PRAISE FOR ROISIN MEANEY

'A wonderfully woven, beautiful book full of hope,
love and characters so fully formed I feel like I know them. I adored it'
Emer McLysaght

'A warm, insightful story about new beginnings and the power
of kindness'
Rachael English

'A cracking yarn . . . Meaney can excavate the core of our human failings and present it to us, mirror-like on the page . . . Which makes her utterly credible, utterly authentic, utterly irresistible' ***Irish Independent***

'Roisin Meaney is a skilful storyteller' **Sheila O'Flanagan**

'A real treat . . . Meaney wraps her readers in the company and
comfort of ordinary strangers'
Sunday Independent

'Meaney weaves wonderful feel-good tales of a consistently high
standard. And that standard rises with each book she writes'
Irish Examiner

'This book is like chatting with a friend over a cup of tea . . .
full of all the things that make life interesting'
Irish Mail on Sunday

'Delightful . . . a cosy read for any time of the year, be it in your
beach bag or sitting curled up in front of the fire'
Swirl and Thread

MovingOn_text.indd 1 18/12/2024 11:00

Roisin Meaney was born in Listowel, County Kerry. She has lived in the US, Canada, Africa and Europe but is now based in County Clare, Ireland.

She is the author of twenty-one novels and has also written books for children.

www.roisinmeaney.com @roisinmeaney

Bluesky: @roisinm.bsky.social

ALSO BY ROISIN MEANEY

A Winter to Remember
Life Before Us
The Book Club
It's That Time of Year
The Restaurant
The Birthday Party (a Roone novel)
The Anniversary
The Street Where You Live
The Reunion
I'll Be Home for Christmas (a Roone novel)
Two Fridays in April
After the Wedding (a Roone novel)
Something in Common
One Summer (a Roone novel)
The Things We Do for Love
Love in the Making
Half Seven on a Thursday
The People Next Door
The Last Week of May
Putting Out the Stars
The Daisy Picker

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Puffin Paulie (with illustrator Louisa Condon)
Don't Even Think About It
See If I Care, co-written with Judi Curtin

MovingOn_text.indd 2 18/12/2024 11:00

Moving On

ROISIN MEANEY



MovingOn_text.indd 3 18/12/2024 11:00

SPHERE

First published in the Ireland in 2025 by Hachette Books Ireland,
First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Sphere

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Roisin Meaney 2025

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

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

PAPERBACK ISBN 978-140-873173-4
TRADEBACK ISBN 978-140-873172-7

Typeset in Arno Pro by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

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

Papers used by Sphere are from well-managed forests and other responsible sources.



Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

The authorised representative
in the EEA is
Hachette Ireland,
8 Castlecourt Centre,
Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland
(email: info@hbgi.ie).

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

For Emily Moriarty, with love

MovingOn_text.indd 5 18/12/2024 11:00

Life itself is the most wonderful fairytale

– Hans Christian Andersen

MovingOn_text.indd 7 18/12/2024 11:00

GALWAY
OCTOBER 2019

MovingOn_text.indd 1 18/12/2024 11:00

Anticipation

HER TEA HAS GONE COLD. SHE WONDERS HOW MANY cups she's wasted over the years, made and then forgotten as she's tapped the keys of her laptop or sat lost in thought, trying to puzzle her way through a roadblock in a plot while tea has cooled in a cup.

Today she's not typing or sitting; she's standing in the littlest bedroom that became her writing room after the girls moved out, and she's preparing to pack up the contents of her bureau, a task she's left till last. She found the bureau in a charity shop over twenty years ago, and its drawers and cubbyholes harbour many memories.

Packing again, moving house for what she hopes – no, she knows – will be the last time. Tomorrow she will leave the home she loved best, of all the places she's lived, and today she's lost in the past, and her tea cools.

She sets the cup back on the windowsill and makes a start. From one of the little nooks in the top of the bureau she takes a notebook, its cover dark green with a flowery print. She traces the inscription on the flyleaf, its ink faded with age. They were children, two children playing at love.

