

The
Family
Gift

Cathy Kelly is published around the world, with millions of books in print. She is the bestselling author of *The Year That Changed Everything*, *Secrets of a Happy Marriage*, *It Started With Paris* and *Between Sisters*, and is a No.1 bestseller in the UK, Ireland and Australia. Her trademark is warm and witty Irish storytelling about modern life, always with an uplifting message, a sense of community and strong female characters at the heart.

She lives with her family and their three dogs in County Wicklow, Ireland. She is also an Ambassador for UNICEF Ireland, raising funds and awareness for children orphaned by or living with HIV/AIDS.

Find out more at www.cathykelly.com or follow her on Instagram @cathykellybooks or Facebook www.facebook.com/cathykellybooks

Also by Cathy Kelly

Woman to Woman
She's the One
Never Too Late
Someone like You
What She Wants
Just Between Us
Best of Friends
Always and Forever
Past Secrets
Lessons in Heartbreak
Once in a Lifetime
The Perfect Holiday
Homecoming
The House on Willow Street
The Honey Queen
It Started With Paris
Between Sisters
Secrets of a Happy Marriage
The Year That Changed Everything

The
Family
Gift
Cathy Kelly



ORION

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment,
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Cathy Kelly 2019

The moral right of Cathy Kelly to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of both the copyright owner and the
above publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 7922 1

ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 7923 8

ISBN (eBook) 978 1 4091 7925 2

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Somerset

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



www.orionbooks.co.uk

*For my four rocks – John, Dylan, Murray and Mum.
And for Emma, whose light will always burn brightly*

I

Dance like nobody's watching

The boxes are going to break me – I can see that, now.

Up until this point, everything was about filling them, closing the house sale and making sure the movers got every single item, every single box, from our old house installed in their truck.

But at this moment, exhausted from being up since half five rushing round tidying and stuffing everything left into boxes, I have a sudden, horrible realisation: *I will now have to unpack it all.*

It's a Friday mid-afternoon in May: Dan and I and four house-movers, who had been looking singularly underwhelmed with the uncool and inexpensive contents of our old house, are staring at our new one.

They've stopped arguing about sports, so I think they might be mildly impressed.

Number Nine, Rowan Gardens was a tall, narrow house with on-street parking and the garden, such as it was, consisted of two olive trees in pots outside the front door.

Kellinch House – I *know*, a name and not a number! – is set in its own eighth of an acre, boasts several trees and is in a whole different league for myself and Dan.

Our new home, I think, looking up at it from the drive which is half gravel/half weeds.

It's a slightly run-down Edwardian red-brick that needs more than a lick of paint to dolly it up.

In fact, it probably needs a live-in handyman who works for free to fix all the wonky doors, fallen-off skirting boards and the gap between the bottom of the kitchen door and the garden which must be heaven if you're a mouse.

But – this is the important bit – it's a structurally sound, detached house with its very own gate and, really importantly, *high walls*.

We will be safe in this new house with the big wall.

Safe.

Dan puts his arm around me and I lean in to him, determined not to let unpacking anxiety – I'm sure it's a disease – get the better of me.

'Freya, you're right. Buying this is a sound economic decision,' he says in his 'are we mad?' voice, and I laugh because Dan always makes me laugh, even when I know he's saying this to convince both of us that we haven't put ourselves into unmanageable debt for a detached house with issues.

'I don't know why they say economists aren't sexy,' I tease, to change the subject, 'because they so are.'

Dan slides one large hand up under my now-dirty T-shirt and encounters bare skin. 'We need to christen this house,' he murmurs.

'Can we wait till the movers are gone?' I deadpan back. 'Or do you want an audience, because the gravel will be uncomfortable and phone footage of the whole thing could ruin my career . . .'

He laughs out loud and we stand there, entwined, enjoying the warmth of the slanting afternoon sun, with the scent of flowers driving the bumblebees mad.

'Dan, are we starting to unload or are you going to stand there all day?' demands one of said movers, Big Brian, to

distinguish him from Young Brian, who is blithely hauling boxes of china out of the van as if he was about to fill a skip.

Big Brian defers all questions to Dan because he is The Man and knows all things.

I packed the boxes and allegedly *I* know all things box-wise but Brian and his crew will be gone soon enough, so I ignore this rampant misogyny.

Dan looks at me, understanding instantly that I get irritated by men who assume women are idiots, but I wave him off.

‘It’s falling apart: you know that, right?’ says Martin (Gaelic football all the way and driver of the second truck).

