

THE GARDEN PARTY

THE AUTHOR

Maeve Binchy was born in 1940 in Dublin. After school and university in Ireland she became a teacher and then a journalist. She has written plays for television and the stage, and is the author of many bestsellers, both novels and volumes of short stories. Among her novels are *Light a Penny Candle*, *Firefly Summer*, *The Copper Beech*, *The Glass Lake*, and *Tara Road*. Her novel *Circle of Friends* was made into a film in 1995. Maeve Binchy's books are affectionate pictures of the lives of ordinary people, and her stories concentrate on birth, friendship, marriage, death, and the small details of everyday life. She makes gentle fun of her characters, turning village gossip into art, and conveys a strong sense of the confusion of life, full of joys and sadnesses at the same time.

THE STORY

If a marriage fails, it can seem like the end of the world. A wife deserted for a younger woman, for example, can easily sink into depression and despair. But life goes on, and people recover – a cliché, but true. And as the Danish poet, Piet Hein, wrote: 'Things that don't actually kill you outright make you stronger.'

Helen, betrayed, deserted, and utterly forlorn, stares miserably out of the window of her new house at the garden next door. She sees no way of rebuilding her life into anything meaningful, until she meets her new neighbour, Mrs Kennedy, who has her own tale to tell – of a rather unusual strategy for survival . . .

THE GARDEN PARTY

Helen looked out the window at the garden next door. It was a mass of colour, mainly from bushes and small trees. No troublesome flowerbeds that would need endless weeding, nor were there paths that would have to have their edges trimmed, or rockeries where one thing might spill and crowd out another. Little brick paths wound through it and there were paved areas with tubs of plants around the garden seats; unlike her own garden which badly needed attention.

She had been told that her neighbour was a Mrs Kennedy, who had two placid cats and was known to be easy-going. Admittedly Helen had been told this by the estate agent who would hardly have warned her even if Mrs Kennedy had been one of the Brides of Dracula*.

Helen had been there for three days and she had not yet seen Mrs Kennedy. The two big cats spent almost all day asleep on the sunny garden seats. They looked so peaceful, Helen envied them. Dim creatures purring and dozing in the sunshine; someone to feed them at the end of every evening, birds to watch sleepily from a distance. How Helen wished that she too could have a life like that instead of sleepless nights, hours of anxiety, torrents of grief and regret. And now the whole nightmarish business of facing a new house, a new life, because Harry didn't love her any more, because he had found *real* love with this girl young enough to be his daughter. The girl who was pregnant with his child.

And Harry was so pleased to be a father. For fourteen years of their marriage he had told Helen that he wasn't ready for parenthood yet and that they were so complete in themselves they didn't need anyone else in their lives. Now, when she was thirty-six years old and he was approaching his fortieth birthday, he decided

he would like to be a father. But he told her about the change of heart and direction only after he said that he was leaving her, and the mother of his child would be a nineteen-year-old.

Other people survived, but then other people could never have felt so betrayed, so shocked and so aimless now in life.

Her sisters lived far away in other cities; they were not a family given to writing or long telephone calls. And her friends? Helen knew only too well how easy it was to alienate your friends by weeping all night at their kitchen tables. Friends preferred to think you were coping, or trying to cope. Then they were supportive and practical and around. Friends could disappear into the woodwork if you cried on their shoulders as much as you wanted to.

So when Helen told people that she was going to move house, make a fresh start, everyone seemed pleased. A place with a garden, ideal they all said. Her sisters wrote and said she would find great consolation in digging the earth and planting and seeing things grow. Helen read their letters with mute rage.

She spent many hours of her first week in the new house staring aimlessly from the window and wondering about the unfairness of life. And then when she was least expecting it she saw Mrs Kennedy; much younger than she'd imagined – this woman barely looked ten years older than herself. She wore a rainbow-coloured skirt and a white T-shirt. She had a big black straw hat and smiled as she carried a tray of tea things to one of the two wooden tables in her garden.

Helen watched as she saw her neighbour sit down and stretch and close her eyes with pleasure in the afternoon sunshine. She was as languid and relaxed as one of the big sleepy cats.

As she watched, Helen heard the gate creak and two girls came in. One about sixteen, dark and attractive; one about six, a mopet with blonde curls. They flung themselves at the woman on the wooden seat.

'You were asleep, Debbie,' the older girl cried. 'We've finally caught you. This is what you do all day!'

'Poor Debbie, are you tired?' The six-year-old had climbed on Mrs Kennedy's lap and was hugging her.

Helen felt a wave of self-pity wash over her. She would never know anything like this. How could life have been so unfair? She wondered for a bit why they called the woman Debbie, but she could look and listen no longer. She sat down by a box of untouched china. She didn't know where she would store it, who would eat from it. No marvellous children would come and throw their arms around her calling her Helen.

The afternoon wore on. Helen unpacked one cup and one saucer and one plate. She couldn't live the rest of her life like this. But what were the alternatives? Harry was gone; he was not coming back. She wished she could get the woman next door out of her mind, but it was like probing a sore tooth.

