



The
Cantankerous
Molly
Darling

Chicken
House

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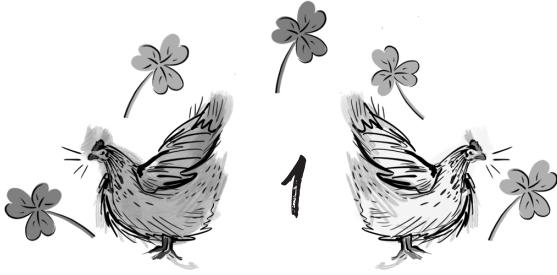
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*To Stephen Murphy, for always making me laugh
(even when I am mid-teary cleaning rampage).
Without you, I'd be far too stressed to write a novel.*



Iwake to Mum singing Dolly Parton in the attic, which is never a good sign.

I pull the duvet over my head and try to make a soundproof bed-cave but it's no use. Our old farmhouse intensifies noises. Between its groaning floorboards and moaning pipes, and Mum's tendency to break into song, there's never a quiet moment.

The stretched-out lyrics filter down through the floorboards as she croons about how to make a living.

Mum started to sing three days after Dad left, as part of her new arty persona, and I've learnt that the songs tend to *mean* something. Her performance is no doubt connected to the fact that it's the anniversary of Dad's departure – 365 days since he packed his bags and left behind a PowerPoint presentation entitled 'Data Supporting my Departure from Farming'. Mum pretended not to care, but if anyone ever

bothers marrying me and then leaving me, I would like them to use proper stationery.

Mum interrupts my thoughts by switching song to 'I Will Always Love You'. As she strains for notes that don't exist, I roll out from under the duvet and sit on the edge of my bed, wiping the sleep from my eyes while I think about how to handle the day.

Luckily, Polly never came home last night, so that's one less piece of melodrama to worry about.

My room still looks as if a six-year-old sleeps here, with its sunshine-yellow walls, rainbow duvet cover, and an old doll's house that I store my knickers in. Aside from that, there's not much to it: a load of fairy lights criss-crossing over my double bed, a disgruntled pile of clothes, and a paint-faded wardrobe that still boasts my early crayon scribbles.

I pull on a fluffy, giant jumper over my pyjamas, and tie my long brown hair into its usual loose plait. It is my only noticeable feature – I'm the kind of girl who looks so ordinary strangers wave at me just in case. I stick my feet into the pair of green wellies that stand to attention beside my bed, having accepted the fate of wellies long ago. There's no point pretending we're going to wake to a life of glamour anytime soon.

'Here we go,' I say to the upstairs hall when I step outside my bedroom.

Leaving my room usually feels like it requires some type of armour, something to deflect the chaos that lurks in the rest of our house. As I pass the door to Polly's room, I pause and listen, but there's none of her usual shuffling and murmuring. She met BrainDrain's mother last night. Afterwards she texted me to say she was taking a long walk. Which most likely means they broke up. The time Dermot dumped her, she walked thirty kilometres across the fields and ended up three towns away.

There's a loud thump from the attic, followed by a drawn out *yoooooooooooo* that sounds more like a wild cat in a death grip than a heartbreaking solo. I glance at the trapdoor to the attic but decide to avoid Mum for the moment.

Instead I make my way carefully down the stairs, my breath visible in the cold air. Morning light makes our house look shabby. The once-plush stair carpet is now muddied by time, as if the colour red is decomposing there. The actual stairs are rotting too, so Mum has stuck plastic glow-in-the-dark stars where it's safe to step, and there are buckling turrets of dusty books lining the bannisters. Most of the books are older than me and, according to Mum, have been sitting on our stairs since the beginning of books. We refer to it as the Great Wall of Books and we slot books in and out of it, treating it like a precarious

game of Jenga. It is an unspoken house rule that one should never compromise its overall structure.

In the kitchen, the sink is crusted with food. Mum used the last of the oats in a flapjack binge last night. I'd found her spooning the gooey mixture straight into her mouth, without a thought for baking them into squares. She considers the final step (i.e. the baking) irrelevant. I'll have to fetch eggs from the shed for breakfast or try to locate bread that isn't sprouting fungus. Our larder is home to many foods; few of them are edible.