‘Martin, how else would we be able to buy it?’ says Dan reasonably, and he strides towards the truck. ‘We haven’t won the lottery yet.’

As the movers and Dan all laugh, I watch him walk towards them.

Dan is dark and sexy, with olive skin that tans, ruffled dark hair that looks as if he never brushes it, even when he has, conker-brown eyes and enough charisma for at least four normal people. I swear, women’s eyes follow him on the street, watching those long legs and broad shoulders.

We’ve been married blissfully for ten years, together for thirteen, and adore each other but somewhere deep inside (a residue of my horribly uncomfortable teenage years and something that would make a Jungian analyst suggest years of therapy) I feel that physically, I do not measure up to his hotness.

I am too tall. Always have been. Not skinny model-tall, either, which appears to be the only way the world wants its tall women.

I don’t have the permanently bent neck of many lofty women, stooping to decrease myself. My mother wisely made

me do ballet for three years as a child, but I was too tall for school, too tall for dating, felt too tall for *everything*: until I met Dan.

At the age of forty-two, I am generally happy with myself, but sometimes, just *sometimes*, I wish I had been born tiny, with a retroussé nose, exquisite bones and size four shoes, instead of my canal-boat size nines.

When you're tall, you can never blend into the crowd.

The plus is that when you're tall, you have an inbuilt desire to take care of people. I mean, look at the Amazons and Wonder Woman, right? Makes total sense. Plus, I love Wonder Woman, both versions.

An hour after we arrive at Kellinch House, I'm in the hall looking at the vast quantity of our possessions and wondering how exactly we have so much stuff and why I haven't dumped half of it, when my younger sister, Scarlett, phones.

'Can I bring the children round?' she asks.

'I'm not a child, Scarlett, I'm a teenager,' says the deeply wounded voice of Lexi, our oldest daughter, fourteen and two months, who argued hotly to be allowed in as soon as we got the keys and the moving trucks rolled up.

'Getting keys on moving day is a bit chaotic,' I'd explained to her. 'With Rowan Gardens, we only got the keys at five to five. We'd been waiting since one . . .'

'Sorry, Lexi,' apologised Scarlett. 'Can I drive over with two children and one fabulous teenager.'

'Come on,' I say. 'It's ninety per cent packing boxes all over the place. I'll leave a trail of breadcrumbs in the hall so you can find me.'

I hear Lexi giggle.

'Mum.' Lexi has grabbed the phone. 'Can you come and get me? Liam is playing with Uncle Jack's computer and he

says it's cooler than ours and Teddy's using Aunt Scarlett's make-up. I don't think they'll move.'

Lexi, who is not tall but is petite and so darkly beautiful that she looks like a Disney princess, has a sweet, slightly husky voice that soars in the school choir.

Unlike me, before long she *will* have boys following her around like lovesick puppies, which both worries me and makes me happy for her. She will not need to lurk in the home economics room at lunchtime because the school canteen is a place of high anxiety to those kids who are different.

'No, Lexi, honey,' I say, with regret. 'I can't leave now. The moving guys need me and Dad here because they are moving stuff in at speed and have to be told where to put things. Get Scarlett to close up the make-up shop, switch off Jack's computer and tell them I've double chocolate brownies heating in the oven.'

This is not true. Yet. But my superpower is cooking and if I can't whisk up brownies in half an hour, then nobody can.

'Love you, Mum.'

'Love you, Lexi.'

Scarlett comes back on the line: 'Message being delivered. We'll be there as soon as I de-sparkle Teddy and drag Liam away from the computer.'

'Good luck with that,' I say, laughing.

Liam, eleven and a gloriously even-tempered boy, loves the computer but is wonderfully biddable.

Teddy, four and the empress of all she surveys, needs careful handling to make her do what you want her to do. Bribery, fibbing and serious manipulation are always involved. It doesn't matter how often I read *Raising Girls*, I still can't find a chapter which deals with a child with the iron will of Teddy. I bet she'll turn up wearing most of Scarlett's make-up and

clutching all the bright, shiny lip glosses in her chubby little hands.

I abandon the hall and go into the kitchen which is large, pretty, the only updated part of the entire property and is the reason I managed to persuade Dan that we needed this house, despite having an upstairs main bathroom with an original, not retro, avocado suite.

‘Not that I’m Mr *Elle Decoration* or anything,’ said Dan slowly when he first saw the avocado explosion, ‘but I’m not that keen on the main bathroom.’

‘We can live with it,’ I said brightly. ‘Think of the garden for the children! And the kitchen for my show.’