When she heard a car draw up outside and a younger woman arrived to collect the girls, Helen was again at the window. The younger woman seemed to have trouble dragging the children away; there were still so many things to do. The teenager wanted to inspect the flowerbed, which was her very own, and examine the lupins. The little girl said she had to feed the cats. Then there was a final hug.

'Give our love to Granny,' said the teenager to Mrs Kennedy.

'Do you still have Granny, aren't you wonderful, Debbie,' said the younger woman: the girls' mother?

'I love Granny coming, we'll be making gingerbread and fudge tomorrow if you want to drop in.' Mrs Kennedy smiled encouragingly.

Immediately the girls said they would come, and Helen saw from her upstairs window a look of irritation cross the younger woman's face. She had to know who they were, these people who were acting

out a play in the garden next door. There was wine unopened in her fridge. Helen wrapped it in tissue paper.

'I'm your new neighbour, Mrs Kennedy. I saw your friends or family leave just now so I thought I would come in and introduce myself. I'm Helen . . .' she began, and then burst into tears.

She didn't really remember the next bit, but she was sitting in the garden on the wooden seat with a cushion at her back. Debbie Kennedy had poured them two glasses of wine and produced some little bits of cheese and celery. They sat like old friends in the evening sun. And Debbie seemed to look into the distance at the sleeping cats as Helen wept the story of Harry and his betrayal. 'I can't go on, it's no use pretending.'

'I think you have to pretend one way or another, we all do. But the question is which way you pretend.' She was very matter of fact.

'How do you mean?' Helen had stopped crying.

'Well you could go one route and pretend nothing had changed and that you still thought he was wonderful, remain part of his life and take over the best bits . . .' Debbie spoke calmly. 'Or you could pretend that he is no longer part of your life and that you have forgotten him, and eventually, of course, you will. It will take time, but you will. It just depends which you think would bring you more peace, but both of them involve pretending.'

'I'll not forget him. I can't write it off, start again.' Helen felt the prickling tickling in her nose, and hoped she wasn't going to start crying again.

'Well then, don't forget him. Stick to him like a limpet, take over his life. I did,' Mrs Kennedy said, pouring them another glass of wine as she explained the story.

Her husband left her seven years ago for a woman who already had a ten-year-old daughter. A ready-made family, he called it. He left with a series of clichés: Debbie was a survivor, she had a good job, she wouldn't miss him, it would leave her time and space for

the things she really loved. But Debbie had really loved her husband. She had been shattered as Helen was now. If grief could be measured, hers had been just as great. But she had decided not to lose him.

She had not been hostile to the woman with the ready-made family. She had been welcoming. She had offered to baby-sit for them. She had won the mind and heart of the girl who was now her husband's stepdaughter, Tina. She had moved to live near them; she was a presence in their lives. Her ex-husband thought she was a woman in a million. He sometimes came and talked with her in the garden. He lived in a place where the garden didn't flourish.

Debbie Kennedy had decided to make her successor's weaknesses her own strengths. Perhaps the new woman — she never spoke her name — was a tigress in bed; perhaps she was an intellectual giant; perhaps she flattered him more than Debbie had done. But Debbie still cooked better than she did. Debbie picked up his children from school and entertained them royally while the new woman was still at work. Debbie entertained her husband's mother regularly when the new woman had no time or inclination to do so. Debbie had arranged deviously that Tina should win two pedigree kittens in a competition when she knew the new woman was allergic to cats, and Debbie kept them, on loan, for Tina.

'It sounds like hard work,' Helen said, full of admiration.

'It's very hard work,' Debbie agreed. 'But then I was like you, I didn't think the day would come when I could ever live without him.'

'And now you could?'

'Oh yes, indeed I could. Now he actually bores me. Not totally but slightly. He's very predictable. You would know immediately how he will respond. I never thought the day would come . . .'

'So, if you're over him why don't you bow out? Live your own life?' Helen wondered.

'I can't now. I have too many other people that I love and who love me. I have his mother; she never liked me much during the marriage, but I'm like some kind of angel compared to the new woman.'

'But surely . . .'

'No, I can't abandon her, she never did anyone any harm. She didn't abandon me and divorce me, her son did. And I adore the girls. And there are the cats. I only organised them out of spite, but I love them now. I couldn't move on somewhere and abandon them when they had served their purpose.'

'And the garden: I realised that the secret was to have the minimum to do, but to give the children a flowerbed each, and I work on those secretly and feed whatever they plant, so they think it's all their own work. It's a life, Helen, and I had no life the day he said he was leaving.'

'But he's not the centre of it?'

'No, not now. He was when I needed it. Every single thing I did, I did from some kind of vengeance, and it gave me a purpose to my day.'

'I don't think I could do it. I mean it's not as if there were a ready-made family. There's only a bump* and an awful nineteen-year-old, and he doesn't have a mother, and the cat thing wouldn't work.'

'It's that or get out of his orbit completely. When do you go back to work?'

'Next week.'

'Right, if you like, I'll ask the girls and Gran to help you unpack tomorrow. It's much better with a few people there. We'll do a great deal in an hour and a half . . .'

'But I can't.'

