

# Just Thinking

*Battie White*

I LOVE THIS TIME of the morning, time to myself, with a cup of tea and a Kimberly. Time to think, about everything.

Shannon is happy now to go to the play school. She waved me a smiley goodbye when I left her at the Resource Centre. Sometimes though she reminds me of her Da, that look. Jack is having his morning nap.

I was talking this morning to the woman in charge of the Centre, Sally, talking about all the different courses they have.

Aromatherapy, Flower Arranging, Cookery, Parenting, Personal Development. I'm not sure what that means. I wish they had classes in Acting. I'd love to be an actress, or maybe even a film star, some day. Just imagine, me on the Abbey stage. Nora Clitheroe, in my fine Arnott's hat, walking hand in hand with handsome Jack in *The Plough and the Stars*. Or even a small part in *Fair City*. That'd be brilliant. I'd really love that. I had a part once in the school musical. Sr. Rosita said I had a 'sweet voice', and I'd be good if I got training. I was Sandy in *Grease*. Nicola Fagan was so jealous. She hated me anyways. The first time I saw myself in the mirror at the dress rehearsal I didn't know myself. I looked so different. I felt different. No longer Doris Mooney from Marrowbone Lane. I was like a real film star. Ma said she had tears in her eyes

watching me on stage. I was brilliant; at least everybody said I was. I was really sad when the show ended. Sr. Rosita told Ma I should go to the Gaiety School of Acting after Leaving Cert. Ma said we couldn't afford that. She said I was doing well to be left in school until Leaving Cert. I was the first in the family to go that far. Ma said it was time I got a job.

I'd still love to do acting. There's still time. I'm only twenty four. In a few years when Shannon and Jack are at school, maybe I could go to acting classes.

Helen Mirren must be nearly seventy, and she still acts.

I got loads of points in the Leaving, enough to do something in college, but Ma said I'd be better off working, so I got a job in the Centra in Parnell Street. That's where I first met Joe. He often came in to buy cigarettes. Sometimes he came alone; sometimes he'd come along with his mate Tony. He'd come in to the shop, spend ages looking at the magazines and papers, and then all he'd buy would be twenty Major, sometimes maybe a pint of milk or a can of coke. The day he asked me to go to the pictures with him I nearly died of shock. Up to then he never said much. He was good looking, with his jet black hair, dark brown eyes. He always wore a black leather jacket. When we went dancing my friend Angie said he looked just like John Travolta in *Saturday*

*Night Fever*.

We were happy together. Until Joe got caught carrying drugs. I'll never forget the evening he came home after being caught. I never knew about him and drugs, I thought he was just a cycle courier.

'It's all Tony's fault. If he hadn't introduced me to that Jimmy Clarke, I'd be grand. I didn't know what was in the packages.'

He looked pathetic, sitting at the table with his head in his hands.

'What am I going to do?' he said, 'I'm innocent.'

The case came up in Court three weeks later.

The judge didn't believe him, and sentenced him to two years in the Joy.

I went to see him the first week. I got my hair done, got all dressed up with my new blue coat and high heel shoes bought in Arnott's sale, and got a taxi. I asked the taxi man to drop me off at Doyle's Corner and I walked the rest of the way. I'd never been in a prison before and didn't know what to expect. I was scared, afraid someone I knew might see me. A grumpy prison officer let me in and brought me into a big waiting room, full of women and children, some crying.

'I'll call you when he's ready', he said, disappearing back out the door.

I sat down in a chair at the end of the room, and waited.

The other women all seemed to know each other. I was sorry I dressed up. Everybody else was in tracksuits. The yellow paint on the bare walls was peeling all over. There was nothing to read, not even Hello, nothing to do except wait.

What if Joe has been telling me lies all along?

Ma had told me not to go.

'You're far better off without him,' she had said, 'he's a waste of space. I knew the minute I set eyes on him. You were reared better than that.'

I was brought to a different room and told to wait. When they brought Joe down I couldn't believe how much he had changed in a few days. He hadn't shaved, and he looked dirty. He was wearing a faded Liverpool top and the same jeans he'd been wearing for weeks.

'Doris love, I'm so glad to see you. I hate it in here; I'm not sleeping or anything. There's no way I'll stick two years of this.'

He slumped in the plastic chair, his head in his hands.

I could have cried. I squeezed his hand.

'I love you Joe, and always will. When you get out you can go back working as a courier, or even get a steady job. We'll get a place of our own and make a new start.'

The big prison officer standing at the door was playing with his phone, listening to everything.

I wanted to tell Joe about me wanting to be an actress, about the amateur group I was thinking of joining, about me and my sister Betty planning a holiday in Lanzarote.

I didn't.

