

BEAUTIFUL DREAMER



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ALLIUM PRESS OF CHICAGO

Allium Press of Chicago
www.alliumpress.com

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Revised edition by Allium Press, 2010
Originally published via Booksurge, 2009

Book and cover design by E. C. Victorson

Cover image: from author's private collection
Cover background: detail of Rookery Building façade
Title page image: women shoppers in front of
Marshall Field's, Chicago, circa 1905; DN-0002553;
Courtesy of Chicago History Museum

ISBN: 978-0-9840676-4-0

ONE

Christmas Day, 1899

Christmas morning, Kitty pulled back the plaid curtain and rubbed her hand against the kitchen window to clear a spot to view the steady fall of snow. All was white: the sky, the streets, even the cottages across the street could hardly be seen, covered as they were in deep, fluffy snow that erased all the dirt, soot, and smoke that usually spoiled the view. She shivered in the steamy heat of the kitchen that misted the window again immediately after she had cleared it. The air was filled with the scent of roast turkey, potatoes and cabbage, cooking in preparation for the Christmas dinner she and her mother would serve at two. She wondered if the snow would prevent her aunt and uncle from joining the rest of the family for Christmas.

The warm kitchen was quiet except for the bubble of the saucepan on the stove and occasional crackling from the oven. Her father and the boys must still be asleep upstairs, it was never this quiet when the boys were up and about. Her mother, sitting in her own world in a corner of the parlor, was folding napkins as carefully as if they were to be offered to nobility, not her own boisterous family members. Kitty's sister Margaret, who lived down the street with baby Sean and husband Kevin O'Connor, would arrive just before the meal was served, as usual, so Margaret could sit at the table like a guest and not be running in and out of the kitchen with her face red from the heat and her hair all falling down with the hustling. That role fell to Kitty, the dutiful younger daughter, not yet married with a husband and child of her own. Kitty picked up her cup of tea from the table and sat down in front of the open hearth, placing her slippared feet on the fireguard in

her favorite position. She stared at the flames, wondering if she were destined to be an old maid, living in her parents' house forever, taking care of them in their old age, being aunt to Margaret's children and any children her brothers might have, should they ever get off their arses and actually marry the neighborhood girls they pretended not to see while they watched them so wishfully. Or maybe she would marry one of the neighborhood boys and settle down to live near her parents, as Margaret had. She picked up the poker from beside the fireplace and stabbed at the logs, creating a rising shower of sparks.

Kitty's reverie was broken by her mother's return into the kitchen, her face reddened with the heat of the house. The two of them worked together pulling plates and cutlery out of the cabinets and piling them in their arms and aprons to bring them into the parlor. The parlor itself wore a festive air, with boughs of ivy draped across the mantelpiece and pinned up around the doorways. A thick bunch of mistletoe wrapped with red ribbon hung from the central gas fixture in the middle of the parlor ceiling. Their voices must have awakened Mr. Coakley, because he came down the narrow stairway in his stocking feet, looping a suspender over one shoulder.

Michael Coakley stretched and yawned and then beamed at his wife and daughter. "Christmas Day it 'tis, my dears and here you are slaving away to make a feast for the rest of us. And just where are those lazy layabouts, not yet out of their warm beds?" He turned and called up the stairs: "Michael, Patrick, John, William, Daniel. Up and about, you lazy lumps. It's a merry Christmas we're planning to have, with you or without you. So move your sorry carcasses down here straightaway."

Silence above, and then the slap of bare feet on the wooden floorboards, dresser drawers pulled out, a shout or two, and then one by one the boys appeared, tumbling down the stairs. Such a rousing call from their father was not to be ignored, even though all five of them were adults, in age anyway, ranging from Michael, the oldest boy, at twenty-eight, to Daniel, the youngest at twenty-two. Margaret, aged thirty, and Kitty at age twenty were the engine and the caboose, Mr. Coakley liked to say, the oldest and the youngest with the train of boys

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in between. To those who didn't know them, the five Coakley boys were variations on the same Irish theme: freckled, red-haired and willing to fight. But Kitty had lived her whole life with them, and couldn't imagine how someone could mistake one for another.

Daniel, the brother she was closest to, was quiet and thoughtful, sneaky too, sometimes. She thought he was the best-looking of them all, his occasional freckles more like beauty marks on his smooth, warm-looking skin.

William, next up in age, was the scholar, the only one she might see with his nose in a book, even though, like the others, he had barely finished at the parish high school and used his back more than his brain in the work he did.

John was the smallest of the five and the one with the most freckles and the least hair. He had a temper and a smart mouth, and would fight a man twice his size.

