

The Strange Man

1

Rain pattered like rattling drums against the roof of a small car and a little boy let his forehead stick to the glass of the backseat window. He looked gloomily out onto the bleak landscape of Northern Ireland. What on earth was he going to do with himself? Rain caused the road to turn to mud, filling it with potholes. Every time the car went down into one, the boy rocked back and returned to the window with a weighty thud. The rain here was wet. Much wetter than in Colorado. In Colorado, the rain came down in screams and shouts, but it only lasted for a moment. Here, the rain went on, and on, and on. Brenden wondered what it was like to be Ireland's kind of wet. He rolled down the window, letting rain seep all over the sticky leather seats of the vehicle. *Pitter pat, pitter pat*, went the rain. A girl with strawberry-blond hair and braided pigtails hit him hard on the arm as he stuck his hand out into the drizzle, soaking his sleeve. Goose bumps crawled their way up her arms and she shivered as she shouted, "Roll the window back up! You're getting me soaked!"

Reluctantly, Brenden obeyed and he eventually resorted to staring at his shoe where an interesting mark had been scuffed into the toe. It was almost in the shape of a duck. But not quite a duck. His sister began to text someone most likely important as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, the skin of her thigh ripping up loudly from the leather. Brenden yawned, asking, "Lettie, do you think

living here will be nice?”

“One sec...” she replied, her fingertips dancing across the buttons. She snapped her phone closed and looked back to her brother. “Sorry. Margaret just told me that Jestin broke up with Lindsay over the phone. He’s such a jerk.”

Brenden sighed in disinterest. Quite frankly, he did not care.

Lettie huffed, forced optimism in her eyes, “And, yes, I do think that it will be wonderful to live with Mr. O’Brien. He sounds like a nice man.”

“How are we related to him again?”

“Oh, I don’t remember... he’s like, mother’s brother’s brother-in-law, I suspect.” *Buzz, buzz.* Lettie flipped her phone open again and replied with unmatched speed.

Brenden sighed, as if held down by a weight, “Which makes us...not related...”

“Do lighten up, Brenden. If you’re going to be a rotten sack of potatoes the whole time, I’m leaving you on the side of the road. We’re going to be here for the rest of our lives, so you might as well get used to it. Mom and Dad are gone, and they’re not coming back. We just...have to be grownups and take it.”

Brenden thumped his forehead against the window again, looking out at the ruins of abandoned houses. The car launched into another pothole. Ahead, he saw a tunnel approaching and his throat tightened. The sky was a suffocating gray as it pressed down as thick as the foggy mist that surrounded everything else. And the tunnel was dark. Darker than dark. It wasn’t the sort of day to try and think happy thoughts. There was absolutely no room for them.

He and his sister had just endured three hours in the car from Dublin to Londonderry and seven hours in a plane before that. Now they were traveling in a car southeast to a house that they had never visited. It was a place that their family friend, Mr. Adler, said sat in a secluded part of Northern Ireland. The more Brenden looked at the foreign landscape, the more Brenden felt that he just wanted to go home. He wiped his eyes, trying to get rid of his tears, and wondered if his sister was as disappointed and heartbroken as he was. She said that they should grow up, but he didn't want to grow up. He didn't want his parents to be gone, and, most of all, he didn't want to go live with this "Mr. O'Brien" character.

Brenden's legs creaked like an old boat on the sea from stiffness. The children were told that O'Brien was a wealthy Irishman who didn't have any children and didn't plan on it, but had plenty of room in his house. Mr. Adler had said that his mansion was so huge with so many rooms that you could get lost and never find your way out. No one lived near him for miles, which was fine, but that also meant that there were no other children to play with for the rest of the summer. The car entered the tunnel and Brenden shuddered. He didn't like the dark. He never had, and never would. It was too unpredictable. Only the blue light from his sister's phone, which wasn't at all bright, radiated in the black.

His sister must have sensed his fear and nudged him on the shoulder. "It's okay. Brenden. Don't you see the light at the end of the tunnel?"

"A kid in my class told me that if you see a light at the end of the tunnel, you're supposed to run because it's a train coming to

splatter your brains all over the road.”

Lettie crossed her arms and they emerged from the blackness. The gray, comparatively, wasn't so bad after all. “Nick said that to you, didn't he?”

Brenden nodded. How had she known?

“I told you to not listen to him! That horrible boy gets more detentions in a day than anyone normal can get in a year. He's a brat and I don't want you to talk to him ever again, alright?”

“I don't *try* to talk to him! He just... comes up and talks to me, is all...” Brenden's breath fogged up the glass and he drew a frowney face in it. When its eye started to drip, he smudged it out. “I don't like him either, you know.”