Instead we just talked about the

prison food, his laundry and bringing in cigarettes the next time. When I got back to the apartment I just lay on the bed and cried for Joe, for myself, for the two of us.

I went to the Joy the next week. Joe was on tablets for his nerves, and to help him sleep, he said. He looked real dopey. He spoke slowly, it was like he was drunk, but he couldn't be, not in a prison. This time it was a different screw in the room. I asked him on the way out about Joe, what had happened him.

'Nothing, Miss. It's just that he's on a lot of medication. He's finding it hard to settle here, so the doctor prescribed some sedatives. He should be right as rain soon.'

But he wasn't. When I called to see him the week after Lanzarote, he was worse. He never looked me in the eye once. It was like he hardly knew me. I'd brought him in some clean clothes, but all he was interested in was the cigarettes. When I told Ma she said he must be on drugs, they're all on drugs in there. She said he'd never be anything; I had my whole life ahead of me and to forget about him.

I hadn't said anything to Joe about me and Betty in Lanzarote, or about meeting Glen on our second night there. I didn't want to upset him. I'd never laid eyes on Glen before that. Even though he only lived around the corner from Ma's flat in Marrowbone.

Glen had a good job. He worked on the buildings, doing roofing. There was loads of work. He was really good to me, bought me lots of clothes. Even though he wasn't very tall, Angie said he was much

better looking than Joe, in a different kind of way. We moved into this flat in Gardiner Street after I got pregnant.

I'll never forget the first time I saw Joe when he got out of the Joy. Me and Angie were walking along the Boardwalk, on our way to Temple Bar.

Angie caught my arm.

'Jesus, Doris, that's Joe asleep on the bench. Just keep on walking.'

I was afraid to look around. As soon as we got to Capel Street Bridge we turned back the way we had come.

'I'm sure it's him, just up there at the kiosk.'

We slowed down. He was lying on the flat of his back on the bench, asleep. He had a dirty beard and was wearing a grubby tracksuit. He looked about fifty.

But it was him. Beside him a young one was drinking a can of cider. She noticed when we slowed down, stared at us and started to shake him to wake him. We speeded up and turned the corner onto O'Connell Bridge. We kept walking till we got to the top of Grafton Street.

'Angie, I need a cup of coffee, I need to sit down.'

We went in to a café in the Stephens Green Centre. Angie brought the coffee and scones.

'It's awful seeing him like that. I should have kept in touch, visited him more often.'

'Doris, it wouldn't have made any difference. Joe's a loser, always was. He would only have dragged you down along with himself.'

I felt sick. I had loved Joe once, laughed with him, danced with him, slept with him, lived with him.

I hope Ma doesn't recognise him if she ever sees him, I thought.

It didn't work out with Glen and me. I couldn't even talk to another man he'd be so jealous. He wanted me all to himself. He wasn't into drugs. But he drank a lot. The night he came home drunk and accused me of having an affair with Karol, the Polish guy in Centra, was the worst night of my life. He was off his head. Where he got the idea I'll never know. Karol and me were just friends; we worked the same shift, that's all.

Glen hit me hard; I fell over and nearly passed out. You should have seen my face. I had a black eye and a badly bruised nose. Luckily Ma was away in Wexford that week, so she never knew. I had to ring in sick to work.

Glen made me give up my good job in Centra. He said I should be at home anyways, minding Shannon, instead of paying a babysit-

ter. So I stayed at home, just to please him.

It was grand for a while after that, until we were walking down O'Connell Street one day and someone said hello.

'Who's that? Do you know him?'

'I haven't a clue, must be someone who knows me from Centra.'

I got another belt when we got home, only it was worse this time. I didn't want Ma to know anything but I had to ring her; I was terrified of what might happen, because I was pregnant again.

He nearly smashed the door on his way out

'If I ever catch you looking at another man I'll fucking kill you next time.'

Shannon was looking out from the bedroom, crying. I'll never forget her terrified little face as long as I live. I crawled to the bathroom and wiped my face with the sponge.

I rang Ma, and she came over.

When she saw the state of me

she rang the guards, even though I didn't want her to.

Glen was arrested and charged. We got a Barring Order. He was never able to set foot in the flat again.

After Jack was born Glen had no interest in seeing him, which suited me fine. I don't even know where he is now. Someone told me he's gone to London. Good riddance.

I'd love to be a big star like Imelda May. My ma knows her ma. I never met her, but I've seen her on TV a few times and I have all her albums. I love her voice, it's so husky.

Lucy from the drama group says they're always looking for new members, to come along the first Tuesday in September for the next auditions. She sounded really nice on the phone.

I still often think of Joe. I haven't seen him since that day with Angie. I wonder where he is now.

Maybe Ma was right. It would never have worked out.

I'm better off on my own.