

How Will I Know

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Extract

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1

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Chapter 1

Anchusa (Summer Forget-Me-Not) – Blue, white, pink or mauve star-shaped blossoms cover branching stems. Water in dry weather.

Claire woke up earlier than usual on the morning Georgia was due to go to summer camp for a month. She lay in bed with her eyes closed for a couple of minutes while she tried to figure out what was different about the day and then it struck her. It was the absence of noise – more especially the absence of the gentle hiss of rain which had been present every single morning for the last two weeks – that had woken her. The only sound was of the birds singing in the apple trees outside the house.

She opened her eyes and slid out from under the sheets. The early-morning sun – something she hadn't seen in ages – filtered through the chink in the heavy damask curtains. She pulled them open and blinked in the unexpectedly bright light. Then she took her white silk robe from the back of the bedroom door and tiptoed downstairs so that she wouldn't wake her fourteen-year-old

daughter. Not, she thought, that there was really much chance of that. Most mornings a pickaxe wouldn't have gone amiss when trying to prise Georgia out of bed – Claire would spend ages shaking her and calling out her name before Georgia budged. But she felt that this morning might be different, because Georgia was thrilled about her trip to the Irish College in Galway and had been wildly overexcited the night before. It had taken all Claire's powers of persuasion to get her to bed in the first place, and she knew that Georgia had spent at least an hour reading or listening to her shiny pink iPod in her room afterwards because she'd been able to see the glow of the light from beneath her door. So she didn't really want her waking up too early now.

She went into the kitchen and opened the back door. Phydough, their two-year-old mainly Old English Sheepdog (his mother was pure-bred and beautiful but his father had legged it after his moment of illicit lust), barked happily at her. Claire had chosen the quirky spelling of Fido from a children's book that Georgia had once loved, believing that a dog of his undoubted intelligence and dignity needed a special name.

'Quiet, Phy,' she whispered. 'Don't wake the entire neighbourhood!'

The dog gave a small woof and then wagged his tail enthusiastically. Claire scratched him behind his ears and took a pouch of food from the cupboard. Phydough jumped up on his hind legs and leaned against the cupboard doors, his soft brown eyes eager with anticipation.

'Down, Phy,' she said. 'Sit.' She filled the bright blue

How Will I Know?

ceramic bowl which Georgia had bought him the previous Christmas and put it down in front of him. The dog snuffled his way happily through the chicken and vegetable mix while Claire filled the kettle and plugged it in. Then she walked out on to the patio behind the house and surveyed the bedraggled garden.

It was long and narrow and right now it was also a total mess. The lawn badly needed to be cut and the evergreens that lined the walls were growing out of control, choking the rose bushes which had been forced to thrust their stems high into the air in the fight for light. The flowerbeds were overrun with weeds and the two apple trees desperately needed pruning. Part of the problem, of course, was that the incessant rain of the past fortnight had caused everything to shoot up by an extra couple of inches as well as flattening some of the flowers and giving them an appearance more suited to autumn than midsummer. But the real reason the garden was unkempt and overgrown was that it had always been Bill's domain, not Claire's. And she hadn't been able to face tackling it in the past three years, so the only job that had been done, even on a half-regular basis, had been mowing the lawn. She bit the inside of her lip as she looked at the weeds encroaching on the patio area and the sodden bamboo grasses along the near wall. Soon, she promised herself. Soon I'll do something about it.

The kettle clicked off and she spooned coffee into her favourite yellow mug. She took a blueberry muffin out of the bread-bin and peeled away the waxy paper as she tucked her legs beneath her and perched on a chair at the kitchen

table. She pulled the previous day's paper towards her and glanced through the news. But her mind wasn't really on the task. She was thinking about Georgia and her trip to the summer camp in the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht and hoping that she'd have a good time in her month away. And, if she was really, really honest with herself, she was wondering how the hell she herself was going to cope on her own for a month.

The closest she'd ever come to living on her own before had been the few weeks she'd spent as an au pair in France. And that didn't really count because, even though she hadn't had any family or friends around her, the house had been full of the shouts and squeals of the two Carmichael children and she was never actually on her own. Admittedly their parents hadn't been around that much, but at least Amy and Raul had taken up her time.

