

Joan
O'Neill

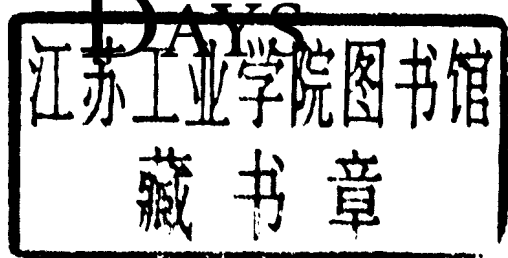


DAISY CHAIN DAYS

PRAISE FOR DAISY CHAIN WAR:

'One of my all time favourite teenage books' ROBERT DUNBAR, *THE IRISH TIMES*

Joan
O'Neill
DAISY CHAIN
DAYS



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Dedication

This book is dedicated with love to my daughters, Elizabeth and Laura, my friends and mentors, and all my family who bring me joy, and in memory of Daisy, our beloved and faithful golden retriever, who we miss so much.

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I'd like to thank all my family for their enormous encouragement; to Elizabeth and Laura for editorial comments, and Robert for his computer skills in times of crisis.

Most of all thank you to all my readers who wanted to know what happened next.

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To a Squirrel at Kyle – Na – No

*Come play with me;
Why should you run,
Through the shaking tree
As though I'd a gun
To strike you dead?
When all I would do
Is to scratch your head
And let you go.
W. B. Yeats*

1

It was a brilliant Sunday afternoon in September, one of the last remaining days of summer. The garden shimmered in the heat. Apple and pear trees groaned with fruit. Drunken bees droned around them. Butterflies flitted among the lavender and roses. All was peaceful now that Dad had stormed off.

The sun filtered through the twists and tangles of branches and glossy green leaves of my poplar tree at the bottom of the garden. I sat in its centre curled up on an old rug I had nicked from our six-year-old golden retriever Trudy's basket.

Streaks of sunlight poured through the branches, trickling warmth as my Biro scabbled across the page. The rough bark scratched my skin through my top. This was my hiding place, where I came to write in my diary. Under its green-leafed canopy the trailing branches widened out to form a dark, rounded dome.

Ivy covered its trunk and brambles grew untamed along the boundary wall. No one ever came down here except John, the gardener, to dump the weeds, rousing

me if I fell asleep. I often wondered what it would be like to fall out of the tree in my sleep, crack my head against the trunk. I imagined the crimson blood pouring down the trunk, the sudden limpness, and Mum's screams when I was finally discovered unconscious on the grass. I always did have a lively imagination.

This was my private place; not even Rebecca (Becky), my older sister, knew about it. But then she was hardly ever around these days. We used to spend our summers together playing tennis, and swimming. All that changed when she went to Trinity College to study medicine last year. She changed. I miss her not being here as much to tease me and laugh with me about boys. Only this lunchtime I heard Dad complain to her, 'I never see you these days.'

Becky had stared into the distance. 'I'm busy,' was all she said, and turned away.

'You should be here sometimes with your mother,' he'd said.

'Isn't that your job?' she'd retorted, storming off leaving Dad and me staring after her.

She'd been very grumpy lately. I don't know what's the matter with her. Now that she was a college student, she seemed a lot older and she didn't confide in me so much.

Mum and Dad seemed to do nothing but argue lately too. Mum complained about how late Dad had got home the previous night. He said that he'd met some important people and had got held up. They hardly

noticed me sitting there while they sniped at each other. I grabbed an apple and shifted away from the row that was brewing, escaping down here where I sat still until the fluttering in my heart stopped. When at last I heard the sound of the front door bang and Dad's car drive off to his afternoon surgery everything inside me quietened down enough for me to take out my diary from its plastic folder.

Recently I had become an expert at making myself invisible, because I hate rows. Dad and Mum had been at each other's throats, acting as if they hate each other. Why does it have to be like that? Being the teenager in the family. I should have been the one throwing the tantrums. That's what's expected of teenagers. Yet, I'm the quiet one, the peacemaker, which is a waste of time. I might as well be as moody as the rest of them for all the difference it makes.

Why do they make me feel so bad? I wrote in my diary. What did I care? I had my best friend Sarah Shaw, who lived across the road, and whom I'd known all my life, and my other best friend, Kim O'Driscoll from school. We share all our secrets, go on crazy diets together, discuss spots, exchange beauty secrets. Sarah envied me my thick, straight hair but it was mousy compared to Becky's shining mane, and utterly lifeless. I'd been dying to get highlights but Mum refused to let me. She said the sun would bleach it, but so far it hadn't and the summer was almost over.

We talked about boys a lot too. Boys would be Sarah's only topic of conversation if she had her way, but I couldn't understand what she sees in the boys she fancied. Last summer I had a crush on Scott Brady, who lives on the corner of our street. I'd known him since I was eight years old. We'd played together as children. He was always joking around, never taking anything seriously, much to his parents' exasperation sometimes. He didn't seem to notice me much. Perhaps he only had eyes for cars. I really liked him but he was out of my range. It was hard at the time, but my feelings soon faded and, besides, he was too old for me. At seventeen he was studying for his leaving certificate. As Sarah and Kim pointed out, he wouldn't take any notice of a fourteen-year-old. Still, I wondered what it would be like to have a real boyfriend of my very own and for a second I felt lonely.

