

A Simple Man

The familiar warm buzz of female conversation was interrupted by Joe Walsh's long lean frame racing through the back door.

"What's the hurry Joe?" his petite homely wife asked without even glancing his way.

His answer was to lean on the doorframe as he struggled for breath.

Still holding the small peeling knife in one hand and waving the apple, with its skin whipping towards him in a dangerous fashion, May turned to face him saying, "I thought you were on your way to Mrs. Ryan's - remember you promised to paint her sitting room?"

For one second the sunshine faltered in its delivery and particles of dust floated in the air between them. Joe took a deep breath, "I was but....."

A movement in the far corner of the room caught his attention and he glanced across to see Mary his oldest daughter, staring into the mirror fussing about her appearance. His bushy eyebrows formed one thick line. He frowned. What was she at? She never stared intently into any mirror! Her exaggerated care only reminded him of his encounter with the sharply dressed stranger some minutes before.

Joe prided himself on being open minded but when a smug young man, who looked as though he had stepped from the pages of a slick magazine, spoke to him in a condescending manner, it annoyed him.

Something else was bothering him. His daughter was to be married next month. Why was she being so careful about her appearance when her husband to be was safely tucked up in his office? It was confusing him. There were too many contradictions swirling around in his mind. But more confusing still was the conversation he'd had a few minutes ago.

It began, with Joe cycling leisurely in the wrong direction. He knew there would be hell to pay with May when he appeared back home, but, he admitted, there was nothing unusual in that. He was whistling cheerfully, if a trifle tunelessly, as he went. The roar of the passing traffic didn't affect him.

His whistling was accompanied every now and then by the odd clang coming from the

A Simple Man

battered bucket dangling from the handlebars. The paintbrushes just visible above the top of the bucket were responsible for the noise. An irate driver swerved around him. The harsh sound of the car horn blared. Joe deftly lifted his much loved paint-spattered hat and grinned revealing a row of sparkling teeth. The driver wasn't impressed. He shook his fist at Joe who merely chuckled softly.

We should all slow down and enjoy nature. Joe mused, even if nature in the city was limited to the odd wandering cat or dog on a treasure hunt for the grand prize of a tree. He wobbled another bit as a driver overtaking him, shouted at Joe.

"Smart alecks like him deserve everything they get." Joe was debating what it was smart alecks deserved when the red brake lights of the car in front of him lit up like a traffic signal.

The low sports car slithered alongside the kerb a short distance from Joe. He aimed his bicycle at the footpath. There was a smooth burring sound as the electronic window opened.

"I wonder if you'd ... Hang on could you come forward a little, so we may talk?"

The haughty tones floated back to Joe. He decided to stay where he was because from his point of view it was up to the driver to get out and come to Joe. Another lazy pompous git, was Joe's opinion.

Joe leant on the handlebars of his bike. He tilted his head and waited.

The gleaming expensive car, the bad manners, the overbearing tone of the yet unseen driver, was enough to irritate. Lucky enough I'm not easily annoyed, Joe thought. He waited patiently to see what would happen next.

Two minutes passed before the driver's head emerged. A pair of beady brown eyes looked Joe over. In a commanding tone of voice he began, "Could you tell me..."

Joe had heard enough, "Sorry, I'm in a hurry." He grabbed the handlebars and began to cycle. Before he arrived at the car, the young man hastily got out saying, "Wait! I'm looking for a family called Walsh." His voice held a hint of arrogance manner but the words were spoken slowly. He looked at the paint spattered workman before him.

Joe took his time in replying. There was something about this man that didn't add up, for

A Simple Man

one thing he was in too much of a hurry, and flash cars were not the norm around this part of Dublin. Old bangers with bright bandages of rust were the rule. Most of all, Joe didn't appreciate being taken for an eejit. Everyone on the road knew him to be a loving father, dotting husband and a good teller of a yarn, with a dreadful history at the bookies. But, he thought with a dangerous glint in his eyes, why disappoint him? If it's an idiot he is looking for then perhaps that is what I should give him.

