

OUT TO LUNCH

A hotel dining room, all tables set for lunch with starched linen table-cloths and silver service. ANNE, a dark-haired woman in her late thirties, dressed in a fuschia pink silk wrap dress with lips painted in the same hue sits at a window table opposite a grey-haired man in his late sixties called JOHN. They are the only diners. He is dressed in a sober grey suit, white shirt and red tie, he has a grey moustache and short grey beard, his face is both lined and freckled, his eyes beneath the steel-rimmed glasses are flinty and cold. They both peruse the menu in silence as they sit alone in the room. MARY, a waitress in her mid-fifties occupies herself polishing cutlery at her station by the bar.

ANNE: I can recommend the chowder here, it's really good.

JOHN: I don't eat fish.

A funereal silence envelopes the room as JOHN hides behind the large menu, which is bound in a mahogany leather cover.

ANNE: That's a pity, the fish is really good here. It's brought straight from the boat in Dingle every day. Seafood is really their speciality.

MARY bustles up to their table, with a notebook in her hand and pen primed for action.

MARY: Will I give ye a few more minutes or have ye made yer minds up? The chef recommends the John Dory in a salsa sauce, it's freshly caught this morning in Dingle Bay. Isn't it a beautiful day today after all that rain? I put a line of washing out earlier..

JOHN stares flintily at Mary and interrupts her.

JOHN: I detest fish, I'll have the steak, medium rare, with salad, thanks.

He hands her back the menu.

MARY: Anything to drink sir?

JOHN: Just tapwater.

MARY: That's grand sir. And what can I get the lovely lady?

ANNE: I'll have chef's special please with the vegetables and potatoes.

(She pauses momentarily and then adds.)

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ANNE: And a glass of white wine as well. Thanks.

JOHN stares out the window and interlocks his hands. ANNE fiddles with her necklace and examines the table cloth. She coughs.

ANNE: We are really honoured that a writer of your calibre has come to the festival this year. I've always been a big fan of your work and I can't believe that you're actually here. There are hundreds of people coming to hear you read today, it's not everyday that there's a nobel laureate in our midst.

JOHN: I hate giving readings. In fact I'll only read for fifteen minutes maximum.

ANNE: That will be fine Mister Coetzee. Oh sorry I'm probably pronouncing it wrong! I'd better get the correct pronunciation from yourself. Is It Kut-see ?

JOHN's mouth twitches and he stares at ANNE with a hostile air.

JOHN: No, it's not. It's Kut-see-uh.

ANNE: Am so sorry, I'll have to remember that for your introduction Mister Kut-see-uh. You see, I'm getting the hang of it.

MARY appears with a tray.

MARY: The fish for you sir.

JOHN: I told you that I don't eat fish. Mine's the steak. S-T-E-A-K.

MARY: My mind is like a sieve today, like a sieve. Sorry about that, sir, sorry about that.

JOHN tucks into his food. ANNE takes a large sip of the wine and then starts to eat her lunch. She puts down her knife and fork and coughs.

ANNE: I was interested to see when I was reading your biography that you have a daughter my age. Born in 1968, in July as well I think. Is she still living in South Africa?

JOHN: Yes

ANNE: What does she do?

JOHN: She lives in a care home. She is disabled.

ANNE: Oh..

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Silence again. ANNE has another sip of wine.

ANNE: As I was saying I'm a great admirer of your work. I really loved your novel Disgrace. It was interesting that you referenced the Yeat's line " This is no country for old men." It gave it a bit of an Irish connection. And here you are in Ireland.

JOHN: Yes, so I am.

ANNE: Your writing has such a unique style. It's so spartan and spare, nothing is superfluous, it's all so pared down and economical. Were you very influenced by Beckett?

JOHN: Only by his work prior to 1952. Are you familiar with this period from his great canon of work?

ANNE: I'm afraid that I'm no Beckett scholar Mister Kut-see-uh. I saw a production of Waiting For Godot once, that's as far as it goes really. How did it feel to win the Nobel Prize?

JOHN: It felt distinctly uncomfortable. That prize belongs to the days when a writer was thought of, by nature of his occupation, as a sage. And of course it led to too many invitations to travel and give lectures and come to literary festivals. I am not comfortable with any of that.

JOHN again stares out of the window. Silence again. Broken by the arrival of MARY.

MARY: Ah you cleaned your plate, good man yourself. Would you like a dessert ? A bit of appletart and cream? Or a slice of lemon meringue pie.

JOHN: I detest sweet things.

ANNE: Nothing for me, thanks. We're in a bit of a hurry, this man is giving a talk in the theatre shortly. I'll just have the bill and settle up with you.

MARY: I was thinking that I knew you. Are you Roddy Doyle ?I loved that film The Snapper, it was very funny altogether. Even my husband Danny, he's not one for the films usually, but he nearly got a heart attack on the couch laughing at all the funny bits.

JOHN: I'm not Roddy Doyle.

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MARY: Well, you're the spitting image of him, you're a dead ringer for Roddy Doyle. A yank told me once that I was very like Maureen O' Hara, you see I had red hair then and was a lot younger. My crowning glory as my mother used to say. She used to set it in ringlets for me when I was a little girl, just like Shirley Temple. That Roddy Doyle is a good looking man, you should be..

JOHN interrupts while waving his hand, as if swatting a fly.

JOHN: That will be all thanks, that will be all.

MARY runs off.

ANNE: I think that your personality is very similar to your writing style Mister Kut-see-uh. You're very economical with the chat.

JOHN: I imagine that when you write it's very florid and purple.

ANNE: I don't really write much, just e-mails and stuff. And you're right, they're probably overstuffed with words and emotion. I'm not exactly spartan and spare in my personality either.

ANNE stares out the window while settling the bill.

JOHN: I'm so sorry if I offended you. I'm not a natural at this, at most social interactions.

I'm a loner really, and better off at my desk. I want to buy you dinner after the reading and continue our discussion.

ANNE: I would be delighted to have dinner with you later Mister Roddy Doyle !

JOHN's face lights up with a smile. ANNE and JOHN exit the dining room.