I scrape out the hardened oats and add them to the slops bucket, and think about washing up, but the water in the tap is icy and the kettle takes five minutes to wake up in the morning. The fire in the range is out. And the fuel box, a giant coffin-type chest that is about as big as the range, is empty.

'Typical,' I grumble. Feeding the chickens, I decide, is a much better option than deciphering Mum's Sunday-morning vocals or cleaning the kitchen or wondering where Polly ended up walking to last night.

Feeding our seven little cluckers has always been my responsibility. There have been two deaths over the years: old age and an unfortunate incident with a water pump that I won't go into. But other than that, this sisterhood of hens has served us well. Farmers

aren't meant to name animals, but ours are rescue hens and I've carefully christened them all after literary characters: Mrs Danvers, Boo Radley, Scarlett O'Hara, Miss Trunchbull, The White Witch, Bellatrix and Lady Macbeth.

I stir the slops bucket to make sure it's full of the chicken's favourites: oat scrapings, carrot peelings, lumps of tuna and leftover baked beans. Not exactly appetizing, but the chickens aren't one bit fussy. They have been known to savage tiramisu. As chicken's lives go, they have pretty cushy ones. They sleep inside the shed at night, and all day they can choose between wandering the yard in search of meaning or heading back to bed if it all seems a bit too much. Dad had wanted to fence them in, but Mum tended to take charge when it came to the farm and said a chicken would never leave you if you treated it right. It's a pity she didn't extend the same logic to husbands.

Heaving the slops bucket with me, I walk out of the kitchen, through the small hall, past the stairs and out into the big hall. It is home to a banjaxed grandmother clock, a large flagstone floor, and a giant rug that has a path beaten into it from the front door towards the kitchen. I nod good morning at the Three Paddys – three snarling fox heads mounted on a plaque by the front door, an heirloom that remains despite Mum's best efforts to hack them off the wall.

Dad's old orange waterproof coat hangs on a hook beside the Three Paddys. Not that he wore it much; he was never prone to the outdoors. Sometimes he helped me feed the chickens, but he didn't like chaos or getting his hands dirty, so he'd stand nearby and tell me his latest notions. They were always new ways to revolutionize the farm, but never became more than just things for him to say while I fed the chickens. Sometimes I wonder if I should have encouraged him more.

The coat fitted him perfectly, but swamps me, skirting my knees. It is necessary, though, because we live, literally, on a big wet hill. That's what our farm name, Leitirmór, means: big wet hill.

I often think of our house as a place where clouds go to reproduce. The rest of the sky might be entirely blue, but there will always be a wisp of rain hovering over our hill. Today the red-and-green corrugated roofs and white walls of our patchwork of sheds are bright against the slate sky. Dark skies make the rest of the world look so much more vibrant. The splay of green fields that reach in every direction looks bright and inviting, although the reality is muck to the knees, and cowpats to the elbows.

I shuffle between the potholes and puddles, careful not to spill the slops down my pyjama leg – it has happened before. In the shed where I keep the

chicken supplies, I stick my head in the grain sack and take a deep breath. There's nothing quite as lovely as the smell of chicken grain; it's the only part of a farm-morning worth inhaling. Then I dig in with the red enamel cup, scoop out the grain and mix it through the slops. I fill the watering can from the rusty old tap. The water is so I can top up the water trough in their shed and then indulge the chickens in a bit of a sprinkle.

I close the supply shed and go to unleash my beauties.

On a Sunday, the chickens are normally causing a ruckus. They're accustomed to being let out earlier on school mornings and have adjustment issues at the weekends. I've explained about teenagers needing to catch up on sleep, but, as with everything else I confide in the chickens, they don't appear to listen.

Today, though, the yard is strangely quiet. When I open the shed door, rather than the usual burst of feathers, clucking and general mayhem as the chickens make a beeline for the slops bucket, there is only silence.

