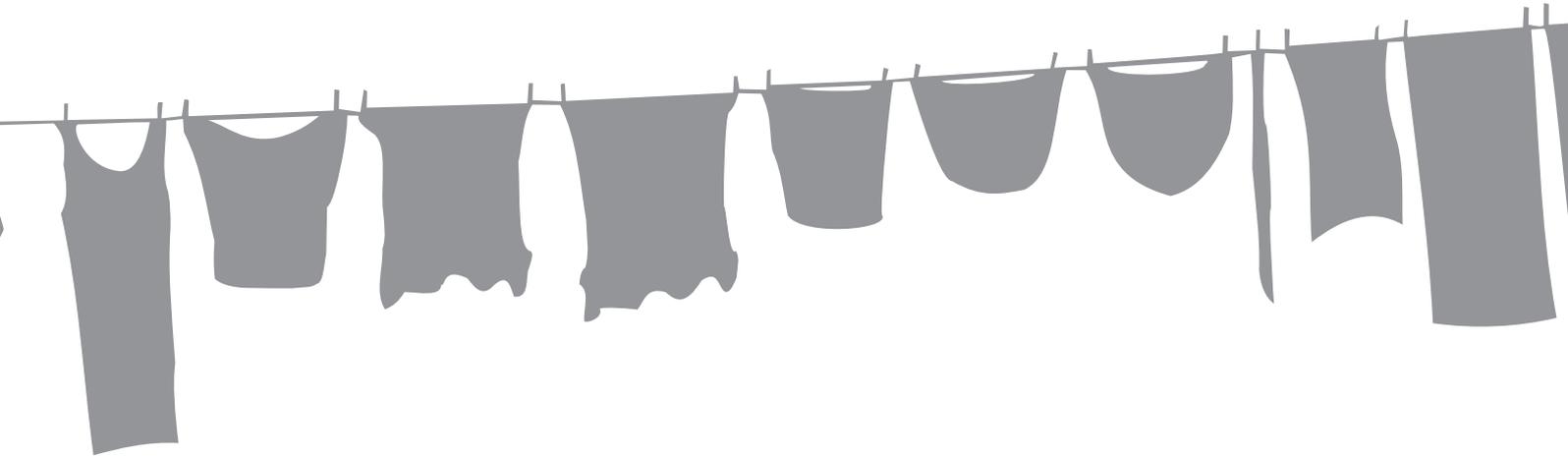


30-Minute -Meals



HIS wife said he was obsessed with Jamie Oliver, but he wasn't. He just wanted to be like him. She laughed at the idea of her James believing you could actually prepare and cook a nice, three-course, healthy meal in *thirty* minutes, not to mention fifteen.

"But it can be done, you stupid woman. Just look at any of Jamie's television shows and he actually achieves it," James argued.

"Rubbish! He has all the ingredients prepared beforehand and he has loads of little helpers in the studio. Sure it takes ten minutes alone to set up his bloody food processor and another ten to take it apart and wash all the fiddly bits. There's twenty minutes used up already!"

James was really tired of Joan belittling him and his skills. Other people had told him that he even *looked* a lot like Jamie. He was boyish and good-looking, even if he said so himself. It was a total coincidence that they had similar names, Jamie Oliver and James O'Leary. And he too was a brilliant chef. His dishes just weren't appreciated by the people who lived in this small Irish town. Jamie had Jools to support and encourage him. James had Joan to hold him back and put him down.

"I'm like the cobbler's wife with no shoes," she said to him one Saturday morning before she went to the supermarket to do the weekly shopping. "Why can't you get the bloody dinner for once on your day off? Especially if you can show me that it'll only take you thirty fecking measly minutes. Most of us mere mortals have to work on a Monday in order to put food on the table. And I'd love if the dinner were to be handed up to me, even one day a week."

And so, reluctantly, he accepted her challenge for the following Monday when his café was closed. (His accountant had told him some weeks before that there was no point paying out for the overheads to keep it open on a Monday, when business was so sluggish).

When Joan came home from work on that Monday, she was in good form, especially when she noticed the food processor standing proudly, and assembled, on the kitchen counter. She could also smell the strong aroma from a bowl of fresh herbs on the windowsill.

"Ah, brilliant, thanks James. Now I know why I married you! I'm really looking forward to this meal," she said. "It's been so long since we have sat down together and had a decent chat. Is it okay with you if I go and have a nap for a half hour or so? Then I'll shower and tidy myself up and make myself look nice for you."