Long and lanky Patrick lacked the temper, but was always willing to help John take on any man who bothered him.

Michael, usually called Mick or Mickey to differentiate him from his father, was the biggest of the brothers and had the worst temper of them all. His little sister Kitty, though, had learned early on just how to get his attention and he had adored her since she was born, which annoyed their older sister Margaret. Kitty sometimes thought his love for her had been born out of his need to put his big sister Margaret in her place, but she never complained about his obvious devotion.

The five brothers all worked the warmer months on the ore boats that sailed the Great Lakes. It paid well and didn't require any education or connections, like so many jobs in the city did.

Daniel came over and hugged his mother. "Merry Christmas, Ma. It smells like a feast in here." The other boys followed his example, mumbling and running their fingers through the red curly hair they all sported, and then flopping down on the sofa in front of the parlor fire. Other than Daniel, whose cheeks blazed as if reflecting the flames, the boys looked much the worse for wear, as Mr. Coakley asked, "And what time was it that you boys tumbled in? The crack of dawn?"

“Is that what cracked?” John muttered. Mick dug his elbow into John’s side.

Mr. Coakley looked stern and said, “I asked you what time you came in.”

Daniel replied, “We were all there at the five o’clock Mass this morning. All five of us.”

“Bah, the drunkard’s Mass,” Mr. Coakley said. “And I suppose you can remember the sermon?”

Daniel looked at the others before he answered his father. “It was the birth of Jesus, of course it was. And what else would you expect on Christmas morning?” His four brothers nodded seriously, as if to say they supported Daniel’s interpretation.

Mickey rubbed his face with his hand and said to his sister, “We could have used your lovely voice last night, little Kitty. Who knows how much more money we could have pulled in if our caroling had actually pleased the crowd.”

“And here I thought we were making even more money with the gentry paying us to go away,” said John.

“So it was out caroling, you boys were?” Mrs. Coakley asked, a worried look on her face. “With all that snow coming down so fiercely?”

John said proudly, “We made a pot of money last night. Might have been the snow that made our voices sound reasonable.”

“And we warmed up from time to time in a comfortable place,” Patrick added.

Mr. Coakley said, “I hope it wasn’t the bars you were frequenting last night on Christmas Eve.” He had taken the pledge as a youth back in County Cork, after his own father had fallen off a roof he was patching because he was drunk, and died in the yard in front of him. He hadn’t had an alcoholic drink since then, more than thirty years before.

“A lad has to come in out of the snow,” said John.

Mrs. Coakley asked the boys to move the chairs into the parlor and set up the table where they would eat. The boys, joking and pushing one another, put together a large table from four sawhorses and a long

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wide board that were kept in the shed out back. When it was covered with Mrs. Coakley's best Irish linen tablecloth that she had stayed up late to iron, the makeshift table could hardly be distinguished from ready made. Except, as Kitty found when she came to set the plates upon it, it wobbled dangerously when she knocked against it.

After setting the table, Kitty retreated to the small room behind the kitchen that was her very own, and pulled out the red dress she had worn at Midnight Mass the night before. She loved wearing it—the bright red showed off her dark hair and the glow of her blue eyes and red lips against her white skin. She checked herself in the mirror that rested on top of her dresser, lifting her hair up to see how that would look and then letting it fall. Why bother putting it up if I'll be in the kitchen all afternoon? she thought. And besides, it's just family. She roughly tugged her hair back and tied a red ribbon around her head to keep it off her face.

"Katherine," her mother called from the kitchen. "Come help me with the potatoes."

When her mother called her Katherine, Kitty knew there was no stalling or arguing. She gave the mirror one last look, bit her lips to redden them even more, and joined her mother in the kitchen. She pulled an apron from the drying rack beside the fireplace and tied it around her red dress. Then she and her mother together drained the heavy pots that held the cabbage and the potatoes that they would mix together for colcannon, the family favorite.

"And we mustn't forget the trinkets," said Mrs. Coakley, opening a drawer in the kitchen sideboard and pulling out a small cloth bag. She poured them out on the table: a small gold ring, a silver dime, a thimble, and a button.

"Oh, Mama, really, that silly superstition," Kitty said. "And besides, I thought we did that at Halloween."

"Shush, girl. Remember the boys were off on the boats in Lake Superior then and we didn't have a proper colcannon. What's it to you, miss, if you don't believe in it anyway?"

Kitty shook her head and turned away. How could she admit to her mother that she feared getting the tiny thimble that would predict spinsterhood for her? Or even the gold ring, which foretold marriage within the year, what with no beaux lining up for her at the front door. She didn't want the others to laugh at her. Besides, nothing she ever said had ever deflected her mother's behavior, once she had gotten it into her head to do something.