My first thought is that a chicken has died, and the others are honouring their lost feathered friend. Since Dad left, my mind defaults to the worst-case scenario and then, after a deep breath, slowly allows room for more reasonable ideas to float to the surface.

My more reasonable thought is that they must be hiding.

‘*Shuk, shuk, shuk*,’ I call as I step into the dark shed. ‘*Shuk, shuk, shuk*.’ Dad used to raise his eyebrows every time I did this. He said it was another of Mum’s ridiculous inventions. And though I agreed, Mum was the authority on farming. She grew up at Leitirmór, and inherited the farm. She said chickens responded to this call and that it was passed down through the generations.

‘*Shuk, shuk, shuk*,’ I call again. And it feels meaningful, as if I come from a long line of chicken whisperers, rather than bog-standard Ballyfert farmers who happened to have chickens.

The shed has always been full of straw, shelves, old kitchen drawers and cupboards without doors for the chickens to make nests in, but as my eyes adjust to the gloom, I notice that the cupboard homes have been smashed up, the wood piled in the corner like firewood, and the floor has been swept clean of straw. Aside from a few feathers here and there, the place is empty.

My chickens are gone.

I stand completely still, letting their absence sink in. Mum has sold off every other animal since Dad’s departure – the cow, the three goats, the fifty sheep, the six ducks (who might have left of their own

accord) – but I’d petitioned hard for the chickens. They were the only piece of our old life left. If I kept them fat and happy, part of me felt like Dad would return and the farm would go back to normal. Mum said it was the dumbest thing she’d ever heard, considering Dad had about as much interest in farming as in toenail clippings. But we’d spoken about it and eventually she agreed to let me keep them. That was just last week.

And now they’re gone.

Like Dad.

Here one day. Gone the next.

My life an endless series of disappearances.

Turning away from the empty shed, I march back up the yard, stamping right in the middle of any puddles, letting the muddy water splash my pyjama bottoms, kicking at pebbles and behaving in a generally rebellious manner, the anger gurgling away. Leitirmór House looms at the top of the hill. Even the ivy on its walls looks half-hearted, as if it knows by now that nobody will bother cutting it.

Mum’s probably peeping out of the attic window. How dare she sit up there yodelling Dolly Parton tunes as if that was any way to warn me? My chickens aren’t ordinary farm animals; nobody else will care for them like me.

Will anyone else bother to sit down and keep Mrs

Danvers company when she gets creepy? Or praise Boo Radley for the unexpected bottle caps she leaves amongst her eggs? Or put a mirror in the coop for Scarlett O'Hara? What about Miss Trunchbull? Who will hug her when she battle-rams walls?

For all I know, Mum has sent them to a farm where a bunch of philistines will fail to take care of their needs. Will they know to make a higher shelf for The White Witch, so she can nest above the others, ruffling her milk-coloured feathers with an air of cool detachment? They certainly won't understand that Bellatrix, my feathered nightmare, needs to be kept in isolation whenever she takes to pecking Lady Macbeth.

And as for Lady Macbeth. The most misunderstood of the bunch. What if the new owners force her to act like a rooster? Sure, she was born one, but she was so determined to be a hen that she learnt to cluck, build nests, and tries to lay eggs. Part of my daily routine is to slip a new egg into her bundle. Lady Macbeth guards these dormant treasures, strutting about with pride, nuzzling them while the other chickens are guzzling slops.

How can Mum upend their lives like this? As if it wasn't traumatic enough being rescue chickens the first time round.

My babies in a factory farm. How dare she!

I'll show her.

As I near the house, I kick an empty bean can that has fallen out of the recycling.

Yes, that's right, I'll show her exactly what I'm made of.

Why didn't she have the backbone to tell me herself? Did she sell my chickens to fund her stupid new art habit?

She's had her year of pretending we're fine, fine, fine, selling off the animals, spending all day in the attic, dating the insufferable Hulk, and ruining what's left of our lives.

My thoughts aren't this constructed, though, more a jumble of:

It's not fair, I hate the world, incoherent mind grumble, MY chickens, MINE.