Summoning up a strong country accent from deep within his past, Joe said, "Why? "

The driver hesitated momentarily startled by this unusual reply. "Why, what? Oh no, you misunderstand..."

Joe suppressed a smile. "Now sir, it's obvious that you don't know me because if you did then you would know that I don't do misunderstanding!" Joe waited, pleased with his answer, for a reaction. The man did not let Joe down as a deep frown appeared on his face.

He attempted to start again, "Perhaps I could explain."

"Always a good idea," mused Joe absently. His attention was now focused on the tiny boy approaching them carrying with great difficulty what appeared to be a laden schoolbag complete with a teddy bears head protruding from it.

"Hiya Joe," panted the boy.

"Hi Mike. Running away again?" Joe was the picture of calmness as he leant on the handlebars.

"Yep!" The boy nodded his head vigorously.

"Good day for running away." Joe complacently remarked as the tiny figure continued on.

"Aren't you going to stop him?" spluttered the driver.

"No point." Joe sighed and continued. "He'll only get as far as his granny's, two doors down or he'll turn about and follow me inside for a snack. Mike is always hungry." Taking a long slow breath Joe shouted after the boy, "Mike is today Tuesday?"

Mike stopped mid step and turned to face Joe, "Yes!"

"Good that means apple tart for tea!"

A Simple Man

"Apple tart! Really Joe?"

"Mike would I tell a lie about food? Keep me a slice, I'll be a minute here. You go ahead."

"Thanks" Mike did a neat one eighty and walked back the way he had come.

The nonplussed man digested this unusual conversation for a full minute. Joe's polite cough woke him up. "As I was trying to say, I've lost the number of their house but I'm sure this is the street, Willow Road"

"Hmm and which member of the Walsh family are you looking for?"

"Ah good, so you do know them." When Joe didn't confirm or deny this the next question was shot at Joe as rapidly as gunfire, "Am I at least in the right street?"

"Ahh you've car trouble. Has it broken down?" To emphasize his point Joe looked at the car.

The driver hesitated momentarily startled by this unusual reply. "Oh no, my car's fine, perfect, brand new."

"Hmmm, new things are often the most troublesome are they not? I often think that if we had stayed with something as simple as the bicycle, well the world would be a far better place." Joe smiled politely.

"I don't understand it I had the address with me. The directions were clear so I'd know where to go." He searched through his pockets in a frenzied manner. His jacket was being blown about his thin frame courtesy of the steady stream of traffic passing behind him.

"Always a good idea to write things down." muttered Joe absently. He was busy trying to figure out what sort of work a youngster like this could be doing to enable him to dress so outlandishly and drive such a smart car. Or worse he was possibly a drug dealer or an owner of one of those fancy nightclubs with the terrifying women with the poles. It wasn't the night clubs that worried Joe. It was what those women could do with those poles. With a shake of his head he pulled his attention back to the present and the jigsaw in front of him. . No, I shouldn't make too rash a decision, Joe thought. Besides I'll find out the truth one way or the other, I usually do!

"I have an appointment at the Walsh's and I don't want to be late!"

A Simple Man

"I suppose," Joe looked up at the sky, "it's one of the sons. They're always up to no good." He paused, "Just like their father or so their mother says anyway."

"I have an appointment. And I don't want to be late, I hate being late." The slick young man repeated with a grunt.

Joe almost smiled because the man before him sounded like an angry cat growling through gritted teeth.

"Grand family, some would even say a very fine family. You'd be a friend of theirs then, or a future employer." Joe's tentative hopes about acquiring some lucrative information began to rise as rapidly as his eyebrows did. He held his breath and waited for the answer.

"No! I don't know them, yet. Which house did you say?"