For a moment the car was silent until Lettie impatiently smacked the side of her phone. “Rats... no service. Mr. Adler, is there a phone tower near here?”

Mr. Adler was a broad, fat man with a thick mustache. Brenden had nicknamed him Mr. Cheese because every time he went out into the sun, he sweat like a slice of Swiss left outside for too long. A straw hat that didn't suit him at all covered his bald head and his plain, old suit frayed around the edges. “I don't believe so, my dear. You'll have to use Stanley's land line. We didn't pay for a new plan for you over here. I'm sure he'll sort all that out.”

“But you can't use a land line to text!”

“Sacrifice is a virtue, child.”

Lettie muttered, “I thought that was patience...”

“It's both.”

The rain came down harder now than ever before and

hailstones were starting to beat rhythmically against the roof of the car. Loud noises annoyed Brenden, but not enough for him to cause a fuss. It sounded better than listening to Mr. Adler and Lettie talk about his “new home”. He had stayed out of the conversations that they had shared with each other, and he had figured that Stanley was Mr. O’Brien’s name. Stanley O’Brien. What a boring name.

More abandoned, stone houses darted by on the road but soon the car shot into a thick group of trees. The forest glowed an eerie green and the vegetation packed so thickly together that Brenden could hardly see beyond the first few rows. The leaves blocked the hail, but the rain still tapped down on the tin of the car. When Brenden rolled down the window, his sister didn’t yell at him this time, and he swore he heard an unfamiliar bird call in the distance. Everything here looked so alien. He had come from urban housing; a people-crowded place where trees didn’t grow anywhere except in planters.

The forest seemed to go on forever and Brenden started to doze off. The woodland finally broke and they emerged onto an enormous property in a clearing. A gray gravel driveway led through a courtyard, a garden with carved topiaries and past a bubbling fountain. A few koi swam in it and, when Mr. Adler parked the car, Brenden and Lettie stumbled up the stairs to the front door.

It was big, foreboding and was guarded by a huge gargoyle knocker. Brenden and Lettie stood for a while, staring at the iron, intimidating face that glared at them. The boom and crackle of lightning resounded behind the children and echoed loud enough to scare them inside. The door pushed open with a great moan. When

they regained themselves, they found they were in a grand hall with marbled floors and an enormous staircase. There were busts adorning the walls in every room, gawking at the two with cold, stone eyes. Footsteps could be heard coming from every part of the house, but they came most loudly from the balcony above them.

Soon, the two saw a man with hair much redder than Lettie's coming quickly down the stairs tying a hot magenta bow tie as he went. The bright colors of his *very* miss-matched vest almost made Brenden's eyes hurt. Half of it glittered a blue and gold and the other pink and orange, something that no one, Brenden thought, should ever wear in public. Mr. Adler had been right when he had said that Mr. O'Brien was young. He looked not yet even over thirty. When he saw the two rain-soaked children standing in the doorway, his face shifted into a look of frustration, his thick, Irish accent rang throughout the hall. "Janey Mack, Miss Mirandy! Who in the name of the Eastern Wind let these ragamuffins into my house?!"

Miss Mirandy, a young, beautiful woman dressed in maids' clothes came running down the opposite staircase. She sounded American. "Sir, I suspect those are the children you offered to take care of."

"I..." Mr. O'Brien, who had been nudging the two children out the front door, stopped and crossed his arms. "Oh. I see."

Mr. O'Brien began inspecting every part of the children, lifting their arms and even looking closely at Lettie's pigtails. After he finished looking the two over, he smiled, a quirky, bright smile that made Brenden want to laugh out loud. "So," he said, placing his hands on his hips. "You're Collette." He pointed to Brenden, who

tried incredibly hard to contain his laughter. “And you’re Brenden, yes?” He smiled as he pointed to Lettie.

Lettie crossed her arms and Brenden laughed, “No! I’m Brenden and she’s Lettie.”

“Oh!” Mr. O’Brien smiled again. “I’m sorry I made the mistake! Is Lettie a nickname for you, my dear?”

“Yes, sir, it is.” Lettie still seemed a little shy of Mr. O’Brien. “You don’t have to call me that if you don’t want to. Most adults don’t.”

Mr. O’Brien smiled a sly, magical smile at the comment. “My dear, this isn’t a matter of adults and children. You will find that out very fast. This house is the least grownup place you’ll ever be.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” Miss Mirandy crossed her arms and sighed. “I’m afraid I have to disagree.”

“Aye, disagree, disagree...” Mr. O’Brien laughed, a laugh that seemed to light up the whole room like a sparkler. “You’re quite wonderful at that, aren’t you, Miss Mirandy? Don’t you have chores to do? Maybe a bed to make or a room to clean?”