Up in my tree I snoozed, only woken by my mobile ringing. It was Sarah.

'Hi, want to go for a walk?' she asked.

'Okay. I'll be over in a few minutes.'

She laughed and clicked off.

Mum was standing on the patio in front of her easel, painting. She was lost in concentration, unaware of being watched. Her hair was a fiery halo of gold around her pretty, oval face, her unruly curls diffuse in the light. In her cut-off shorts, and her smock hanging loosely from her shoulders, she looked like a girl – much younger

than forty, anyway. Then she looked at her watch, and turned quickly to go back inside. I waited until she had gone before making my own way up the garden path to the house. But Mum stepped out before I got to the back door, holding a glass of water.

‘Oh, there you are,’ she said.

The sun struck the cut-glass prisms as she lifted the water to her lips, throwing a myriad of coloured light across her face and giving her a theatrical expression.

‘I like that,’ I said, examining the soft pink roses on her canvas.

‘It’s a mess,’ she grumbled, gazing at it critically.

‘You say that about everything you paint, but you know it isn’t.’

‘I have such a headache,’ she sighed, taking another gulp of water. ‘I’ll never get everything finished in time for the exhibition.’

‘Shall I get you an Anadin?’ I asked.

‘No thanks, love.’

‘Wear your sun hat then.’

Her chaotic curls shook negatively. ‘No, I’m almost finished.’

She picked up her brush and continued painting. Trudy, lying on her side, one eye open protectively, grunted contentedly.

‘I’m going over to Sarah’s,’ I said. ‘I won’t be long.’

Trudy’s ears immediately picked up. I put her on her lead and we went across the road to Sarah’s house.

Sarah was stretched out on a sunbed in her garden, her sandals kicked off, her head thrown back, her baseball hat at a precarious angle on her head. Her skin was golden, the freckles across her nose like a dusting of fine brown sugar.

‘There’s nothing to do,’ she said, moving restlessly, her face blank, a sure sign that she was bored. She wasn’t the only one who thought that hanging around the house was boring. So did I, but I still hated the thought that the summer was nearly over and we were going back to school the following day.

‘I can’t believe we’re back to school tomorrow,’ I said sadly.

‘I can’t wait,’ she said. ‘Fifth year is a doss, no exams so we can have a laugh. Can’t hack this hanging around, it’s such a massive waste of time. I’m dying to see who’s new this year.’ Her eyes glazed over.

She meant the boys of course.

During the summer Sarah had become boy-crazy, obsessed with having a boyfriend – and always going for the ‘wrong type’ too. Previous summers we’d spent all our time in each other’s houses playing games, dressing up, or messing with make-up. These days I had to go looking for her if I wanted to spend time with her.

Trudy was eyeing me, anxious to get going.

We walked along the East Pier, Sarah wiggling her hips exaggeratedly. The pier was crowded with Sunday strollers. Children were playing on the green opposite

Teddy's ice-cream kiosk. I liked it here. As a child I had often played around the bandstand, and the rocks behind the wall, while Mum sat and chatted with her friends. Sarah and I bought ice creams, and sat side by side on benches overlooking the harbour, watching the HSS ferry drawing away from the jetty. Magnificent boats lined the marina; music blared from one of them. Things were looking up for Dun Laoghaire. It was a more prosperous place these days.

On the way home we stopped at the café. Seated on the terrace was Becky with a dark-eyed boy I'd never seen before. They were drinking cappuccinos. She was laughing at something he said. Laughing her loud laugh, her blonde hair cascading down her back, she looked as if she hadn't a care in the world. For a moment I considered going over to say hello to her then decided against it.

'I'm thirsty, let's have a latte,' Sarah said, her eyes on the waiter.

As soon as we sat down her mobile rang. Sarah then spent several minutes chatting, reorganising her social life, twisting her hair or fiddling with her bracelets. She was obviously talking to a boy. I ordered two cappuccinos then I turned my attention to my sister, wondering where her boyfriend, Simon, was.

Becky and I used to be great friends, talking about clothes and boys and all kinds of things. But she'd lost interest in me when she went to Trinity and started dating Simon Caulder. She'd grown away from me and I

was sad about that. Now as I watched her animated face, heard her tinkling laughter, I wondered if she was disenchanted with Simon and his ideals.

Tall and confident, with long legs, straight blonde hair and big blue eyes, she was a real beauty in the same oval-faced way that Mum was, and had the boys drooling over her. She looked stunning even in scruffy jeans and a baggy sweater tied around her waist. Simon, a second-year politics student, had a confident air and inquisitive mind. He was a member of the Green Party and had encouraged Becky to be politically aware, including her in all the party's activities. She was an asset to him because she was intelligent and pretty and interested in everyone – except for her own family it seemed. Sometimes she and Simon were like an old married couple, bickering all the time. But Becky was the boss in that relationship – or so I'd always thought – with Simon putting up with her nagging good-humouredly.