"Come along, Kitty. It's a harmless thing, it is," her mother said, her nimble fingers dusting off each token. "And we can make sure you don't get one at all, at all, if that's what you want."

"That's all right, Mama," Kitty said. "I'd prefer to find nothing in my colcannon. Except my fork, of course."

"Of course. Now why don't you go and light the candles for the Baby Jesus? 'Tis probably as dark as it will be getting, with all that snow falling down."

"Actually, the snow seems to have stopped itself, I do believe," Mr. Coakley called in from the parlor, where he had stationed himself near the window to watch the weather. "Is that the sun itself that's coming out?"

Kitty rushed to her father's side to peer out the front window. The snow had stopped falling and the way the sun hit the heaps of snow made them glow as if a magic spell had been cast upon them. "You'd never see snow like this in County Cork," Mr. Coakley said. "No, not ever. Just a mean cold rain, that's all we'd get for Christmas."

"Ah well, then," Kitty said. "You know they always say that the streets of America are paved with gold."

Her father laughed. "We'll be sending the boys out to shovel soon. Perhaps for them the gold will be forthcoming. Once they put their strong backs into it."

Kitty lit the white candles she and her mother had set in the windows to light the Baby Jesus on His way. And just as she was blowing out the taper, she could hear the kitchen door opening and Margaret, Kevin, and Sean O'Connor trooping in, boisterous and

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happy. Kitty's parents immediately began to fuss and coo over their only grandson.

Margaret entered the parlor, fluffing out her hair, and leaned over to give her sister a kiss. "Happy Christmas, our Kitty. And what a pretty dress! Is that the same one you wore last Christmas?"

Kitty laughed. Margaret was so predictable—she never offered a compliment that wasn't wrapped around a little dig. "No, it's new for this Christmas, it is. And didn't you see me wearing it—singing at Father Egan's Mass at midnight?" she asked, knowing full well that Margaret and her family had not appeared, even though she had said they would try.

"Well, that explains the bit of incense I smelled when I came into the room," Margaret said, hanging her long dark blue cloak on the stand next to the front door. She ran her hand over the cloak, smoothing it. "And did you see the fine wool cloak my Kevin bought me for Christmas, Kitty? He bought it at Marshall Field's, he did, although it cost a packet." Kevin O'Connor had started as a junior bank clerk when he was not yet twenty and had risen slowly to more authority in the fifteen years since. Kitty believed that money was all he and Margaret ever talked about, so keen he seemed on it and what it could buy. Kevin gave Kitty an affectionate kiss on the cheek when he entered the parlor. And he was by far the best-dressed man in the room, in his sleek black suit, white shirt and bright red tie, no contest with Kitty's brothers who appeared one by one, wearing collarless shirts with no ties and corduroy trousers. Only Mr. Coakley himself sported a dark green tie, but he remained in his shirtsleeves, his red suspenders adding a note of holiday cheer to his outfit.

Mrs. Coakley entered the parlor, removing her apron and folding it carefully. "All right, my dears, I do believe we're ready to serve. Kitty, come into the kitchen and help me now. And Margaret . . ."

"That's all right, Mama. I must see to our Sean," Margaret said, seated already in the chair to the right of the head of the table, her three-year-old son wriggling on her lap.

Mrs. Coakley hesitated, then shrugged her shoulders and accompanied Kitty into the kitchen.

“But what about Aunt Mabel and Uncle Patrick?” Kitty asked anxiously. “Shouldn’t we wait for them before we serve?”

“No sense in waiting for them when the food is hot,” Mrs. Coakley said. “Mabel said not to wait, anyways, she was concerned that they might not be able to make it on time, so she said not to delay our dinner. Implying of course that civilized people have their Christmas dinner much later in the day, God save them, and don’t sit down at the table until the sun goes down. Hmmph. Them with servants don’t give a care about what time the servants are finished for the day. When you’re doing it all yourself, of course, that’s a different matter. Not that your Aunt Mabel would understand that.”

Kitty didn’t quite understand it herself. Why did her mother get up so early to start cooking on Christmas Day, when she’d been out so late at Midnight Mass? And stayed up even later to iron the tablecloth? Why not sleep in and take it easy on Christmas morning, and save the big meal for late in the day, when everyone was awake and hungry? But her mother had always done it this way, as her own mother probably had done back in Ireland, and there was no changing her mind now.