In the pocket inside the notebook's back cover are letters written in different hands, all precious, all folded and stored there over the

MovingOn_text.indd 2 18/12/2024 11:00

years. She unfolds them carefully and rereads them now, tears brimming as the words conjure long-ago emotions.

In the same pocket is a newspaper clipping of the Irish fiction bestseller list from almost twenty years ago, her first book sitting at number ten. Seeing it listed there prompts a stir of the old excitement. Its publication had been the beginning of something, when she'd thought herself too old for any more beginnings. So much still ahead, and she'd had no idea.

In a week she'll be fifty-nine. At twenty she'd considered herself so grown-up. She shakes her head, smiling. How little the young know, and how wise they fancy themselves to be.

She returns the clipping and the letters to their pocket. She closes the notebook and places it into a waiting box. In the next nook is a cork, which she lifts out and sniffs. *Keep the cork,* she hears Alf saying, and she did keep it. Her first-ever champagne, popped open to mark a bittersweet day, years before any of the books. She adds it to the box.

In a small drawer she finds a page from a magazine that she meant to frame and never got around to. Her first-ever press ad, for a yogurt aimed at weaning babies. She remembers buying extra copies of the magazine, sending the page to Danny and Frances and Joan and her mother.

An hour or so later, as she's closing the last box, her phone rings. She pulls it from her pocket and sees Juliet's name.

'Hello, darling.'

'Mum – we're just leaving now, see you soon.'

'Wonderful. Drive carefully.'

'I will. Any word from Grace?'

'Not yet.'

MovingOn_text.indd 3 18/12/2024 11:00

Her last phone conversation with Grace had turned into a row. At twenty-seven, Ellen's younger daughter could still be volatile – and when she told her mother that Tom wanted to take a year out to travel the world, Ellen made the mistake of saying that it sounded like a good idea.

'A good idea? Really? It's fine for Tom – he can take leave of absence. What am I supposed to do with my clinic, pack it up until we come back?'

Ellen should have backed off and left it at that, but she didn't. 'Maybe you could get someone to stand in.'

Another mistake. 'Right – like vets are floating around just waiting for a job offer! Have you forgotten when I tried to find someone to go into partnership with when I was starting up? You haven't a clue!'

And on she went, taking her frustration out on her mother, like so often before. Since then there's been no response to any of Ellen's voice messages – were they even listened to? Will Grace show up this evening?

After saying goodbye to Juliet, Ellen brings the boxes downstairs and stacks them with the others in the hall, and then she push-pulls the empty bureau out to the landing. A lot of the furniture has already been moved; the rest will be transported tomorrow. Now the house feels hollow when she walks through its rooms.

She enters the bedroom that used to be her aunt's and looks down at the back garden. She remembers her first sight of it in 1981, and Frances on her knees, digging weeds out of the rockery. How strange it will be to see a different garden when she pulls apart other curtains every morning.

MovingOn_text.indd 4 18/12/2024 11:00

She's just out of the shower when her phone rings again. She looks at the name and smiles.

'Hey.'

'Hey yourself. How are things?'

'Great. I emptied the bureau.'

'Finally. Don't dream of trying to move it.'

'I just pulled it out to the landing.'

She hears his long sigh. 'I can't turn my back for an instant.'

'I'm fifty-eight, not ninety-eight. I'll have you know I'm still young enough to move furniture.' But she's laughing. Every day he makes her laugh.

'Just don't come crying to me when you slip a disc. You all set for this evening?'

'Why? Is something happening?'

'Very funny. You're hilarious. When can we expect you?'

'About half an hour.'

'Love you,' he says.

'Love you more. See you soon.'

Her heart is too full for all the happiness. It spills over; it fills all the spaces in the hollow house. Tomorrow they are moving into the cottage closer to the sea that they came across six months ago and instantly, jointly, loved. They are going to live there for the rest of their lives, and they are going to be monumentally happy. Abundantly happy. Stupidly happy.