I will *not* obsess about being alone, she muttered as she threw her half-eaten muffin out of the open kitchen door and on to the grass beyond the patio; loads and loads of women live on their own all the time. I only need to get through the next month. It won't be that difficult. And besides, I've lots of work to do and some very tight deadlines to do it in. I'm always complaining to Georgia about how much work I have to get through. With her out of my hair I'll be able to concentrate on getting stuff done instead of moaning about how hard it is to find the time.

She drained her mug and refolded the newspaper. Then she began the task of tackling the mountain of ironing piled up on the rocking chair in the corner of the kitchen. This was her second major batch of ironing in the past

How Will I Know?

twenty-four hours. Yesterday had been the critical stuff – all the clothes that Georgia wanted to take to camp with her. Claire had wailed at her that she hardly needed to take a T-shirt for every day she'd be there and that seven pairs of identical jeans was surely a bit excessive, but Georgia had given her that pitying look that teenagers use when faced with hopeless parents and reminded her that it was important to have the right stuff and that she had to cater for goodness knows what social events and that there was no way she was going to be the only one who had nothing to wear.

'But Georgey – you're bringing eight white tees and they're all the same,' cried Claire. 'And I know you need different things for different events, but different doesn't just mean another pair of jeans.'

Georgia had pointed to an overlooked stack of brightly coloured miniskirts. 'And you can't complain about those because you bought them for me,' she'd said triumphantly.

Now Claire pulled one of her own T-shirts towards her and began to iron it. Actually she didn't really mind doing the ironing too much, she found it comparatively restful. She switched on the radio and listened to an early-morning chat show as the iron glided across the cotton material.

She'd finished the three T-shirts and a couple of pillow-cases and was just starting on her king-sized sheet (she hated doing sheets; even though there weren't any awkward parts they were just too big to fit over the ironing board properly) when Georgia walked into the room wearing her blue pyjamas, rubbing her eyes and yawning widely.

'You're awake early.' Claire glanced at the wall clock.

'Couldn't really sleep,' said Georgia. 'I texted Robyn and she's up too.'

'Are she and her mum still calling here around ten?' asked Claire.

'I guess so.' Georgia shrugged as she opened the fridge door and took out a fruit smoothie.

'You'll have to have more than that for your breakfast,' remarked Claire.

'I know, I know. Don't fuss.'

'D'you want me to make you something?'

'Don't be daft, Mum.' Georgia put her arms around Claire's waist. 'I *can* boil an egg, you know.'

'Is that what you're having?' asked Claire sceptically.

'Yeuch.' Georgia leaned against Claire's back so that her red-gold hair cascaded over her mother's shoulders. 'I'm going to make some toast. But to be honest with you, I'm not very hungry.'

'Excited?' Claire turned to look at her daughter. Georgia's eyes – amber-flecked like Claire's own – were sparkling with anticipation.

'It'll be fun,' said Georgia. 'It really will.'

'Though how on earth you're going to make yourself understood in Irish at the college when I can hardly understand your English these days I'll never know,' teased Claire gently.

'Oh, like, you're so not with it.' Georgia grinned at her mother. 'Though I'm not sure about the Irish either. I can see myself not speaking at all!'

There was a sudden, awkward silence and the two of

How Will I Know?

them looked at each other. ‘Not like that,’ said Georgia hastily, seeing the flicker of concern in Claire’s eyes. ‘Not . . . you know . . . just not knowing what to say.’

‘Sure, sure.’ Claire nodded vigorously. ‘But I bet you’ll get the hang of it in no time.’

Georgia made a face. ‘I hope so. I know it’s my native language and I do want to understand it, but it’s bloody difficult.’

‘Only because we don’t speak it every day,’ said Claire. ‘It’s like anything, once you get used to it it’ll be no bother to you.’

‘Your faith in me is very touching.’ Georgia grinned.

‘Go and make yourself some breakfast,’ Claire ordered. ‘And stick the kettle on again for me, I’d love another coffee.’

Leonie O’Malley and her daughter, Robyn, who had been Georgia’s best friend since primary school, arrived exactly on time to take both Claire and Georgia to the train station where Georgia and Robyn would catch the train to Galway. Some parents had chosen to drive their children to the Irish College, but the group who were going from Georgia’s school had elected to take the train. A teacher from the college had come to Dublin to supervise them on the trip west.

