

THE OLD MAN AND THE PRINCE

Look at him Saoirse, the old geezer, sitting there nursing his coffee and a single croissant. Every day it's the same. He sits there enjoying free heat, reading his books and when he's not reading, he just stares across at the river running through the park. I feel like telling him to move on, and make way for paying customers.

Saoirse felt like saying, there aren't many customers at the moment Jack, and there won't be, till lunchtime, when the students from the local college start to arrive, but she stayed silent. After all Jack was the manager of this Cafe, and she was only one of the waitresses, and she really needed this job.

When Jack left for his morning visit to the Bank, she looked down at the old geezer as Jack called him. What she saw was a sad old man with grey hair, and eyes that couldn't hide the pains of years now long gone. She poured a fresh coffee and carried it to his table. As she laid it down, he said "Thank you young lady" and started to hand her his VISA card.

"No sir there's no need"

He said "thank you" and she realised, from the look on his face, he was not used to small acts of kindness.

Soon Jack was back and then the students started to arrive.

The old man saw her go to a lone table and lay out a meal where one of the young female students was sitting. Before moving on he saw her brush the young girl's hair away from her eyes. How odd he thought?

For the next hour Saoirse, Jack and the rest of the staff were literally run off their feet, while the students ate, laughed, played and discussed how someday they would solve all the worlds problems. Then as quickly as they came, they left, and all was silent again. He could see her fellow workers all gathered at one table, for their lunch, but she didn't join them. He ordered another coffee, and this time a ham and cheese sandwich. When she brought it, he enquired about the young girl she had first served, though he had already worked out the answer.

"Oh, she's my sister Alannah, and someday she'll be a famous author"

'Does she know you give her your complimentary lunch Saoirse, if you don't mind me asking, and is it ok if I call you Saoirse'? My name is Jacob by the way'

Of course you can use my name.

She didn't answer his first question.

You and your sister seem very close Saoirse?

Well, we only have each other now Jacob.

We do have our own house which is small but at least it is ours.

Please excuse me if I'm being impertinent but should you not also be at college?

It was always my dream but that dream died along with Mam and Dad some years ago.

It can never be, unless my Prince arrives some day, she laughed, not very convincingly.

There's not a prince alive, that would not joust for such a beautiful girl as you Saoirse.

Stop it Jacob or you'll make me cry.

She lifted one of the books he was reading and remarked.... You read an awful lot Jacob.

Yes, I used to teach literature you know. Somewhere along the way I just lost the will to continue.

My father loved reading, so I suppose I picked it up from him. One of his favourites was Dickens though he also loved Wilde, Yeats, Keats, Shelley.
She interrupted to say, I see you're reading Marley. I love Marley.
Yes, he's good Saoirse but not in the same class as the others.
And forgive me if I seem impertinent Jacob, but why do you often sit and stare at the river in the park.
Oh, I'm not staring at the river, I'm staring at the seat overlooking it. You see that's where my daughter and I often sat and argued the pros and cons of Wilde and Yeats. She was also one of my students, till the bloody angels got jealous and stole the very last of my treasures, away from me.

She had a great temptation to throw her arms around him, but instead hid her emotions, and said I better get back to work, Jack is starting to glare.

The brief table meetings continued through all that summer and Autumn and sometimes even on the seat in the park, overlooking the flowing river.
Winter arrived and the meetings became less frequent. In the second week of December Jacob didn't appear at all, and Saoirse became very concerned. In week three she heard the news that Jacob had passed away in his sleep.

It was a cold Winters Day in January, when she went to the place where he now lay, and placed six red roses on his grave.
On that same day when she reached home,
Alanna met her at the door, and handed her a letter from the University.
As she read, Alanna could see a worried look come over her sister's face.

The principal wants to see me tomorrow. I'm sorry Alanna, but I was late paying the fees. I'll promise him it won't happen again and maybe it'll be, ok?
Alanna hugged her.
The next morning as she sat outside the principal's office, she practiced what she would say. The secretary came out and said the principal will see you now miss.
As she approached his big desk, she blurted out I'm sorry for the late payment Principal and it won't happen again.

What on earth are you babbling on about girl? I called you here to tell you, in person, about some wonderful news the University has received this week.
Oh, so it's not about the fees?
What are you going on about girl, I've just told you we received the most wonderful news this week.
I don't understand sir, what has that got to do with me, or my sister?

Well one of our past pupils, a very famous past pupil I may add, and indeed a lecturer at this college for many years, passed away recently.
In his last will and testament, he left this University a sum of money that will secure our future, I'm almost tempted to say for evermore.
Thank you for sharing, sir, but I still don't understand why I had to endure a sleepless night over my sister's fees. Why am I here?
Because our benefactor stipulated that you are to receive a scholarship to study literature, at this great place of learning.

What? Sir, as wonderful as all this sounds, and I am speechless with gratitude, but I couldn't afford to stop working. I mean how could I pay Alanna's fees.

Oh, I forgot, she's also to receive a scholarship, and in fact your benefactor almost insists you both continue to a Master's degree and a Doctorate if you so desire.

Sir, again, and no disrespect, but are you completely insane? How could we possibly continue to those dizzying heights on my Waitresses pay.

Without another word the principal handed her a Bank draft made out in her favour.

This man left me a hundred thousand Euros?

No Saoirse you left out a zero.....it's a million Euro. She looked again and couldn't believe her eyes. A million Euros to me, but why and who is this man?

Surely you know Jacob Marley the famous writer. We'll be enjoying his royalties for the next hundred years or more.

Oh, and one last thing he left you this first edition, signed copy of the book, he said, you so admired.

She opened the front cover and there he was, a young smiling, handsome Jacob Marley.

Oh my god, oh my god, my Prince did arrive on that warm sunny day in May.

Thank you, Jacob...thank you.... thank you...

Thank you a million times my darling Prince.

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