

## - Go Away Man -

John-Joe Keogh was old.

I mean, he was *real* old.

The kids who used to throw stones at his door and at his walls and at his prize winning rose bushes - well they thought he was older than a thousand of their Daddies all put together.

They used to say that he was the first person to walk the fields of Offaly; that he used to charge people to enter the County.

A pound and a penny, young Billy Walsh would say. Was an awful lot of money.

Little George Jameson heard that he carved out the hills with his own hands. He had nothing to do you see. No one else had arrived yet.

And Taigh O'Sullivan was sure he was the one responsible for the potato. And he *hated* him for it. Boiled Potatoes and Broccoli his mother would cook.

That was awful too.

But kids have the most wonderful minds. They can run all day and yet never get tired.

What they didn't know though, was that John-Joe had a heart. And it broke at the thought that they didn't like him. That he was nothing more than a mean old man.

He would wince at the feeling it brought. To think his whole life had been reduced to just being that old man that no one noticed anymore.

As he stood at the gate of his little home in the country, he felt sad. The Autumn had settled in and the days were shorter now. Light was scarce.

He had no neighbours. Just the odd traveller on the road making his way to the village.

They would pass him as he stood at the gate.

They would shudder.

But he couldn't remember the last time one of them said hello.

He could remember very little these days, in fact the days themselves had faded beyond him. He'd lost count of the mornings he'd walk out to his gate and stand there, saying hello to passers who never said hello back. Waving at people in their modern day contraptions they call transport, but never seeing a soul wave back.

They'd all just shudder.

Just drift on by.

Even the children never through stones at his door or at his walls or at his rose bushes.

Not that the roses bushes would have minded. They had died long ago. He couldn't look after them anymore.

It was the strangest thing you see, one morning he had woken up, and, well it was if he had just gone and damn forgotten how to look after them.

He would turn to Mildred, his wife, and say, "Mildred - I just don't know what I'm doing. I'm trying. I'm trying. They just won't grow."

And Mildred would kiss him on the forehead and smile. And she would quietly whisper to him, "John-Joe. One day you'll make those roses grow. You just wait and see. You *just wait and see.*"

He did love Mildred. She was a sweetheart. The one thing that all his life had picked him up, pointed him the right direction and given him the push to get there. But she had fallen on the dark side of time too. She was old and frail like him.

Mildred would sit in the kitchen all day long, sowing and sowing and sowing some more while John-Joe would stand at his gate.

The same routine.

Day in.

Day out.

But she made him feel safe. When darkness would fall, he would go to her, tell her he loved her and they would fall asleep. And he would always wonder would he wake up

the next day. Or would she wake up. Or would they both just drift off in to the sky, their work here done.

But that didn't scare him. You see, all he cared for now was Mildred. And she seemed content. She seemed at peace. Ready for whatever God was gonna throw their way.

But while he wasn't scared, he was (as we have already found out) ever so slightly sad.

And as the morning dawned, the Sun raising itself from behind the ground. John-Joe Keogh walked out to his gate. Leaving Mildred behind in the kitchen.

Sowing.

How many hours had passed, poor old John-Joe didn't know. It had rained ever so slightly earlier. Less rain than he would have thought a big dirty cloud like that was going to give.

But the cloud went on it's way to. Far off into the distance.

Two people had passed him by during the morning.

The first one he could have sworn he knew (not that he swore, he'd more respect for the language he spoke than to run it through the mud). This person though, obviously didn't know him. He just shuddered when John-Joe tipped his hat and said, "Good Morning."

And as the stranger who may well not have been a stranger walked on, John-Joe bowed his head and thought what must he have done to deserve this?

The second person who had passed him by was a lot older. He had a walking stick and seemed to take his time going past his gate. He seemed to mutter to himself. What he was muttering John-Joe couldn't tell you for the life of him.

