

The Jar

Excerpt from a novel-in-progress, by Joan Christie

Introduction: The fourteen year old girl, who is in psychiatric care after overdosing and cutting her wrists, is talking about her past experiences of living in a one bed flat with her Ma, Ange. Ange is determined that the girl be exposed to only the best and most positive aspects of life – they travel half way across Dublin to get to school every day, so the girl can get the best education.

She is just finished primary school at this stage of her story – and is trying to find a way to convince Ange to let her go to the local secondary school. However, Ange has a tendency towards depression which is a real worry. And when she is on a mission, it is impossible to talk her out of it.

The girl has an older brother, Luke. He has spent most of her life in and out of care/detention centres. She only really got to know him well over the past 18 months. He is unreliable, on and off drugs, goes missing a lot, has dodgy friends. But, while the girl has an extremely serious disposition, Luke is good fun and when he is clean he takes a real interest in her and her ideas. Six months ago, Ange kicked him out of the flat, threatening him with a barring order, after he hit Ange in a row.

Chapter Three

Maybe I could start that Sunday evening last June, when Ange ran out of cigarettes, and I was walking back from the Esso. There wasn't really anyone around. It was about half eight maybe nine. There was scatter of kids here and there, playing – but it all seemed quiet. It was a very different evening. Different to most evenings; although I remember evenings like this before. You know when it's a warm day, and later everything is an orangey red. I was still wearing my t-shirt and shorts, and I was taking my time. Usually, I walk fast looking straight ahead, on some kind of mission. Not this evening; I wanted to eat my choc ice, have it finished before Ange saw – and I couldn't help looking at everything. Even the flats were orange like, and the stairwell. A Nuclear war or an asteroid falling on us seemed impossible now, not something that could happen at any moment.

Just as I got to the top step and me looking behind at block 2 and the blue sky behind it, imagining this was Spain or somewhere, I fell. I fell flat, face down but without my face banging on the concrete, and my choc ice splattered on the ground. The long stretch of balcony was either side of me. I looked to the left side and to the right and there was nobody there to see me. The choc ice was inches from me, lying there mixed with dirt now and a few cigarette

butts. I thought of picking it up, wiping the butts off and eating it anyway, just for a split second like. It wouldn't do you any harm. But the dirt looked like it had blended in too much. Watching it was as painful as my cut elbows.

And listen...

I knew I'd heard it, and there it was again, a clear whisper...Hey! It came from the far corner of the balcony that stretched just to the left of me. It wasn't my imagination, I knew that. I don't have what you might call an imagination. Me thinkin of block 2 been Spain is about as good as it gets. Then I heard it again, a faint low whisper, and I thought maybe I knew who the sound was coming from.

I stood up slowly, and glanced over my shoulder to the corner. My mind was saying get yourself back to the flat quick girl, not because I was afraid of who was there.

I wasn't.

I breathed in deep, real deep like you do when you've jumped into the swimming pool, and that first rise out of the water. I hadn't breathed this deep in months.

No. What I was afraid of was... that it might not be him - and then when I realised that it wasn't - the breathing out again. And that voice that can come up and out of you without you asking it to, that roar. The way it happened the last time I saw him, the back of him walking out the door. I hate the back of people walking out doors.

A body appeared, came out slowly out of the darkness of the corner; wearing jeans and a black hoodie, the face of it was still a bit in the shade. But some sun got at it, and I recognised it straight away. It was him - my brother, Luke. I hadn't seen him for maybe six months - Ange had made sure of that. And if she was to have her way, I would never see him again.

He was thinner now, whiter, even in the orange light I could see this. Also, his eyes were smaller and not so green. Maybe they were as green but he was too far away for me to see this. If you told me it wasn't him, just someone who looked like him, I might have believed you at that time.

I stood still; my head turned to the side, staring at him. The corner of a milk carton pressed into the side of my leg. It seems now, looking back that the traffic got quieter, sounded so much farther away. It was like we were the only two people awake. I couldn't have moved if you threw a firecracker at my feet.

Then, just as I thought he maybe said something, a gang of seagulls must have got disturbed down in the yard and shot up screaming passed us and into the sky. The last thing I could have done was walk over to him, and I was sick to think of giving him a hug. But whenever I thought of him after - my imagination of me squeezed my face in there, under his chin. It was still Luke, even if it was a skinnier, whiter Luke. Even if it was a bad Luke, a stoned Luke,

He backed into the shadow of the corner a bit, and asked me, where's Ange?

The flat, I said.

There was quiet for a moment with him standing where he was and me standing where I was, then he asked me, you still going to Mount Sickville? He smiled at his own joke the way I remembered him to do that, and I just said, no.

No?

No.

Where are you going now?

Where do you live? I asked him.

He stepped back further out of the light...Here and there, you know?

I didn't know so I didn't answer, cos how would I know? Like where is here and there? I was pissed off now. Suddenly, I could move. I lifted my bag so the carton of milk wouldn't press into my leg any more. He said, how is Ange? And I said she was okay.

I turned then toward the balcony to my right where my flat is. My head stayed looking back though, over my shoulder. I was careful not to look too directly at the dark spot, in case I might look him in the eye. Then, I said, I have to go. It was a short walk to my flat, the second last door, but this time it felt longer and the back of my neck felt hot as if he was there behind me all the way, breathing on it. I never turned till I got to the door. Then I looked all the way down past the stairwell opening, to the corner. There was nothing there.

I thought then I shouldn't have gone off like that, and maybe I'd just tell him look you know what Ange is like? Something like that. I don't know what I was doing when I ran back and said his name. But either he didn't step out, or most likely he walked away whenever I did. He was gone.

There was no way for me to know if he was in there. No way for me to ever know if he

was ever there. It was like a black hole there, whatever way the sun was. One by one the seagulls made their way back down to the yard. And suddenly I heard the traffic from the Crumlin Road, that is always there. Some shouts and curses came from the yard below; that was just Old Ed on his way home from the Leapin Horse. Some kids playing hopscotch.

There was a feeling inside the flat, that Ange knew everything.

If a room could talk it was as if the sitting room was only quiet because it knew that there was trouble afoot, the armchair was slanted away from me like it couldn't look at me. The shelf under the T.V. had more space in it even though it was filled with magazines and books now, where Luke's picture used to sit. There was only the tick of the clock coming out from the kitchen and I figured Ange would be standing right inside the door with her arms folded, ready to say, well? You'd better feckin well explain yourself girl.

If you're thinking of telling Ange about this, you need to know that she lives on the edge of things. She should hold her arms out wide when she moves cos nobody walks on ropes without doing that. You can't tell her things like I saw Luke out on the balcony, cos firstly when you tell someone something happened and maybe it didn't you might end up in the loony bin, sitting by a window nibbling on an apple quarter... It doesn't matter though. It would be just to say his name - that could be enough to send her over. So I say nothing. Some day though, if I'm not careful, I'll send her over. I'll send her over, and she'll never come back...

Like Luke.