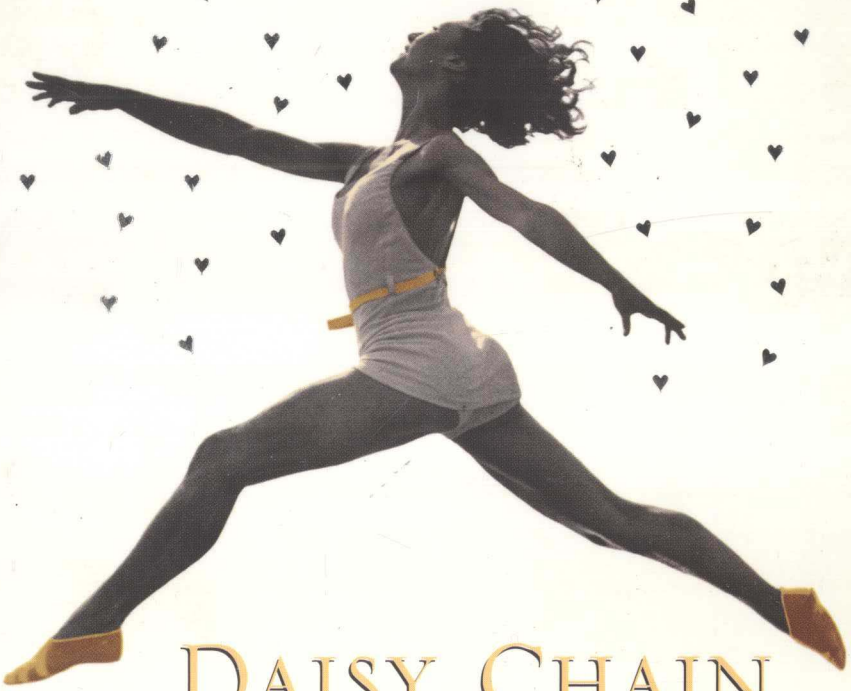
Joan

O'Neill



DAISY CHAIN DREAM

'...beautifully written in prose that is as warm as a sunset on a hot summer's day.' THE GUARDIAN

raise for **Daisy Chain War**, *the first part in this compelling trilogy*

Joan

O'Neill

DAISY CHAIN

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In memory of my mother, Josephine Manahan, who gave me the inspiration, and my father, William Patrick Manahan, who passed on the talent.

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All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

William Butler Yeats, 'When You are Old'

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1

Mrs Keogh was cooking the breakfast. Her skin was dull, and beads of perspiration glistened on her upper lip. Yet curiosity made her eyes sparkle, and mobilised her face into expressions of girlish enthusiasm. Her hair was concealed by a turban, and she wore a wrap-over apron to protect her dress from the spurts of fat that were hissing from the sausages sizzling in the frying pan.

'Oh it's true they're the talk of the nation, La la la lala la la la.'

Without removing the cigarette that was dangling from her lips, she greeted Gertie as she entered the kitchen.

'Top of the morning to you.'

'How many times have I told you not to smoke while you're cooking?' Gertie reached out and removed Mrs Keogh's cigarette.

'Ouch.' Mrs Keogh grimaced and, licking her lips, began sliding the sausages on to a large plate, warm from the oven.

'Is it too early to start on the rashers?'

Gertie glanced at the clock. 'They should all be down soon, though I wouldn't bank on it.'

'Have a bit more confidence,' Mrs Keogh began peeling rashers from their greaseproof paper on to the pan, 'else you'll never make a go of it. I'll do the eggs while they're having their porridge.'

'It's a wonder they don't burst with all the food you pile on their plates.'

'That's what they're here for. Most of them haven't seen a bit of meat since before the war. If we give them value for money, they'll be back.'

The smell of bacon permeated the dining-room, and filtered up through the house. Mrs Keogh's loud rendition of 'If I knew you were coming, I'd have baked a cake' greeted the first of the morning's sleepy guests.

Gertie cut home-made brown bread into thick slices, and made butter twirls out of the country butter from the Monument Creamery. It had been three months since the Doyles had decided to turn their home, Santa Maria, Victoria Terrace, Dun Laoghaire, into a guest-house for holidaymakers. April was a beautiful month, ideal for putting the house in order. The wind blew in from the sea, cool and fresh, and snapped at the clothes-line. The curtains billowed, and Mrs Keogh polished every surface until the house was gleaming. Even the Waterford glass had been washed and returned to its cabinet, where it winked and sparkled in the sunshine. Rugs were beaten, drains gushed with water, doors were slammed, and windows that had not been opened for years were cranked up and down.

