

NO COMMENT

“What do you mean, ‘oh’?” said Moira. She was Frank’s wife and Frank hadn’t known she was there until she spoke.

“Did I say something?” asked Frank.

“Yes,” Moira replied. “You said ‘oh’.”

“Right,” Frank said. He frowned.

“I mean, look at this.”

He showed Moira his phone screen.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?” she asked.

“Last night,” Frank said, “I posted – reposted, because it wasn’t my photo, I suppose - ”

He stopped. He was aware that he was losing Moira’s interest.

“Anyway,” he said, hurriedly, “I posted a photo of a cat and look at the comments.”

Now he had Moira’s attention. She took the phone and scrolled down.

“Ha ha yor a pussy,” she read out loud. “You love kittens twitface.”

“There’s hundreds of them,” said Frank. “All I did was post a picture of a - ”

“Kitten, no, I get it.”

Moira gave Frank his phone back.

“if you don’t like the comments,” she said, “You can turn them off.”

“Sorry?” said Frank.

Moira pointed at the screen.

“There,” she said.

Frank looked. Underneath Moira’s thin finger were the words:

“Turn off comments for this post.”

There was also a little blue circle. He pressed it tentatively.

“See?” said Moira.

Frank didn’t, at first. Then he squinted down and saw that next to the blue circle it now said:

“Comments are turned off for this post. No-one can reply.”

Moira went out to work and Frank, who was supposed to be going to the tip, spent the morning going through his old posts and clicking the “comments are turned off for this post” button. Then he posted a picture of a kitten sitting on an otter’s back, turned off the comments, and played Tetris for two hours.

Moira came home for lunch (she only worked round the corner, doing accounts for a local businessman).

“Did you go to the tip?” she asked.

“Not yet,” said Frank.

Moira made her lunch and went back to work but Frank didn’t notice. He was watching a kitten video in which the kitten was making a noise that sounded like someone’s name, a bit.

His phone buzzed.

GO TO THE TIP, said the message.

Frank went to the tip.

He unloaded the car and was about to put rubbish in a huge skip when a man in an orange jacket ran over to him.

“That’s builder’s waste,” he said.

“Sorry?” said Frank.

“We can’t take it,” the man said. “This is a household waste only site.”

Frank put the rubbish back in his car. It made quite a mess.

On the way home he went to the café. It was a new café on the high street and, even though Frank had already had his breakfast, it was just cornflakes, so he reckoned he could have something else and call it brunch.

The café was pleasant if spartan. It had plain wooden tables and old school chairs to sit on. Frank looked at the menu and was overcome by hunger and indecision all at the same time. He couldn’t decide between the sausage bap or the bacon and egg roll.

“Yes?” said the teenager behind the counter. He had a topknot and an impatient face. Frank wondered if the former was the cause of the latter, the hair on the boy’s head being pulled so tight that it made his face look tense and bored.

“Yes?” the boy said again.

“I’d like a sausage bap and a bacon and egg roll,” said Frank, “And a latte.”

“Just one latte?” asked Topknot.

“Yes,” said Frank.

“Two meals and one drink,” Topknot said.

“A roll isn’t a - ” Frank began, but the boy had already turned away.

Frank ate his brunch, and then he drove home.

“Did you go to the tip?” asked Moira.

“Yes,” said Frank. It was technically true.

Moira embraced him.

“Thanks,” she said.

Moira went to have a shower and Frank went on his phone. He was surprised to see that nobody had commented on his kitten videos, but then he remembered that he had turned off the comments. He thought about turning them off again but didn’t.

He put the phone to one side and opened the fridge. It was his turn to make dinner and he had no idea what to cook. He decided to make spaghetti vongole.

“That was lovely,” said Moira. Then she said:

“Can I make a small suggestion? The clams were - ”

Frank shook his head. He made his ‘I am going to tell a joke’ face.

“No,” he said. “Comments are turned off for this meal.”

Moira looked confused. She opened her mouth to speak.

It was like watching television with the sound off. Frank could see Moira’s lips moving but there was no sound.

Alarmed, Moira took a sip of water from her glass.

“I - ” she began, then, “That was weird.”

“Are you OK?” asked Frank.

“Yes, now I am,” said Moira.

A thought entered Frank’s mind. It was a disruptive thought, a real gate-crasher of a thought.

“What were you going to say?” he asked.

“I was just commenting on the - ” said Moira.

Her voice disappeared.

“On the - ”

Now she was coughing.

“Drink some water!” Frank shouted.

He clapped her on the back.

“Stop that!” said Moira, suddenly. “I was - ”

Frank interrupted.

“Maybe let’s change the subject,” he said.

That night they watched a police drama. Nobody spoke. Moira coughed once or twice and Frank wondered if she was thinking about the vongole.

The next day Moira went to work and Frank went on his phone. There were no new kitten videos of note, so he decided to have brunch again.

The car rattled dustily and Frank remembered the builder’s waste in the boot.

He parked and went into the café. He was not pleased to see Topknot behind the counter.

Frank was seriously thinking about ordering just a glass of water and a nutrition bar when a thought came into his head, a memory of Moira at dinner time.

“Yes?” said Topknot, as if pre-bored.

Frank cleared his throat.

“I’ll have a bacon roll,” he said, “and a sausage and egg bap. And a latte. And a Kit Kat. And a croissant. With butter. And jam.”

Topknot raised an eyebrow.

“That’s a lot of - ”

Frank raised a finger and wagged it.

“Ah-ah,” he said. “Comments are turned off for this brunch.”

Topknot’s lips moved but nothing came out of them.

“I’ll be sitting over by the window,” said Frank.

Feeling overfull, Frank got into his car. The lurch of bricks in the boot as he pulled out reminded him again of the rubbish.

Frank dragged the sack of builder’s waste over to the skip. A moment later the man in orange appeared.

Even before the man could speak, Frank said:

“Comments have been turned off for this rubbish.”

And, as the man looked on in silence, he heaved the contents of the sack into the skip, got back in his car, and drove away.

After that, Frank basically just went for it.

He strode into a supermarket, put an unexpected item into the bagging area, and when a cashier came, told her, "Comments are turned off for this supermarket."

He went to the library. It was pretty quiet already, but Frank still stood on a chair and whispered, "Comments are turned off for this library."

He climbed the biggest hill he could find and at the top of his voice he shouted: "COMMENTS ARE TURNED OFF FOR THIS WORLD! NO-ONE CAN REPLY!"

And no-one did reply.

Frank walked back down the hill. He could hear cars and trucks and birdsong and the occasional plane flying overhead, but nothing else. Nobody was talking.

In restaurants, waiters pointed at menus. In schools, teachers found pages on laptops or screens. In theatres, actors mimed furiously.

Frank walked home through the mute streets until he came to his own house.

Moira was waiting on the doorstep, her bag packed.

"There's someone here to see you," she said, and left.

Frank was so surprised to see her go he didn't even notice that she had spoken. He went inside. There, in the front room, hovering ever so slightly above the ground, was an otter. Standing on the otter was a kitten. The kitten had tiny wings like a cherub's and was wearing a little crown. "Frank," said the kitten in a surprisingly deep voice. "This has gone far enough."

Frank cleared his throat.

"Comments - " he began.

The kitten mewed once.

Frank's voice disappeared.

So did the kitten.

Time passed. Most people forgot what had happened, or blamed it on aliens, or the CIA. Frank's voice came back, and so did Moira.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again," said Frank.

"I'm a very forgiving person." Moira replied. "Look, I even made you a cake."

Frank peered at the cake. There was writing on it.

It said, "EVERYONE CAN REPLY."

"Fair enough," said Frank.

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