‘I think it’s a great idea,’ said Leonie. ‘Makes it all the more exciting for them. Plus, the idea of driving to Galway and back on a Saturday, whether it’s in the so-called height of summer or not, is too awful for words.’ She grimaced as she spoke, but Claire simply nodded and called up to

Georgia and Robyn – who'd decamped to Georgia's bedroom for reasons unknown – to get the hell down here now, Leonie was ready to go.

'Are you sure you want to come to the station with us?' asked Leonie.

'Absolutely,' replied Claire. She picked up Georgia's case, made a face at the weight of it, and lugged it to Leonie's 4X4. 'Just as well this case has wheels,' she told Georgia when her daughter reappeared. 'It weighs a ton.'

'That's *why* I picked the one with wheels,' said Georgia.

'That's why they tell you not to pack too much,' retorted Claire, but she grinned at Georgia all the same.

'All aboard!' cried Leonie.

'Are you sure you want to come?' Georgia echoed Leonie's words.

'Of course I'm sure,' said Claire. 'I have to see you off safely, don't I?'

'You could do it from here,' said Georgia. 'Rob's mum will make sure that we get on the train OK.'

'I know.' Claire moistened her lips. 'But I want to see you off myself.'

'OK.' But Georgia's eyes were anxious.

Claire took a deep breath and got into the Subaru. She wedged herself up against the door, Georgia beside her, while Leonie and Robyn got into the front seats.

'Everyone all right back there?' asked Leonie.

'Yes,' said Georgia. Her hand slid across the seat and held on to Claire's as Leonie turned the key in the ignition.

Claire felt her heart beat more rapidly in her chest as

How Will I Know?

the car moved away from the kerb. She closed her eyes and kept them closed. She knew that she would be more or less all right if she didn't open them again, if she didn't admit to herself that she was in a car. And, she told herself, as she always did on the rare occasions she needed to be in one these days, it wasn't cars she should panic about. It wasn't a car that had been the problem. But somehow it was cars that set off the panicked feelings inside her.

She felt the pressure from Georgia's fingers increase as they picked up speed and she wrapped her own fingers around her daughter's in response. I really need to do something about this, she told herself for the hundredth time. I can't spend the rest of my life terrified of something so basic as being a passenger in a car. And it's very hard for me to lay down the law to Georgia about anything when she knows that such a simple thing has the power to render me rigid with fear. Surely she must lose all respect for me.

But, Claire acknowledged, that didn't seem to have happened so far. In fact Georgia was a great daughter, although Claire did worry because she hadn't yet turned into one of the snarling monsters that most teenagers eventually became. Give it time, Leonie, who had two sons and a daughter older than Robyn, had told her. It'll happen eventually. Though Georgia's such a great girl it might not be as bad as you think.

Claire hated to think that the bond between herself and Georgia might come under pressure as her daughter started to grow up even more. Right now, Georgia was the best thing in her life. It wasn't fair, Claire sometimes told herself,

to think of her daughter as her rock, as the most important part of her existence. But it was a fact all the same.

The car slid to a halt at traffic lights on the quays. Claire allowed her eyes to flicker open and then clamped them closed again. I *will* get help about this, she promised herself. I will.

'OK, Mum?' whispered Georgia.

'Sure I am,' Claire responded. 'I'm fine if I keep my eyes closed, Georgey-girl. You know that.'

'I know.' Georgia's voice was full of reassurance and Claire squeezed her hand again.

She knew that she was shaking as she got out of the car at Heuston station. Leonie looked at her enquiringly, but she assured the older woman that she was absolutely fine. She hefted Georgia's case out of the boot and dumped it on the pavement.

'Are you sure you don't want to take out a few things?' she asked.

'Mum!'

'You know you exceed the recommended clothing essentials by a factor of about ten?'

Georgia laughed. 'OK, Mum, but those recommendations were obviously for refugees from the fifties or something.'

Claire laughed too. Her heartbeat had slowed down again and she was feeling much better. They walked into the station concourse and towards the platform for the Galway train. A short, dumpy, grey-haired woman, dressed in a navy tracksuit with a school crest on the sweatshirt and carrying a massive clipboard, looked at them appraisingly.

How Will I Know?

‘*Coláiste Cian?*’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said Leonie. ‘Robyn O’Malley and Georgia Hudson.’

The woman consulted her clipboard. ‘Robyn *agus* Georgia. *Fáilte,*’ she said as she ticked off their names. The girls looked at each other and giggled.