She dries her hair and pins it up with the big tortoiseshell slide Juliet had taken off and given her, one time Ellen admired it. She dusts powder on her face and adds lipstick, and gets into the black dress Juliet had insisted she splash out on. As she slides her feet into red shoes she hears Claire saying *At least one pair of red shoes*

MovingOn_text.indd 5 18/12/2024 11:00

should feature in every woman's wardrobe. Claire, who knew it all, or thought she did.

In the kitchen Ellen checks that she switched off the cooker before phoning a taxi. As she hangs up, her eye is caught by the cardboard box on the worktop. She looks at the books inside; twelve copies, all the same. She lifts one out and runs a hand over the cover. Her happiest book yet, every word flooded with love.

Ten minutes later, a car horn sounds outside. She pulls on her coat and leaves the house.

MovingOn_text.indd 6 18/12/2024 11:00

GALWAY
SEPTEMBER 1981
THE FIRST MOVE

Freedom

'I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE ACTUALLY GOING,' CLAIRE said.

'Oh, I'm definitely going.'

All morning she'd felt fluttery with excitement, for once not able to eat breakfast. At the age of twenty, Ellen Sheehan was finally leaving home, making a start on a life that she knew would be filled with amazing adventures.

Her one tiny regret – well, maybe not that tiny – was that Claire wasn't coming too. That had been the plan, for both of them to escape together, but that was before Claire's only brother had skipped off to London to work on the building sites for the summer, leaving Claire trapped behind the counter of her family's pub.

'The minute Martin comes back you'll follow me, right?'

'I've told you I will. Can't wait.'

Claire had turned twenty in February, five months before Ellen. They were grown-ups now, ready for the world and all it could throw at them. They rounded a bend and there was the bus station, causing Ellen's stomach to flip again. Another few minutes and she'd be on her way – and this time tomorrow she'd

MovingOn_text.indd 8 18/12/2024 11:00

have begun her new job, surrounded by books all day, meeting people who loved them as much as she did. Could things get any better?

At the station they found the Galway bus and stood at the open door. 'Behave yourself,' Claire said. 'And obviously I'm joking.'

Claire never behaved herself if she could help it. She believed in having fun, particularly if it meant breaking rules. Ellen knew she'd never be half as brave – and so did Claire. She called Ellen her rock of sense, but Ellen didn't want to be anyone's rock of sense. She wanted to have fun too, without worrying about it.

Ellen's mother didn't think Claire was brave. *That girl is a bad influence,* she'd said more than once. *I'm glad you're getting away from her.* She didn't know that Claire was following on: Ellen had thought it best to say nothing about that.

'Here,' Claire said, fishing a long blue box from her pocket. 'A little going-away present' – and inside, Ellen found a silver pen.

'Wow, I love it. Thanks a million.'

It crossed her mind that it might be stolen. Claire was an experienced shoplifter. *The trick,* she'd told Ellen, *is to buy something small, and look them in the eye when you're paying for it, and smile like mad and talk about the weather*.

There had been a time, a horrible time, when Ellen had stolen from shops too, but it hadn't lasted.

The bus was filling up. 'Find a proper boyfriend,' Claire said. 'You'll have plenty to choose from in Galway. Stop being so fussy.'

Claire wasn't fussy. She'd lost her virginity at seventeen, in the back seat of her then boyfriend's car, and she'd had plenty more sexual partners since then. *It's just physical,* she'd say. *It's fun, and no big deal* – and that was the problem, because Ellen wanted the big deal.

MovingOn_text.indd 9 18/12/2024 11:00

She wanted the drama, the deep passion of all the lovers she read about, the Cathys and the Heathcliffs, the Elizabeth Bennets and the Mr Darcys. She wanted someone who would die for her, someone who would kill for her. She wanted nothing less than a soulmate, and she was happy to wait for him.

And she would meet him in Galway. She was convinced of it.

For one thing, she was bound to encounter lots of readers in the bookshop: right from the start, they'd have that in common. Plus, if she could lose ten pounds by Christmas, and stop biting her nails, and let her hair grow, she'd feel so much better about her appearance, and that confidence would definitely attract more attention.