He was horrified when she gave him a playful pinch on the bum before she went upstairs.

"It might only take you thirty minutes, but I'm going to give you an hour so that you have plenty time to make it special. Don't hold yourself back," she called down to him from the upstairs landing, before he heard their bedroom door bang shut.

And then he swung his plan into action. He didn't need an hour, but now that he had the luxury of a full

one, he could relax a little and ensure that every detail was in place. He checked his jacket pocket for the two batteries that he had taken out of the smoke detectors.

He then went out to the shed and put them in the bottom of the tin, on the shelf that Joan kept for storing spent batteries before she brought them for recycling.

He brought in from the shed the half-full gas canister from the barbecue and he put it into the cupboard under the stairs, in front of the vacuum cleaner and the bucket and mop. For good measure, he put a bundle of tea towels into the mop bucket. He then set the table for two, using the good crockery and cutlery that normally only came out at Christmas. He even put out two cloth napkins in napkin rings, part of a set that Joan's mother had given them the previous Christmas. He put two long-stemmed crystal wine glasses on two of the little coasters that they had brought back from their honeymoon in Cyprus, three long years before.

He crept to the end of the stairs and listened carefully but he didn't hear any sound coming from above. He went back into the kitchen and put cooking oil into the open chip pan and a pile of tea towels, as well as an air freshener aerosol can, on the counter next to it. He pulled the end of the kitchen curtain out from the window so that it was touching the edge of the pile of cloths. He checked the time before running a trail of cooking oil from the towels, down the kitchen cupboards, along the bright red lino to the open kitchen door and around the corner to the laminate floor leading to the understairs cupboard. He then locked the mortice lock on the front door and put across the intruder bolt from inside.

Going back into the kitchen, he put the electric ring, under the open chip pan, on to high; and waited until the oil was bubbling madly before he calmly took his jacket from the coat stand in the hall, and put it on. He put his wallet and phone into the pocket of his jacket and picked up his bundle of keys. He then went out the back door, closed it gently, and locked it from the outside. He removed the back door key from his bundle of keys and put it under a stone in the flower bed, before he sat down on the back step for five minutes. When the time was up, he walked calmly around the side of the house to the front door. There, he pretended to fumble with the lock before walking up and down the garden path a few times, peering up at the upstairs windows.

Next, he walked up to the front door, again, and pretended to ring on the bell. He checked his watch and let out a sigh, before he went slowly up the path of the Doherty's, who lived next door, and rang their doorbell.

When Paul opened the door, he said, "Hi Paul, how's it going? I can't get into our house. Joan has a habit of putting across the intruder bolt if she's at home alone and is probably upstairs in the shower or something. I've been ringing, but she probably can't hear me. Is there a spare back door key on the bundle you have by any chance?"

"Come in, come in, James, we'll have a look. Your spares are in this drawer here, somewhere."

Paul opened a little drawer under the telephone table and began rummaging among the take-away menus and bundles of keys, in search of the O'Leary's spare set.

"Take your time, Paul. There's no rush. As far as I remember, it's a keyring from Cyprus."

Eventually, Paul produced a set of keys and, as James already knew, it was clearly marked with a label in Joan's handwriting, *Front Door. O'Leary's*. The handwritten label blocked out the letters 'RUS' of the keyring.

"That's a shame. No back door key. Will you have a cup of coffee, James, while you're waiting? When Joan gets out of the shower, she'll hear the bell or the phone then. You're sure she's home before you?"

"Oh, definitely. She always gets home before me on a Monday," said James. "The café is closed, but I go in to do the books. She always tries to treat me to a nice dinner, it's her little way of thanking me for working so hard in the restaurant, you know yourself."

"Ah, she's a lovely lady, your Joan. You're a lucky bloke. How's business these days?" asked Paul, moving towards the kitchen. He looked back at James over his shoulder.

"Someone in the office told me that you're doing a good value early bird menu and it's served up nice and quickly. Jackie and I must treat ourselves after work one of these days."

"That'd be great. I'd love to have you in. Any evening except Monday!"

James followed Paul into the kitchen, and was just about to sit down at the table when a loud explosion came from the direction of his house next door.

"Christ, what was that?" shouted Paul, as he began running towards the front door.

"Jesus, Joan must have decided to do something fancy from that cookbook of hers," said James, running after him. "What has she gone and done now? Sure she can only be home a bare thirty minutes."