just hate to be wrapped up with that lot,' Ella said.

'Now funnily enough, I'd find being wrapped up with Eric, that eldest brother, no problem at all,' Deirdre laughed.

'You might get your chance, they're going to have a family gathering here in Dublin for Frank's parents. We're invited,' Ella read at the end of the letter.

'Great. I'll get one of those suspender belt things.'

'No, Deirdre, you won't, it's only three years since the wedding, they won't have forgotten you. We'll keep well away from Frank's family.'

The party was very showy. There were even columnists and photographers at it. Frank and his three brothers posed endlessly as an Irish success story. They were photographed with politicians, celebrities, with their parents and their wives.

'It's very fancy for a fortieth wedding anniversary, isn't it . . . all this razzmatazz. I think that the old folk look a bit bewildered,' Deirdre said.

Ella pushed her sunglasses back on her head to study the party more seriously. 'No, they're well able for it, the mam and dad, for them it's a triumphal celebration. It's "Look at what a success Our Boys have made in life".'

'Why don't you like them, Ella?'

'I don't know, I really don't, to be honest.'

'Do you think Nuala's happy?'

'I think so, a bit hunted. But she got what she wanted, so I suppose that's happy.'

Ella always remembered that remark because just as she was saying it a man beside them was jostled against her by a press photographer. 'Please, Mr Richardson, can we have you in the group?'

'No, thanks all the same, but this is a family party. It's not appropriate.'

'It would make sure we got it in the paper?' The cameraman was persuasive, but not enough.

'No, thanks, as I said, I'd really much prefer to talk to these two lovely ladies.'

Ella turned at the calm, very forceful voice. And she looked at Don Richardson, Financial Consultant, whose picture was indeed often in the newspapers. But they had never done him justice. He was good-looking certainly – dark curly hair, blue eyes – but he had a way of looking at you that excluded everyone else in the room. Ella knew she hadn't imagined this because out of the corner of her eye she saw Deirdre shrugging slightly and moving away. Leaving her alone with Don Richardson.

Ella had never been able to flirt. Her friend Nick said it was a weakness in a woman. Men just loved that come-on look from under the eyelashes. Ella was too up-front he said, lessened the magic somehow. She wished she had listened to Nick. Now for the very first time she wanted to know how to do it.

Even if she had five minutes with Deirdre – but her friend had gone to hover in the danger area of Frank's brothers.

It turned out not to be necessary.

He held out his hand to her with a great smile. 'Ella Brady from Tara Road, how are you? I'm Don Richardson. It's such a pleasure to meet you.'

'How do you know my name?' she croaked.

'I asked a couple of people, Danny Lynch, the property guy, he told me. He lives near you, apparently.'

Ella heard herself saying, 'Yes, well, near my parents, actually. I've moved out of home, you see, and I have my own place.'

'Why am I very pleased to hear that, Ella Brady?' he asked. He hadn't stopped smiling and he hadn't stopped holding her hand.