Yes, she was hopeful. Very hopeful.

'Are you getting on?' the bus driver called.

'Just a sec.' Claire flung the rucksack into the luggage compartment and threw her arms around Ellen. 'Phone me,' she ordered. 'I want all the news. If your aunt doesn't allow you to use her phone, wait till she goes out.'

At the mention of her aunt, Ellen's excitement dimmed. Moving in with her mother's older sister, a relative she hardly knew, wasn't the start she'd have chosen for her new life, but it would only be for a short while, until she and Claire found a flat together.

'See you soon,' she said. 'Tell Martin he has to come home.'

'I will. Have a ball. Go wild. Now get on before they leave without you.'

Ellen hitched her small bag higher on her shoulder and boarded. From her window seat she waved at Claire until the bus pulled out of the station. Watching familiar streets as they flashed past, she wondered if she would ever live in the town again – and this thought stirred a memory of another uprooting when she was eight, the

MovingOn_text.indd 10 18/12/2024 11:00

family leaving their old town when her father had been offered a better job here. It must have been momentous at the time for her and Joan, but they'd been young enough to adjust and make new friends.

And then, eight years after that—

No. She would not think about it, not today. She switched her thoughts to the man who was going to be her new boss, and whom she had yet to meet.

Ben McCarthy, he'd said at the start of their phone call two weeks earlier. *Manager of Piles of Books. Coming back to you about the job you applied for.*

Oh . . . yes. She hadn't expected to hear so quickly – hadn't she only posted her letter two days ago?

What's your favourite book?

The question had caught her off-guard, but was an easy one to answer. *Lolita.*

Ah, the great Nabokov. Could you live without reading?

Another unexpected question – but again, one she hadn't had to think about. *I couldn't go a day without reading.*

The right answer, he'd said, sounding pleased. *Which dead author do you wish you'd met?*

She'd almost laughed. This was crazy. *Dickens.*

And what are you reading now?

Housekeeping.

Marilynne Robinson?

Yes.

Like it?

Yes, I'm really enjoying it.

A brief pause had followed, and then: *You'll do.*

MovingOn_text.indd 11 18/12/2024 11:00

Pardon?

Six pounds an hour, half nine to half five, Monday to Saturday, with one flexible day off in the week. How does that sound?

She'd hardly believed it. Was he actually offering her a job based on a conversation lasting less than a minute, and involving no more than a few bookish questions? He hadn't asked anything about the typing pool, wasn't even looking for a reference.

Is that a yes? Are you thinking about it?

Yes, she'd said hastily. *Yes, please. Thank you.* She'd already forgotten the terms and conditions he'd rattled off, but she hadn't cared.

Great. How soon can you start?

She'd thought fast. *I need to give two weeks' notice where I am.*

Two weeks. That brings us up to . . . Friday, September fourth. So let's say you start here on Monday seventh.

OK.

Good, all settled.

Um . . . is there anything else I need to know?

Yes. Wear comfortable shoes – you'll be on your feet a lot. Be here at half nine sharp, or I'll have to fire you.

She'd waited for a laugh, but none had come. *Thank you,* she'd replied, but he'd already hung up.

Half nine sharp, in comfortable shoes. No mention of a dress code, or what her duties would be. No information about the shop or who else worked there. It had certainly been an odd interview, but it had ended with an offer of work, and it had enabled her to hand in her notice at a job she'd hated, and now she was on her way.

She wondered what he'd be like face to face. Hopefully he'd be a bit less . . . unpredictable. Some people just didn't suit the phone.

MovingOn_text.indd 12 18/12/2024 11:00

On the other hand, what was wrong with unpredictable? Might make life more interesting, working with someone who didn't do the expected thing. From now on she must be open to every possibility, willing to embrace the unknown, the unexpected. Willing to be brave.

She rummaged in her bag until she found her book, and the apple she'd snatched from the fruit bowl on her way out of the kitchen. She began to read, and the world outside the bus window fell away.

MovingOn_text.indd 13 18/12/2024 11:00