'Of course you can, and then, when you get back to work, have a gardening party. Invite every one of your colleagues to lunch, say that in return for two hours' gardening they'll have a great picnic.'

Hire a huge trestle table for the day. I'll tell you what to tell them to plant and what to weed.'

'But I haven't decided which road to choose; whether to worm my way back into Harry's life or not.'

'You'll still need to unpack and to clear up that messy garden,' Debbie said.

They wouldn't talk about plans and strategies again. From now on they would not need to refer to the desperation of the one and the deviousness of the other. As the curtains went up at the windows, and the china was unpacked on to the shelves and into the cupboards, and the garden took shape, their lives would go on. Helen would make friends again. She would start with her colleagues in the bank who would view her differently after they had seen her as the host of a marvellous gardening party. Debbie's surrogate family would never know she had loved them initially as an act of revenge. It was good to have such solidarity established on a summer evening.

NOTES

Brides of Dracula (p10)

a monster (Count Dracula was a vampire in Bram Stoker's novel

Dracula; his brides were women he seduced and turned into vampires) bump (p15)

(informal) a reference to the new wife's pregnancy (i.e. the 'bump' in her body)

DISCUSSION

1 Revenge is usually thought of as a negative, destructive force. 'No revenge is more honourable than the one not taken,' a Spanish proverb says. Do you think Debbie's revenge can be seen like that? List the positive and negative features of all the things Debbie did, initially as acts of revenge.

2 Debbie was also deserted by her husband. What similarities were there between her situation and Helen's? Do you think Helen is likely to attempt a similar revenge? Would that, in your opinion, be a good idea? Why, or why not?

3 Describe the two routes that Debbie offers to Helen as ways forward out of her present situation. What other courses of action might deserted wives take? Do husbands deserted by their wives react in the same way? Do you think people generally have the same attitude towards an unfaithful wife as they do towards an unfaithful husband?

LANGUAGE FOCUS

1 Find these expressions in the story and explain what they mean.

Friends could disappear into the woodwork (p11)

it was like probing a sore tooth (p12)

I can't write it off, start again (p13)

Stick to him like a limpet (p13)

she was a woman in a million (p14)

Perhaps the new woman [. . .] was a tigress in bed (p14)

perhaps she was an intellectual giant (p14)

if you're over him why don't you bow out? (p14)

It's a life [. . .] and I had no life the day he said he was leaving (p15)

or get out of his orbit completely (p15)

whether to worm my way back into Harry's life (p16)

2 She wore a rainbow-coloured skirt and a white T-shirt. She had a big black straw hat . . .

This is the only time in the story that clothes are referred to. Why are they mentioned here, do you think?

3 Helen saw from her upstairs window a look of irritation cross the younger woman's face.

What is the significance of that look?

4 Debbie tells Helen that her husband left with 'a series of clichés': 'You're a survivor; You have a good job; You won't miss me', and so on. What purpose did these clichés serve for Mr Kennedy when he told his wife he was leaving her? Why do you think these expressions are described as clichés? Would they still feel like clichés if said to Debbie by a different person, for example, by a friend, or her mother?

ACTIVITIES

1 Helen decided to follow Debbie's suggestion to hold a gardening party. What other positive actions could she take to begin to rebuild her life? Write a paragraph of advice for her, as though for a 'problem page' in a magazine.

2 Imagine that you are one of Helen's sisters, writing one of the letters about the new house that Helen read with 'mute rage'. Use the information in the story to write the letter, full of hearty and insincere enthusiasm for the 'consolation' of gardening.

3 Mr Kennedy's second wife shows some irritation at her daughters' readiness to visit Debbie again the following day. Imagine that you are the girls' mother and write your diary entry for that day, describing how you feel about Debbie Kennedy and the girls' attitude towards her.

4 Is *The Garden Party* a good title for this story, do you think? Is it appropriate, and if so, in what way? What other suitable titles could you suggest?

ROMAN FEVER

THE AUTHOR

Edith Wharton was born in 1862 into a wealthy, upper-class New York family. She was educated privately at home and in 1885 married Edward Wharton. The marriage was not a success and in 1907 she left him to live in France, where she had a wide circle of writer and artist friends, including Henry James, the famous novelist. Wharton wrote novels, short stories, and several travel books. Her major novels include *Ethan Frome*, a tragic tale of passion and poverty, and *The Age of Innocence*, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1920, the first woman to achieve this honour. A recurring theme of her writing was the struggle between social and personal fulfilment, which can often lead to tragedy. She died in France in 1937.

THE STORY

In the New York society of the early 1900s, the only career usually available to girls from upper-class families was to make a good marriage. Mothers kept a watchful eye on their daughters, and once a suitable young man had proposed, been accepted, and a formal engagement announced, there was an end to the matter. It was considered disgraceful behaviour to break off an engagement just because you had changed your mind.

Mrs Slade and Mrs Ansley, two upper-class American ladies, have known each other since childhood. Now both widows, each with one daughter, they meet by chance in Rome. The girls are out for the afternoon, and their mothers linger on a restaurant terrace, admiring the glories of ancient Rome spread out below them. As the evening light descends, they recall the courtship days of their youth. But it can be unwise to look too closely at the past . . .