I am a chef, which proves that all those years in the home economics classroom were not wasted. Eight years ago, I was plucked from obscurity by a TV producer who spotted me doing a high-speed food demo at a city food festival and thought I had ‘promise’. Since then, I’ve a new job as a chef with her own TV series and I’ve written four best-selling cookery books. Four books and five TV shows, to be precise.

I’ve even been named Sexiest Cook of the Year – once – which made me laugh and made Dan get me an apron with the logo printed on.

‘At least they agree with me,’ he said with a grin that was X-rated.

‘And where do you think I can wear that?’ I asked.

Dan grinned some more. ‘In our room . . .?’ he suggested. I’ve always cooked. It’s my thing.

In the same way Scarlett’s was how to do make-up and inadvertently make boys/men drool; while my older sister Maura’s was to boss people about without them quite noticing. I have a baby brother, too, Con, and at twenty-nine, I think his superpower is telling perfectly nice women he’ll phone them, which is nearly always a lie.

Truthfully, I learned how to cook from my mother who can stare into an empty fridge, see nothing but a few bits of bacon, leftover potatoes, a rind of cheese and a shrivelled pepper and conjure up the most amazing 'throw in everything' frittata you have ever tasted, followed by a crumble made with those apples you'd forgotten about. But training at the world-famous Prue Leith culinary school in London meant I knew my stuff.

I race into the kitchen, start ripping open one of the many boxes labelled 'pantry' and finally find all the ingredients. A bit more ripping provides a brownie tin, my palette knife and the emergency hand mixer that's got me out of so many kitchen crises. You can't take a pale silver Kitchen Aid to cookery demonstrations in tents is all I'm saying.

Seven minutes later, the brownies are in the oven and I'm making tea and coffee for the masses.

'I'm an almond milk flat white man, myself,' Big Brian is saying, looking with distaste at the instant coffee.

'Ah, Brian,' I say kindly, 'we're not up and running yet. Can I interest you in a millionaire's shortbread?'

'You made them, Freya?' he asks.

I nod.

'It'd be rude not to,' he says happily, and takes two.

The men are reluctantly getting back to work, when I hear a car horn tooting from outside along with the insistent press on the gate button.

'It's me, Mum!' says Lexi's voice on the intercom.

I tear up. My babies. They might be four, eleven and fourteen, but to me, they'll always be my babies.

This house will keep us all safe.

I close my eyes for a moment and pray. I'm not much of a one for prayer but in the last year, I've been living proof

that fear and trauma make you want to pray to something or someone.

I pray now: 'Keep us safe, house.'

*

It's Saturday morning and as I survey the endless boxes at the edge of our bedroom and on the landing of our new house, I wonder if I could hire a skip, fling all the contents of our old house into it, and start again?

Feng shui the whole Abalone-Conroy family in one swoop without ever unpacking a box?

People could interview me and instead of writing 'Television chef Freya Abalone tells us how she cooks nutritious food for her whole family', they could explain how the five of us live in a junk-free home where we all drift around in linen smocks like people in a Scandinavian clothes brochure.

'We just got rid of everything when we moved into our new house,' says Freya, who looks five (no, *ten*) years younger than her forty-two years . . .'

The photos would show our new house with no excess stuff in it.

Sadly, this idea is just a lovely dream. Sorting out will have to be done, to the soundtrack of my inner voice, Mildred, who spends all her time telling me where I am going wrong.

How could you not have dejunked before you moved?

Yoga pants, again? Really?

You could fit in some exercise if you weren't so addicted to Netflix, you know.

Yes, we all have some version of a Mildred. She lives in our head and she says things no true friend would ever say to a woman. You'd dump a friend who says you're about to be found out by the Imposter Police and fired.

But that inner voice bitching at you non-stop . . .? You listen and you believe it.

I hope that one day, with meditation, yoga, mindfulness and reading Eckhart Tolle on a loop, I will banish Mildred and replace her voice with a chorus of the lovely – deluded, possibly – people who said I was Sexiest Cook of the Year.

Just not today.

The box labelled ‘first morning’ is missing and all I can see are ones labelled ‘shoes.’

In the story of my life, shoes take up a whole chapter. This is because I am hopeless with actual clothes but nobody can mess up buying shoes, right?

Shoes used to take up all the space in the bottom of my wardrobe in our old house.

Organising them has always been the problem.

I thought about lining them up in boxes with Polaroid photos on the outsides but really . . . Who does that?

So today, my many shoes are clogging up the landing in ten giant boxes and there is no sign of the vital ‘first morning’ box.