Miss Mirandy huffed back up the stairs and Mr. O’Brien smiled his mysterious smile again. Brenden wondered if smiling was something Mr. O’Brien did often. “You’ll find that Miss M is the most stubborn of us, but she’s also one of the finest maids I’ve ever had the pleasure of employing. She will be both your governess and your tutor while you stay here and once the summer ends.”

“Speaking of which, Mr. O’Brien,” muttered Lettie, who normally was quite the chatterbox. “Will we get the chance to go back to normal school? What will our schedule be like? Where will

we be staying?”

“Oh...” Mr. O’Brien stepped over to a bookshelf, pulling two rolled up pieces of parchment off of the shelves, handing one to each of the two children. “You may search the entire house for your rooms. The maps are on those pieces of paper. There are, however, two rooms that are off limits. The first is my study, which is just down the hall to the left. You are not to go in there unless I tell you that you are allowed. Don’t like being disturbed while I’m working. The other room is the one on the far west wing, at the end of the hall. That room is personal to me and I would prefer it remained undisturbed. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Lettie grinned. Brenden thought that she was always such a suck up. Lettie nudged Brenden hard in the ribs and said, “You know, that’s just going to make Brenden want to explore that place even more now.”

Lettie was right, Brenden thought. It most certainly would.

Mr. O’Brien winked at the two. “Well, you better be running along now. Your rooms are waiting.”

Brenden darted up the stairs and rushed to the right-hand side, climbing to the west wing. He searched every single room, finding a small study, a library, a bathroom large enough for three people, and, finally, a bedroom. On the bed sat a wrapped present labeled: *To Lettie*. That *would* be his luck. Brenden rolled his eyes and stepped out of the bedroom, looking toward the closed door that Mr. O’Brien had mentioned. He loved secrets and the black door was odd compared to the rest of the house. Brenden felt his heart start to pound and he found himself thinking about what would happen if he

opened that door. How much trouble he would be in if Mr. O'Brien found out that he was in there? There was something attractive about the door, as if something behind it were calling his name. He could almost hear the whisper.

Brenden shook his head, darting back to the foyer, where he found Lettie prancing down the opposite stairs at the same time. The two children said, as they passed each other, "I found your—"

They both laughed, Brenden dashed up the opposite stairs and found another bathroom, a balcony overlooking a garden, a music room, storage and his bedroom. It was large, containing a four-poster bed with turquoise sheets and a window overlooking the same garden that the balcony did. On his bed was a large box wrapped in silver paper and another with a blue ribbon that was much smaller. Greedily, he tore through the paper that covered the big box first. Inside, he found some adventure books, just the kinds he liked, a new umbrella, and a flashlight. On it was a note that read, *For those days that you just feel like exploring.*

The small box caught his attention and as he pulled the string off, he realized that it was no ordinary box. The string shimmered in a way that made his heart flutter. When he slid the lid off, he discovered that, inside, was only a rusty key and a note; nothing incredibly exciting. But then he saw it. The note was folded in the way that his father had taught him. It was a note meant for their secrets.

Brenden almost tore the note trying to open it.

Here's the key. When help comes, don't give this key to anyone. Don't talk to strangers. Don't trust anyone that weirds you out.

I love you. Be nice to your sister.

Papa.

Brenden folded the note again and shoved it secretly in a drawer in his dresser with the key. He grabbed a new book that looked like a good read and skipped down the stairs to find Miss Mirandy tapping her foot impatiently. “Dinner’s on the table. Mr. O’Brien’s waiting.”

Brenden nodded and looked over to the front door, seeing that Mr. Adler had brought in their luggage from the car. When he entered the dining room, he looked around in awe. Food of every kind was strewn across the large oak table and a huge window looked out upon the front of the house. Brenden could see the courtyard, and the place where Mr. Adler’s car was parked. Mr. O’Brien was sitting at the head of the table, regally sipping a glass of red wine. Lettie was to his right with a brand-new sketch pad and a new pencil and Mr. Adler was sitting next to her, smiling. A spot had been saved just for Brenden to Mr. O’Brien’s left. When Brenden entered, Mr. O’Brien’s face lit up. “Alright! Now that we’re all here, let me explain what we have for dinner.” He began pointing clockwise around the table, beginning with something in front of him. “We have coldwater lobster tails, lo mein, paella, maguro maki, spring rolls, gyros, and, finally, good ol’ colcannon. If there’s anything you’d rather fancy, just ask me and Mr. Aering will be glad to get it for you.”

When Brenden looked to the man that Mr. O’Brien mentioned as Mr. Aering, he shuddered. He hadn’t even realized the man had been standing in the corner. His hands looked rough, like his whole

life had been spent working, and his eyes were such a chocolate brown they were almost black. They had an aggressive twinkle in them, so Brenden averted his eyes. He lifted his fork and began to scoop some lo mein onto his plate, but he just couldn't seem to reach the gyros that were on Lettie's side. "Lettie, would you please pass the gyros?"