Gertie was busy again, and happy.

Mrs Keogh sang as she handled every object in the house, and put new lavender bags in linen drawers. Gertie took her canteen of cutlery out of its box, and her silver tea service from the cabinet, wedding presents that had never been used, and put them on the serving table in the dining-room. Boxes of delph and china, put away for Karen and Lizzie, were carefully lifted down from the attic. The house was cleaner than it had ever been.

It angered Bill, Gertie's husband, when something he was searching for had either disappeared or was in a new place. Any change disturbed him, and Gertie's new energy and happiness seemed to him to be an affectation. As she worked with Mrs Keogh, he watched anxiously. When Mrs Keogh would say, 'Do you need this or will I throw that out?' his answer was always the same. 'Leave it.' When Mrs Keogh asked him why he was so irritable, he said, 'She'll make herself sick with all this running up and down stairs and cleaning.'

'Relax,' Mrs Keogh said. 'It's only a phase. She'll calm down as soon as the guests arrive and she's into her routine.'

Bill was not so sure. He bought Gertie a new washing-machine that clamoured in the kitchen as it washed the clothes, while jars and earthenware crocks clanked together as Gertie filled them with home-made marmalade. The idea of turning their home into a guest-house had come from Mrs Keogh, when Gertie and she had been talking about the emptiness of the house since Gran's death. Bill objected, but Gertie's enthusiasm won the day.

'It's one way to make money, and with Lizzie getting married in New York we could use it. And there's Karen and Paul to think of.'

'The Lord will provide,' Bill retorted. 'Anyway, there's no privacy when you open your house to strangers.'

'It's only for the summer. Three months – if that. And we'll have the place to ourselves for the winter.'

Bill frowned and bashed his newspaper.

Gertie said, 'It's either that or sell it. What do we need all those bedrooms for with the family gone?'

The days had loomed long and heavy for Gertie after Gran's death. Lizzie, her daughter, had left her job as a nurse in England, and had gone to work in New York to be near her fiancé, Pete Scanlon. Lizzie had dreamt about her wedding day for as long as Gertie could remember: walking slowly down the aisle in a long white dress, swirling skirt, long train, Pete by her side, teasing her to hide his shyness, the photographers on the lawn. Vicky, her bridesmaid, dressed in coral blue, Gran scattering rose petals from her little cloth bag.

Gertie thought of all the times she had objected to Lizzie's marriage. 'You're too young to fly the nest,' she would say to her. 'Only finished your exams. What's the rush?'

The truth was that Gertie did not want Lizzie to leave home. 'What'll we do without all this?' she would say, surveying the chaotic bedroom, clothes scattered everywhere, drawers pulled out.

In spite of everything Gertie said, Lizzie left home,

and her bedroom had been empty until now. At least if the season was good, Gertie and Bill would be able to afford the trip to America, some new clothes for the occasion, and perhaps a little financial assistance with the cost of the reception.

Gertie's spirits lifted as it began to dawn on her how much she was looking forward to seeing Lizzie again. Karen, her eldest daughter, had moved into the basement with her husband Paul, but Gertie was determined not to intrude. Solitude was precious when the children were small and Gran was alive. She had craved it because it was a rare time of peacefulness, when she could gather her spirits together and recover from the everyday hurly-burly. Now her solitude was filled with anxiety, relieved only by visits from John, Karen's son. Visits that she cherished. The weather had affected her too.

The winter had gone on too long and Gertie told herself that at fifty-five years of age, she was not ready to cross the bridge into old age. Doctor Gregory, the new English doctor, said she was suffering from depression. Gertie herself felt that if she had a purpose, her life would settle, and she would free herself from the burden of her solitude.

Gertie and Bill moved their personal belongings into the breakfast room at the back of the kitchen, including the bed they had shared since their marriage, almost thirty-four years before.