Kitty was disappointed. Without Mabel and Patrick the meal would be no more than a family dinner, not a festive occasion. With the same squabbling between the brothers, their rude table manners and half-hearted rebukes from their parents, and Margaret’s posturing about their rising status and wealth. It always seemed that her aunt and uncle—especially her aunt—added a touch of civility when they joined the wild pig-in-the-parlor Coakleys. Kitty sometimes wished that she were an only child, the only child of Aunt Mabel and Uncle Patrick. Their lace-curtain life would be much more pleasant, or at least much quieter. And she wouldn’t have the Coakley reputation to live down.

Finally, they were all seated at the table, with Mr. Coakley at its head, carving the roast turkey, the hungry eyes of all upon him. As soon as he put down the carving knife, Mrs. Coakley called out, “Grace now, before we serve.” And she made the sign of the cross and

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bowed her head. "Thank you, Lord, for that which we are about to receive. And bless all of us gathered here, as well as those who are not able to join us."

Kitty thought she saw a satisfied smile quickly cross her mother's lips as she spoke the last sentence, or she could have just been imagining it.

Just as everyone chimed in, "Amen," and made the sign of the cross to end the prayer, the front door opened and in came Aunt Mabel and Uncle Patrick, blown in on a rushing gust of cold air. "Merry Christmas, everyone," Aunt Mabel said, her arms filled with gifts, wearing an amazing hat structured of velvet and feathers firmly tethered to her pompadour.

"Happy Christmas to all of yez," said Uncle Patrick, tall, broad and big-shouldered, his face as red as a roast ham, looking like the policeman he was, even dressed in his Sunday best.

"Sit, sit," said Mr. Coakley, rising to take their heavy wraps. "Here, Kitty, lay these across the bed in your room."

When all were settled at the table, with Aunt Mabel next to Kitty on the side nearest to the kitchen, and her husband next to her, Mr. Coakley began piling slices of turkey on the plates stacked next to him. He passed these to his wife on his left, who spooned out great steaming piles of colcannon. Kitty watched her mother portioning the fried potato and cabbage dish, looking for telltale signs of the fortune-telling trinkets, but could see no indication, either in the lumps of potatoes or in her mother's eyes, of what was hidden inside.

While the plates were passed around, Mr. Coakley asked his brother about the world outside—how much snow had fallen and whether he thought it would paralyze Chicago in the days to come. Uncle Patrick regaled them with stories of how the snowfall had affected the citizenry he had seen that morning, with overturned carriages, bones broken in falls, and small boys pelting their neighbors with snowballs. He had them all laughing so that when Kitty put a forkful of colcannon in her mouth and bit down on something, she didn't immediately recognize what it was, thinking instead that

somehow one of her teeth had fallen out. Then she realized what it was and looked accusingly at her mother, whose rapt attention was fixed on the face of her grandson across the table.

Then Daniel whooped, "I've got the dime, I've got the dime. It's the life of wealth for me!" His brothers cheered and slapped him on the back. Of all the five brothers, Daniel was the most likely to hold onto his money. The others said he'd pinch a penny until it squealed like a pig being butchered in the Chicago stockyards.

"So you'll be the one we'll be borrowing from," said John.

"Just you try and get it, brother," said Daniel. "You don't get wealthy by giving it away."

"What's this in my mouth?" said Mickey, spitting it out onto the table. "It's that blasted ring."

"Now, Mickey, watch your language at the table," his mother chided.

She might have also mentioned how rude it was to spit out food, especially at the table, Kitty thought, wiping her mouth with her napkin in such a way as to move the trinket from her mouth to her hand.

"Somebody call Peggy O'Neill," cried John. "She'd best be planning the wedding."

Mickey grinned and rubbed his face with his hand. "Aw, get off my back about the girl. She'd never be looking at the likes of me."

"Time you made an honest woman of her, Mick," said Patrick. "And haven't you been after her since you walked up the aisle behind her at your first holy communion?"

Mickey blushed, but said no more.

With all the attention focused on Mickey, Kitty opened her hand underneath the table and examined the trinket she had found in her mouth—the thimble, sure sign of spinsterhood. She clenched it in her fist, wondering if she could just drop it on the floor or into her shoe and pretend she never received it, when she heard her aunt's soft voice.

"Here, give it to me," Aunt Mabel whispered, placing her hand on Kitty's beneath the table. Kitty gladly relinquished the thimble and sat

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back while her aunt cried out, “The thimble, the thimble. So it’s to be spinsterhood for me.” She held up the thimble for all to see.

Her husband put his arm around her and kissed her. “I do believe I saved you from that,” he said.

“Yes, but there’s no shame to it,” Mabel said, patting his big red hand contentedly. “A woman doesn’t have to be married to have a good life.”