By the clipped tone of voice it was clear to Joe that he would get no closer to the truth this way and all in all he didn't like that last reply. Sitting down on the saddle and grasping the handlebars of his bike he said, "The second last house on the right." With that he threw a leg over the cross bar and began to pedal for all he was worth. Darting up the narrow laneway, which ran behind the houses, he vanished. Arriving at his back gate Joe neatly kicked it open and then raced up to the house. The bike was roughly thrown against the back wall the bucket clattering noisily as Joe nipped through the open doorway.

Now standing in his soon to be sweet apple pie smelling kitchen Joe was desperately trying to find out what was going on. Both women were being very awkward.

The cause for their feelings was due to the small mishap with the parish priest. But they were friends again, or in Joe's case, nodding acquaintances.

The words exploded from him, "Who's the slashing fine fellow that's looking for Mary?"

His wife patiently repeated her first question, "Never mind him. I thought you had gone to finish that painting job for Mrs. Ryan!" When Joe didn't reply she scolded him, "Joe you know she is waiting for you."

Joe shrugged his shoulders and waved his hands about. "I've no time for that now. Mary

A Simple Man

what is going on? Why am I always left in the dark?"

Mary was too used to her father's dramatic ways and far too preoccupied by the arrival of a smaller friendlier visitor to the kitchen to pay any heed to him.

Mary smiled at Mike, "Hi Mike. Hungry?"

Mike nodded his head hopefully. Just then the doorbell rang. Mary took a banana from a bowl and handed it to Mike.

"No need for all of this fuss Dad. I know who it is." Joe opened his mouth but before he could ask she continued. "It's the photographer."

"Huh, they're normally old geezers like me. This guy is too well dressed and too young."

Mary didn't appear to hear him. "Bother I've a stain on my tee shirt. Could you answer the door for me? And Dad?"

Joe was already rolling down his shirtsleeves. "Yes?"

"Could you please not interrogate him? Just answer the door and be polite."

Joe smoothed down the few wisps of grey hair that he still possessed. "Oh don't worry I'll be the perfect picture of politeness." Winking and ruffling Mike's hair he whispered, "Watch this!" With that he sauntered towards the front door. Mike, banana in hand, not wanting to miss anything scooted quickly in front of Joe just as he opened the door.

Mr. Coffey stood with his back to them. He was staring out at his bright red car wondering if that strange man had heard a mysterious noise. It could be an indication of trouble about to start.

"Hi ya Mister," Mike said.

Mr. Coffey pivoted about and looked down at Mike. He gave a small gasp of surprise. Mike patiently waited for a reply.

The photographer took a deep breath and began to speak, "I'm here.." the words died as his eyes travelled upwards and took in who was standing behind Mike. The colour vanished from his face and his features froze.

"Ah, Mr. Coffey I believe. I hope you had no trouble finding us." Joe smiled pleasantly as he spoke in his most polite voice, devoid of any trace of a country accent.

A Simple Man

Mr. Coffey's eyes protruded, his jaw dropped and his face paled.

Joe remembered his daughter's warning. "Are you all right? You look a bit weak?" he politely asked.

"Maybe he saw a ghost!" Mike peeped outside enthusiastically. "No, nothing there! Maybe he's afraid of you Joe." He grinned at his own private joke.

When the man before them still did not speak. Mike spoke softly, "It's ok Mister, Joe wouldn't hurt nobody ..."

Mr. Coffey simply nodded his head.

"May I be of assistance?" Joe persisted softly.

Luckily Mary interrupted them. "Good afternoon, Mr Coffey," her voice was slightly raised in an attempt to disguise the giggles coming from Mike.

Mary glanced curiously at her caller hoping that he wouldn't be so tongue tied on the big day itself; she needed him to put everyone at their ease, not the other way around. Glancing back to her father, she said "It's OK Dad, Mike I'll take it from here."

Joe put his hands into his pockets and said to no one in particular. "As I said before, why, oh why, can't the father of the bride be involved in all of this fun and planning? We never get the chance to create a little fun. I'd be very good at it if I was let."

"I know you would" said his three foot high side kick as he in turn shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

Then stepping away from Mary Joe began to whistle softly and accompanied by Mike retreated for apple pie and tea.