Rationing during the war had left the British people

ravenous, and they were coming to Ireland in droves during the summer months, in search of good food. Industry in Britain had come alive again, and the war damage was being repaired. For the first time since the war, the British had money in their pockets, and they wanted to refresh their palates with the flavour of home-cured bacon, Irish butter and beef. Guest-houses sprang up overnight in Dun Laoghaire. As Mr Mulvey, the manager of McCullough's drapery shop, said, 'Where there's space, there's a bed.'

Mrs Keogh had taken on the job of cook without a quibble. It tickled Gertie to wonder what Gran would think if she could see her greeting 'them foreigners, with strange accents' and being friendly to them. She could imagine Gran saying, 'We burnt them out in the twenties, and now you're welcoming them with open arms.'

Gertie had no retroactive guilt. She was sure that she was just in her dealings: feeding the guests well and giving value for money. They also had the choice of coming down to breakfast in the dining-room, or having their breakfast served in bed.

Turning towards the dining-room, she gave a welcoming smile to the woman sitting at one of the check-clothed tables.

'Good morning, Mrs Turnbull. Did you sleep well?'

'Like a log.'

Mrs Turnbull's husband joined her, explaining his lateness. She did not want to share any part of the last

dreary half-hour of her husband's litany. Her attention was focused on Gertie.

'We went on the coach to Wicklow yesterday,' she said. 'What beautiful countryside. I think there'll be a lot of visitors here soon.' She cast her eyes towards the window. 'In spite of the rain.'

'I hope so,' Gertie said. 'It's early days still.'

She was thinking of the money Gran had left her; she had spent it redecorating the ten bedrooms in pastel shades of pinks, greens, blues and yellows, so that each room was distinguished by its colour. Her shopping sprees took her along the Dublin quays, among the antique shops, to buy washstands, floral basins and matching jugs, wardrobes, chests of drawers, an assortment of tables for the dining-room, linen tablecloths.

Each table was decorated with sprigs of flowers in tiny bowls. New beds had been delivered, and the sewing-machine whirred for hours on end as Karen made curtains. Then there were the wages to pay; thirty shillings a week to Mrs Keogh, and fifteen to Biddy Plunkett whom Gertie employed as a waitress. Gertie liked Biddy and knew that her experience as a waitress in the Roman Café would come in useful when she was serving the tables. Biddy had started her new job at the beginning of June.

'Is there no one else available?' Mrs Keogh had asked disapprovingly when she opened the hall door to Biddy that first morning. Mrs Keogh was in her late fifties and Gertie suspected that she was jealous of Biddy.

'She won't stay,' she had said, hinting at Biddy's instability and her own reliability. As the days went by, she bossed Biddy, and listed her shortcomings with such regularity that one day Biddy had lost her temper and flung down the pile of washing she was carrying in from the clothes-line.

'Have you looked in the mirror lately, Mrs Keogh?' she had shouted.

'Why?'

'Because whoever knit your face dropped a stitch.'

'How dare you!'

A few days later when Gertie asked Mrs Keogh to stay and serve the evening meals, she refused. She wanted to be home to get her husband's dinner, which, she said, had to be on the table at six o'clock sharp.

Biddy had offered her services, glad of the extra money.

Fat spattered as Mrs Keogh arranged plates of rashers, sausages, eggs, black and white pudding, and tomatoes, and handed them to Gertie. The dining-room filled up as the guests came straggling down, nodding to one another.

'Eeeeeh. Lovely morning.'

'Och yes. We're off to Killarney today.'

Scottish, Yorkshire and Lancashire accents mingled, and drifted around the dining-room as the guests finished their meals, and Biddy cleared the tables.

Biddy did not mind the work because she nurtured secret ambitions of her own. She longed to be a fashion

designer and wear her own elaborate creations. A career like that would provide her with a place in life, where she might own a car someday, and drive around in grand style. She was good at sketching. Everybody said so. Already she was beginning to set herself apart from her sisters and friends, the work giving her a good excuse to do so.

'What's the matter with you, Biddy?' Mrs Keogh asked. 'You're not listening to a word I'm saying.'

'Sorry, Mrs Keogh. I was thinking.'

'Not to be recommended at this hour of the morning. We're too busy. Now get that dining-room cleared.'

Biddy was dressed scantily. Her darned dress was partly concealed by her frilly new apron. In her eyes there was a tentative expression, and her dark hair, held back with a white-peaked band, offset her complexion. Gertie had bought her uniform, and when Mrs Keogh insisted on a dress-rehearsal, she declared that Gertie was suffering from delusions of grandeur.