Kitty happened to glance at her mother’s face when Mabel made this proclamation. Mrs. Coakley curled her lip in contempt, whether for Mabel or for what she said, Kitty wasn’t sure.

Then little Sean cried out, “The b’on, the b’on,” and pulled from his mouth the small round button that signified a life of bachelorhood ahead. Everyone laughed and applauded the small boy, congratulating him on his good fortune.

“Perhaps by the time he’s thirty, he’ll have changed his mind,” his grandfather said knowingly.

“Or maybe he’ll be a priest,” said his grandmother, her eyes shining. “A man of the cloth in our very own family.” Groans came from the boys, but no one claimed a different future for the youngest member of the family, especially not Margaret, who had taken Sean onto her lap, cuddling him. She seemed to be taken with the idea herself.

“So Margaret, you ready to send your boy off to the service of the Lord?” asked Mickey.

“It’s a bit early, isn’t it?” said Margaret, brushing Sean’s hair softly and kissing his head. “He’s only three years old.”

John, sitting next to Kitty at the far end of the table, turned halfway to her and whispered, “I saw you get that trinket, Kitty. What’s the matter, too proud are you? So you let Aunt Mabel take the rap for you, didn’t you? Hiding behind her skirts again?”

“What’s it to you, Johnny?” Kitty answered. “It’s a stupid tradition anyhow.” And she turned her attention back to her plate.

“Feel how hot these potatoes are, Kitty,” John said, looming over her. He put his freckled hand with its broken nails over the steaming mound of colcannon on her plate.

Fork in hand as if she were about to stab him, Kitty said, “As if I’m about to fall for that one, John Coakley.”

John’s hand darted out and grabbed Kitty’s free hand, turning it so it landed in the pile of potatoes. She struggled in his grasp as he smashed her hand in the food to cover it fully with the mixture of cabbage and potatoes.

Her lips pressed firmly together, Kitty wriggled and wrenched her hand from her brother’s grip, collecting a handful of potatoes as she did. “Let’s see what you think about the temperature of these potatoes, boyo,” she said, swiping the steaming white mass across John’s face.

John pulled back, gasping at his little sister’s audacity.

“Miss Katherine Coakley,” said her mother from the other end of the table. “You apologize to your brother right now, you little minx. Such behavior. And on Christmas Day, the birthday of our Baby Jesus himself. You can just clean up the mess you’ve made, miss.”

“I will not,” said Kitty, standing up and stamping her foot. “Johnny started it.” She turned, pushing against the table, which began to tip to one side and slide off the sawhorses. Sean’s glass of milk spilled into his lap and onto his mother’s skirt. Margaret dabbed at it with a linen napkin. Mickey and Uncle Patrick jumped up and seized the board beneath the tablecloth, steadying it to quiet the rattling of the dishes. Mr. Coakley stood, his mouth open to scold his children as Kitty ran past him through the steamy kitchen and out the back door into the snow.

Although it was just mid-afternoon, it was dark outside and the air was still. The gas lamps hadn’t yet been lit, and snow clouds crowded the sky, their dark undersides promising more snow to come. There was no traffic on Adams Street, an unusual sight, its thin coverlet of snow still white and fresh and inviting, unstained as yet by the encroachment of manure and mud. Kitty walked down the block to the corner of Desplaines and sat on the cold stone steps of St. Patrick’s,

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looking east. The lyrics of one of the carols she had sung the night before came into her head, “How still we see thee lie.”

So unlike the little town of Bethlehem, Chicago’s downtown lay spread before her, encircled by the iron band of the Loop, the rails of the elevated train. Although much stiller than usual because of the holiday, the tiny trains ran, shorter and slower than on a weekday, and the ever-present roar of traffic muffled by the west wind still rang out. Kitty breathed in the clean air that had overcome the usual miasma of smoke and coal dust, blowing it away from the city and over the lake. She tasted its purity on her lips and inhaled its energy, so different from the close and chaotic atmosphere inside the house. It gave the scene a clarity that it usually lacked, sharpening the cityscape that appeared on the horizon just a mile or so away across the railroad tracks and the river and block after block of falling-down houses.

Kitty remembered how her brother Mickey, who had worked on some of the skyscrapers as they began to pierce the sky, taught her their names: the Fisher Building and the Monadnock, as mountainous as the New Hampshire peak for which it was named, over on Dearborn. The Women’s Temple, once the tallest building in Chicago, and the Reliance Building, its white terra cotta and broad glass windows pink with the reflection of the setting sun behind her, across from each other on State Street. She felt the city’s energy and hope flowing through her own veins. She stared straight ahead of her, breathing in deeply several times, before she turned, head held high, to face what awaited her back home.