It kind of made him feel a little awkward. Wanting to shy away from the man. But John-Joe would never pass by a soul without saying hello or wishing them good day. So he said, "Nice Day Sir." And immediately hid behind the gates pillar for fear of the old muttering passer by coming up to him and giving out to him about the woes of the world and throws of the youths.

George didn't have a problem with the youths. He was happy for them. He had had his time and done his part to try and make the place worth living in.

"If you want a better world," He used to say, "Get busy in your own little corner."

And he had been busy. He had built roads and railways and even helped build a hospital far away from where he was now.

But now it was the turn of another generation. Now it was their world, and they would build and they pass on what they had learned to whoever would come next.

It was the way of the world. John-Joe accepted this and in a tiny sort of way, loved the poetry of the process.

Another generation entirely was heading up towards him. A child now more than 4 holding onto the hand of a young woman.

Out for a walk no doubt. Getting in some air before that big dirty cloud came back and soaked them all.

He peaked his cap and stood by the pillar. But the child was curious. The child was actually looking at him while the young woman just stared straight ahead.

John-Joe got fidgety. How strange a feeling this was - someone actually recognising him, or seeing him at least.

He didn't know how to react or what to do, so he just done his normal thing of nodding and saying, "Hello there, nice day."

The child stopped. This seemed to surprise the young woman because she kept walking, although she did shudder ever so slightly.

"Jimmy, what is it?" She looked down at the boy.

He just stared.

Straight at John-Joe. Tilting his head slightly. And them almost dismissively said three simple words.

"Go away Man."

John-Joe's heart dropped. He knew he was only a child, but for the first time in, well, as long as he could remember, someone had said something to him.

Words.

And they were to tell him to go away.

What didn't help was the woman that was with him. It really seemed to disturb her. She looked over at John-Joe and said to the child, "Come on. Stop that."

The child tried to argue back, but they had scarpered so quickly that by the time he'd gotten anything out of his mouth, John-Joe couldn't make out what it was.

He bowed his head for a minute, trying not to think too much about it.

He was only a child after all.

Nobody else came his way for the rest of the afternoon.

John-Joe retired for the evening to Mildred and they both closed their eyes and slept.

The next day had the strangest feeling all around. John-Joe couldn't put his finger on it. He had done his usual thing.

- Got up.
- Talked with Mildred while she got her sowing ready.
- And walked slowly out to the gate.

Even the sky; a brilliant blue sky for such a season. He hadn't seen one like this in a long, long time.

No one had passed all morning. Not even one of those contraptions they used for transport. It was strange not to see a single soul. Especially on a day like this.

A glorious sunny day like this.

He had been standing at the gate for what must have been 4 hours, when he heard a natter coming up the road.

He tried to look around the corner, but couldn't see a thing. He dare not go out onto the road for fear of what would come around that very corner.

He never went out onto the road.

Never.

As the natter came a little nearer, he recognised it. Or at least thought he recognised it.

It was the 'Go Away Man' Boy.

John-Joe started to feel a little awkward. He didn't want to here the words again that the child had muttered.

He didn't want to feel down again.

Maybe, maybe he'd just stand out of view for this one time. Move a little into the garden. John-Joe walked up to the corner of the house, just far enough so he could see when they were passed but far enough so he couldn't here them.

But he hadn't counted on them coming into the garden, coming in through the gate.

And that is when he heard the woman say the most peculiar thing.

She said, "What do you mean he was standing there? Jimmy, there was no one standing here yesterday."

John-Joe frowned. *He* was standing there. Of course he was. She must have made a mistake. It made sense; probably why the child said hello and she didn't.

She just simply didn't see him.

The child shook his head. "He was here. I saw him. He was really, really old and he wore a silly hat."

John-Joe frowned once again. He was really, really old to a boy of that age, but his hat was far from silly. In fact he was rather fond of his hat.

"Jimmy. Come on. Stop messing." She said finally muttering under her breath. "This place gives me the creeps."

But Jimmy broke away from her grasp and ran into the garden.

"Jimmy!" She shouted after to him. "Jimmy! I'm not going to say it again! I'm not going to chase after you!"