‘Go on,’ said Claire. ‘You’ve got to get on the train. And not another English word out of you for a month.’

Georgia put her arms around her mother and hugged her tightly. ‘I’ll miss you,’ she said, her voice suddenly younger and a little anxious.

‘I’ll miss you too,’ said Claire. ‘But you’ll have a great time.’

‘I know I will,’ Georgia told her. ‘You’ll look after yourself, though, won’t you? You won’t do anything mad or crazy?’

‘Me? Mad or crazy?’ Claire grinned at her. ‘When do I ever?’

Georgia’s smile wobbled. ‘Well, you know, now that you have an empty house you might start living some hectic social life.’

‘I might.’ Claire chuckled.

‘So no sleazy nightclubs or picking up unsuitable men or anything,’ said Georgia.

‘Absolutely not,’ said Claire. ‘Although maybe the odd seedy nightclub . . .’

Georgia smiled at her. ‘You’ll be OK, won’t you?’

‘Georgey, it’s *me* who’s supposed to worry about *you* being OK,’ said Claire. ‘I’ll be at home. I have Phydough to look after me. Don’t fret.’

'I won't,' said Georgia. 'It's just . . .'

'I'll be fine,' Claire assured her. 'And so will you. I hope you have the most wonderful time.'

'You don't mind me going or anything, do you?'

'Georgia! Of course not. And I think it was fantastic that you decided you wanted to go yourself. It'll be great fun. You probably won't want to come home.'

'Can't see me wanting to stay in the wilds of the west.' Georgia grinned. 'I'm a city girl at heart!'

'*Brostaigh oraibh,*' said the grey-haired woman impatiently.

'You'd better hurry all right,' said Claire. 'Take care, honey. Have a good time. Keep in touch.'

'I'll text you,' promised Georgia.

'*As Gaelige?*' asked her mother.

'Ah, listen, you don't understand half my texts in English,' protested Georgia, 'so I can't see you having a clue about the Irish ones.'

'You might be right,' agreed Claire. She hugged Georgia again. 'OK, pet, off you go.'

'See you, Mum.'

Georgia and Robyn walked through the barrier and towards the train. Claire kept her smile fixed firmly on her face as she watched them get into the carriage.

'I suppose we'd better stay until the train goes just in case either of them has an abrupt change of heart,' she said to Leonie.

'If Robyn has an abrupt change of heart I'll kill her,' Leonie responded. 'Leaving aside the cost of the college, she made me buy her an entire new wardrobe for the

How Will I Know?

summer. She'd better get plenty of wear out of it in Galway!

Claire laughed. 'At least I only had to buy a few skirts for Georgey, although heaven knows whether she'll wear them or not. She's going through a jeans phase at the moment.'

'Jeans are good,' said Leonie darkly. 'Jeans mean that they're covered up. You should see some of the tops Robyn thinks are acceptable items of clothing.'

'Oh, I know.' Claire nodded. 'You'd never be able to keep up with them and what's fashionable and what's not. And I don't want to be a nagging sort of mother, but sometimes . . .'

The two women exchanged looks of understanding. Then the train pulled out of the station and they sighed with relief.

'Excellent,' said Leonie. 'I know I'm supposed to miss her for the month, and of course I will, but it does give me a bit of space to reclaim my life.'

Claire smiled noncommittally.

'What about you?' asked Leonie. 'Anything wild and wonderful planned?'

Claire shook her head. 'Up to my neck in work,' she told Leonie. 'And I'm reckoning that this month will be a great opportunity to get down to it without Georgey barging in and asking me where the TV remote is or what I've done with her iPod or whether there's anything to do because she's bored out of her mind.'

Leonie laughed. 'But it's an opportunity for you to get out and about without having to worry about her too.'

'Oh, sure,' said Claire dismissively. 'Not that there's anywhere I need to get out and about to.'

'Well, look, if you're at a loose end or anything . . .'

'That's really good of you, Leonie. But I'll be fine.'

For a moment it seemed as though Leonie would pursue the issue, but in the end she nodded briefly and simply asked Claire if she could drive her home.

Claire shook her head. 'No thanks. I think I'll wander downtown and do a bit of shopping.'

'Well then, would you like a lift as far as O'Connell Street?' asked Leonie.

'No thanks, all the same,' said Claire. 'I could do with the walk.'

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely,' she said. 'Absolutely.'