Biddy was young and enthusiastic; she unnerved people because her ambition made her different. In a seaside town like Dun Laoghaire everyone was recognisable, either from their background or their place of work. Biddy was not. She refused to be servile or cringing. Instead, she was proud and workmanlike, and popular with the guests.

Mrs Keogh glanced at the clock. 'You haven't started on the rooms yet.'

The blow of her reproach fell on deaf ears.

'The day isn't long enough,' Biddy complained, knowing that her work had fallen behind because she had been listening to one of the guests, eager for conversation, telling her terrible life story. She also liked to hear talk of places she had never been, places she recognised from her Geography schoolbook. Places like Leeds and Bradford, where the woollen mills were. One family had come all the way from Spain with their seven-year-old daughter, Carmelita. Carmelita had dusky skin, and her black hair was braided and coiled around her head. Gold earrings glinted in her ears, and she had ribbons to match all the exotic colours of her dresses.

'Buenos días, Biddy,' she would call, and everyone would laugh delightedly at her accent.

Biddy would smile patiently at the guests, her interest encouraging more conversation. Inexpert and young as she was, she managed to make Mrs Keogh feel foolish. Mrs Keogh's resentment of Biddy affected her posture and the curl of her lip.

'You are being unfair to her,' Gertie said when Mrs Keogh complained. 'She hasn't done anything wrong.'

'She talks too much. Far too friendly with the guests.'

'The guests are happy and the work gets done,' Gertie snapped. She suspected that Mrs Keogh also resented her friendship with Biddy.

Suddenly there was an influx of visitors and Biddy had to take on the extra task of chambermaid. She delivered

breakfast each morning to those who had ordered it. Placing the tray brusquely on the bedside table and drawing the curtains with a whoosh, Biddy would call, 'Good morning,' in a cheerful voice.

'That time.' Mr Goodall, who had arrived the previous day from Huddersfield, stretched and rubbed his eyes.

'It's a beautiful day,' Biddy said, as she pulled the curtains, her back to the bed and Mr Goodall.

The lawn stretched out below, shadowy and silver with dew. A shaft of sunlight struck the low wall.

'Would you like me to pour your tea?'

'I don't feel very well.' Mr Goodall's voice was plaintive. 'Something I ate, I suspect.'

'You poor thing. The food here is rich.'

'That's the trouble. Hard to resist, like yourself.' He gave her a roguish smile, and felt better when he saw the look of concern on her face.

Biddy poured his tea, with one eye on the half-open door, in case she needed to make a hasty retreat. She handed him the steaming cup and said, 'Get out in the fresh air today. It'll do you good.'

He sipped the tea. 'Ah, that's better. You're right. I'll go for a walk. Would you like to come?' He grinned slyly at her.

'You're a devil, Mr Goodall. I've work to do.'

Biddy never spared herself. She had her home to keep clean for her mother, and the shopping to do sometimes. But this particular morning she felt sorry for Mr Goodall.

He looked vulnerable, as he lay there, grateful for her attention. He was a middle-aged, lonely man who had buried his wife the previous year.

She could hear voices downstairs. Someone calling her name.

'Jasus,' Biddy exclaimed. 'And not a bed made yet. I'd better go.' She vanished, cursing under her breath.

Biddy collected her mop and brushes, dustpan and dusters. She disappeared upstairs, away from the bedlam of the kitchen. 'Make sure you get into all the corners,' was all Gertie had ever said to her.

Later she walked jauntily to the clothes-line, the basket of washing bumping against her side. Pegging up the wet clothes, her hair shining in the sun, she smiled to herself. She loved the garden. As she dipped her strong arms into the washing basket, she was unaware of Mr Goodall peering out at her from behind the net curtains of his bedroom. Gertie's voice, calling John to take his shoes off, brought her back to reality. The sky was blue, clouds drifting hurriedly. She leaned against the wall for a minute, listening to the sound of a lawnmower in the distance, a motor car, the clop clop of Mr Meaney's horse's hooves heralding the milk delivery. The sound of steady noises soothed her, and reminded her of the safety of her childhood.

Biddy hung up the last of the washing and went to get the jug for the milk.

Mr Meaney's horse was waiting outside, flies buzzing around his ears, while Mr Meaney went from door to door.