You are hopeless, says Mildred.

Yeah, yeah, I tell her. Enough already.

With a mere two days to go to the actual moving truck turning up, my younger sister Scarlett asked: ‘Have you done lists for every box, so you know what’s in them all?’

I gave her my *seriously?* face.

‘Do I look like I have time to do lists of what’s in every damn box?’ I said waspishly. I was also considering the fact that I would never, ever be able to buy a pair of shoes again. Yes, we will be *that* broke from buying this house.

‘I am too busy to do lists because I am overseeing things.

Did you know that Teddy is unpacking her toy boxes even when I duct-tape them shut.'

'Respect,' laughed Scarlett. 'I can't open things shut with duct tape.'

Scarlett does not have children – a source of much pain, I should add – which is why she is impressed with the things four-year-olds can do that their mothers do not want them to do.

It is a mark of what an amazing human being Scarlett is that after years of infertility treatment, she can even be in the same house as a child. She has taken every hormone known to woman, still has no little beloved baba to show for it, and yet still takes care of my children all the time.

Today, my fabulous childminder, Angela, has had to have a tooth out, so my afternoon help is absent.

I continue my rant, albeit calmer: 'Dan has gone off to do an interview, when I've cancelled all work for four days so we can get sorted. Lexi has done her boxes and wants me to take her and her friend to the cinema, as a last treat in this house, which is not happening.'

Instantly, mothering guilt rages up in me.

You can tell me that guilt is a wasted emotion and I know it is, but I still let it have its way with me. The same way I feel bad when I eat huge slices of cake on shoots for the cake bit of my books, even though I *have* to. All part of the job.

Guilt is part of living, although I've bought several self-help books on the basis that they can help me banish it.

'Plus,' I continue, 'Liam is spending far too long every evening playing Super Mario on the Super Mario yoke because I promised it was the last thing I'd put away. Dan should be here.'

'Naughty Dan,' says Scarlett, grinning.

She loves Dan. All my family do. Con, annoying little brother, teases me that because Dan is younger than me – three years younger – he is infinitely cooler.

Which is true. Dan is the economist everyone wants on their TV and radio shows.

And in truth, everyone is cooler than me.

‘Don’t stand up for him,’ I say crossly. ‘I can’t do everything myself and I’m running out of time.’

At that point, I was at the basically-throwing-things-into-the-cardbox-box stage of moving. Even my beloved shoes, which I had planned to pack like Michelangelo artefacts in tissue paper, were being jammed into boxes willy-nilly.

You should have planned this.

Yeah, well, the *Oprah* people should have called by now, Mildred, but that isn’t happening, either.

I argue with Mildred. In my head. Doing it out loud is just plain weird.

Now, I hear a rustle in Teddy’s bedroom and peek in. Teddy sleeps like a small bear who has found a duvet in a cave and decided to wrap itself up. One small arm pokes out at the top, clutching Bunny – formerly white, now grey, much darned by myself, and Teddy’s favourite thing in the whole world. Her other favourite cuddlies, all twenty-two of them, are scattered around the small bear shape. I want to curl myself round her just to smell her scent, that little girl shampoo, yogurt and perfume-made-from-rose-petals scent.

Asleep, she is a cherub with the blonde curls that come from my family. All my family are white blonde, including me, and she is going to be tall, too, also like me. I am determined that she won’t slouch and wish she were smaller, the way I used to do during my hideous teenage years. I have grown into my body, a confident woman of nearly six foot

who is described as a Viking Chef.

Note: if you are tall, blonde, wear a plait and are called Freya, you get called a Viking in the press. People really have no imagination, is all I'm saying.

Dan is tall too. Deliciously, much taller than me. Because he's dark, together we look like a black and white photo.

Next, I peek into Lexi's room. Lexi is fourteen and is ballerina tiny with long dark hair. Asleep, her face looks so much younger than it does when she's awake and practising being fifteen. I want to stroke her but she'd wake up and on a Saturday during term time, she'd be grumpy.

In the third bedroom – wallpapered an unhappy green, but he did choose the room himself, even though he knows that it will be ages before we can redecorate – eleven-year-old Liam lies star-fished on the bed with his duvet on the floor and a pillow under his feet.

Gently, I put the duvet back on my gorgeous boy with limbs that are confusing him because they are growing too much. Liam is still a hugging sort of child, which makes me want to cry because I know that one day, he'll fight off all affection. But not today, for which I am grateful.

For a long time, I thought gratitude was an overrated, corporate invention dreamed up to keep stationery addicts buying more little notebooks.