But he ignored her.

Goodness me, John-Joe thought to himself. The young child was heading right for him! He turned on his heel and started for the back of the house.

But he didn't get very far.

A voice from behind stopped him in his tracks.

"Hello." It was soft, innocent. "You were the man at the gate. Weren't you?"

John-Joe looked down. He suppose'd he'd have to get it over with it and say something.

Look at him, he thought to himself, all these years in me and I can't speak to a child!

"Hello." John-Joe said, turning around to see the child's head once again tilted, no doubt out of curiosity at his 'really, really old face a silly hat', he continued, "Yes. I was."

The child smiled. "I knew it. Aunt Joany didn't believe me but I knew it."

"Aunt Joany mustn't have seen me." John-Joe added. He wasn't as nervous.

"I'm Jimmy. I'm four. How old are you?"

John-Joe smiled. "Why, I don't think there is a number big enough for my age." He paused. "Some kids said I invented the potato. How silly is that?"

Jimmy shook his head enthusiastically. "I don't think it's silly. I like potatoes."

For some strange reason, those little few words that came out of the child's mouth meant quite a lot to John-Joe.

John-Joe looked at him. "Shouldn't you go back to Aunt Joany?"

"Naw." Jimmy said. "She's old too, but she not as nice as you."

John-Joe was touched, in fact a tear almost formed in his eye at the words the child said. The old man looked at him. "You don't even know me. How could you possibly say I am nice."

Jimmy though for a second. Looking for the words to say what he wanted to. "Some people are just nice. I think you are nice. You seem like a good person."

John-Joe bowed his head to the boy. "That is a very nice thing to say to an old man like me. Thank you."

And then as soon as the moment had come to be, it was suddenly gone as Jimmy's Aunt came bursting around the corner.

"Jimmy, come on!" She said, vexed with him.

"But Aunt Joany, he's there." Jimmy pointed at John-Joe, who just stood there, head bowed.

Aunt Joany looked straight at him, but she had nothing in her eyes. She knelt down beside Jimmy.

"There's *nobody* there." She said softly.

Jimmy imitated her and knelt down beside. "Yes there is." He said whispering quietly in her ear.

Aunt Joany looked, getting up and walking towards John-Joe. She shuddered ever so slightly. Almost questioning what she herself was thinking, and then just as quickly shaking her head. "What is with your imagination Jimmy? Can't you give it a rest for just five minutes?"

She walked back and grabbed him by the hand and started leading him down the short driveway.

John-Joe followed the edge of the house and walked onto the driveway after them.

Jimmy never took his eyes of the old man once. The child had a look of mystery in his eyes, as if he'd made a new friend.

"Bye bye, nice man." He shouted back at John-Joe. "Say hello to Mrs. Old Man." And John-Joe noticed Jimmy look to the house. He turned and saw Mildred standing there, smiling.

John-Joe smiled at the young boy. "Goodbye Young Man. Farewell." A tear appeared in his eye.

And then they were gone. Down the road and gone. But John-Joe's smile was still there. Strange as it had seemed, he was content. He was even at peace.

Because it all made sense now. Everything made sense. All those evenings standing at his gate, all those evenings when not one soul said a single word to him.

They simply hadn't seen him.

But little Jimmy had. And he hadn't thought he was a mean old man like everyone else.

He thought he was a nice man.

A familiar voice sounded from his right shoulder.

"John-Joe." Mildred said. Standing there.

He turned, and looked to where she was pointing. His rose bush sat there. It sat there in the most glorious and amazing colours he had ever seen in his entire life.

"What do you know! Why Mildred, ain't that something."

"Ain't it something indeed." She smiled, taking his hand. They walked up to the house, with the sun fading away in the distant horizon.

John-Joe Keogh took one more look at the gate as they went into the house holding hands.

Nighttime fell pretty soon after that.

They closed their eyes and drifted off into the sky.

The End

Shane Ferguson - 10<sup>th</sup> November 2009