"No!" Mr. O'Brien yelled so suddenly that it almost made Lettie jump. Her hair stood on end as she slowly let go of the plate. Mr. O'Brien squinted at her. "We'll have none of that!"

Suddenly, all the dishes started to glide across the table as if on the smoothest conveyer belt in the world. Soon, the gyros were in front of Brenden and Mr. O'Brien winked, taking a tiny bite of lobster. He smiled playfully at Lettie to make amends for his practical joke.

"Well!" Mr. Adler seemed amused. "That was quite a parlor trick!"

"Thank you, but I don't do tricks." Mr. O'Brien looked like he remembered something. "Oh, Mr. Adler, your wife is going to be expecting you in Derry. It's six o'clock."

Right as he finished his sentence, all the grandfather clocks went off in the house, chiming at the same time. Mr. Adler leapt to his feet, looking flustered. "You're right. Goodbye, children. I'll be back in a week to check on you."

"Bye, Mr. Adler! Thank you!" Lettie waved, took a bite of lobster, and looked back to her sketch book, where she drew a beautiful portrait of Miss Mirandy. It looked exactly like her, as all of her drawings had before, exact copies of whoever she sketched that

day. Mr. O'Brien leaned over to contemplate her sketching.

"My, my! So, I guess it was a brilliant idea for me to go out and get you a new sketch pad then, wasn't it? You're very good."

Lettie grinned and took a sip of milk from her glass. "Thank you so much, for everything. The dresses are lovely."

"Dresses?" Brenden slurped up a noodle.

"Don't tell me you didn't look in your wardrobe! You'll have to check after dinner."

Lettie looked up from her drawing. "What did you get from Mr. O'Brien, Brenden?"

"Um...an umbrella, a new flashlight, and some adventure books." Brenden tried to not mention the key, but, when Mr. O'Brien gave him an odd look, Brenden suspected something.

"There should have been something else."

"Um...not that I know of."

"There should've been a small box tied with a blue ribbon. Was that not there?"

Brenden hated lying, but he felt that Mr. O'Brien was not someone to be trusted just yet. "Oh, that. It was from Dad. He gave me one of his old Babe Ruth baseball cards."

"Hm...I don't get too involved in American sports." Mr. O'Brien took another sip of wine. "So... I hate to bring us upon bad news, but Mr. Adler told me I should ask. Your parents and I haven't been in contact for some time, and I must know...what happened to them?"

Lettie and Brenden both stopped eating and looked at each other. Lettie saw that Brenden's mouth was glued shut, so she told

the story.”We were at a summer camp, Brenden and I, just last week, and we were on the bus ride back. As we pulled up to the house in the bus, we saw the smoke...and the fire trucks...and Mr. Adler. The whole house burned down. The firemen didn’t even find the bodies. They said it had been a stove fire, an accident. Brenden and I walked through the ashes and we tried to pull as much of our things from the wreckage as we could. The ash stained all our clothes, though, so we had to throw them out.”

“Stained them?” Mr. O’Brien looked intrigued. “How do you mean?”

“Red soot. We found red soot and got it all over our clothes.”

“How *very* peculiar...” Mr. O’Brien finished off his glass. “That’s not normal for a fire...fire is an uncontrollable animal. It blackens and scars everything it touches.”

Brenden nodded. “This kid at school told me it was the remains of my parents...”

“Brenden! I told you to not listen to him!” Lettie passed her hand over her face. The thought must’ve made her sick.

Mr. O’Brien smiled a comforting smile. “You both should go wash up and get comfortable in bed.” He pointed to Lettie’s drawing and grinned. “Miss Mirandy would be quite pleased to see that.”

Lettie nodded and the two stood, heading up to their rooms. Brenden opened his wardrobe and took the clothes out, laying them on the bed. They looked like they had been plucked right out of a fairytale. Some were made of silk and were bright colors, like an entertainer’s clothes in a medieval castle. Others were coarse and thick, like the clothes that he always imagined peasants in. Brenden

thought it strange that Mr. O'Brien wouldn't give them normal clothes. They had lost almost all their belongings and costumes weren't exactly what they needed.

He hung the clothes back up and took a deep breath, unpacking his old things. All that remained were the clothes that he had during the summer camp and one metal penny he had gotten from the zoo. All his other things had burned. His sheets were warm and comfortable, almost like home, and he turned on a lamp, beginning to read one of his books. It was uncomfortable, being in a weird place, and little lights kept flitting by the window, distracting him. After a long while of reading, he realized he most certainly wouldn't be able to sleep.