Sarah, her eyes glittering as she clicked off her mobile, said, 'We'll want to be at school before assembly.'

'Why? We never go in early.'

'I want to see Ryan.' She struggled to keep her excitement at bay.

Ryan was the school bigmouth. I loathed him.

'You see him all the time,' I protested.

'Only in a crowd.'

I raised my eyes to heaven.

On my way home I rounded the corner and walked smack into Scott Brady, tinkering with his car. His handsome face was pinched with nervous energy. There was a sheen of perspiration on his brow. Scott was waiting to start a mechanical engineering degree course at University College Dublin once he got the exam results he needed.

‘Hi Beth!’ he called out.

I stopped.

‘How’s it going?’ he asked, wiping his grimy hands on a clean rag.

‘Fine. How are you?’

‘Living it up as you can see,’ he laughed.

His eyes shone a wicked blue, and he had a mischievous grin. He was popular with everyone. I hadn’t seen much of him lately; he’d been working as a lifeguard down on the seafront.

‘How’s tricks?’ he asked. ‘Like my new set of wheels?’

‘Nice,’ I said, admiring the sleek, second-hand cabriolet VW. ‘When did you get it?’

‘A few days ago. Traded in Matilda, she’d had it. It’s a pre-results pressie,’ he said, making a big deal out of it.

Scott loved cars. He spent what little spare time he had tinkering with either his or his father’s.

‘I hope you get the results you need,’ I said.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘I hope so too or there’ll be killings. The parents are giving me grief. Mum’s worried sick, she says she’s having a terrible summer. Dad’s insisting

on getting me career advice in case I don't get the 475 points I need. I should have got out of here, gone to Croatia with the lads, but there you go.'

'Well . . . Good luck,' I said, and whistled for Trudy.

'Thanks. Where are you rushing off to?' He grinned at me, pushed his tangled hair out of his eyes.

I could feel myself blushing. 'Home. School starts tomorrow. I have to sort out my uniform and books.'

'I know, you can't wait to get there.'

I made a face and Scott laughed. 'Like to come for a drive, test the engine?' he said.

I looked at Trudy.

'She can come too.'

Trudy looked at me beseechingly, her tail wagging.

'Okay – why not,' I said.

'Come on then.'

Scott squeezed Trudy into the back seat and we got in. He started the engine, and with a confident shift of gears we were off, sweeping round corners, driving along the seafront, my hair whipping around my face in the wind.

'What do you think?' Scott called out.

'Good!' I shouted to make myself heard above the roar of the wind.

We swung right to Dalkey and the Vico Road.

'Nervous!' he called out as he sped up Killiney Hill.

'Of course not!' I lied, trying to soothe Trudy, who was cowering in a corner. 'But what if the cops are out on speed checks?'

‘Don’t worry, we’re not going that fast. I’ve no intention of killing you,’ he said, laughing.

The wind blew my hair everywhere; Led Zeppelin blared out from the CD player. Lights studded the bay. Stars were appearing in the darkening sky. Scott drove home slowly, and I savoured the magical scene. He pulled up into his driveway.

Trudy leapt out and stood waiting anxiously for me on the path, wagging her tail with relief. I sat still for a moment, my head still woozy from the gushing air.

‘Thanks,’ I said, getting out.

‘You weren’t scared, were you?’ he laughed.

‘Only of the cops catching you.’

Scott’s eyes shone with amusement. ‘You look terrific these days, Beth, all tanned and glowing.’

‘Thanks.’

Trudy was pulling on her leash.

‘I’d better go,’ I said. ‘Thanks for the ride!’

‘Pleasure,’ said Scott. ‘See you around then.’

‘Yeah!’

I shut the front door with relief. I still felt a bit awkward around Scott, even though I didn’t fancy him any more.

The house was quiet. I went into the kitchen.

Becky was there, her eyes red rimmed from crying.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked her.

‘Nothing, I’m fine,’ she said quickly, turning away from me.

When she turned back she put on a cheerful smile and I decided not to probe her too much.

‘Were you out?’ I asked.

‘Pub.’

She crossed to the fridge, got out a carton of milk, slopped it into a glass.

‘I was looking for you,’ she said. ‘I wanted to say sorry for shouting at you earlier on.’ She spoke with exaggerated slowness to keep her voice steady. She’d had a few drinks.

‘That’s okay, I went for a drive with Scott.’

‘Oh! And what happened?’

‘Nothing. He took me for a drive in his new car.’

‘He fancies you,’ she said confidentially, moving closer.

‘No he doesn’t.’ I made a face. ‘I’m only a kid in his eyes.’

‘Beth, you’re fifteen going on sixteen and grown up for your age. You can tell a mile off Scott fancies you. He’s finally noticed that you’re not a kid any more.’

‘Rubbish!’ I was embarrassed.

‘Did he . . . you know?’

‘What?’

She pursed her lips and blew me a gushy kiss.

‘No he didn’t.’ I was annoyed.

‘No need to take that tone. I was only asking – anyway, Scott’s a nice boy.’

‘I don’t fancy him,’ I insisted – not sure whether that was the truth or not.