But for the past year, since, well . . . everything, I have been working hard on gratitude. Also: a spiritual connection; mindfulness; thinking about booking a yoga class; getting round to answering my Emails of Shame and actually finishing *The Power of Now*.

'Thank you for this,' I murmur into the ether, to God/the goddess/whichever deity is in charge.

At that precise moment, Teddy appears on the landing, a small, exquisite sight in a forest of packing boxes.

Her cheeks are rosy with sleep. Her blonde curls are tousled adorably. She looks perfect. Apart from her frowny face.

Waking up in a new bedroom in a new house would send anyone over the edge.

It's done it to me at forty-two and my poor Teddy is only just four.

'How is Mummy's little pet?' I say, scooping her up, covering her face with kisses and getting that special ticklish place under her ear, which makes her giggle.

'Stop!' she commands, all suddenly right with her world again.

Mummy is here, kissing her.

She is adored. Back to normality. Teddy is in charge of our household and she knows it. I instinctively feel that when Teddy is older, there will be no critical inner voice torturing *her*.

'Peppa Pig,' she says now with an imperious duchess wave. Teddy came out of the womb waving imperiously. She was my hardest birthing experience.

Liam had been a blissful birth and I swear, if we'd had whale music, candles and a birth plan, Liam would have gone along with it and come out at high speed during the most operatic whale-singing bit.

With Teddy, I got the full works – screaming pain that went on for hours, and no sign of a person to give me the promised epidural, even though I'd have consumed a bag of Class A narcotics during the worst of the pain.

This is the big secret of childbirth. Not the stitches which require you to sit on an inflatable rubber ring for two weeks. No, it's the fact that one child can slip out like a dolphin, while another comes screaming into the world practically sideways (this is possible, I am telling you), having made their mother howl with pain during an eighteen-hour labour.

Lexi, my eldest, is not my birth child but I am her mother. Totally her mother.

I have been her mother since she was just over two and Dan, her birth father, brought her round in desperation on a weekend he wasn't due to have her because her mother, his ex, had left her in a restaurant by mistake. Yes, I am serious.

Keys, handbag, yes – oh gosh, I forgot the toddler. Silly me.

Lexi was the only child of his first wife, Elisa, a woman who was physically twenty-six when she gave birth but emotionally, still a wild, party-loving nineteen-year-old. As someone who was never a wild, party-loving nineteen-year-old because my sense of responsibility has always been in overdrive, I cannot grasp this concept at all.

'She was indulged as a kid,' Dan says now that his rage is gone over the child-abandonment issue, which is basically standing up for the stupid cow in my book.

My rage is not gone, I can tell you that.

'Her brothers were the smart ones,' Dan always continues.

It's well-remembered speech catalogued in his brain: he tries to make excuses for Elisa because he has somehow forgiven her and he feels that Lexi must have an unbiased version of her birth mother.

Intellectually, I agree with him.

Emotionally, it's a different story.

I had already fallen in love with Dan, but when Lexi came to live with us full-time, that was the fiercest love affair ever.

She had not emerged from my body but she was mine. I became her mother; and everybody knows, mothers are feral when it comes to their children.

Have you ever watched those nature programmes where females with their young will kill animals much larger in their defence . . .? Yup, that's me.

‘Nobody knew what to do with Elisa,’ goes the rest of Dan’s spiel. ‘She was always a bit immature . . .’

Immature? That’s the best he can do?

And standing up for the woman who left our darling Lexi, innocent and defenceless, in a restaurant . . . ?

Imminent high blood pressure moment, Mildred mutters, pretending to be a health robot from the future.

She’s right.

I can’t think about Elisa or I will start having arguments with her in my head – ‘You left Lexi in a restaurant! What is wrong with you? Immature and indulged do not cover this level of stupidity!’

‘And you, *you*, Dan Conroy, do not give me any old crapology about how she wasn’t clever and her brothers got all the attention. Selfish and spoilt are the words you are looking for!’

Almost twelve years after Elisa abandoned Lexi, the very thought of the woman can still ignite fierce rage in me.

Instead I give thanks that Lexi is mine and Elisa is out of all our lives, what with her busy ‘modelling’ career and her exotic lifestyle financed by her current husband and possibly, her father, who appears to be remarkably wealthy.

Which suits me just fine.

My beloved Lexi is our child. After Dan and I got married I adopted her as soon as I legally could.

I love Dan more for his trying to make it all right for Lexi, but it’s the one area we’ve always disagreed on.

Still, Elisa has been out of our lives for years, so I guess we’re safe.